

Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African American Male Student Achievement

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Introduction

“We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

(Edmonds, 1979, p.23)

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a nationwide college preparatory program for students who are often economically disadvantaged and underachieving. It enables academically average first-generation students to succeed in rigorous curricula, enter mainstream activities in school, and increase their opportunities to enroll in four-year colleges. With support, desire, and determination, these students with a 2.0-3.5 grade point average and average-to-high standardized test scores, will ultimately acquire the tools to attend a four-year college with continued success. The program targets low-income students in the “academic middle” -B, C, and D students- who are capable but falling short of their potential to receive a college education.

The program includes a rigorous reading and writing curriculum that is designed to help students be successful in their core classes. It also includes weekly tutorial groups that encourage students to work together to resolve their academic problems through modeling and questioning. In AVID, students will be successful with the help of study skills enhancement activities, college preparatory training, and college visits.

The AVID philosophy is simple, yet promising: by holding students accountable to the highest standards, providing academic and social support, they will rise to the

challenge. In addition to offering challenging coursework, the program strives to improve students' study skills and their knowledge of their cognitive abilities. Students receive tutoring and a log to record subjects that they have difficulty with.

The AVID organization has experienced overwhelming success since its inception in 1980. Adopted by nearly 4,000 schools in 45 states, the District of Columbia and 15 countries, AVID currently serves more than 320,000 students in grades 4 through 12. Used in AVID elective and content-area classes, the AVID curriculum, based on rigorous standards, is driven by writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading skills.

In its second year, sponsorship of the 2008 AVID Conference, *Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African American Male Student Achievement*, is shared with the College Board and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). Speakers and community leaders from across the United States were invited to share with educators strategies for helping address the challenges that African American males face in today's society, thereby increasing their success in school toward earning a college education. This report has been created to capture and highlight this year's conference, which was filled with excitement from beginning to end.

Nearly 500 participants from across the country attended the two-day conference in October, 2008. The varying presentations represented several themes that focused on the education of African American male students and provided possible solutions for closing the achievement gap. Woven throughout the various village meetings were themes representing and embracing core values of the African American culture; the cultural climate within schools; effective teaching practices; the importance of school; family and community connections; shared goals for lifelong learning among

stakeholders; and promoting scholarship and leadership among African American male students. This paper is designed to serve as an historical record of the Up Where We Belong conference with written documentation of the presentations, village meetings, keynote addresses, and panel discussions.

Core Values of African American Culture

The conference opening session featured highly acclaimed Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu as the keynote speaker. Dr. Kunjufu has dedicated his career to addressing the ills afflicting black culture in the United States, working primarily as an educational consultant and author, but more recently expanding into video and film production. All aspects of the African American experience occupy Dr. Kunjufu's attention, but the main thrust of his work has been directed toward improving the education and socialization of black youths. He is the founder and president of African American Images, a Chicago-based publishing company that sponsors dozens of workshops intended to help educators and parents develop practical solutions to the problems of child-rearing in what he perceives to be a racist society.

Kunjufu immediately captured the audience's attention by quoting statistics relative to society's health and poor eating habits that lead to disease and poor health conditions. He encouraged listeners to carefully read food labels and count the meals consumed each day. His address was complete with homework assignments to improve mental and physical health and to help improve the academic standing of African American males in schools across the nation.

Dr. Kunjufu cited that a record 816,000 African American males are currently enrolled in college, yet the media elects to highlight prison enrollment instead. To the

detriment of the successful integration of African American males into society where their maximum potential is realized, Kunjufu posited that prison enrollment is based on the reading levels of boys as early as third and fourth grades by state governments. He indicated that there are three critical grades for boys, kindergarten-when young males sit in the front of the class and are eager and on task; fourth grade-where they experience the “fourth grade syndrome,” indicating the start of the decline in academics; and ninth grade-when they fail to ask questions, are no longer eager to learn, and await dropping out of school.

According to Kunjufu, the problem facing black youth is systemic, not genetic, as suggested by Charles Murray in his controversial publication *The Bell Curve* (1994). Dr Kunjufu shared that the achievement gap widens among girls and boys as they matriculate through school toward high school graduation. The number of boys who stay in school and graduate decreases compared to that of girls, which increases. He reported a 3:1 ratio of black girls to black boys attending school on college campuses.

Kunjufu proposed a four-part theoretical paradigm that he adopted from one of his mentors, Barbara Sizemore, the first African American woman to head a major school system when she was chosen as superintendent of District of Columbia schools in 1973, to address the achievement gap. The paradigm includes the problem, the cause, the solution, and lastly, implementation, which Dr. Kunjufu promised to return and discuss at next year’s conference.

According to Kunjufu, poverty, the major problem African American male youth encounter, is not based on factors beyond educators’ control as generally attributed. In many schools, these problems can be readily addressed by administrators who must be

instructional leaders constantly walking the corridors of the school building, rather than sitting in offices behind closed doors.

In research conducted by Kunjufu, most teachers indicated that the problem of the racial, academic achievement gap is rooted in the low income households from which students come. Others placed the blame on single parent homes, while others contributed it to a lack of parental involvement and education. Genetics has also been listed as the culprit. To Kunjufu, administrators make all of the difference in narrowing this gap by becoming more proactive and encouraging teachers under their direction to match instruction to students' learning styles.

Dr. Kunjufu provided several solutions to help decrease the achievement gap. Instructional pedagogy should match the learning style of students. The types of teachers selected to serve students is crucial in solving this problem. Teachers must bond with students in order to assist in their academic success and lessons must exhibit congruence between pedagogy and instruction. Looping classes with master teachers and coaches is another solution. With the same teacher for four years in each core subject, students are better equipped to make academic strides and will have formed a bond with their instructor. Kunjufu further recommends that administrators can help African American youth succeed in school by implementing all male academies, and programs such as Call Me Mister, which provides scholarships and grants as incentives to address the drought of African American male teachers. Incorporation of a Freshman Academy helps nurture students who are making the transition from middle school to high school.

Peer pressure to be popular rather than smart is a challenge facing many of today's youth. To them, being smart is "acting White". The potential money gained from

participation in professional sports or narcotics distribution further distracts students from applying themselves in school. Kunjufu suggested that schools implement real estate and stock market entrepreneurship programs to counteract these distractions. Another strategy is the institution of single-gendered classrooms. The Eagle Academy for Young Men in Bronx, New York, readies young men for college, while educating them about obstacles they may face and how to overcome them. The curriculum is based on how male students learn and provides hands-on experiences to address boys' natural competitive nature. There is also a one-on-one mentoring program that matches students, based on their career interests and/or social needs, with a member of the nationally acclaimed 100 Black Men of America organization for the duration of high school.

