

## *How to Help African-American Males in School: Treat Them like Gifted Students*

*This was written by Yvette Jackson, chief executive officer of the [National Urban Alliance](#) and former executive director of instruction and professional development for the New York City public schools.*

I wanted to cry when I read about the [recent widely publicized report](#) from the [Council of Great City Schools](#) about the underachievement of African-American males in our schools. Its findings bear repeating: African-American boys drop out at nearly twice the rate of white boys; their SAT scores are on average 104 points lower; and black men represented just 5 percent of college students in 2008.

When I was the executive director of instruction and professional development for the New York City Public Schools, I grew keenly aware of the challenges schools face in educating African-American males. For many reasons, far too many boys don't get the support at home or in the community they need to thrive as adults. Instead, that job falls almost completely on their schools. And that means it comes down to their teachers.

Driven by the intense focus on accountability, schools and teachers used standardized test scores to help identify and address student weaknesses. Over time, these deficits began to define far too many students so that all we saw were their deficits – particularly for African-American males. As a result, we began losing sight of these young boys' gifts and, as a consequence, stifled their talents.

As the report notes, it would be great to create national urgency around this issue and find more mentors for African-American males. But we have an army of educators in schools now who can help black males by doing for them what works for gifted students.

Teachers and schools can create activities that identify, affirm and build on student strengths. This can be done through student surveys, honest conversations and teacher professional development. We need to shift from remediation focused on weaknesses to mediation that develops strengths.

Damaging and pervasive chasms grow between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of students of color or economically disadvantaged students. Making cultural connections and strengthening teacher-student relationships are critical to making learning meaningful and relevant to students.

Finally, students must be enabled to be more active in their own education. Schools should give students opportunities to participate in teachers' professional development aimed at enriching curriculum, improving teaching and expanding the range of materials students create.

In this way, student strengths will be illuminated. Teachers will get meaningful feedback on their instruction. Numerous ideas for creative classroom activities will be generated, and new bonds between teachers and students will develop. We must embrace a new approach to African-American males that focuses less on what they aren't doing and builds on what they can and want to do as the path to improving their academic performance.

This is what a 6th-grade African-American boy from Newark, N.J., said recently when asked how it felt to lead his class in a lesson: "I got a lot of compliments from teachers saying that they think when I grow up I am going to be a very good teacher. I felt proud because it felt like I was doing very good. It was one of the best feelings that I had in life."

Our schools and our teachers need to help more students grow up capable and confident. Students who don't believe in themselves or who accept adults' low expectations are one step closer to dropping out – or worse. Growing up to become a very good teacher is a destiny we can all support. ■