

The Path to Success for All

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To improve educational – and life – outcomes for Boston’s Black and Latino males, we must use a systemic, equity-focused approach.

While important conversations about race, spurred by deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of police, are taking place all across this nation, in Boston another equity conversation is beginning anew – a conversation about opportunity and equity for Black and Latino males in the city's public schools.

Black and Latino males make up 78 percent of the male enrollment and 40 percent of the overall student population in the district. Despite their sizable presence, Black and Latino males have significantly less access to more rigorous academic programs. This restricted access begins as early as third grade, when testing determines which students will move on to classes offering accelerated – and arguably richer – curricula. They also have significantly higher placement in separate special education classes than their White and Asian peers, even though research shows that students with disabilities who are instructed in general education settings tend to have better academic outcomes and, ultimately, better opportunities in adult life than those instructed in more restrictive settings.

In 2012, only 20 percent and 16 percent of graduating Black and Latino male seniors, respectively, had completed the MassCore curriculum, the standard course sequence recommended by the state for college readiness, leaving the great majority of Black and Latino male graduates unprepared for the rigors of college or the workplace. White and Asian males completed the MassCore curriculum at more than double those rates. The risk of a Black male being suspended was more than three times the risk of a White male being suspended in elementary, middle, and high school. The risk of dropping out during high school was 1.7 times higher for Black males and 1.8 times higher for Latino males than for White males.

These are the grim facts that we uncovered in our **recent research** on Black and Latino males in the Boston Public Schools. While we should be particularly alarmed by the stubborn persistence of these achievement gaps, we must be equally mindful that these gaps do not reflect any differences in ability; they are, more fundamentally, opportunity gaps. When you close them, achievement gaps dissipate. It is imperative that we

determine how to ensure that opportunity gaps by race, income, language, and disability are effectively eliminated within the district. There is no place for these gaps in today's world, when our goal is for every Boston student to graduate prepared for college, career, and civic life.

The **first phase** of our research, released in November 2014, focused on uncovering these numbers. The **second phase**, released in April, zeroed in on four Boston schools where Black and Latino males perform comparatively better than the district average. We hoped to discover the reason why these young men were succeeding at these schools. While these schools exhibited the hallmarks of good schools – caring school cultures, professional collaborative communities, individualized support, and family engagement – within each school there was little acknowledgement of race and diversity. While there were individual teachers who integrated culturally responsive curriculum into their classrooms and schools engaged in occasional “feast and festival” celebrations, no school had adopted an intentional, systemic, school-wide approach to cultural responsiveness. We posit that this is one reason why these schools were performing only incrementally better than their peers and why we were not able to identify any schools in which Black and Latino males were excelling.

We applaud the bold step that Boston Public Schools took in commissioning this research, and their commitment to tackling the recommendations upon the release of both reports. These stark disparities will certainly invite scrutiny of the district's schools, but this collaborative research effort has strengthened the district's and the community's resolve to create lasting change. There is much work to be done.

To close these gaps, we need to apply system-wide approaches that work specifically with Black and Latino males, such as valuing students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and providing them with access to rigorous and culturally responsive curriculum and academic supports. This must take place in an environment where the diversity represented by Black and Latino males is regarded as an asset to student achievement and school performance rather than one that detracts from a strict focus on rigor.

The district needs to recruit, retain, and install teams of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse and effective principals, teachers, and staff who represent the different cultural and linguistic experiences of the student body. Staff should be given regular and ongoing opportunities to collaborate, share strategies, and discuss both problematic and promising practices for educating Black and Latino males.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators should abandon what the researchers characterized as a pervasive “color blind” approach to educating students, in which many insisted that “race doesn't matter” when, of course, it does. Instead, they should engage in explicit explorations of student identities, including race, gender, ethnicity, language, culture, and sexuality so that their backgrounds and experience can be used as a foundation for learning and development.

We know that schools alone cannot ensure that all students will have the resources and supports they need to succeed. Districts, in partnership with community agencies and organizations, need to collaborate to provide a comprehensive web of learning supports to improve student outcomes. These partnerships should have an explicit focus on the elimination of opportunity and achievement gaps to enhance the academic, enrichment, and extracurricular activities that support the success of Black and Latino males. The district should intentionally engage families, particularly those of Black and Latino males, with student learning at school and home.

The solution is not strictly technical; it is not about gathering more data. It is about fundamental change at the social, political, and cultural levels.

The district must work to eliminate all opportunity gaps. This will require a shift in the attitude toward Black and Latino males from one where they are seen as bearers of deficits to one where they are seen as students who possess rich social and cultural assets that advance learning. To accomplish this shift, the district must help schools develop strategies that increase educator and community competency in addressing race, gender, and equity and create an intentional, systemic strategy that infuses cultural responsiveness into all aspects of the system. This difficult but necessary work will surely lead to better outcomes for all students. The failure to do so will perpetuate two very predictable paths for Boston's students and residents: one that leads to success for some, and another that undermines the engagement and achievement of a significant and growing number of bright and talented Bostonians.

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