The implementation component of Dr. Kunjufu's plan occurs when teachers are provided additional time on-task to engage students in learning activities. Currently, there is a decline in African American teachers, and most inner city classrooms across the nation are lead by White female teachers. According to Kunjufu, these are teachers who must be trained to identify and better understand "class clowns," or those boys with poor reading scores who make jokes in class rather than do the assigned lessons. This often results in many students being put out of class or referred for special education services. To counteract this occurrence, it is important for educators to teach reading and account for gender differences among males and females in instructional delivery. To motivate African American males, the selection of reading content must be centered on subjects of interest to them. Options for reading materials can be found in the school library or from district curriculum support personnel.

Dr. Kunjufu closed his remarks with a challenge to educators of moving out of the state of denial to help black boys in our schools and communities. Rather than allowing rap lyrics in isolation outside of school to raise our students, teachers should incorporate contemporary music television shows and lyrics as dialogue to develop curriculum with students. This strategy will motivate students to take notice of the changes in traditional approaches to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs.

Youthful Artistic Expressions

The Rockdale High School Choir, under the direction of Antoine Holman, presented a moving rendition of “Up Where We Belong,” to honor the conference title. “Imagine Me,” an anthem of victory and overcoming obstacles, was the title of the second musical selection. Along with the vocal renditions, the students also performed interpretive dances.

The luncheon keynote speaker was Jonathan Grant Brown, a former AVID student. Jonathan is a highly sought-after motivational speaker, positive role model and mentor. Currently, he serves as the West Texas AVID Consultant and Master Tutor for the Midland/Odessa area. Jonathan, an extraordinary young man whose journey began in the foster care system, shared his moving story of overcoming obstacles in his personal and academic life, having been separated from his brother at a young age.

Jonathan described the influence that the AVID organization has had on his life and how differently his path has been compared to his brother, who did not have the support of such an organization or foster parents like Jonathan. Full of emotion and displaying a true sense of triumph over tragedy, Jonathan moved the audience to tears with his life story. He delighted the crowd by ending his address with an impersonation

of the narrator on Telemundo, a Spanish-American television network. Jonathan's story serves as a personal testimony that there is hope in what is possible when any student is nurtured and guided by self-motivation, caring educators, high expectations, a loving family, and a committed community.

The highlight of the conference has become the Student Panel Discussion during which time young males share their experiences as AVID students and entertain questions from the audience. During this fun-filled village meeting, the students provided glimpses into their lives as successful African American male students. With ease, humor, and honesty, the students described the AVID programs within their schools and how much they have matured academically and socially since joining the classes.

Motivated, Talented, Dedicated, Athletic, Competitor, Justice, Focused, Innovative. These self-descriptors were chosen by the eight young African American male middle school, high school and college student panelists who are previous, active, and future AVID students in various school districts throughout Georgia. Many of these dynamic young men were inspired by their parents and mentor teachers to improve their school success and personal lives by joining AVID classes in their respective schools.

The all male panel agreed on many aspects of the positive role AVID has played in their lives. Faced with new challenges in AVID classrooms, they were in agreement that, despite these challenges, participation in AVID has helped to make them better students. In the words of Morehouse College freshman Jalil Henry who has participated in AVID since sixth grade, "AVID is the best choice I've ever made. The most rewarding thing about AVID is being able to wear this Morehouse blazer now." Morehouse College President, Robert Franklin, instituted the practice of giving every freshman a tie and a

blazer in the college's primary color, maroon, as a tangible symbol of the image of a gentleman. Jalil's blazer represents his academic accomplishments throughout his years in school which earned him an opportunity to enter a prestigious historically black college.

Malcolm Daniels, an eighth grade AVID student, stressed how influential the organization has been in his life. "Before AVID, I had anger problems. I realized I was not going far that way." Maurice Collier, a seventh grade student, agreed. "I failed all of my classes before AVID. There were a lot of fights that I got away with. Since AVID, I have better grades. I have an A-B average, and I have only been in one fight."

Asked about their interactions with fellow schoolmates who are not in the AVID program, senior high school student DeMarcus Jacobs responded, "Students who are not in AVID want to join. At my school, there is overwhelming interest. We have to turn students away. We have a good program and students are constantly talking about the program and asking how they can get in." Maurice concurred, indicating that "some people think persons in AVID are dumb, but they realize that we have advanced learning that is different from the other classes. More people try to join." Joshua Reese, an eleventh grade AVID student, added, "everyone thinks that we are spoiled because we have a team of teachers that stay on our cases. If something happens with one of us, they are on top of it immediately."

The role of teachers, parents, and the community in the lives of these young men was evident. Most of the young men agreed that their parents and teachers are their motivation for continued success in AVID and in school. Malcolm shared that his

teacher helped him improve his grades. He indicated that AVID gives him confidence in school to reach his career goals.

The students were asked if they would recommend AVID for other students. They emphatically agreed that AVID is an excellent component to have in schools. Malcolm indicated that everyone should have an opportunity to be in AVID. He added that because some students are failing and dropping out of school, they lack confidence and need the chance to go to college to better themselves through a program like AVID. Austin Stewart, a seventh grade AVID student, agreed, sharing that AVID helps him be better organized and his teachers are there for support. DeMarcus is using his influence as an AVID student to recruit fellow students experiencing difficulty in their classes. He recently recommended a friend with poor grades to the program who, after being accepted, is doing much better in school. Now, he and his peer help support each other in the program.

With regard to the underrepresentation of Black male students in today's classrooms, the young men were asked to discuss the impact of having black male teachers. Eleventh grader Zachary Johnson responded that Black male teachers have a great impact on him, serving as role models with whom he can better relate. Jalil shared that his student advisor at Morehouse College is a great role model who did not earn a high school diploma, but received a doctoral degree and returned to teach there. The determination of Jalil's advisor has definitely impacted his life and will to succeed. He added that it is great to have him as an instructor and mentor. The wisdom of youth was evident with DeMarcus' comment. "Successful black males, not just black male teachers,

(like my father) inspire me. I look up to any black male doing something positive as a role model and try to follow in their footsteps.”

The panelists were asked how they felt about being in all male classes. Joshua replied that the small learning community of an all male academy is great for all young men, both successful as well as those who may struggle to bring themselves up to par. He added that although there is a lot of testosterone in an all male class, he misses the classes with females. He is inspired to have his brothers beside him in class, and they are all getting A’s and B’s.

