DRIVER RESEARCH BRIEF: YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

A research brief to maximize the success of African American male students

About this brief

This research brief brings to life Kingmakers of Oakland's driver research through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative equity work nationally, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for African American/Black male youth. The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for educators and community partners to use during professional learning and collaborative conversations. This research brief explores how schools and educators can work together to cultivate youth voice and leadership.

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Focus

Elevate Black Male Youth Voice and Leadership

Consistent with current literature and practice, youth voice and leadership refers to the opportunities for youth to (1) engage in self-advocacy; (2) express —and have others hear and value — their ideas, thoughts and beliefs; (3) engage in dynamic learning; and (4) build their leadership skills as part of the decision-making process. Decades of research and practice on what is needed to cultivate and nurture Black youth voice and leadership is clear: educators need to create safe, supportive environments where students can cultivate their self-advocacy, academic, and leadership skills.[1]

Affirm a Positive School Culture for Black Boys' Success: Youth Voice

Fostering an affirming culture of care for Black boys is central to growing Black boys' voices. This respectful culture is one where students (and their families) experience a deep sense of belonging, positive, trusting relationships, and recognition for their achievements and accomplishments. Researchers and practitioners broadly agree on the positive impacts of a welcoming school climate on well-being, identity, and mental health. Importantly, a warm, kind, intellectually challenging environments are associated with decreasing the following: bullying/cyberbullying,[2] unwanted social behaviors,[3] and suicidal ideation.[4] Likewise, academic achievement and engagement improve.[5]

Nevertheless, the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices like suspension and expulsion in response to Black male students has been well documented for decades.[6] Bias, a key contributing factor, impacts educators' expectations of Black male students, contributes to a toxic environment, and negatively impacts their voice by excluding them from the learning process. And, bias toward Black boys begins early: Black children represent 18 percent of preschool students, yet they account for 48 percent of preschool suspensions.[7] Likewise, Black boys are disproportionately

suspended from school,[8] less likely to experience intellectually challenging instruction,[9] and more likely to experience the school to prison pipeline even though the behaviors mirror those of White adolescents.[10] In fact, Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students, and Black and Latino/a/x students account for 70 percent of school police referrals.[11] Understanding data on discipline practices and bias is key: research shows that suspension is the lead predictor (more than poverty) that results in greater likelihood of students dropping out of school and increasing the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system.[12]

To support educators to understand and unpack these data, the Kingmakers of Oakland uses a pond metaphor to identify (name, frame, and explain) and unpack current school culture and conditions that prevent Black male youth from achieving at high levels. In a polluted pond, inequitable practices ignore students' lived experiences, cultural wealth,[13] and unique needs, hindering their ability to flourish. In a polluted pond, the fish suffer.

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This polluted pond prevents Black boys from flourishing academically and socially and creates the impetus for disparate educational, financial, and health outcomes for Black men in America. Accordingly, it is essential to engage the entire community in nurturing a healthy pond for the well-being of Black boys by creating the conditions for them to strengthen their positive self expression and voice. To improve school culture and climate and create a healthy pond (i.e., healing the fish), equity-conscious educators, including administrators, teachers, and support staff, acknowledge how institutional racism (i.e., the toxic pond) is hardwired into the educational setting, and intentionally creates welcoming conditions that centers Black male youth voices in the school community. Specifically, these leaders purposefully design and implement school and classroom structures that nurture secure relationships (e.g. high levels of self-esteem and sense of belonging, high rates of literacy, high expectations from adults with support) and cultivate opportunities for positive individual and group expression. [15]

Affirm a Positive School Culture for Black Boys' Success: Youth Leadership

Creating positive opportunities for Black male students to grow their leadership skills is pivotal. Providing culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices that value and celebrate their' strengths, identities, and communities — from preschool through high school — supports their leadership growth. These multidimensional instructional practices and approaches underscore two overarching areas of focus: building trusting relationships and focusing on content mastery (i.e., demonstrating mastery of subject matter).[16] To create the conditions for Black boys to thrive in both areas teachers must be able to implement culturally relevant practices that use an asset-based

lens that values and integrates the cultural and linguistic strengths and experiences these students bring to the classroom, instructional scaffolds to support language and content learning, and daily affirmations and encouragement. The authentic use of affirmations and micro-affirmations (i.e., nodding, calling students by their names, providing opportunities and space for a variety of responses) can counter harmful messages students may have internalized [17] and promote leadership skills like self-awareness, self-empowerment, and advocacy.

An example of an approach to support student leadership is the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model: a community-based, critical inquiry forum that centers youth as researchers who design and investigate important issues in their communities.[18] Students work together, often in an elective course or extracurricular program, to solve real-world programs. In the YPAR programs, students conduct qualitative data collection in their schools or communities and, with support and guidance from YPAR staff, students analyze data to understand trends and illuminate findings. YPAR projects have shown promising outcomes for both increasing student engagement and informing policy at the school site level. [19]

One study explores how students in Stockton Unified School District utilized YPAR through the Peer Leaders Uniting Students program, a school-based initiative that empowers students to lead their own research and inform the school strategic plan.[20] In the two years of the program across 49 schools, there was clear evidence that PLUS students felt more engaged and connected to their school sites. In one PLUS class, students administered a survey and found that tardiness, which resulted in discipline, was a chronic issue at their school. YPAR student researchers held a forum with students who were chronically absent/tardy and discovered that the between-class passing period was too short. This finding was presented to school leadership and resulted in a schoolwide pilot program for longer passing periods. This shift in practice impacted the entire student body and the school schedule.

