



engage and educate for equity

BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT and

EARLY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Children’s Educational Achievement Is the Foundation for Our Nation’s Future

- Our nation’s vitality depends on the **talents and ingenuity** of each successive generation. The United States will need 60 percent of its population to possess a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025 to remain globally competitive.¹
- Grade-level reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a **strong predictor of future success**, including high school graduation and advanced education, employment outcomes, and successful adulthood.² For children to develop this competency, they must be in school to learn.
- Yet, **chronic absence** from preschool and elementary school settings – a critical measure of attendance – negatively impacts academic achievement for many students, especially if it occurs over multiple years.³ Certain barriers to regular school attendance disproportionately affect African American children, who tend to experience higher levels of chronic early absence than White students.⁴ Moreover, when chronic absence affects a large number of students, it affects not just the students missing school, but can also slow down instruction for the entire classroom, since teachers need to repeat material for returning absentee students.
- It is especially important to interrupt and prevent a pattern of poor attendance while children are young – before they have missed so much school that they are far behind academically, and while building a habit of regular attendance is easier to nurture. As we raise the attendance rate for all children, we must take **specific steps** to ensure that the particular challenges to attendance faced by young Black males are addressed, since chronic absence is a key contributor to their later poorer educational outcomes. Our **shared fate** as a nation requires the promise of *all* young people to be realized. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is partnering with the Campaign for Black Male Achievement in recognition that advancing early school attendance

The composition of the category “Black males” is complex. We include US-born African Americans as well as those of the African diaspora who have settled in the US, when data and research make that distinction possible. National origin, class, geographic location, and other variables may need to be taken into account when shaping effective strategies.

requires an understanding of the different strategies that different groups of children may need in order to realize their potential.

For guidance to frame communications about racial inequities, please refer to the Race Matters Institute’s “How to Talk about Race” tool: <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.

“Racialized” Obstacles Compromise Black Children’s Early School Attendance

“Racialized” means that (1) the obstacles to early school attendance disproportionately affect Black families and children, both male and female, and often other communities of color, and (2) these obstacles are the results of institutional policies, practices, and perceptions that maintain inequity. The items below are illustrative. Readers are encouraged to identify specific institutional and structural obstacles that exist in your locale. The section following this one focuses on racialized obstacles that are specific to Black males.

- **Environmental toxins that cause health problems.** African American children and those of Puerto Rican descent are disproportionately exposed to environmental conditions that trigger severe asthma – allergens, air pollution, and stressful circumstances. Hospitalization, doctor visits, and sleep disturbances that result from severe asthma contribute significantly to school absenteeism.⁵ Elementary schools whose physical facilities are in need of significant repair experience higher absenteeism than others.⁶ Schools with large minority enrollment, in districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families, are most likely to be in the worst physical condition.⁷ Yet, in the decade prior to the latest recession, “school districts with the largest enrollments of white students had significantly higher spending on their school facilities...than school districts where minorities make up the majority of student enrollments.”⁸
- **Limited and ineffective outreach to parents.** Black children, in relation to their White counterparts, enter kindergarten in schools that are less likely to undertake outreach to parents to ease the transition to first grade or to institute parent-teacher partnerships for child success from the beginning.⁹ Focus groups with immigrant parents reveal that parents have varying childrearing practices and culturally based ideas about how to

Defining Chronic Absence

Attendance Works defines chronic absence as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (equivalent to 18 days out of a 180-day school year), *regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused.* If children miss this much school while in grades K-3, it is chronic *early* absence. The National Center for Children in Poverty found that this level of school absence in the first years of school was associated with lower academic performance in subsequent grades. It is different from truancy, which typically only refers to *unexcused* absences.

prepare their children for school success, but schools have not built upon parents' approaches.¹⁰ Effective culturally and linguistically appropriate parent outreach is even more important for parents who themselves may have little prior experience with formal school or, even worse, feel alienated from school because of negative experiences from their own childhood. Outreach may also need to be specialized for grandparents who are raising 17 percent of African American children.

- **Logistical difficulties.** Lack of reliable transportation, conflicting or changing parent work schedules, and challenges particular to immigrant families can make it difficult for some students to get to school regularly. Car ownership varies by race. One in four Black households (24 percent) does not own a car, compared to one in 14 White households (7 percent).¹¹ To the extent that housing is segregated, families of color without cars will live in communities where neighbors are less likely to own a car, too.¹² Black children with immigrant parents may experience disruption if their parents return to their country of origin for lengthy periods due to family circumstances.
- **Residential instability.** Residential instability (e.g., frequent moves, doubling up, homelessness) is associated with absenteeism and poor academic outcomes for children.¹³ Instability particularly impacts Black children from families with lower incomes, who are *disproportionately* exposed to family financial struggles, home foreclosures, the incarceration of a parent, foster care placement, and unsafe neighborhood conditions. Further, residentially stable students in schools with high student turnover rates are also more likely to experience educational disruption because of teachers' necessary adjustments to changes in classroom composition.