The effects of AVID on the students’ lives are evident as some of the panelists were performing below average or experienced discipline problems before entering the AVID program. The students were asked how they were able to make connections with their AVID teacher(s) and build relationships to show that education is an important aspect of life. DeMarcus indicated that before AVID, his teachers would yell “Get out!”, but now, his AVID teacher helps keep him in line. Zachary concurred. Before AVID, he maintained a C average and experienced discipline problems. “AVID helped me to be a better student and do my work and my teacher helped me. If I were not in the program, I would not do as well.” Austin shared that he was in private school before, and felt as though his teacher did not like him because he was always accused of trouble-making. “Something clicked in my head, I started getting A’s, got in AVID, and since then, I have only gotten in trouble once. I talked with my teacher who said to keep my anger down. I have had no problems since then.”

The students were asked to provide advice for white educators to help black students succeed. DeMarcus’ response inspired a round of applause from the audience.

He shared, “There is no difference between a white teacher and a black teacher. Just help your students. Some learn differently than others and may need one-on-one help. It’s not a black or white thing. Make sure your students are learning what they need to learn (the curriculum), and you’ll be just fine.” Zachary added, “Switch up the lessons, be interactive and interesting.” Malcolm replied, “Race doesn’t matter as we were all put on God’s earth.” He also suggested that teachers use humor in teaching.

Another question from the audience was how the students make AVID cool when they are accused of “acting White.” Jalil responded, “Success is the coolest thing that has ever been. To say I’m acting White, it’s not how you see me; it’s that I’m doing something important.” Joshua agreed, “Success is the highest goal. We need to break seeing success as White and Black as poor. It’s not true. (Students should) look at parents and teachers. Something is wrong with the inner you if you find success wrong. The person (who says I’m acting White) is ignorant.” Malcolm shared, “I’m popular now because of AVID. I am the ‘whitest black kid’ my peers know. How is that even possible? I’m just being me. **Stereotypes are not about color, but maybe having trouble in school.**” Another round of applause erupted from the audience when DeMarcus, showing his youthful wisdom added, “I’m pretty popular. I have friends on both sides of the fence, in AP[®] and academy classes. If somebody were to come to me in that way, I would think to myself, maybe this person doesn’t know that Dr. Martin Luther King was black; Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was black. Maybe they don’t know that the Democratic National Candidate for President, Barack Obama, is black. I think that statement needs to change. Why can’t they say “acting Black?”

In the absence of some schools having AVID programs, the students were asked how they would suggest that male students, who do not respect themselves and others, develop and maintain self-respect and self-confidence. Malik Phillips, a seventh grader, responded, “I really do have respect for myself and others because in AVID, teachers show that it’s alright to be yourself. It’s okay to respect other people. How can you have self respect if you don’t have respect for other people?” DeMarcus shared that respect starts in the home. “Parents must show self-respect and by sending you to AVID, continue to teach you to respect yourself and others.”

Cultural Climate

After the family, school is arguably the most influential arena of social relationships for children. Besides delivering academic instruction, there is a large body of research dedicated to the importance of the social environment of schools. The caring relationship formed between teachers and students has been posited as a vital component of helping students experience education in positive ways (Noddings 1984, 1992; Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Dr. Jeanette R. Patterson, a principal from Horizon Community Middle School in Aurora, Colorado, hosted the village meeting entitled Understanding Culture: African American Male Students Surviving in Suburbia School Systems where she shared pertinent information. She started the session with a political cartoon that really made participants think about all of the young black men in prison. Factors affecting this population of students are that most schools do a poor job of handling Black male students, teachers are only trained to teach motivated students, and some teachers believe they have bad students rather than admitting that they employ poor classroom

management skills. Most attendees agreed with the facts and some stated that they were not trained to teach multicultural students and did not know how to reach them.

Dr. Patterson shared a lesson on the history of African American education (pre-desegregation and post-desegregation). She opened with the following quote by Theresa Perry, “For African Americans to achieve, they need to be sufficiently grounded in their own identity as members of a racial caste group, especially in school.” During pre-desegregation, African American males attended African American schools with inadequate materials where the school environment was of poor quality, and were taught by African American teachers with whom they felt very connected. During post-desegregation, African Americans were provided unlimited access to schools with nice facilities, updated instructional materials, and curricular activities. The school environment improved, but inequitable practices were instituted and these students did not have relationships with predominately White staff members. To sum up the history of African American education, Dr. Patterson again quoted Theresa Perry, “African American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership.”

Dr. Patterson informed the audience of powerful statistics regarding Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics as they relate to the dropout rate, school enrollment percentages among these populations, and reading and mathematics achievement. These statistics showed that nationally, in fourth and eighth grades, African Americans are lagging behind their White counterparts in reading and mathematics achievement.

Dr. Patterson mentioned her own school district, The Cherry Creek School District, in Englewood, Colorado. The district's motto is "To inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve, and to care." Dr. Patterson indicated that it is important for school districts to have a vision. The Cherry Creek School District has experienced several changes over the last ten years, including a huge increase in minority students among its new student population. The school district's Framework for World Class Instruction is cyclical and has four steps--plan, teach, monitor, and adjust. District administrators ask simple questions such as "Is this lesson preparing students to go to college?" One of Cherry Creek's missions is college preparation for all students because it propels the American dream—to prepare students for college and success, which closes the achievement gap. To district proponents, this is a more compelling vision than most state and federal mandates, and it helps students have greater career earning power.

Dr. Patterson shared ten strategies and belief statements that have proven to be helpful to her staff in assisting African American male students survive their suburban school system.

1. Recognize the problem.
2. We must talk about race.
3. Stop blaming and start working.
4. Let data guide instruction.
5. Create a culture for learning.
6. Listen to your students.
7. Access and opportunity for all.
8. Take risks.

9. Continue to focus on results.

10. Teach.

Overall, the village meeting was a success. The discussion was filled with practical strategies for use in schools. Many of the participants left the session with a renewed sense of hope and empowerment in helping their African American male students to succeed.

Dr. James L. Moore, an Associate Professor in Counselor Education, Coordinator of the School Counseling Program and Director of the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male from The Ohio State University, led the village meeting entitled, “African American Males and School Achievement Social Stressors.” There was standing room only as Dr. Moore began with a quote from Murname and Levy (1996), “The education system must adapt to meet the needs of the child rather than forcing the child to meet the needs of the system.”

