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HIGHLIGHTING  
CRITICAL ISSUES  
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YOUTH

**POLICY BRIEF**

**2014**

**BUILDING BRIDGES:**  
Connecting Out-  
of-School Time to  
Classroom Success  
Among School-Age  
Black Males in the  
District Of Columbia

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# **BUILDING BRIDGES:**

Connecting Out-of-School Time to Classroom  
Success Among School-Age Black Males in  
the District of Columbia

*photo: Men Can Stop Rape*



# POLICY BRIEF

This report identifies specific mechanisms by which out-of-school time (OST) programs can build effective bridges to encourage and affirm academic success among Black male students. Conceptually, we believe that existing OST programs that focus on workforce development, healthy lifestyles, safety and structure, and strong families can incorporate key elements that will influence Black males' adjustment to school. The major findings of this report revolve around three primary areas:

## 1 SURVEY OF DATA

The report includes findings from original analyses of secondary national and local data, as well as original empirical analyses of primary interview data collected by the project's research team. These findings support the premise that OST programs should be specifically tailored to meet the needs of Black boys and young men. Although the statistics are sobering and reflect the realities of Black males in the

District and urban areas around the country, these statistics by no means represent the experiences of all Black male youth. In order to promote their academic success and wellbeing, educators and service providers need to go beyond the data to understand the various ways in which Black males are surviving, thriving, and demonstrating a level of resilience belied by the statistics.

## 2 SURVEY OF RESEARCH

Researchers examined literature across the four domain areas—workforce development, healthy lifestyles, safety and structure, and strong families—and found many functional components that had promise for OST programs. However, we also found aspects of OST programs that work across domains. Based on our examination of the literature and our conversations with OST practitioners, we compiled a list of key components of effective OST programs. This list was used to frame our dialogue with OST programs in Washington, DC, who provide services to Black males.

## 3 SURVEY OF PROGRAMS

In-depth interviews with senior leadership at 16 OST programs suggest a variety of ways in which key program components were operationalized. The director of research at the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation (The Trust) convened a meeting with its program officers and leadership to brainstorm the OST programs in the District of Columbia metropolitan area that were doing the best work with Black male youth across a range of goal areas. As a result, we were able to determine the extent to which the OST programs studied operated in a manner that was consistent with best practice literature. Also, we identified key challenges that may impact OST programs.

Young  
Black males are  
keenly aware of  
the problems  
facing their  
community.



## THE DATA

### HIGH SCHOOL PERSISTENCE

- The cohort graduation rate for Black males in Washington, DC, is 38%.
- Nationally, the dropout rate for Black males is 8.7%. In Washington, DC, the dropout rate for Black males is 14%.

### GRADE SCHOOL RETENTION

- Among Black males in Kindergarten through 12th grade in DC, 7.2% have been retained in a grade.
- Black males in Washington, DC, are more than twice as likely to be held back in Kindergarten as in any other grade from elementary to 8th grade.
- Black males are the least likely to be retained in the 8th grade and most likely to be retained in the 9th grade.

*photo: Life Pieces to Master Pieces*

## DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS

- Black males account for 39% of all Kindergarten through 12th grade students in the District of Columbia Public School System, but account for nearly 60% of the 5,485 students who have been identified as having a disability, compared to 33% for Black females and 1.6% for White males.
- Black males in Washington, DC, account for 74% of students who have been diagnosed with an “emotional disturbance,” compared to 24% for Black females and 0% for White males.

## SUSPENSIONS

- In 2009, Black males were the most likely to be suspended from school in Washington, DC.
- Black males account for 54% of all students in Washington, DC, schools who have been suspended, yet they represent only 39% of public school population.

## HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

- According to the U.S. Census, only 15% of dependent Black males are being raised with both a mother and a father in the household in Washington, DC. The percentage of Black males in Washington, DC, without two parents in the household is almost half the percentage for Black males nationally.

