These lines from Langston Hughes’s 1940s poem “A Note on Commercial Theatre” echo my convictions about education and theatre. I am convinced that it must be me who educates the public on the value of an African American theatre presence. More importantly, I am convinced that in large part it must be me, a professional African American
male, who takes action to help solve the educational crisis facing young African American males. As I humbly take personal responsibility to contribute constructively to the advancement of a solution to this alarming trial, I invite everyone else to take action as well. When I say take action, I do not simply refer to an appearance at a conference or an anonymous cash donation to an important cause. I speak of considered, consistent, and collaborative active involvement in the education of young African American males.

When I was invited to write a chapter examining solutions to this challenge, I used that invitation as an opportunity to review how I may have influenced the advancement of African American males within my personal spheres of influence: in the family, in education, and in the theatre arts. I reflected on my efforts to lead by example at home, in the classroom, on the stage, and in the community. I questioned whether I had identified enough meaningful ways to incorporate my love of education and theatre into projects and programs that positively influence African American males. I recalled having many opportunities to influence my now 25-year-old son’s development so that he could achieve personal success and contribute constructively to society, and wondered whether I had taken full advantage of those opportunities. Reflecting upon the African American males who have taken my college classes, I asked myself if I had been a positive role model who not only espouses positive values and standards but also lives what he teaches. I also thought about my impact as a director on African American male actors. Had my directing style encouraged any of them to pursue careers in the theatre? According to the research, my presence—as an African American professor, actor, and director—should have had a profound impact on the African American males who pass through my classrooms and theatres. The sources I reviewed to prepare this chapter, ranging from online sources, periodicals, and books to my networking experiences and humble perspectives, confirmed this to be the case.

Consider, for example, the dire statistics regarding African American male failures in the academic community that Worley (2006) describes in the *Journal News* of Westchester County, New York:

A 2004 report by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and The Urban Institute noted that 43 percent of Black males graduated from high school in 2001, compared with 56 percent for Black females and 71 percent for White males.
Worley reports that African American males’ academic achievement not only falls behind that of their White peers but also behind that of African American females. He further adds that “the gender gap in college is widest among Blacks, with Black women accounting for 63 percent of enrollees compared to 37 percent for Black men.” Although the article goes on to list what others may view as an overwhelming litany of failure, I contend that there is another way to look at the challenges facing African American males, and that is to realize that having knowledge about these challenges is the first key to finding solutions to them.

The presence of three specific challenges facing African American male youth—lack of positive role models, peer pressure against academic achievement, and low expectations by teachers and communities—clearly tells me that we educators must do more to develop programs that effectively combat these pressures. Those of us who are African American and male must provide consistent, positive role models for these youth and work to instill within them the value of academic achievement. We need to program our schools and communities to enforce high standards of academic excellence for African American male students. We know what needs to be done. What we need now is to implement the strategies necessary to accomplish these goals. And who will take the lead on this? Again echoing Langston Hughes, I say, “Yes! It’ll be me.”

This chapter will examine some of the key obstacles that prevent African American males from participating equally in American society and education, both in the state of Michigan and in the United States. It will also share insights on some programs that have successfully overcome those obstacles as well as suggest other innovative and creative options.

**The Challenges before Us**

Most of the successful educational programs for African American males involve one or more of the following factors: community collaboration, mentoring programs, African American male role models, and ultimately empowering young African American males to succeed. Regarding the first of these factors, research has clearly shown that broad-based community collaboration is essential. According to Jackson (2005), however, the problem of African American male educational
underachievement “is not even on the radar of many Black churches, businesses, elected officials, media outlets, civil rights, and social service organizations.” Although this may be so in some communities, it is clearly not the case in Michigan. We of Michigan’s African American communities are attending summits and conferences focusing on this issue around the country. We are reading about and reviewing what successful programs are doing to change the dynamic of educational failure for Black male youth. We are taking our own steps to solve this problem. Like me, many of us are working within our own spheres, but we may need to do more. We may need to reach out to other groups for help.

I recently attended a community meeting on how to advance tourism in Lake County, Michigan. During this meeting, David Lorenz, vice president of Travel Michigan, led a session that included members of the state Chamber of Commerce and local citizens and business owners from Baldwin and Idlewild, Michigan. The flyer distributed during that session highlighted two key concepts: “What can I do now?” and “Network! Network! Network!” The speakers emphasized throughout their presentations that despite any single individual or community’s good intentions, one cannot nor should not operate in a vacuum. We can only achieve success if we collaborate for the good of African American males, for the good of family, and for the good of society as a whole.