Dr. Moore shared common factors that impact academic achievement in African American males, such as school factors, family/cultural factors, social/community factors, and individual factors. Some school factors include inappropriate early curricular experiences, absence of opportunities to develop appropriate work habits, negative interactions with administrators, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel, absence of challenge in school (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), and questionable school experiences.

Family and cultural factors include family dysfunction, strained relationships with family members, inconsistent role models and value systems in the family, minimal parental academic monitoring, guidance, and expectations, problems with siblings and

sibling rivalry, and poverty and economic stress and strain. The social and community factors are negative school and/or surrounding community environment, hostile environment, negative peer and social pressures/injustices, and inappropriate coping strategies among community members. Individual factors consist of behavior problems and disciplinary issues, problems with unstructured time, confused or unrealistic aspirations, insufficient perseverance and low self-efficacy, inappropriate coping strategies, and poor identity.

Dr. Moore explained ways that educators promote feelings of alienation among African American male students. These include seating African American male students closer to them than they do other students to serve the purpose of surveillance and control, giving African American male students less direct instruction, paying less personal attention to African American male students in academic situations, calling on African American male students less often to answer classroom questions or to do demonstrations, giving African American male students less time to answer questions before moving on, failing to give African American male students feedback about their responses more frequently than other students, and demanding less work and effort from African American male students than from other students (Duncan, 1999).

The “cool pose” is a ritualized form of masculinity that uses certain behavior, scripts, physical posturing, and carefully crafted performance to convey a strong impression of pride, strength, and control. Dr. Moore shared that African American male students adopt the “cool pose” for various reasons: to cope with oppression, invisibility, and marginality; to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style; to maintain a balance between their inner life and their social environment; to cope with conflict and

anxiety; to render themselves visible and empower themselves, to neutralize stress; to manage their feelings of rage in the face of prejudice and discrimination; and to counter the negative forces in their lives (Tatum, 2005).

Dr. Moore indicated the negative consequences of the “Cool Pose,” (Tatum, 2005). African American male students’ potential is thwarted because of their refusal to involve themselves in experiences that could expand their personal, social, and political consciousness. These males can get into trouble with authorities who lack understanding of the use of the behavior as a coping mechanism. The students’ inclination to disclose little about themselves makes it difficult for educators and others interested in their welfare to provide them with necessary support. African American male students’ refusal to retreat in the face of violence can lead to personal harm and increased fatalities for African American youth. Finally, these male students avoid institutions and activities that are considered “uncool” (i.e., schools, museums, churches, etc.).

Dr. Moore shared that by using only a few factors, schools can predict with better than 90% accuracy students in the third grade who will later drop out of school. These factors are: reading one year below grade level, having been retained, low socioeconomic background, and attending school with many poor children (McPartland & Slavin, 1990).

Another statistical fact that wowed the audience was how to predict poverty and middle-class status. “There are three powerful predictors of the socioeconomic level people will achieve during their lives. If individuals accomplish all three of the factors, there is a better than 90% probability that they will achieve middle-class status. If they fail to do all three, there is a 79% probability that they will live their life in poverty-stricken communities. The three factors are as follows: 1. Graduating from high school,

2. Not having a child before age 20, 3. Not having a child outside of marriage (Wilson, 1997). The audience had stimulating conversations about these three factors.

Dr. Moore also discussed school characteristics associated with success in educating high-risk youth. Schools should have a clear academic mission, an orderly environment, focus on academics, frequent monitoring of student profiles, caring and demanding teachers, and dynamic leadership (Teddie & Stringfield, 1993).

Dr. Moore quoted the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability (2004) when stating key environmental supports for pro-academic behavior: access to education-relevant capital; supportive family, community, and academic environments; socialization to the attitudinal and behavioral demands of high academic achievement; social interactions to include academic and social integration; exposure to various forms of supplementary education; exposure to models of academic excellence; and exemplars of scholarly practice.

Dr. Moore suggested ways to help students achieve. Some key points were for educators to behave as if the expectation is for all students to achieve at a high level; actively work to remove barriers to learning; teach students how to help themselves (e.g. organizational skills, study skills, test-taking skills, etc.); teach students and their families how to successfully manage the bureaucracy of the system (e.g. teach parents how to enroll their children in academic courses that will lead to college); and teach students and their families how to access support systems for academic success (House & Martin, 1998).

When working with school personnel, Dr. Moore cited strategies from House and Martin (1998) such as: use school data to promote system change; work collaboratively

with all school personnel; offer staff development training for school personnel promoting high expectations and high standards for all students; challenge the existence of low-level and unchallenging courses, and highlight information that negates myths about who can and cannot achieve success in rigorous courses and on standardized tests (e.g. PSAT/SAT).

The strategies that Dr. Moore shared for working with communities were also helpful. According to House & Martin (1998), these strategies are to:

- Organize community activities to promote supportive structures for high standards for all students.
- Help parents and the community organize efforts to work with schools to improve test scores and academic achievement in general.
- Work as a resource broker within the community to identify all available resources to help all students improve their test scores and academic performance.

Dr. Moore shared recommendations for monitoring students' academic progress and improving learning environments and relationships. Some of these strategies were for educators to monitor the academic progress of students, and proactively approach and communicate with them about resources to improve their school performance and test scores. He stated that struggling students need to be provided academic support, such as tutoring, study skills, time-management skills, and organizational skills. Mentoring programs should be used to help students refine their interests and examine career goals, as well as improve their academic performance. Educators need to create learning environments that are culturally responsive rather than culturally neutral, culturally blind,

or culturally assaultive. Having students work in cooperative groups, engage in peer tutoring, use study buddies, and participate in other social learning experiences can promote a sense of community and family for students. Educators need to work diligently to build relationships with students and parents, based on caring, trust, and positive regard.

Dr. Moore ended his presentation with the following quote from Dr. W.E.B. DuBois,

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, not are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime.

Dr. Moore reminded educators in attendance to remain cognizant of the many factors affecting African American male students in their daily practices. He shared that students should have every opportunity to succeed and reach their maximum potential, and that educators should make every attempt to model professionalism by guiding students toward responsible citizenship.

Effective Teaching Practices

The village meeting, No More Excuses: Utilizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Bring State Standards to Life for African American Males in the Classroom, presented by Dr. Chance Lewis, was highly favored among the conference participants. Dr. Lewis is an accomplished author and associate professor at Texas A&M University. This session provided classroom teachers and other educators with culturally relevant teaching strategies to assist in improving the academic achievement of African-American males in K-12 educational settings. Attendees engaged in interactive exercises to support the

strategies presented in the session. Several participants expressed their interest in duplicating the strategies with their various student populations.