Healing the Fish by Treating the Toxic Ecosystem

The pond metaphor comes full circle: by treating the toxic ecosystem, the fish can heal and thrive. The transformational benefits of healing the fish and creating a culture of care for Black boys in schools means that educators engage in an ongoing process and learning to ensure a safe and welcoming environment where Black boys express their intellectual thoughts and ideas, engage in dynamic learning, build their leadership skills as part of the decision-making process, and engage in self-advocacy and leadership. Elevating Black youth voice and leadership is a way of being for equity-conscious educators: and holding an asset-based mindset about Black boys is foundational.
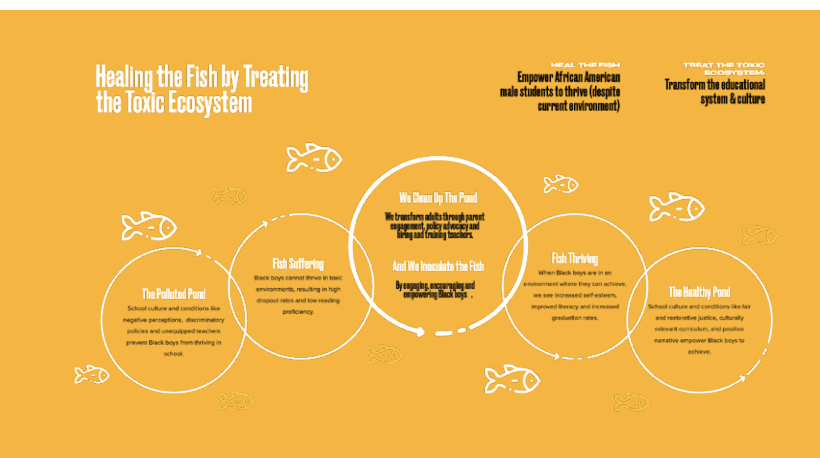
Implications and Actions

Youth voice and leadership matter. A collective commitment is needed to change the way districts and schools engage Black boys in their educational journeys. Importantly, educators need to elevate Black male youth voice and leadership and affirm a positive school culture. Likewise, educators and policy makers need to see Black male students as assets to the leadership decision-making process, foster safe conditions for them to voice their thoughts and beliefs, support them to advocate for themselves and others, and ensure dynamic learning is happening every day.

Actions for Educators
(teachers, support staff, administrators):

- View Black male students as legitimate, crucial contributors to school improvement and positive school change.
- Provide Black male students opportunities to address school improvement issues, through such activities as planning and decision making.[21]
- Create a rich environment in which Black male students know they are expected to participate, contribute, and add value.[22]
- Engage in efforts to create or refine Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) programs that center Black male experiences and voice.
- Create an environment where students own and drive their own learning. When students are empowered to own their own learning they are enabled to take a leadership stance.[23]
- Identify resources that can support social, emotional, health, academic, and economic well-being for students and families.
- Establish expectations and yearly performance measures (school and district) for student voice and leadership. Implement feedback loops and share the information with students, families, and the school community.
- Implement a student code of conduct that minimizes suspensions and allows students to learn from their mistakes.
- Provide sustained professional learning for educators to build their understanding and ability to create positive school culture and climate by fostering the conditions to support safe, nurturing environments.

Actions for Policy Makers (Boards of Education, Departments of Education, legislatures):

- Create board policies that ensure students from historically marginalized communities are represented on local and state boards of education.
- Review yearly students' perspectives data (e.g., student climate surveys, focus group data). Disaggregate the data by student group (e.g., ethnicity, grade, school) and use it to inform current and future policies and decision-making.
- Review and frequently monitor academic and behavioral data for Black male students and ensure Board goals are inclusive of their progress and unique needs.
- Institute codes of conduct that requires school/district staff to use positive discipline practices (e.g., Restorative Practices, peer-to-peer problem solving).
- Work with local law enforcement agencies to keep minor offenders out of criminal courts.

Questions

1. In what ways and how often do staff analyze patterns of how they talk about, think about, and implement practices (academic and discipline) that positively and adversely affect Black male students?

2. What is the culture around Black male students advocating for their needs? How is this advocacy perceived by the adults on campus? What spaces are provided or processes are in place to hear Black male students share their needs and experiences?

3. Where is the locus of control over learning in the classroom? How are Black male students encouraged and supported to take ownership of their learning?

4. What are the expectations and supports for Black male students to use discipline-specific habits of thinking in their academic discourse?

5. What questions, statements, and actions does the teaching staff use to encourage Black male students (and all students) to share their thinking with one another, to build on one another's ideas, and to assess their understanding of one another's ideas?

6. What biases about behavior, discipline, and intellectual ability do we hold about Black male students? What are the implications of these biases for Black boys? What opportunities exist to learn about the underlying social and historical context?

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