## EMPLOYMENT

- Among Black males in Washington, DC, who are between the age of 16 and 24 who are in the labor force (not in school and looking for work), 44% are unemployed.
- Among Black males in Washington, DC, who do not have any education beyond a high school diploma, 56% are unemployed, compared to 27% for Black females.



## HOUSEHOLD INCOME

- In 1990, 27% of Black children in Washington, DC, were being raised in families that were in poverty, while 69% of White children were being raised in families that were “comfortable,” (as measured by having an income that is more than 5 times the rate of poverty).
- In 2011, 39% of Black children were living in poverty, while 90% of White children were living in comfortable homes.
- The percent of Black families in comfortable homes increased from 9 to 15% in the last 30 years.

*photo: Life Pieces to Master Pieces*

# THE RESEARCH

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### *Key Findings*

- Black males need to believe that what they are learning in school is important for their future.
- The High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 found that most Black males want to go to college after they finish high school.
- Among Black males who participated in Health Behaviors in School-Age Children (HBSC) survey, when replying to the question, “What do you think you will be doing when you finish high school?,” the majority (61%) of Black male respondents replied, “4-year college or university.”

**Implications for OST Programs:** Black males desire an education that prepares them for the future. They become disengaged from school when they do not find schoolwork meaningful or relevant to their future. Most Black men desire to go to college, which

represents an “aspiration-attainment paradox” as the majority do not complete college. To improve these outcomes, workforce development should be interwoven into the academic experiences of Black males. In addition, Black males need access to a rigorous curriculum that contains a full range of math and science classes. OST programs, in particular, have the potential to connect Black males to experiences that link their schoolwork to broader life objectives.

**Key components include:** communication skills; high quality work experience and career exposure; and positive sense of self/self-esteem.

## HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

### *Key Findings*

- Academically successful Black males were almost twice as likely to report feeling happy about the quality of their life when compared to those with failing grades.

Black males need access to a rigorous curriculum that contains a full range of math and science classes.



**Implications for OST Programs:** Mental and emotional health and wellbeing together with nutrition and fitness should be integrated into OST programs for Black males. After school educational programs that emphasize healthy eating and the preparation of fresh, healthy foods can be an effective learning tool. OST providers should also consider the nature and role of peer relationships on the academic success of Black males. Peer support networks can be an integral component of the OST experience.

**Key components include:** physical activity, fitness, and sport participation.

- More healthy foods and less junk food were associated with higher academic achievement.
- Eating raw vegetables was the only food that was independently associated with higher levels of academic achievement among Black males.
- Physical activity, fitness, and participation in sports also correlate with positive social and emotional wellbeing among Black males.

## SAFETY AND STRUCTURE

### *Key Findings*

- Black and Latino males are more likely to report feeling unsafe in their school environment.
- Black male students, regardless of academic standing, rate school safety below the average of their peers in other races.
- Across all races, feeling safe at school is associated with improved academic functioning.

*photo: Men Can Stop Rape*

- Black and Latino males were significantly more likely than White males to feel unsafe in their neighborhood and had a much more difficult time trusting neighbors.
- Overall, these findings suggest that students' feelings about safety are associated with academic success. Specifically, a perceived lack of safety is correlated with lower levels of academic success.

**Implications for OST Programs:** OST programs should emphasize the development of safe, secure, and supportive adult interactions with students, when devising strategies to promote academic success. Program developers should consider ways to encourage and support schools and school districts in developing policies and practices designed to ensure student safety, developed in partnership with students. OST programs should enact strategies that build connections between schools and communities that bolster security in school environments and address the feelings of students regarding the level of safety in their school environments, thereby reducing difficulties with trust among school-age Black males.

**Key components include:** community building and involvement; conflict management and resolution skills; creative expression through the arts; culture-based approaches; emphasis on achievement; moral and spiritual development; personal identity development; and safe and supportive environment.

