



Report examines challenges, opportunities for boys of color

Myriad non-school factors affect education outcomes

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The past year brought national attention to the violence and challenges facing too many young men and boys of color and their families in communities across the country. The national dialogue has provided another opportunity to examine the intersection of race and gender, and how it continues to influence opportunities to succeed.

Understanding the challenges and opportunities, along with the resilience of boys of color, is necessary to move forward as a united community. We must deal directly with the fact that the outcomes for boys of color have been so dismal for so long that we have gone through a process of what noted scholar and New York University professor Dr. **Pedro Noguera** refers to as “normalization.” As a society, we’ve grown accustomed to the fact that certain groups will be overrepresented in domains associated with failure, such as incarceration and unemployment, and underrepresented in domains associated with success, like higher education and gainful employment.

The Franklin County 2015 “Champion of Children” report provides an annual look at issues affecting children and education by sharing data, research and recommendations. It was created by Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Community Research Partners and United Way of Central Ohio.

In this year’s report, we took what we learned from the previous two reports and applied them to boys of color. The 2015 report is available at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/82522>. The previous reports are posted at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/21016>.

From the 2013 report, we drew on the importance of neighborhoods of opportunity for success and the types of structures that foster healthy outcomes for children.

From the 2014 report, we brought the understanding of how corrosive toxic stress is for child development and the potential for success in every facet of life. As a community, we can and must do better. We cannot afford to allow so many systems to fail black and Latino boys and expect the future health and well-being of a community not to be jeopardized.

Prolonged poverty can depress life outcomes

Poverty, and the stress associated with it, has a significant negative effect on mental, emotional and physical health. Consistent and unrelenting stress becomes toxic, and impairs a child’s cognitive development. Dr. **Eric Dearing**, a Boston College professor, extensively documents how children living in poverty are more likely to display delayed cognitive, language and socio-emotional development. This has far-reaching consequences, including lower lifetime earnings, more involvement in crime and increased mental health complications.

Persistent poverty in early childhood is especially problematic, but even transient poverty has been found to have negative mental health consequences. In Franklin County, 25% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty. For boys of color, this figure is almost 40%. Further, African-American families represented approximately half of all Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) and Medicaid recipients in 2013.

Neighborhood environments have a powerful effect on education outcomes

Education is a pathway to opportunity, yet we have never delivered on the promise of education equally for all children. For example, the Massachusetts-based Schott Foundation for Public Education has been tracking black



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and Latino male educational outcomes in every state for 10 years. Its most recent report finds persistent and systemic gaps in educational outcomes for these young people.

The gap between white and black males continues to widen. For the 2012-2013 high school cohort, Ohio ranked 41st out of 50 states on black male graduation rates (54% for blacks versus 84% whites). Also, Ohio recorded one of the largest gaps in Latino/white male graduation rates, 22 percentage points. These disturbing outcomes persist despite a national call to action — embodied by No Child Left Behind legislation — to address class and racial gaps in academic outcomes.

Much of recent educational policy focuses on in-school factors, such as teacher preparedness and performance, and inferior classroom environments, as the cause of achievement gaps. This has fueled the push for accountability, testing and other outcome-oriented results. While in-school factors certainly are crucial, it's necessary to acknowledge the powerful effects that out-of-school factors have on educational success. Indeed, far greater contributors to academic success are family and neighborhood effects, accounting for approximately 60%.

Although poor children of all races suffer when exposed to negative neighborhood conditions, research shows that

black and Latino children are far more likely to live in areas of "high poverty" or "concentrated poverty" than white children. Concentrated poverty refers to areas where 40% or more of the residents live below the poverty level. The percentage for a high-poverty designation is at least 20% living below the poverty level.

In a 2011 study, researchers Dr. **Patrick Sharkey**, an associate professor at New York University, and Dr. **Felix Elwert**, a University of Wisconsin-Madison associate professor, found that prolonged exposure to extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods during childhood negatively impacts cognitive ability and primary and secondary educational outcomes. These factors, in turn, impede access to college and economic mobility. In Franklin County, boys of color are most likely to live in a neighborhood with more than double the poverty rates experienced in the neighborhoods of white children.

The depths of this crisis, particularly for black youth, are perhaps best revealed by a 2010 finding that, nationally, the average black male has performed below the basic level in every grade and every subject on the National Assessment of Education Progress for the past 20 years. To reverse this trend, it is imperative that both families and neighborhoods are equipped with the resources that support and encourage scholastic success and positive life outcomes.