For guidance to identify barriers that produce racial inequities, please refer to the Race Matters Institute's "What's Race Got to Do with It?" tool: <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Star%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf> .

Some Racialized Obstacles Are Gender-Specific to Black Males

Both Black females and males encounter identifiable racialized obstacles to realizing their potential. They also experience racialized obstacles that are specific to their genders. The items below are illustrative. Readers are encouraged to identify specific obstacles in your locale that negatively affect Black males.

- **Exposure to complex trauma.** Black male children who enter school with the *most serious challenges* often come from home and community environments where they have experienced multiple traumatic events that impair the development of coping skills and social-emotional competencies – poverty, maternal depression, abuse or neglect, family or community violence or substance abuse, and physical deprivation. As young children, they are exposed to fear-arousing and overwhelming experiences that can cause grief, anger, depression, hypersensitivity, irritability, and delays in emotional self-regulation.¹⁴ Child exposure to multiple traumas often results for boys in “externalizing problems”¹⁵ such as school difficulties, lying, destroying things, and getting into fights.¹⁶ If these children encounter teachers who are unprepared to appreciate and engage their needs constructively, they may be misdiagnosed and/or dealt with punitively at the very time when

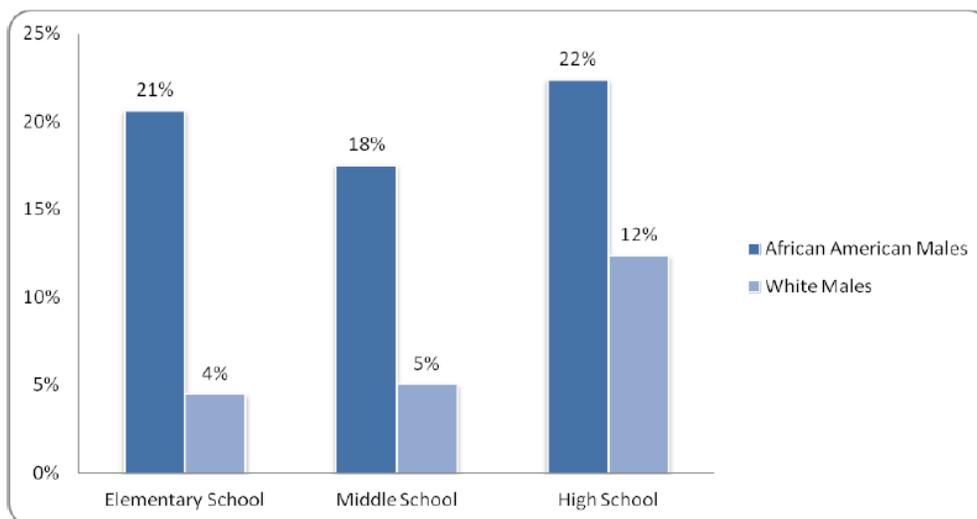
they need mental health supports. Such punishment may include school suspension. Further, trauma affects the development of a child's prefrontal cortex, where executive functioning and working memory arise, making the child's classroom learning more challenging.¹⁷ This can discourage a child from attending school.

- **Early school suspension/expulsion.** The pattern emerging from the still limited but growing availability of data about kindergarten and elementary school suspension and expulsion is clear: Black males are disproportionately likely to receive these forms of discipline. The majority of suspensions and expulsions for Black boys are administered for discretionary reasons rather than violent behavior, suggesting the need for the examination of potential suspension/expulsion bias in kindergarten and elementary schools.¹⁸ Black boys are more likely to be disciplined more severely than White boys for similar minor misconduct.¹⁹

Inequities Can Compromise the Early School Attendance of Young Black Males

The foregoing factors can take an enormous toll on Black male children. Some school districts have published chronic absence data disaggregated by race and gender that illustrate this concern. For example, the Oakland, CA, Unified School District (OUSD) launched the African American Male Initiative as part of its commitment to reduce racial inequities. With technical assistance from Attendance Works and the Urban Strategies Council, it was an early adopter around issues of chronic absence, beginning with deep data analysis.²⁰ Their analysis found that Black males in its elementary schools were *five times* more likely than their White counterparts to experience chronic absence, as the chart below shows.