## STRONG FAMILIES

### Key Findings

- As a single variable, household composition carries little weight, and appears to serve as a proxy for more serious issues, such as teenage pregnancy and incarcerated parents.
- Parents who participate in school more have children who are more academically astute.
- Three distinct categories of parental involvement had an impact on children's academic success: (a) academic socialization (i.e., socialization around the goals and purposes of education and strategies for success); (b) school-based involvement (i.e., volunteering at school); and (c) home-based involvement (i.e., helping with homework).

Safety is a factor that is uniquely related to academic success among school age Black males.

OST programs should avoid placing unfair and unfounded judgments on household configurations.

- When analyzing parenting practices with HBSC survey results, the strongest parenting indicators of academic success were holistic factors including: Parents who often told children they were proud of them; and Parents who let students know when they did a good job.

**Implications for OST Programs:** OST programs should avoid placing unfair and unfounded judgments on household configurations and should work to bridge the relationship between parents and school. Parents are more likely to be engaged in their child's education when they receive information about how to help children learn at home; information on community services to help their child; explanations of classes in terms of course content and learning goals; and information about child development. Parent education and parenting organizations should stress aspects of positive parenting that has translated into academic success.

**Key components include:** case management; home visits; parenting and co-parenting skills; and positive father involvement.

## GENERAL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

When examining research literature across the four domain areas (workforce development, healthy lifestyles, safety and structure, and strong families), we found many functional components that had promise for OST programs focused on those goals. However, we also found aspects of OST programs that work across domains. General program components represent those elements of OST programs that did not necessarily fit into the four specified domain areas and were not uniformly represented among the organizations interviewed for this report, but were still noted in the literature and mentioned during the interview process. Key components include: extracurricular activities model; life coaching/problem solving skills; mentoring; school readiness; youth leadership development; and college and career readiness.

## THE PROGRAMS

After using the research to identify key components of effective OST programs, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the senior staff of OST programs in Washington, DC, to understand how they operationalized the components. The interviews with program staff reinforced the importance of the identified program components and also revealed challenges. Many of the challenges were systemic in nature, such as labor market changes impacting employment, community intergenerational poverty, and school discipline policies that seem to work against the best and most well-intended programmatic efforts. Challenges related to programs included lack of funding, leadership changes and instability, and difficulties recruiting and qualifying volunteers and staff members. Additional challenges discussed were related to mental wellness and socioemotional health, including, but not limited to, the wellbe-

ing and motivation of Black males who have been suspended from school, are seriously behind grade level, or have encountered interpersonal trauma or systemic racism.

### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Draw on labor market trends within high demand sectors to create training opportunities and experiences that support the development of job skills and employment attainment, particularly among residents of low-income neighborhoods.
- Expand the pathways to careers by targeting training toward a particular job rather than providing general job training.
- Provide education and support about how to engage with other cultures on the job.



- Encourage community engagement with program participants to create a caring and supportive environment.
- Provide ongoing support, tools, and best practices for program staff to remain neutral in their approach to corrective action, not allowing pervasive stereotypes of Black boys to inform their actions.

## HEALTHY LIFESTYLES RECOMMENDATIONS

- Athletic programs and academic programs should not operate independently, but should be integrated to reinforce complementary benefits.
- Promote nutrition through creative means, such as using urban gardens, science integration, and community-based activities.

## SAFETY AND STRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement more group-based life coaching for youth and create a unique space where the youth can discuss their goals and aspirations, along with the strategies for achieving them.
- Establish rituals and traditions within the program to build community and a sense of belonging.
- Provide self-care and vicarious trauma training for staff who work intensely with youth who have very difficult lives.

*photo: Life Pieces to Master Pieces*

- Create an organization that can respond to trauma at the individual, familial, and community level.
- Use security guards as minimally as possible, as their presence can heighten feelings of distrust and undermine program goals.

### **STRONG FAMILIES RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Support clinical best-practices that promote healthy communication and the development of effective co-parenting skills between the primary caregivers of children.
- Increase the number of Black male clinicians on staff that can directly assist fathers in working through targeted challenges.
- Partner with other agencies (such as Concerned Black Men) to offer additional support and programming for parents beyond the scope of the OST program.