Mentoring and role modeling are additional critical components of successful educational programs for African American males. Clearly, the presence and involvement of successful African American role models is important in influencing young African American males; however, that is not always possible. In integrated learning environments, young African American males may not always have handy access to role models from common backgrounds. In 2002, only 7% of K–12 teachers nationally were African American compared to 17% of the collective K–12 student body (Denn, 2002). For that reason, since 1992 Washington State University has implemented the Future Teachers of Color program, which shepherds minority teacher-candidates through the financial aid, mentorship, outreach, and job search processes.

Oftentimes, educators and community leaders who are not African American males wish to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of African American males’ academic achievement but perceive a challenge in that they do not directly identify with these youth. They may even suffer some apprehension in their attempt to relate to and to serve African American students. They can still
contribute, however, by networking with African American male role models and inviting them to their classrooms as guest speakers, or by taking these students on field trips to institutions where they can interface with African American role models on the job.

Lastly, young African American males need to be empowered from an African American male perspective. John (2000) in his poem “Father to Son” stresses that young African American men need adults—be they the biological parents, foster parents, or extended family members—who care enough to be there for them and who can teach them basic values. Young Black men need to be praised when they do well and challenged when they do not, John continues. He contends that they need role models who can “teach [them] that [their] people need [them] / to become [teachers] in life / and that to do that [they need] / to become [students] of life.” The enlistment of mentors and role models to support such efforts, especially those who share heritage and gender in common with these youth, has been shown time and again to result in classroom and life successes for African American males.

Sometimes, however, African American male professors experience a dilemma when encountering African American male students with poor study skills. I recall the case of an African American male student who came to speak to me about his failing grade. When he claimed he did not understand why he had received such marks, I pointed out to him that he had not turned in some assignments and done poorly on others, and that he had a pattern of tardiness, having missed five days of class. He asked if I could “work with him” to get a D in the course. I assured him that this was not possible without violating university rules or lowering academic standards, and suggested that his challenge was due to his limited study skills. The student, however, was in denial about this critical fact. After our discussion, I felt a deep sadness that was assuaged only by my belief that I did “the right thing” by holding him to the same standards of excellence I hold for all my students.

I once directed a production of LeRoi Jones’s play Dutchman for the Frank L. Ross Laboratory Theatre. This play was not a part of my regular directing load, but I could not bypass the opportunity. One of my favorite student actors at the time played the role of Clay, and he presented me with quite a few challenges relating to his lack of punctuality and failure to work up to my established standards of excellence. We had many conflicts about these issues, and I spent quite a bit of time and energy trying to make my student see the error of his ways. More than five years later, I received a phone call from this young man that assured me that
the values I had enforced and the time I had spent had not been completely lost on him. After years of working in New York City to become a professional actor and with so many other actors out of work, he had learned that producers do not have time for actors who are late or lazy. He thanked me for pushing him to adhere to a strong work ethic.

Alternately, some African American fathers and father-figures go about correcting their sons in ways that do not elicit the desired response or behavior. They know only the yelling and the hitting—hurtful lessons learned from their own fathers or other adult caretakers. They often mean well but may not have the tools necessary to raise an African American boy properly. Sometimes, simple quiet symbolic actions can do the job. For example, my son is an alumnus of Eastern Michigan University, where I teach, and I am proud to say that he is doing well in his career, but that was not always the case. He had a few tough times during high school, and you can bet I was there for him then, whether he wanted me to be or not!

I recall a period when my son simply was not applying himself in some of his high school classes. Fortunately, the university term ends before the public school term ends, and this provided me with the opportunity to visit his classes—all six of them—for two consecutive days. It was amazing how this action got his attention and encouraged him to shape up in class. In another instance, he decided that he wanted to quit the high school baseball team after playing for just a week or two. Of course, I explained to him that quitting was not an option; he would have to finish the season he started, but he did not have to rejoin the next year. Naively, I assumed that that, as they say, was that. A few days later, however, I decided to drop by my son’s school to check on his baseball practice. When I walked onto the field I did not see him anywhere. I asked the coach if he had seen him, and he said that he had not been to practice for several days. I checked in the team’s locker room; no son. I went to the school office to ask if anyone had seen my son, and no one there could provide me with any information about him. Then I noticed three young men hanging out in the hallway and heard one of them says, “Isn’t that your father?” Calmly, I confronted my son, walked him back to the locker room, made him change into his uniform, and walked him back out onto the baseball field. He finished playing ball that season, not because I forced my will upon him, but because he learned the value of living up to one’s commitments by my demonstrating my own commitment to keeping up with him and his whereabouts.