Figure 2: Percentage of African American and White Male Students Chronically Absent (Missing 10% of School Days or More), by School Level, 2010-11



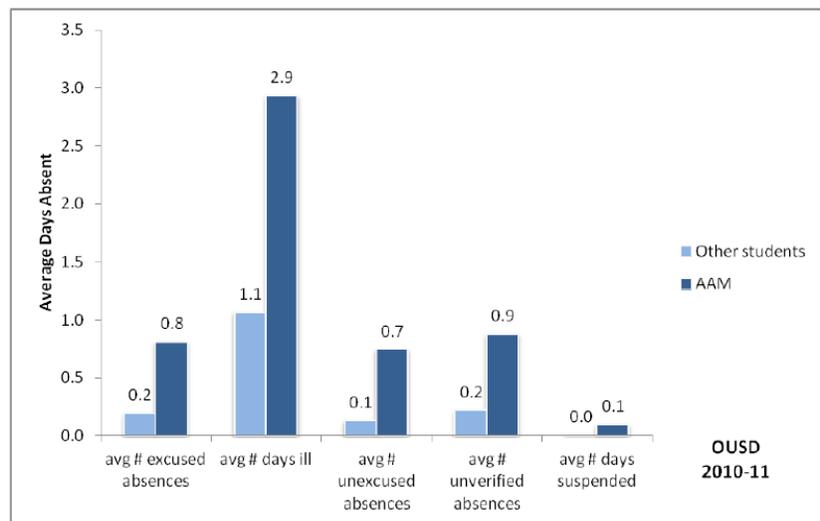
Source:

<http://www.urbanstrategies.org/programs/schools/docs/AAMI%20Attendance%20Report%201.30.12.pdf>

Data from Oakland, CA, Unified School District

In elementary school, Black male chronic absence was at its worst in kindergarten and first grade, affecting more than 1 in 4 Black boys. And even though overall chronic absence within OUSD has declined over the past five years, the racial gap persists. Further, elementary school performance within OUSD was highly uneven, ranging from a few schools reporting no Black male student chronic absence, to one school with 39 percent of Black male students experiencing chronic absence. Elementary school Black boys missed more days of school for every type of absence than did other chronically absent students from other racial groups, as the chart below shows:

Figure 8: Average Days Absent by Category for Chronically Absent African American Male Elementary Students Compared to Non-African American Chronically Absent Students of Both Genders

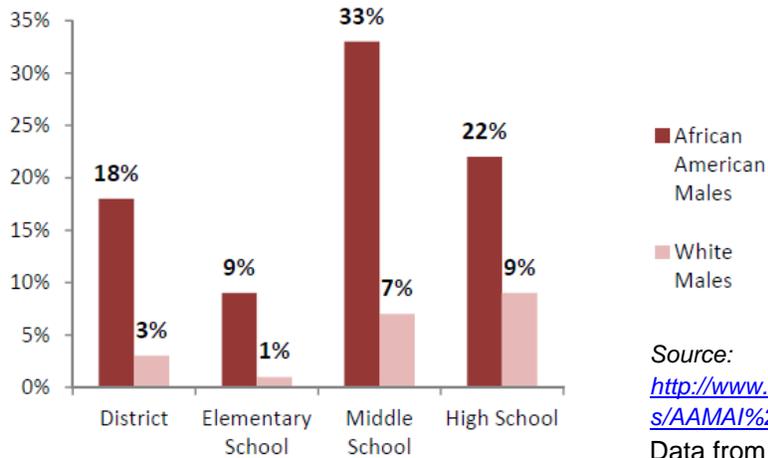


Source:

[http://www.urbanstrategies.org/programs/schools/docs/AA MAI%20Attendance%20Report%201.30.12.pdf](http://www.urbanstrategies.org/programs/schools/docs/AA%20Attendance%20Report%201.30.12.pdf) Data from Oakland, CA, Unified School District

OUSD also examined data disaggregated by race and gender around school suspensions and found that Black boys in elementary school are *nine times* more likely than White boys to be suspended:

OUSD Suspension Rates 2010-2011



As was the case with chronic absence, elementary school performance within OUSD was highly uneven, ranging from several schools reporting no Black male student suspensions to a high of 35 percent – more than one in every three Black boys in that particular elementary school. The largest disproportionality in reasons for suspension was in the category of disruptive or defiant behavior, a discretionary judgment, where Black boys were 7.5 times more likely than students of other racial groups to be suspended.²¹

Effective Actions Promote Early School Attendance for Young Black Males

The items below are illustrative to demonstrate that intentional efforts can indeed improve Black male early school attendance. These actions address challenges identified in previous sections. Readers are encouraged to determine what is needed in your locale. Attendance Works may have ideas that are useful for your community: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works>.

