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## Club 2012: Black parents who made sure their sons succeeded in school

By [Michael Alison Chandler](#), Published: June 14, 2012

For six years, their parents had nagged and prodded and pressed them to perform.

Now these African American seniors in Loudoun County were marking the end of high school with a private ceremony organized by their parents, who had [banded together back in middle school](#) to make sure their sons made it successfully to graduation day.

“For the last six years, we’ve told you to do more, do better. We’re never satisfied, right?” said John Johnson, an Ashburn father addressing the 18 students in dress shirts and suit jackets in the auditorium at Lunsford Middle School in Chantilly.

“Well, tonight,” he declared, “we are satisfied.”

He flashed through a slide show of the core members’ accomplishments: 100 percent graduation rate, 92 percent enrollment in Advanced Placement classes, a cumulative 3.7 grade-point average and a combined \$1.3 million in college scholarships.

Then he estimated, only half jokingly, how much volunteer time the parents seated behind them had invested in their success: 1,173,266 hours.

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The role parents perform is often played down among the many causes of the nation’s pervasive [racial academic achievement gap](#). It’s sometimes seen as a distraction from improving under-performing schools and teachers. But many scholars say parents, or other adult role models, are vital to children’s academic success.

Hundreds of studies have documented how everything from the number of hours parents spend at their children’s school to the way they monitor television can be associated with academic success. For African American boys, parents can also play a crucial role in countering perceptions that they are more likely to be dropouts than valedictorians.

“You have to go out of your way to inoculate your kids against buying into those stereotypes,” said Ronald F. Ferguson, director of the achievement gap initiative at Harvard University, who is raising three black boys.

Many of the African American professionals in Ashburn thought they had stacked the decks in their children's favor. They earned college degrees and good salaries. They bought homes in safe start-from-scratch neighborhoods and sent their children to gleaming high-performing schools.

But over time, they discovered that the achievement gap had followed them to the suburbs. In Loudoun, one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the country, African Americans score an average of 1,399 out of 2,400 points on the SAT, compared with 1,638 for white students. African American passing rates on state standardized tests were 10 points behind those of white students in reading and 16 points behind in math.

Worries crept in. Perhaps in a county where just 7 percent of its 65,000 students are black, their children were too isolated, with few teachers or classmates who looked similar.

Gabrielle Carpenter, the guidance director at Tuscarora High School, grew concerned that her son didn't seem to see race. "We live in a society that sees race," she said. "I didn't want him to be naive or unequipped."

By middle school, she and other black parents noticed that their sons were getting passed over for advanced math or honors classes or losing interest in school.

In 2007, they formed [Club 2012](#), with about 15 boys, including nearly every African American male at Eagle Ridge Middle School.

The strategy was simple: Get parents involved, set high academic expectations, encourage positive peer pressure.

The execution was intensive: They organized twice-weekly homework clubs at school and monthly meetings at parents' homes. They tracked their sons' grades and test scores and pored over research about the causes and effects of the achievement gap. They set up study skills workshops, etiquette training and father-son rap sessions.

They visited colleges, traveling to the University of Virginia, Howard University and Harvard Medical School — all before high school started.

And they partnered with their teachers and principal, inviting them to meetings and events.

At the beginning of the school year, some parents sent letters introducing their son to his new teachers, describing his personality and work habits, and explaining that they expected "nothing short of excellence" and that the teacher could count on their "unlimited support."

They requested that their sons be assigned to classes with other black students. They found teachers often welcomed their input.

By the end of middle school, their sons were competing with one another to get higher grades and their GPAs were improving.

During an eighth-grade honor roll ceremony, Mary Ann Dyce noticed that more African American boys than girls were being recognized. Dyce, who eventually started a similar group for girls, asked her daughter what was going on. Her response: “I think it might have something to do with Club 2012.”

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The boys weren't always eager members.