In his 1986 play Fences, two-time Pulitzer Prize–winner August Wilson tells the
story of Troy Maxson, an African American father in 1950s Pittsburgh who does not have the emotional tools needed to properly raise his son Cory, a high school senior who has been offered a football scholarship at a nearby college. Given Troy’s own earlier disappointments and rejections by the professional baseball leagues of his day, he believes Cory will suffer the same rejection and should instead stay home and continue working at the local grocery. He forbids Cory from taking the scholarship and thus keeps him from achieving his goals. When Cory responds angrily, Troy takes umbrage, echoing the harshness of his own upbringing in telling his son:

You grown…. We done established that. You a man. Now, let’s see you act like one. Turn your behind around and walk out this yard. And, when you get out there in the alley … you can forget about this house. See? ‘Cause this is my house. You go on and be a man and get your own house. You can forget about this ‘cause this is mine. (Wilson, 2000, 966)

Wilson thus questions, through theatre, the effectiveness of generations-old approaches to childrearing, and specifically fathering, that may not have provided African American men with the best examples for raising sons in the contemporary period. They contrast significantly with the approach John (2000) recommends in his contemporary poem “Father to Son”:

\[
\begin{align*}
cry with your son, & \text{ laugh with your son,} \\
never ever fear your son, & \\
no matter & \\
what ugliness he passes through & \\
stay there with him & \\
don’t back off he needs you to be the one to make him hurt a little & \\
so he won’t wind up hurting a lot & \\
each him that a man demands respect & \\
by demanding of himself that he & \\
give respect & \\
to all that cross his path & \\
that if a man challenges him to be a man & \\
and fight & \\
\end{align*}
\]
that he can only be a man if he does not depend on violence to gain his sense of manliness.

Too many African American parents today are overwhelmed, overworked, and not necessarily trained in the best ways to ensure the successful academic development of their children. In many cases, they are in single-parent situations with limited resources; when they are part of a nuclear, middle-class, or affluent family, they often suffer the same parenting struggles as their White counterparts. Many need the help of African American educators, professionals, and community leaders to identify, find, and use the tools they need to better prepare their sons. Others simply need to step up and be proactive regarding their children’s education by becoming active members of the Parent-Teacher Association and participating in school-sponsored activities, reviewing their children’s homework periodically, attending parent-teacher conferences regularly, and following up with teachers regarding their children’s progress and problems in school.

Programmatic Issues and Exemplars

More formal programs designed to uplift African American males in education and in society generally are needed, but a number of programs are already in place throughout Michigan and the rest of the nation. These programs can provide valuable guidance for informing the development of other programs. For example, the University System of Georgia funds its African American Male Initiative program at six colleges and universities that are striving to help African American male students succeed academically. Their efforts include a summer bridge program, a precollegiate summer residential institute, a K–12 Saturday Academy/Postsecondary Readiness Enrichment Program, and a Minority Outreach Program that targets rising seventh-grade African American males for mentoring and tutoring aimed at enhancing their college preparation and reducing their high school dropout rate (Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, 2003; “Georgia Regents Continue to Tackle Black Male College Enrollment, Retention,” 2004). Particularly noteworthy is the University of Georgia’s Gentlemen on the Move program, a mentoring and academic support program whose goals are to develop and nurture academic and social excellence in African American male youth.
Some communities may wish to consider providing an all-male academic environment for African American male students like that of the Eagle Academy for Young Men in the Bronx, New York City. This school’s development was supported by the organization One Hundred Black Men, whose ranks include former New York City mayor David Dinkins, actor Danny Glover, the late attorney Johnny Cochran, and entertainer Bill Cosby. Its mentoring program connects each student with a mentor from One Hundred Black Men during his entire high school experience. The school’s principal, David Banks, maintains that “the Eagle Academy is an idea whose time has come and [that it fills] a great need in the community” (Wayans, 2004). He adds,

Hearing statistics stating that 50 percent of African American men are unemployed or unemployable is unconceivable. We felt we needed to take a chance. Teachers have to create a curriculum based on how boys learn and they provide hands-on experiences to address boys’ natural competitive nature. . . . Far too many young men are not making it. Single-sex education may not be the answer but it is worth the try. (Wayans, 2004)

Eagle Academy students attend school on weekdays until 5:30 p.m., working in study scenarios after regular class. Dinner is also provided because of the length of the school day. Students also attend school on Saturdays until noon, focusing on intramural activities and classes that involve collaborative planning and leadership activities.