The goals of this village meeting were to generate excitement among participants to serve the needs of African American males, assist with key strategies to move schools and school districts toward meeting the needs of this population of students, introducing culturally relevant pedagogy and how to use it within schools, and aligning the vision that will include everyone involved in the commitment to improve the lives of African American males. Co-author of *The Dilemmas of Being an African American Male in the New Millennium: Solutions for Life Transformation*, Dr. Lewis suggested a culturally relevant pedagogy using the following formula: Academic Standards + Relevance to Students in their Life = Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Dr. Lewis declared a state of emergency for African American males. He shared startling statistics on the disparity that exists among students from different ethnic backgrounds on nationally published standardized tests as proof positive of the decline in achievement among African American males as they progress in school. He indicated that throughout schooling, teachers are the pipeline for these youth as they go from school to one of two places: prison/death or college.

Dr. William Hammond, Professional Development Coordinator for Dekalb County Schools, hosted the village meeting Teaching African American Learners to Read and Effective Practices from the Field. He shared with participants that many teachers misjudge students by placing stereotyping upon their personality and learning abilities based on their choice in clothing, hair, and overall outward appearance.

Dr. Hammond shared that African American students will not succeed in school until educators learn how to teach them. It is most important for educators to note that African-American children learn best when they:

- are presented with options to demonstrate understanding;
- can engage in discussions and interactions with other students.
- are asked interesting questions;
- are active participants, not passive learners;
- have a sense of closure to learning; and
- receive confirmation.

Culture-based features of African American learners that are often sources of conflict in the classroom include movement and kinesthetic abilities, physical action orientation, a strong tendency towards verbal and nonverbal communication, little eye-contact when listening, and use of slang and variant dialect patterns. According to Hammond, four components of effective instruction for African American children are culturally relevant pedagogy, preferred learning styles, effective oral and written communication, and authentic assessment.

Teachers of African-American learners are most effective when they use culturally relevant pedagogy (Hale, 2001). Teaching strategies should include kinesthetic orientation, affective orientation, oral exercises, an emphasis on creative arts and dynamic activities, activities and materials which encourage oral and written expression and interactions (Haas-Dyson, 2003), and authentic assessment techniques (Hilliard, 1991). It is imperative that educators understand how a child's learning style and culture affects his behavior in the classroom. (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2002).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is instruction based on the learning styles and instructional preferences of students. Hale's (2001) conception of culturally appropriate pedagogy emphasizes "cultural salience in teaching, curricular materials and assignments" and providing cultural enrichment via the school organizing the community and families to plan various experiences for the students (p.147). The teacher using this method demonstrates a working knowledge of the cultural background and history of his or her students and incorporates that information into the instructional strategies used in the classroom.

Research indicates that African American children prefer kinesthetic and hands-on learning opportunities. This is especially indicative of African American boys. Physical activities are another source of enjoyment for African American students. **There is a strong tendency towards verbal and nonverbal communication.**

Oral and interactive exercises provide African American students an opportunity to share their stories. Collaborative projects are also great ways to encourage African American students to engage in learning. Discovery and problem-solving methods provide these students with additional ways to succeed in school.

Authentic or alternative assessment is an approach to evaluation, which provides students with choices to demonstrate mastery of subject matter. The students and the teacher may negotiate the acceptable choices or the teacher may decide to offer limited options. The primary advantage is that it provides students with options.

Authentic assessment includes performing a real life task, construction and application skills, student structured activities, and direct evidence of learning. In order for African American students to be successful in school, they must develop literacy

skills. To achieve this goal, teachers must provide them with a rich vocabulary, effective oral and written communication and be knowledgeable of how to apply reading comprehension strategies across content areas.

To develop comprehension skills, Hammond suggested that it is important to provide students with direct instruction and opportunities to practice specific skills such as identifying main or big ideas and judging the author's purpose or point of view in a passage. It is also essential for teachers to develop assignments that provide practice on content-related reading skills. Additionally, teachers must provide students with a variety of opportunities for formal and informal interaction and engagement with each other, effective models of communication, and activities that encourage them to analyze and critique each other's oral and written communication skills.

Dr. Hammond shared with the audience ten ineffective practices of traditional classrooms, which prevent students from becoming successful learners. These practices are "round robin" reading, overuse of large group instruction, failure to activate the students' prior knowledge, failure to integrate reading and writing activities into content area instruction, failure to properly introduce and reinforce new vocabulary terms and concepts, failure to use appropriate supplemental instructional resources, very little time allotted for student discussion or interaction, few opportunities for students to summarize or paraphrase main ideas of the lesson and to practice strategies for comprehending text, and few examples of "excellent work." Until teachers replace these strategies with the research based strategies discussed in this session, African American students will not reach their academic potential.

Lisa Bankston and Elizabeth Schurman, teachers from Hogan Preparatory Academy, co-hosted the village meeting Exemplary Schools Share Their Successes. They presented information about the success that they have had with African American males at their school. Hogan Preparatory Academy is a charter high school in Kansas City, Missouri. Its mission is to provide a high quality, individualized, values-based college preparatory education for a diverse student population with goals of personal achievement, academic success, and commitment to the community. Hogan Preparatory has 320 students, of which 98% are African American, and 82% qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Students come to the school 2 to 2 ½ years behind grade level, and teachers have been successful in closing the achievement gap by about one year over the course of the students' four years of attendance.

Bankston and Schurman shared a wealth of information with the audience, the most pertinent of which is their successful Advanced Placement[®] (AP) program. Currently there are thirteen AP[®] courses offered at Hogan Preparatory and 76 of 306 students took at least one AP[®] course last year. 124 exams were taken by 60 seniors in 2008, which is a little above a 2:1 ratio. The AP program has had a wonderful impact on the students at Hogan Preparatory. It has helped the school to be ranked in the top 400 in Newsweek magazine's 2008 list of America's Best High Schools. The AP program has allowed transformative travel and speaking opportunities for students. The principles of the AP program are:

- Prepare students for the rigor of AP.
- Encourage students to take AP courses.
- Differentiate the curriculum.

- Support the students academically.
- Encourage work outside of class.
- Periodically recognize the AP students.
- Motivate students to take the AP exam.
- Reward the students.
- Build sustainability into the AP Program.
- Build a culture that values academic rigor and the Advanced Placement Program.

The teachers at Hogan polled their students about their biggest challenges and one stated, “Adjusting to learning that requires more critical thinking.” Another student said, “Managing my schedule with other commitments and responsibilities such as my employment. AP courses put a limit on the number of hours that I can work weekly and determine exactly what my schedule entails.”