“It was kind of annoying, to be honest, to be straight up, to always have someone looking over your shoulder,” said Cameron Molina, an original member who graduated from Tuscarora High on Tuesday.

Cameron recalled trying in vain to keep any low grade from his parents and being slightly embarrassed when his dad thought the assignment planner that the school distributed was too small — he bought Cameron a thick college planner, then doled out his allowance based on how closely he recorded every appointment and assignment.

No matter how demanding his parents seemed, he figured other kids in the club had it worse, particularly as they got older. Chris Holoman wasn't allowed to watch television on weeknights, he recalled. And everyone knew that “you don't mess with TC,” or [Tom Carter](#), Alex's dad. Carter, a former cornerback for the Washington Redskins, imposed strict curfews and rarely let Alex sleep over at friends' houses.

As the boys entered high school at Briar Woods, they became busier with sports and other activities. The biweekly after-school homework club turned into an occasional breakfast club; monthly family meet-ups became quarterly.

The club hit a bump when [a new high school opened in Leesburg](#) and five of the core members transferred to Tuscarora High. The move put club members on rival football teams (Briar Woods's prompt ascension to [the state championship two years running](#) is still a sensitive subject for the players who went to Tuscarora.)

The club grew and eventually merged with the girls' group, but parents found it was difficult to add people. So much groundwork had been laid in middle school.

“I don't want to say we brainwashed these boys,” Carpenter said. But before they had girlfriends and driver's licenses, “for a while they were ours.”

In part by necessity and part by design (not to mention sheer fatigue), the parents dialed back their close monitoring of grades and study habits and tried to give their sons more responsibility for setting the club's agenda.

With the looser structure and more complicated lives, some of the students became less involved. One eventually left Briar Woods and enrolled in an alternative program to finish his degree.

But the parents continued to organize community service activities and college visits, touring Penn State and the University of Maryland. They also brought in occasional speakers, including the admissions director at Virginia Tech and [Redskins Hall of Famer Art Monk](#).

Many of the teens aspired to play Division I sports in college and threw themselves into training. It paid off for some. [Alex Carter was recruited by Stanford University](#) at the end of his sophomore year to play football. Cameron Molina is going to play football at Columbia University. Others got scholarships elsewhere.

Some of the parents expressed mixed feelings about their sons' athletic ambitions, after their concerted efforts to nurture their academic identities.

“While we are focused on getting to football practice,” Johnson said, “the Asian community and the Arab community are at Saturday school.”

In particular, he said, the group should have spent more time preparing for the SAT. Most of the club members had good grades and took college-level courses, but lower SAT scores hurt some of them when applying to schools or vying for scholarships.

Other parents in the club said their sons' sports performance helped them, providing balance to their high school résumés and giving them a bigger footprint at school. Three of the four prom kings and queens at the two high schools this spring were members of Club 2012.

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At the reception after the parent-led graduation ceremony, the seniors helped themselves to a sheet cake that read “It Takes a Village” and posed for pictures with a dozen sixth-graders in baggy shorts and big sneakers.

They were African American students at Lunsford Middle, a recently opened school that is home to one of the most active groups modeled after Club 2012.

“It helps you get ready for college,” is how Jeremy Cofield, a sixth-grader, explained the purpose of the club.

The Club 2012 parents have visited multiple area middle schools over the years to share information about the achievement gap and their approach to dealing with it. The parents also formed a nonprofit group that they hope can benefit parents across the country who want to do something similar. Spinoff clubs have had varying degrees of success, depending on the chemistry and long-term commitment of the parents involved.

During the ceremony, Tom Carter offered some final words. His message was all-too-familiar to the older students, and he hoped it would resonate with the younger ones:

Never be embarrassed by your good grades or how hard you work. Don't make excuses. And know that your parents are behind you.

“We want you to succeed more than we want to breathe,” he said, gazing down at his son and all the other young adults he helped succeed. “That’s just the definition of being a parent.”

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