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## Parent involvement is paramount to student success

By Gabrielle McGill-Carpenter

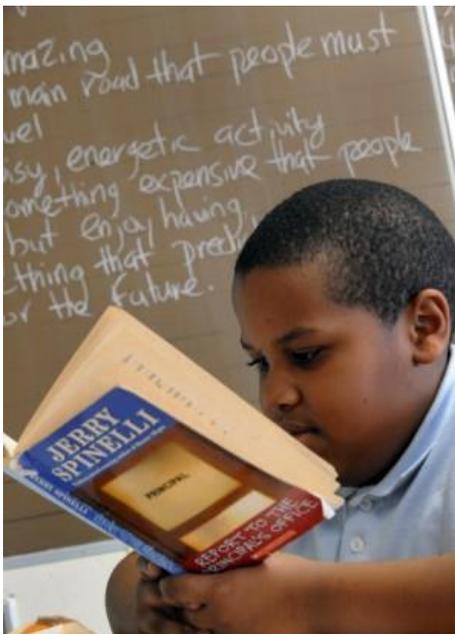
The questions I asked of my son Alden when he was in elementary and middle school in Loudoun County are probably familiar to many African American parents when their children are one of a handful of minority students:

“What color are you?” I remember asking him when he was in elementary school.

“Dark white,” he replied.

“What happened in school today?” I asked him when he was in first grade.

”My hair is different from everyone else’s in class.”



A Leacke Elementary school student reading in class.

*(Photo by Mark Gail/The Washington Post)*

Later, as he got older, the questions changed. But the answers were just as frustrating.

“Why did your teacher switch you from the top math class when you have all A’s?” I asked when he was in fifth grade

“I asked too many questions,” he replied.

The next day when I asked his teacher why Alden was moved from her class, she confirmed that he asked too many questions.

“I thought he was confused,” she said.

Our frustrating experience was not unique. Later, I found out that one of Alden’s African American classmates, John, was also removed from a class taught by the same teacher. Her reasoning: He asked *too* few questions.

Meanwhile, as a guidance counselor in the Loudoun County school system, I heard disturbing comments from African American students not wanting to be the isolated and “the only.”

By the time my son reached sixth grade the evidence was clear. If our sons were to do more than just graduate from high school, but to do so in excellence and with options, we had to intervene. The [research showed](#) in 2006 that the graduation rate for African American males was 50 percent.

Indeed, our black children are consistently dead last or next to last in every academic measurement from elementary throughout high school. This was unacceptable, and we had to do something. It would be an undertaking that I could not do alone. This would take the effort of many families. It would take a village.

After casual conversations with parents at the grocery store and neighborhood parks, I was convinced that my concerns were not unique. So, I contacted the nearly 20 families of every African American male in sixth grade and invited them to my home for a meeting. I spoke about the concern as a mother and educator that I had for my son and shared my experiences as a high school guidance counselor. I witnessed what would be the future of our little boys in the lives of the young men I saw every day in high school. These wonderful miniature men, whom we loved more than life itself, were subject to negative peer influences, low expectations, and the lack of positive examples.

We, “Concerned Black Parents,” as we called ourselves, decided to focus on three areas: High expectations, positive peer pressure and parent involvement. We made an appointment to meet with the middle school principal to discuss our concerns and offer a partnership. We requested honors classes for the boys and that they have at least one other black boy in their class the following year. We met once a month at each other’s homes, invited guest speakers, held home work clubs at school, made college visits and career field trips, all while allowing the boys to bond through rap sessions with their dads and community service opportunities. The work was arduous, challenging and time consuming. We held end-of-year celebrations to acknowledge academic accomplishments. We invited local speakers from an array of disciplines to help influence them: Former Redskins greats Rick “Doc” Walker and Art Monk, Tom Carter and Dr. Jayfus Doswell all came over the years.

The most important thing that happened was a positive peer group developed. By the time high school hit, taking higher-level courses was the norm and not the exception. The boys were competing academically in the classroom just as they were in the sports arena. Just before high school, we recognized that a girls club was just as necessary and that they, too, were just as deserving as the young men to pursue excellence with options. The girls brought a new dynamic and dimension to the club. There was now a battle of the sexes. It was all positive and helped to propel both groups forward.

But even in this wealthy, technologically advanced and suburban community, there remains an academic achievement gap. According to a [2010 study from the Schott Foundation](#) for Public Education, only 47 percent of black male students entering high school in 2003 graduated in 2008. For white males, the graduation rate was 78 percent.

As a black parent, I know this: Collectively it's time to put our money — time, talent and treasure — where our mouths are. Can we as parents spend more time, money and energy on sports and then wonder why we have an achievement gap? We would have made more library trips in elementary school so that now it would be a fun thing to do in high school (or at least not a dreaded place to go). Or perhaps we would have insisted that SAT and ACT preparation take precedence over other activities so that they might enjoy higher scores and even greater options. The biggest lesson we may have learned is that we (parents and kids) need to read more.

This graduation week, the students of Club 2012 had a 100 percent graduation rate; there is much joy and few regrets. Our kids were accepted to 76 percent of the universities they applied to, they averaged at least three offers for admission each, most of them took at least three advanced placement classes, and their average grade point average was 3.7. These are the highest average performances of any demographic in the county and resulted in arguably the best African American class in our county's history. They are scholars and athletes. I am happy to see the fruits of our labor. Our children are proud and equipped for bright futures. They leave a legacy for other African American kids at their schools that it's cool to be smart and that you can graduate in "Excellence with Options."

Now, it's your turn. Don't accept the status quo. Do something! No matter how good the schools are, they will not take care of our children's future. That's our job. I challenge all of the concerned black parents (and parents in general) to set aside a daily time for your children to read (anything), get involved in your child's school, surround him and her by positive peers, insist on the highest expectations for your child from every adult in their young lives. It's your turn for "more excellence, more options!"

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