

OPINION

Saving Black and Latino Boys

By Pedro A. Noguera, *Phi Delta Kappan*

On all of the indicators of academic achievement, educational attainment, and school success, African-American and Latino males are noticeably distinguished from other segments of the American population by their consistent clustering at the bottom (Schott, 2010). With few exceptions, these dismal patterns exist in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States. Nationally, African-American and Latino males are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school (Fergus & Noguera, 2010). In most American cities, dropout rates for African-American and Latino males are well above 50%, and they're less likely to enroll or graduate from college than any other group (Schott, 2010).

African-American and Latino males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or to be identified as suffering from a learning disability and placed in special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They're more likely to be absent from gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement and honors courses, and international baccalaureate programs (Noguera, 2008). Even class privilege and the material benefits that accompany it fail to inoculate black males from low academic performance. When compared to their white peers, middle-class African-American and Latino males lag significantly in grade point average and on standardized tests.

These patterns have become so common and widespread that a recitation of the dismal statistics no longer generates surprise or even alarm. But, in recent years, private foundations and local, state, and federal officials have called for urgent measures to subvert these trends and reverse the patterns. In August 2011, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that he and billionaire philanthropist George Soros were donating \$200 million and redirecting another \$500 million of public funds to a variety of initiatives addressing the "crisis" confronting Latino and African-American males. Similar initiatives have been launched in communities throughout the country.

There is a growing awareness that early intervention within schools may be the most effective way to prevent some of the problems facing males of color during adulthood. More educators are embracing the idea that the educational and social challenges confronting

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black and Latino males can be solved, or at least ameliorated, through single-sex education; such schools specifically designed for young men of color are now proliferating across the nation. Of course, single-sex schools are not a new idea or invention. Since the 18th century, parochial schools, military academies, and elite boarding schools have served young men in all-male learning environments. However, today, single-sex schools are spreading based on the idea that young men are best educated when they're separated from girls in public and charter schools. Spurred by a desire to address the underachievement of boys and justified by highly questionable research that suggest boys learn differently than girls (Gurian, 2011), singlesex schools are rapidly growing. In 1998, there was only one single-sex public school in the United States — Detroit's Malcolm X Academy (Leake & Leake, 1992; Watson & Smitherman, 1996).

Today, there are over 300 single-sex public and charter schools and hundreds of other single-sex classrooms in schools that are ostensibly coeducational, according to the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (www.coseboc.org). Most of the new single-sex schools have been designed specifically to serve African-American and Latino males based on the assumption that the best way to educate and "save" young men of color is to separate them from the rest of the population.

Research is Needed

The need to act on the problems confronting black and Latino males is apparent, but no research supports the notion that separating young men is the best way to meet their academic and social needs.

In 2006, U.S. Department of Education regulations were reinterpreted to allow single-sex classes in coeducational schools under limited circumstances without violating Title IX. The provision required that such single-sex classes must be "substantially related" to the achievement of an important governmental or educational objective.

Thus, the new single-sex schools have been justified because of the belief that they'll benefit young black and Latino men and thereby satisfy the "important government or educational objective." However, a review commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to compare academic outcomes in single-sex and coeducational classrooms concluded that no positive benefits could be discerned. Similarly, large-scale reviews in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as analyses of data from the Programme for International Student Assessment, found scant overall difference between academic outcomes obtained in single-sex and mixed-sex academic classrooms (OECD, 2009; Smithers & Robinson, 2006; Thomson & Ungerleider, 2004; Marsh & Rowe, 1996; Harker, 2000). Some advocates of single-sex schools claim that brain research evidence shows that boys learn differently from girls and that separation on the basis of sex would support and enhance their educational needs. However, none of their claims about innate learning differences have been supported by neuroscientists who actually study the human brain, and their ideas about the types of teaching strategies that constitute "best practices" for boys are also unsupported by scientific evidence (Tyre, 2008).