Bankston and Shurman discussed Hogan Preparatory Academy and its dedicated teachers. They stated that their teachers give students their home phone numbers and they think of them as their extended family. They can call them for homework help if there is something that they don’t understand.

Darius Johnson, Hogan Preparatory Academy Class of 2009, closed the informational session by sharing the challenge faced by Hogan Preparatory Academy students.

A challenge that I believe the Hogan AP students face is beating society’s S.A.S. which is merely an acronym for society’s Stereotyped and Statistics. We’re proving that we can graduate from high school, be accepted into and graduate from college, and have successful careers instead of the stereotypical view of students dropping out of school

and living the shameful life that has been portrayed so much in today's society.

In the village meeting AVID: Supplying Rigor and Support for African American Male Students, there was a lively panel discussion that included: Michael Giles, AVID National Staff Developer and Assistant Principal; Tamara Gilliam, AVID National Staff Developer and AVID teacher; Sam Logan, AVID National Staff Developer and AVID counselor; and Marilyn Gilbert-Mitchell, AVID National Staff Developer and AVID Coordinator/Teacher.

The panel members discussed at-risk students and stated that it was time to stop playing the blame game and start thinking about what schools can do differently to support African American male students. Some schools want to focus more on the affective/social emotional side of their at-risk students. Others want to teach students about note making, not note taking. One successful strategy that they discussed was the use of Cornell notes. This strategy puts more of the note taking on the student and helps them learn material better.

The panelists also discussed three important parts of instruction: rigor, relevance, and relationships. Without these three, you really can't have successful teaching and learning. The audience asked pertinent questions and the panelists answered from their specific points of view.

School, Family and Community Connections

The education of children requires a partnership between the family, school and community. A combination of high expectations and supportive social relationships enhances students' educational experiences. A main theme of the conference was the importance of the school, community and family working together to educate children.

Caring and a broad view of sharing responsibility for students were emphasized as vital to the educational process. The importance of the African American community, in contrast to individual parents, in raising children was emphasized, and viewed as a necessary part of assisting African American children to confront the challenges and succeed in the midst of living in a racially prejudiced society.

Dr. Darlene Willis, a repeat presenter from the 2007 AVID conference, hosted Understanding Parents and Educators: Working TOGETHER to Ensure the Educational Success of African American Males. Phillip Willis, son of Dr. Willis, served as co-host in this drama-filled session. This village meeting began with a captivating monologue entitled *Mean Momma*, which was expertly performed by Dr. Willis. Citing examples from her childhood with a stern mother, Dr. Willis dramatically emphasized the importance of the role parents play in rearing and educating children in partnership with the community and school.

This interactive workshop enabled participants to empower their schools to help students reach their full potential, and become self-confident and motivated. Willis encouraged educators, parents, and AVID representatives to work together to help African American males achieve academic success and self-confidence.

Co-author of *Empowering Parents: A Guide to Taking Control of Your Child's Educational Journey* and co-founder of College Bound San Diego, Dr. Willis shared her successful secrets including the importance of educating and empowering parents. For school districts working to decrease the achievement gap among African American males, there should be on-going efforts to provide specific communications, and

programs and/or activities to build positive relationships between parents and their children's school.

District and school leaders should proactively seek opportunities to encourage and support the creation of parent education and support programs for parents of children from underrepresented and underserved student groups. Parent education support programs should pay close attention to both general knowledge about the educational system and specific information regarding college knowledge. School district leaders should actively encourage, support and engage independent advocacy groups for parents of underrepresented and underserved children. School and district leaders should conduct audits to determine if perspectives of various cultures and culturally diverse literature are appropriately represented in the regular curriculum experienced by all students.

In *A Candid Talk with an African American Male*, Willis' son, Phillip, shared a first-hand account of his life as a young African American male reared in a home with a "mean momma." He indicated that despite his mother's earnest efforts to keep him away from the dangers in the streets, he fell prey to a life of drugs and violence. He was kept under a watchful eye during his high school years and left home to attend college out of state. While in college, he befriended some young men who influenced him to deal drugs, promote prostitution, and fail in school. After falling short of the goals he and his parents set for him, he was forced to return home. With the support of his parents and a renewed sense of purpose, Phillip, an AVID graduate, "got back on track" and is now a motivational speaker for youth.

Proponents of Empowering Parents believe that it is imperative for schools to establish a positive relationship with parents who have the power to take back control of

their children's educational journey, and regain control of their households. With increased membership and support from parents and educators in the community, the program has achieved many successes since its inception in the San Diego, California metropolitan area:

- increased membership to include nearly 50 alumni;
- engaged and empowered parents and students with skills in public speaking, black history, cultural awareness, financial management, career exploration, and parental and student rights;
- 100% of the student membership participate in college preparation tests;
- raised over \$75,000 in scholarships by parent volunteers;
- community partnerships with local and national companies; and
- published *Empowering Parents* which highlights the success of the program.

According to Willis, an achievement gap ignored will lead to increased dropout rates and Black males becoming an endangered species who become misplaced in special education. The Empowering Parents organization makes the following recommendations for educators and administrators:

- believe there are parents who care;
- admit there is a challenge with African American males;
- become champions who empower parent programs;
- keep expectations high for African American males;
- remember Parent-Teacher-Associations may not represent ALL parent voices and to engage ALL parents, and

- be careful of labeling African American males as defiant, intimidating, funny, etc.

Jaqueline Rushing, founder and executive director of Young Scholars Program was another well-received presenter. Her program, *What if the Prince Dared to be King*, has the goal of engaging program strategies that will address the needs of young African American males and give them the tools to be successful academically, professionally, and socially. The program has four objectives. The first objective is to help African American males achieve socio-emotional development, educational achievement (high school graduation and college completion), and career development (internships and well- paid employment). Objectives two and three are to provide a focus on mental and physical fitness as important factors in determining longevity and quality of one's life and to give African American males a sense of individual and collective spirituality. Objective four is to develop an answer to what it means to be a man, such as decreasing masculine bravado attitudes, dealing with anger and rage, and understanding masculinity as it relates to adulthood and responsibilities.

Ms. Rushing discussed the design of this project, and it is based on the answer to the question, *Why do gangs have success in recruiting our boys?* She wanted to include some of the elements of "gang-structure" to create a brotherhood. The program has a logo, t-shirt, and a dress code, a document that guides and defines their behavior, a chain of command, a call and response that says who they are and what they believe in giving unity to their cause, and teams that provide a sense of belonging on a smaller scale and a competitive spirit. They made the program into a real brotherhood.

