

Problem Solved: Engaging African-American Boys and Youth

Here's the problem: According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the leading cause of death among African-American boys and men age 15 to 29 is homicide; and homicide is the *second* most frequent cause of death for black boys between 10 and 14. They are only children. A few years ago we called them an "endangered species." Today we say "Black Lives Matter," but the plight still is the same: African-American boys and teens are in a life-and-death struggle to come of age without ending up in jail or in the morgue. If they make it to adulthood, the dangers do not decrease.

This is not an unnecessarily alarmist statement. Author Michelle Alexander made us aware of the "new jim crow," the mass incarceration of young black men. The school-to-prison pipeline is an equally chilling reality of which many of us are still unaware. The fact is that many youngsters' first encounter with the criminal justice system occurs before they are teenagers; it occurs when they or their classmates are arrested *in school*, usually for extremely petty "offences." In a recent episode of the radio documentary program, *This American Life*, a prison warden is quoted as referring to nearby schools as the "feeder schools" for the jail from which his prisoners come.

It seems an intractable problem, this endangerment of African-American boys, teens, and young men. Little seems to alleviate it. In 2015

OpEd by Pamela E. Ice

there were nearly 6.2 million African-American males between the ages of 10 and 29, a mere 3.9 percent of the total male population of the U.S. Whose responsibility are these boys and youths? And what can be done to help them flourish rather than die before their times or end up ravaged by the criminal justice system?

One thing that can be done to safeguard our boys and teens is developing and implementing community-based initiatives such as the Southern Dallas Project MALE (Making Aspiring Leaders Excel) Program spearheaded by Jennifer Wimbish, former president of Dallas's Cedar Valley College, along with southern area independent school districts (ISDs), Antioch Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, and the Dallas Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

With the help of African-American male mentors and the hands-on support of the participants' parents, the program aims to teach leadership skills such as personal and social responsibility to boys ages five to fifteen in kinder through ninth grades so they can avoid getting entangled with unsavory elements and/or the criminal justice system. Why begin with kindergarteners? "It's an extension of what I do by going to career days and so forth," volunteer Odell Brown explained. "The earlier we get them involved, the better, the more intentional they will become," Brown continued.

“They don’t have to learn everything the hard way; some things can be learned by sitting at the feet of people who have experienced them.”

The participants and their parents meet at Antioch Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church the first Saturday of each month from October to May to experience engaging activities designed to reinforce the boys’ sense of their responsibilities in school and their communities. The parents are addressed for two hours on their own by black psychologist Dr. Katie Johnson regarding what their boys are learning, the volunteer activities the youngsters will be involved in, and what they can do to create the most positive environment critical to the boys’ success. The parents’ sessions also include a question/answer period in which they learn how to address the barriers and concerns their children are facing. In essence, to paraphrase Rev. Rickie Rush, parents are learning the three Cs for successful interactions with their sons: Conversations, courage, and character.

In November, the younger boys were firming up their concepts of community by imagining together the necessary components of a healthy community. The older boys were thinking in groups about various school scenarios – schools with and without community support and how students and teachers would feel about their schools in each case. At the end of their

sessions, the youngsters made verbal group reports to their parents about what they learned that day.

Project MALE Program participants are identified through the various independent school districts and a score of churches in the Southern sector of Dallas county. The parents of boys and youth who want to participate in Project MALE and men interested in mentoring in the program can register or volunteer on the Project MALE Program website (projectmaleprogram.net). Kevin Collins, a Project MALE mentor says the role is fulfilling and a way of giving back, "That is what the program is all about for me – giving to these children what was provided for me by various coaches in my life."

So if you weren't aware of the threat our boys and male teens face before, you are now. If you didn't know how to help, now you do. African-American boys and youth are in imminent danger, and they are dependent on their community to protect them. You, I, *we* are that community.

#