- Good data on absenteeism are needed, disaggregated by race.** School districts should invest resources in determining whether and to what extent chronic early absence is a relevant problem for particular children, grades, schools, neighborhoods, or student sub-populations such as Black males. Step-by-step guidance to obtain good data is available at www.attendanceworks.org, which offers tools for calculating chronic absence (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/tools-for-calculating-chronic-absence/>) as well as guidance about unpacking the factors of chronic absence (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/assessments/>). When chronic absence affects large numbers of students in a particular school, student sub-population, or neighborhood, it is often an indication of more systemic challenges related to a lack of resources, or problematic practices or policies that have an adverse impact on many families.

- **Measurement of chronic absence should begin early.** Chronic absence should be monitored beginning in kindergarten, when it shows up most notably for Black males. Early outreach can be used to identify and address barriers to attendance before students miss so much school that they require more expensive remediation or become deeply disconnected. This is especially important for Black males living in poverty, who are most adversely affected by the lost time in the classroom. It is also especially critical during times that students transition to new school environments.
- **Intentionality by school systems produces results.** The Oakland, CA, Unified School District has made reducing chronic absence, along with addressing racial disparities in student suspension, central to its strategic plan to raise achievement and reduce inequities. Its chronic absence focus involves careful tracking of data and a full-service community schools model that brings community partners onto campus to help reach out to students and families and work together to overcome challenges to school attendance – including a lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, and mental health concerns.²² This comprehensive approach has begun to demonstrate a measurable reduction in chronic absence, especially at the school sites that have advanced the work most deeply. To close discipline gaps, the district is also promoting alternatives to suspensions and creating restorative justice programs. Preliminary indications suggest that this is a promising route to a decrease in referrals for suspension.²³
- **School facilities and programs should contribute to student health.** A checklist is available at <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/School-Health-Center-Self-Assessment-Tool-Revised-2-25-2011t.pdf> to analyze the performance of school-based health programs for reducing chronic absence and improving school attendance.²⁴ Young Black boys are especially susceptible to missing school days due to asthma.
- **Schools can help parents address logistical barriers.** A Providence, RI, elementary school recognized transportation problems as a contributor to chronic absences. They were able to accommodate parents' work schedules by offering an early care and breakfast program and secure a federal grant to provide students with transportation to the school and offer family wrap-around services.²⁵ Over a four-year period, this cut the rate of chronic absence in half.
- **Schools and parents can be partners to advance regular school attendance.** Transition outreach programs that enable parents and children to know what to expect from school and help parents support their child's early educational success can improve student attendance, as exemplified by the school readiness project of the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development²⁶ and research from the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University.²⁷ The latter also points out the contribution of home visits, the use of student attendance awards, and the value of parents having a specified contact person at the school as additional actions that produce better attendance.

- **Schools’ partnerships with other systems can reduce absenteeism.** Through a data sharing arrangement with Baltimore City Public Schools, child welfare workers have access to attendance data for children they monitor and can step in early to address emerging problems. As a result, Baltimore identifies 100-180 children a month whose families receive direct services and case management from Family Preservation workers,²⁸ providing interventions that can prevent chronic absenteeism.
- **Early intervention for trauma-exposed young children is essential.** Addressing the effects of trauma exposure is critical to improving a child’s chances for regular school attendance and early educational success. Because Black children disproportionately reside in struggling families and communities, they may also disproportionately get exposed to traumatic incidents that compromise their early development. Early childhood providers and elementary school teachers must understand the impact of trauma in order to understand children’s needs and actions.²⁹ Acting out in the classroom – through defiance or other disruptive behavior, for example – an action for which many Black boys get suspended, may be a response to trauma exposure that suggests the need for mental health interventions rather than the imposition of another trauma like suspension or expulsion.

For guidance to improve chances that policies and practices will reduce racial disparities, please refer to the Race Matters Institute’s “Racial Equity Impact Analysis” tool: <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.

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¹ National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, PowerPoint presentation prepared by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, slide 5.

² *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010, http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/123/2010KCSpecReport/AEC_report_color_highres.pdf, accessed 11.15.12.

³ Chronic absence in kindergarten is especially problematic for the long-term academic performance of students whose families lack the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom, do not speak English as their first language, and are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school, leading to more than one year of poor attendance.

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- ⁴ E.g., <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Oregon-Research-Brief.pdf>; <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Maryland-background-paper-Version-05-10-11.pdf>; <http://www.utahdataalliance.org/downloads/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf>, accessed 1.16.13.
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