In the program, there are ten different stages of development with corresponding assignments that must be completed for participation in the Rites of Passage Ceremony. The program volunteers mentor on teams and two mentors are assigned to a group of 5-6 boys. Each team has its own name. They use a point system to give incentives to actively participate, which promotes healthy competition. The princes meet two to three times per month for two hours. They have an enrichment activity once a month for five months. In this program, the young princes are taught to say “yes” to a better quality of life.

Ms. Rushing told the audience how she successfully implemented the project with lots of advertisement. She shared that if you hook the mother, you will “hook” the young man. They recruited young men at schools, churches, street corners, and anywhere they could find young men willing to try success. The biggest hook of their program was that they guarantee college admission. They have various programs including white water rafting, enrichment/travel, college tours, mentorships, and great role models. She stated that the most important things that they had were princes who dared to be kings.

The audience was thrilled to see three of Ms. Rushing’s young princes at the village meeting. These young men, DeAndre, William, and Dupre attend Morehouse College and had been through Ms. Rushing’s program. They came in dressed in suits and spoke highly of their time in the program, even stating that they missed spring break last year because Ms. Rushing had a group of young men coming to Morehouse for a tour during that time. The audience could tell how influential the program was in the eyes of these young men who have scholarships to Morehouse College, thanks in part to Ms. Rushing.

Ms. Rushing shared with the audience how schools, colleges and universities can be helpful with African American males. She stated that counselors need to host a night for parents. Counselors should also host programs such as the Prince 2B King to talk with parents about how to get their sons on a post-secondary education track, whether it is a certification skill or earning a college degree. Schools can host Saturday schools or boot camps to boost skills for the assessment test for graduation and college entrance. Colleges and universities can host fly-in programs and overnight stays so they can experience college life before they are freshmen and also to make a good match for the college and the student. Ms. Rushing introduced three mentors in her program, John Know, Coordinator of the Prince 2B King Project; Ronald Mack, Coordinator of the Teen Leadership Project; and Sal Tulah, Good Will Ambassador, who shared their experiences working with the young men and making a difference in their lives.

Shared Goals for Lifelong Learning

No Victims Here! Yes, Our Young Men Can Succeed in College-Prep Programs! was a village meeting presented by Debra Watkins, Founder and President of California Alliance of African American Educators (CAAE). The vision of CAAE is to achieve excellence in education for ALL African American students thereby enabling them to successfully participate in and contribute to a global society. Watkins urged attendees to encourage their students to reject the “victim” mentality that is linked to decades of racist beliefs and practices.

The CAAE sponsors several students in the Greene Scholars Program whose mission is to help African American youth excel in math, science and technology, successfully complete higher education and serve as positive role models and

contributors to their communities. The program honors African American scientist, Dr. Frank S. Greene, a Silicon Valley pioneer in the field of technology, who helped pave the way for the success of today's computer software and applications. It is a long term, college preparatory program with three components, character development, career exploration, and technical training.

As a part of the character development component, parents must volunteer to do various jobs within the organization at least twice during the year. A required six-hour training session on character development is also provided for parents. A commitment of an annual program fee of \$350.00 must be raised or donated by parents. In the career exploration component, scholars participate in a citywide career exposition and career fairs judged by role models with careers in math, science, and technology.

The Greene Scholars Program is proud of its parent involvement. The Organizational Advisory Committee, comprised of parents of Greene Scholars, meet monthly to help coordinate program activities and to ensure that all aspects of the program run smoothly. At all times, parents serve as positive role models for the scholars.

Sponsorship is vital to the success of the Greene Scholars Program. Local and national companies serve as sponsors and partners providing essential resources and materials and helping to fund initiatives in math, science, and technology to promote student engagement. Mrs. Watkins shared with attendees tips for replicating the program and encouraged them to follow AVID's leadership role in forming healthy villages where African American students become culturally conscious, life-long learners.

The technical training component provides a laptop for each scholar included with Microsoft Office Suite software. Scholar parents with careers in technology serve as experts and conduct training for the students. The Greene Scholars meet monthly in individual workspaces in the CAAE headquarters at Cypress Semiconductor in San Jose, California. The program has been a success and helped to increase student interest and performance in math and science.

Todd Suddeth of the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male in Columbus, Ohio, hosted the village meeting The Warrior Method Approach to Academic Success for African American Males. The center was named in memory of the late Bell, a former Ohio State University (OSU) All Big Ten football player, All-Pro safety with the Chicago Bears, and administrator in the OSU Office of Minority Affairs. Todd Anthony Bell was instrumental in establishing OSU's first Black male initiative to rectify the dismal graduation rates for African American males.

The purpose of this session was to raise Black boys to become Black men. The method is based upon the theory on African Mendeh tribal king, Sengbeh Pieh's, life from the movie *Amistad*. The Warrior Method is a rites of passage approach for African American males comprised of a four-step model. Spring (birth-age 4), Summer (ages 5-12), Autumn (ages 13-17), and Winter (ages 17-18).

During the Spring, there is a birthing circle for mothers, which provides assistance with prenatal care, Lamaze classes, and travel to the hospital. There is a naming ceremony for the child. The Summer introduces young Black males to the Young Warriors Council where they participate in monthly meetings and field trips, a reading

club, mentoring activities, and an introduction to careers in media, law, business, and technology.

In autumn, the Warrior Council continues with additional activities for young males. There is a Rites of Passage week filled with education related activities, and dialogue regarding male and female relationships. Monthly meetings and mentoring activities continue during this phase. The Winter phase includes a Bridge Program for male teens that provides college skills training, social support, and encourages supportive relationships with mentors.

There are many benefits to The Warrior Method. This Rites of Passage program helps young males increase self-perception, decrease stereotype threat, and gain self-efficacy and self-esteem. The program provides a support network of peers, mentors, and family members. Social and civic organizations also play a vital role in the success of The Warrior Method. Schools, churches, fraternities and sororities, colleges and universities, and volunteer and service based agencies all provide resources and manpower to assist in the mission of the Bell Center's Warrior Method Approach.

The center has experienced great success in its delivery of programs to young Black males. Its initiatives and programs include the Early Arrival Program, which is a transition program for entering freshman male students. During the weekend before classes begin, the students are invited to participate in workshops related to academic success and personal development. There are opportunities provided to meet with current students, faculty and staff members to increase the retention of African American males in college. Based on this program, Ohio State University increased its retention rate in one year from 82% to 95%.