Businesses have also gotten involved to support initiatives that address African American male academic and social achievement. In 2006 in Westchester County, New York, the New York Power Authority (NYPA) sponsored a seminar on role models and leadership for 20 African American students from Ossining High School.

Another NYPA initiative, Project Earthquake, demonstrates how businesses can actively support the education of young African American men in a way that benefits not only African American men but also the community at large. Project Earthquake exposes young African American males to different types of professions, and according to program coordinator Martin McDonald, its participants are at-risk students who can “greatly benefit from career events like this one where they receive tangible advice from African American men with established careers. . . . It adds a
sense of attainability and promise to their future” (“NYPA to Sponsor Career Day for Students at Ossining High School,” 2006). The NYPA’s efforts in Westchester are supported by other local initiatives that encourage African American male students to complete their education and focus on a career. Since 1990 the African American Men of Westchester organization has sponsored several programs that have positively influenced over 600 African American male youths. These include its annual Youth Network Day for young men from ages 13 to 21, which engages local African American men as role models to deliver workshops on a variety of topics such as education, family values, and community commitment.

Clearly, these Georgia and New York examples represent proactive ways to address the academic challenges facing African American males, but there are other programs and activities of note. Within my personal sphere of influence, theatre and education, I know of a number of institutions of higher learning and professional groups that encourage African American male youths to participate in theatre. By doing so, they are encouraging these young men to participate in a field that is usually overlooked by the African American community because of something I call the “Tennis-Hockey-Golf Syndrome”—that is, the historic tendency for African Americans not to participate in large numbers in certain fields. We know, of course, that Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters have done a lot to change that perspective, but organizations like the Black Theatre Network and the National Black Theatre Festival are changing these perceptions.

The Black Theatre Network’s (n.d.) stated goals are “to expose the beauty and complexity of Black life, in America and throughout the African Diaspora . . . [to] celebrate and perpetuate the theatrical vision and expertise of our ancestors and share it with the world . . . to both broaden and strengthen our work and help to support Black Theatre locally and globally.” The organization, whose web site address is www.Blacktheatrenetwork.org, conducts annual conferences and programs that encourage young African American theatre artists and educators, and it is grounded in a strong educational foundation. The National Black Theatre Festival (www.nbtf.org) holds activities in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, every odd-numbered year that involve theatre professionals and educators. The festival is supported in part by the North Carolina Black Repertory Company and by the National Endowment for the Arts. It features major stage, television, and film stars (National Black Theatre Festival, n.d.). Both these initiatives have made a profound impression on young African American theatre artists.
Michigan has had some success in its efforts to elevate African American males’ academic achievement. The Michigan Department of Education’s (2006) Michigan Blue Ribbon Exemplary Schools program serves three purposes: (1) it identifies and recognizes outstanding schools across the state; (2) it makes research-based effectiveness criteria available to schools so they can assess themselves and plan improvements; and (3) it encourages schools to share with other schools their best practices for educational success. To be recognized as exemplary, a school must demonstrate a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students. The criteria also require that winning schools must have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to the federal No Child Left Behind law. Schools who have applied must engage in peer reviews, site visits, and extended research and data collection. Although it is important to note that the eight Michigan Blue Ribbon schools do not serve a majority of African American students, particularly males, educators in schools that do can be encouraged by the successes of these schools, and use their programs as models to improve their own.

Within my sway, I am currently working to develop a program to encourage African Americans to strive for careers in education and theatre. To that end I have collaborated with the Idlewild (Michigan) Merry Makers and Eastern Michigan University Theatre to teach theatre workshops and produce Afrocentric theatre productions in Idlewild, a small resort community in the western part of the state. In 2004, this group produced Samm Art Williams’s play *Home*; and this year we produced *Ain’t Misbehavin’: The Fats Waller Musical Show*. Each year we accept two or three interns from Baldwin High School to work backstage on the production and to participate in other activities with the company. Interest in this project is growing, and long-term goals include an education outreach program that reaches from Eastern Michigan University to Baldwin High School to Baldwin Elementary School. Plans involve incorporating students and local community members into full seasons of plays that reflect the African American experience.