Implicit racial biases, which we all have, act as invisible barriers to opportunity

Implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that influence our decisions and behaviors without our conscious awareness. It differs from explicit or intentional bias. A 2002 study by University of Colorado Boulder professor Dr. **Irene Blair** and a 2004 study by Rutgers University professor Dr. **Laurie A. Rudman** demonstrated that implicit bias is activated involuntarily without our awareness or intentional control. In a 2004 study, University of California, Los Angeles professor Dr. **Sandra Graham** and Stanford University professor Dr. **Brian S. Lowery** — among others — even found a disagreement between implicit and explicit beliefs.

In his 1999 book *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, Danish author and lecturer **Tor Norretranders** revealed that the vast majority of the information we receive each day is absorbed without us ever being aware of it. Many of the messages we receive about black and Latino boys encompass harmful and pervasive stereotypes. These ubiquitous messages become embedded



Teachers can help boys of color succeed by shifting from a negative narrative to one of resilience and high expectations.

in our subconscious minds. Even when we intend to remain unbiased, we may unknowingly engage in discriminatory behaviors that adversely affect these children's life outcomes. Thus, these implicit associations work to create invisible, but powerful, barriers to opportunity for boys of color.

Discipline, criminalization and the challenges of navigating school systems, perceptions and biases

There are several decades' worth of research documenting the overrepresentation of black and Latino males in the criminal justice system and being disciplined in school. The Sentencing Project documents how, nationally, black youth are incarcerated at six times the rate of white youth, while Latino youth are incarcerated at double the rate of white youth.

In schools, black students are expelled three times more frequently than white students. Although they made up just 16% of students enrolled in the 2011-12 school year, they accounted for 31% of all in-school arrests. And this disparity begins almost immediately. In preschool, 48% of preschool children who are suspended more than once are black.

Given these numbers, we really should be talking about a preschool-to-prison pipeline. A study by Dr. **Sean Nicholson-Crotty**, a University of Missouri associate professor, provides evidence of the link between racial disproportion in out-of-school suspensions and racial disproportion in juvenile justice systems.

Psychological research documents a self-fulfilling expectation of delinquent behavior. Noguera illustrates how students who are labeled as defiant or problematic "are more likely to internalize these labels and act out in ways that match the expectations that have been set for them . . ." Noguera points out that schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest need: "Often, it is the needs of students and the inability of the schools to meet those needs that causes them to be disciplined. . . Too often, schools react to the behavior of children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior."

The stories we tell ourselves and each other about our young boys of color matter. A 2014 study, led by University of Michigan professor Dr. **Stephanie Rowley**, specifically examined the narratives parents, teachers and black boys themselves used to describe black boys as it relates to educational achievement, and the impacts these narratives can have. Researchers found most of the narratives are negative and fatalistic, and undermine scholastic success. They also reinforce the broader narrative that these boys are beyond hope or in peril. Given the educational outcomes of black and Latino male youth, this research suggests that

"our collective perceptions of black boys may keep them from performing at the highest level."

A call to action and opportunity: creating a 'new normal' for our boys of color

The "Champion of Children" report documents the many challenges facing young boys of color, challenges that, if left unaddressed, imperil their successful entry into adulthood and their ability to be flourishing, productive members of society. However, it also is clear that such research does not fully capture the experience of all boys of color in our communities. Indeed, there are places where young boys of color are thriving, where others have high expectations for them and the boys themselves feel confident and capable.

While the report's data and research reveal extreme challenges, it also should serve as a call to action for communities. In central Ohio, there are some programs that are placing boys of color on a path to success. The report highlights some of these programs and interventions that are fostering hope, resiliency and opportunity for boys of color.

Franklin County has significant capacity and resources, but they need to be better aligned to ensure boys of color have opportunities to excel. There also needs to be a greater dialogue about expanding promising programs to reach

more of the community.

"Champion of Children" highlights what is essential for creating an environment in which boys of color can thrive. The following steps can contribute greatly to creating that environment:

- ensuring healthy neighborhoods and families;
- supporting strong and resilient families;
- embracing a new narrative of resilience and high expectations;
- investing in evidence-based mentoring programs and coaching to support youth;
- challenging our implicit biases as individuals and within our institutions;
- repairing the pipeline to educational success.

This is the time to act. We must work and invest to expand opportunities, provide mentoring and coaching, and reduce barriers to success to ensure boys of color — and all children — succeed and thrive. ■

Editor's note: This article was adapted from the Franklin County 2015 Champion of Children report by Jason Reece, senior associate director at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, and Jillian M. Olinger, public policy and planning analyst at the Kirwan Institute.

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