### **GENERAL PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Create a “trainee advisory board” to infuse student feedback into the program, when possible.
- Cultivate, support, and retain Black male mentors who have knowledge and experience that can benefit younger generations, whether they are those whom have overcome adversity or those whom have achieved high levels of wealth or professional status.
- Improve upon the programmatic capacity for data gathering and evaluation.
- Use technology (particularly social media) as a means of constant support to young people.

Athletic programs and academic programs should not operate independently, but should be integrated to reinforce complementary benefits.

OST programs should augment employment opportunities with professional development.

## POLICY SUPPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Expand youth employment opportunities for high school youth in OST programs and in schools, preferably paid positions, ideally, suited to the young person's interests.
- Provide high school and college credits for participation in OST internships/apprenticeships.
- Allow OST programs to become eligible for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) funding, which is currently that is now only available to school systems.
- Fund student stipends to support internship/apprenticeship opportunities during the academic year and/or summer so that youth can acquire meaningful on-the-job skills and receive compensation for their efforts.

- Provide scholarship funds to local and historically Black colleges and universities that support OST programs.
- OST programs should augment employment opportunities with professional development.

### SAFETY AND STRUCTURE

- Extend programs focused on healthy masculinity to boys in juvenile justice and foster care, and to make those programs alternative interventions to suspension and expulsion.
- Provide targeted support for youth in or transitioning from group homes and secure facilities as they reintegrate into the community, specifically connecting them to schools and programs that will benefit them.

- Fund debate programs as a means of providing a safe space for articulating feelings and emotions while promoting effective communication.

## HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

- Support the development of more playing fields and gyms for youth sports programs.
- Provide additional financial resources to high-quality OST programs so they can hire and train more staff, provide more support and expand program space to serve more youth.
- Require that coaches (paid and volunteer) have training, not only in first aid and CPR, but also in principles of youth development and positive coaching; and provide financial support to the professional development organizations that will conduct the trainings.
- Align curricula focused on healthy masculinity and violence prevention with the work happening in the District of Columbia Public School System.



- Recognize the impact of trauma on youth and prioritize the support to programs and initiatives that offer successful models for dealing with these issues.

*photo: Life Pieces to Master Pieces*



*photo: Life Pieces to Master Pieces*

## STRONG FAMILIES

- Help mediate parents' relationship with the school, to ensure that their child is being exposed to a curriculum that builds on their strengths, shapes learning to address their challenges, affirms their culture, and treats them with dignity and compassion.
- Raise awareness among parents of various reform movements in education, and understanding the role of teachers unions, parent organizations, and public-education advocates.
- Expand fatherhood programs and mentoring programs.
- Emphasize aspects of positive parenting that has translated into academic success, such as policies to increase parent involvement in children's learning experiences, including incentives for parents participate in parent-teacher associations and volunteer at the school.
- Increase policies to support parent cooperation programs to combat the high number of Black males who are being raised in homes without fathers.

## GENERAL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- Foster partnerships with concerned advocates and citizens, and involve people who can push positive messages and create a new norm for youth.
- Support partnerships with private enterprise (through corporations and individuals) that would provide valuable financial and human capital, and additional opportunities for entrepreneurial experiences and mentorship.
- Create better data collection and data sharing systems to help support youth (particularly those in the juvenile justice and foster care systems) as they move between programs.

## *Conclusions*

Overall, this report reinforces the need for strong OST programs in the District of Columbia, amplifies the strengths of existing programs, and highlights concerns that OST programs should consider in the future. Specifically, OST program leaders should establish formal mechanisms to evaluate the success of their programs. In addition, all OST program staff members should avoid using a deficit perspectives and use strength-based models that build resilience. Finally, OST programs need to be civically engaged and actively fight institutionalized racism and classism, which can undercut the progress that they are making with young Black males.



1999–2014

**15 YEARS OF POSITIVE  
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**



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