Another initiative is the Leadership Institute, which lasts an academic year with modules in Vision and Goal Setting, Cultural Competency, Historical African American Leaders, and Effective Communication. Lastly, The African American Male Retreat promotes self-awareness, unity, academic motivation, leadership, and manhood among a concentrated group of African American male undergraduate students.

The initiatives and programs of the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male help to create a sense of community and connectedness for African American males at The Ohio State University to ensure their success in college and beyond. Best practices research methods are employed that inform theory, policy, and practice on African American males.

Dr. Mack Hines, III, author, educator, consultant, and speaker, presented the village meeting *Up Where They Belong—How to Create a Rites of Passage Mentoring Program to Facilitate African American Males' Success in Elementary School*. This session described the use of a culturally sensitive African American rites of passage mentoring program to improve the academic and social development of elementary-aged African American males.

Dr. Hines indicated that African American males exist in environments of poverty, crime, and unemployment, succumb to peer pressure, delinquency, violence, and disillusionment with life, flounder in school, and struggle with maintaining direct contact with positive role models. The M.A.L.E. Mentoring Program (Motivating African American Males to Learn and Excel in school) was created to evoke change in African American males' attitudes and behaviors at home, in school, and in the community. The sixteen-week program includes 4 Rites of Passage, one per week over a four-week

period. The four rites of development are Maturity, Achievement, Leadership, and Ethnic Development.

In the Maturity rite of passage, students are introduced to the four habits of mature individuals. The habits taught are being yourself, managing anger, making good decisions, and solving problems. In the Achievement rite, students learn the four habits of high achieving individuals, which are getting a good education, how to study and do homework, how to participate in class, and how to find a career. The Leadership phase consists of the four habits of highly effective leaders. Students are shown tips for being a role model serving others, being a team player, and allowing others to lead. The Ethnic Development phase shows students that African American males are individuals who appreciate and embrace their ethnicity. They understand the meaning of being a Black, a male, and a Black male in America.

There were strengths and limitations to Dr. Hines' program. Teacher surveys indicated an improvement in students' prosocial skills, while interviews showed an increased focus on academics among the participants. Students were observed being more respectful of teachers and other students. There was also improvement in anger management among students and several followers and leaders emerged in the group. Several students also improved their ability to work in a group.

Student survey results indicated an improvement in self-esteem, while interviews with participants revealed an improvement in perception of school, and an increased focus on achievement. Limitations of the program were the ages of the participants and the one hour allotted for the sessions. There was an observed disconnect between the goals of the program and the teachers who worked with the students in the classroom.

Recommendations from Dr. Hines for future Rites of Passage programs include incorporating a training program for teachers and community leaders, that teachers spend six weeks per Rite of Passage rather than four, and more than one hour be spent with students per session.

Dr. Hines has made a difference in the lives of several students in Texas. He indicated that this program, effectively implemented with his recommendations, is a great source of help for African American male students to achieve success in classrooms and schools and a model for how schools can use mentoring to increase their academic and social development. Used appropriately, a rites of passage program can prepare African American students for a sense of responsibility at home, in school, and in the community.

Conclusion

One of the most pressing challenges in education continues to be helping all of America's children meet the standards needed to live, learn, work, communicate, and be productive citizens in the highly technological and global community of the twenty-first century. Within the world of schools, cultural experiences have a profound effect on the ways in which students approach learning and the schooling experience, including their relationships with teachers and peers. Similarly, cultural experiences also affect the ways in which teachers approach both teaching and their own learning (i.e., professional development), as well as their relationships with students and colleagues.

The institutional structures of schools must provide a variety of organizational options designed to support the high achievement of all students. To make schools work for African American students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds, a

school's culture and structure must be built on a foundation of respect for diversity and support for the high achievement of its students.

Education remains the most effective road to success. Removing the barriers that prevent African American students from accessing a high-quality public education is an essential first step to achieving access to the economic, social, and political resources that are needed to support strong families and a truly democratic society. The most effective educational leaders are collaborators, working with their staff, their students and their students' families to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to establish educational climates that ensure the high achievement of African American students.

Critical first steps on this journey for teachers is to seek to acquire skills in culturally relevant pedagogy and to understand more about the concept of culture in general and then to explore their own cultural backgrounds, including how their own cultural experiences have worked to shape their belief systems about other people and their own world views. To become more effective at meeting the learning needs of African American students, educators must commit to becoming more culturally knowledgeable and aware. More specifically, educators must be committed to gaining authentic cultural knowledge of the African American experience in America and the life experiences of their African American students. They must also work toward developing authentic relationships with their African American students, families, colleagues, and communities.

The AVID program has taken the initiative to prepare educators in becoming more culturally responsive and in preparing young African American males for leadership in college and the community. The Up Where We Belong Conference

provided a wealth of village meetings filled with effective strategies for educators, parents, and school personnel to incorporate meaningful lessons to help close the achievement gap that exists between minority, disadvantaged students and their White counterparts. It is evident that what parents, school administrators and teachers believe about the possibilities for teaching and learning for African American children has a profound effect on what they choose to teach, how they will teach it, and how they will determine what their children have learned. To achieve improved results for African American students, we must focus our efforts not only on key aspects of whole school improvement, but also on individual students, particularly those students who are either not making gains at all or are not making gains fast enough to close the achievement gap within a reasonably short time.

Strong positive relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students are key to accomplishing the results that educators, students, and their families are seeking to improve the educational achievements of African American students. When parents are not available to assume their partnership roles, for whatever reason, it becomes important for school personnel to work cooperatively to establish caring, supportive relationships with its students. This enables students to gain the self-confidence and skills necessary to take responsibility for their own learning. Teacher relationships with African American students should be based on mutual respect developed through an understanding of and appreciation for the student's cultural and individual identity. Teachers and students must both accept responsibility for improving achievement, and this is best accomplished through caring, mutually respectful, and cooperative teacher-student relationships.

Many educators acknowledge the importance of authentically addressing diversity in school reform efforts. They often recognize that designing effective educational programs for African American students requires a great deal more than celebrating Black History month, having African American role models, or incorporating the historical contributions of people from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds into the curriculum. Because educators are not always sure how to integrate issues related to differences in students' backgrounds and learning preferences into the overall reform effort, the AVID conference serves as a practical guide to this end.

The *Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African American Male Student Achievement* conference of the AVID organization was a huge success. With leading educators, practitioners, and scholars in the field, it continues to put at the fingertips of education leaders and policymakers an institutional and cultural context from which to develop policies, practices, and programs that support high achievement among African American students.

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