In my African American Theatre courses, I teach students about an Afrocentric perspective and about dispelling stereotypes. I believe these two concepts are invaluable to helping empower African American males. African American males need to experience educational models that relate to their own first-person perspectives—namely, the discourse of the African American male. They should be exposed to subject matter and curricular materials that represent their own demographic. They need to be constantly reminded of their history, of their ancestors’ successes
in overcoming harrowing obstacles, and of their forebears’ resilience, so they can
too aspire to succeed.

My classes also stress dispelling negative stereotypes. The media has convinced
too many young African American males that their image is wrapped in music
videos and the gangster mentality. Sadly, many have bought into it. As educators,
we Black men consistently need to teach our young boys why and how these
images and mentalities are destructive, and model positive behaviors in their
stead. We can stress constructive values to them with regard to education, home,
community, and work. We can emphasize the importance of honest effort, hard
work, reliability, punctuality, efficiency, and effective communication. We can
help them to understand that all actions have consequences and that ignorance
of those consequences will hold them back.

In 1986 the playwright George C. Wolfe wrote a scathing satire on African
American identity titled *The Colored Museum*, which I teach in my classes. The play
includes a scene, “Symbiosis,” in which a successful African American businessman
is in the process of throwing away items from his cultural past. The Man says, “My
first pair of Converse All-Stars: Gone! My first Afro comb: Gone! My autographed
pictures of Stokely Carmichael, Jomo Kenyatta, and Donna Summer: Gone!” (Wolfe,
1996, 465–66). The Kid, the Man as a teenager, soon appears and challenges the
Man to hang on to his cultural past, but the Man eventually throws the Kid into
the trash as well. The message of this scene for African American men is that we
should neither forget our history nor forget that we each have a personal stake in
the academic and professional futures of our Black male youth. Instead, we should
courage Black male youth to seek out and take advantage of opportunities to
be “in the know.” We should help them to make the best choices for their futures,
not the easy choices or the fast ones. We should also help them to set goals, plan
strategies, and commit to accomplishing their objectives.

Young African American men need help to counter a destructive mind-set—the
perspective that studying efficiently and advancing academically is equivalent to
“acting White”—and we adult males must help them to dispel this notion. I have
heard many African American male students complain that their friends and peers
make fun of them or treat them like outsiders because they strive to excel academi-
cally. Ultimately, high-performing African American males should be encouraged
to find their own song, secure in the knowledge that they are highly regarded and
valued within their own communities as well as in the mainstream of society.
I remember as a high school sophomore in 1970s Oklahoma, I always wanted to be an actor. I did not know why, but it was apparently a natural impulse. I recall not receiving much encouragement from friends and adults, who said things like, “Why do you want to do that theatre stuff? You know those White folks don’t want you there.” Once, while I was walking home from school, the football coach sidled up to me in his car and asked me if I was a prospective football player. When I responded that I was in theatre, you should have seen his car burn rubber speeding away! Though I did not get a lot of encouragement from those sources, my high school speech and drama teachers were supportive. That is why I am so adamant about the importance of encouraging young African American males to follow their own song and impulses rather than discouraging them from pursuing their natural interests. We African American men especially must appreciate and encourage the songs of our youthful counterparts. As Jaiya John relates in his poem, “Father to Son,” we must “encourage [them] to tell [their] story / in as many ways as possible / in [their] clothing / in [their] walk / in [their] speech / the people [they keep] in [their lives].”

Conclusion

Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life. (Du Bois, 1903)

A number of successful models are already in operation and several innovative practices are being advanced to achieve DuBois’s objectives today. It is clear, however, that African American men must take the lead in this. We must take action now to ensure the advancement of future generations of African American males and
the advancement of our society. We must take the initiative to collaborate and work to guide these youth to success. We cannot wait for others to do it; we have to approach this challenge with the mind-set that “It’ll be me.”

REFERENCES


Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. (2003). Summary and final recommendation of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia’s African American Male Initiative. Atlanta: Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia.