In the absence of clear and compelling research and well-developed theories on how to respond to the problems facing black and Latino males, the schools that serve black or Latino males have designed curriculum, created mentoring and rites of passage programs, and implemented counseling and recreation services without the benefit of clear and compelling research to support the design of these interventions. Most of these initiatives are being carried out by individuals who are sincere and well-meaning about their desire to "save" young men of color, but, in many cases, they lack a clear sense of how to approach their work. Given the proliferation of single-sex schools and the wide gulf between practice and evidence-based theory, there's a pressing need for an applied research agenda that can shed some light on whether single-sex schools are indeed the best way to improve the educational attainment and social mobility of black and Latino males.

Learning From Schools That Work

In 2009, the center that I direct at New York University—the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education — studied dropout rates among black and Latino males in New York City. The results were disturbing. In one of the few

cities with a rising graduation rate (official graduation rates in New York City are now over 65%), less than 40% of black and Latino males were graduating, and less than 30% were graduating with a Regents diploma, the certificate used to determine college readiness. However, during our study, we also identified over 20 New York City high schools with graduation rates for black and Latino males exceeding 80%. We were surprised both by the significant number of schools that were achieving at this level and by the fact that the knowledge they had gained was not being shared widely among New York City schools.

At schools like Frederick Douglass Academy and Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem and Eagle Academy in the South Bronx, high graduation rates have been the norm for several years. These schools serve students from low-income backgrounds who come from some of the most troubled and disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city, but they've found ways to create school cultures that counter the influence of gangs and affirm the importance of learning. Our research in these schools showed us that strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are critical ingredients of their success. Equally important is the need to provide a personalized learning environment with mentors, counseling, and other supports that make it possible for schools to intervene early and effectively when problems arise. Naturally, these schools have strong and effective school leaders, but that doesn't mean they are authoritarian and intimidating. On the contrary, students report that principals like David Banks at Eagle Academy and Tim King at Urban Prep in Chicago—another urban high school with high graduation rates — are regarded more like big brothers and father figures.

These are safe schools where students feel as though they can be themselves, where the peer culture reinforces the value of learning, and where character, ethics, and moral development are far more important than rigid discipline policies.

Some of these high-performing schools are all male, but not all of them. At coed schools like Thurgood Marshall, a mentoring program was created specifically for 9th-grade males who were paired with high-performing female seniors. The principal realized that if girls are better at school than boys in many cases, why not have them model success for their younger peers? Similarly, former principal Juan Mendez at Enterprise, Business, and Technology High School in Brooklyn learned early that great counseling and a strong focus on internships that lead to real job opportunities could keep his young men engaged and his highly successful school never embraced the idea that boys needed to be separated.

Conclusion

While some of the schools that are successfully educating black and Latino males are single-sex, others are not. A four-year study that I led at the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education found that some but not all of the single-sex schools that have been created over the last few years are quite successful. Many single-sex schools have been created without a clear sense of instructional supports that the students they serve will need. They also haven't created a learning climate conducive to academic success and positive youth development. Not surprisingly, these schools are foundering, and the students they serve are not thriving. Clearly, there is no magic to be found in merely separating boys of color from their peers.

The good news is that there are several schools across the country that are succeeding at educating black and Latino males. These schools remind us that the problem is not who we serve but how well they are served. This point must be made clear to educators, especially those who have lapsed into blaming the students they serve for their own failures or, by extension, their parents. Poverty, crime, gangs, and other social problems that are endemic to some neighborhoods pose formidable challenges. The pull of the streets and all of the dangers associated with it is drawing many young males of color onto the path of delinquency at an early age (Anderson, 1990; Majors & Billson, 1992). However, schools that are successful with black and Latino boys show us that educators can counter and even overcome these obstacles when they work closely with parents and community to design positive learning environments that meet the needs of the children they serve.

Of course, creating such schools is not easy. If it were, the problems facing black and Latino males would have been solved long ago. Moreover, the challenges facing young men of color aren't purely educational. The fact that many children come to school sick, hungry, without adequate housing or social and emotional support, and from

families in distress makes the job of educating them much more difficult. Our schools need help meeting the needs of those they serve, especially those most vulnerable and most likely to fail in American society—black and Latino males. We must address this issue with urgency and treat it as an *American problem*, rather than as a problem that only those who directly experience it should be concerned about. The continued failure of so many young men not only increases the likelihood that they'll end up in prison, permanently unemployed, or dead at an early age, but that our society will accept such conditions as normal. As that begins to occur, all of us are endangered.

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