

# *Steps to Success: The African American Male Initiative*

Summary Report of the  
Study Group of Experts Meeting

January 2008



The Children's Aid Society

[www.childrensaidsociety.org](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org)



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Convened by

The Children's Aid Society

The Campaign for Educational Equity

The Institute for Urban and Minority Education of  
Teachers College Columbia University





## Acknowledgments

The Children's Aid Society is deeply grateful to the experts and practitioners who contributed their time and knowledge to help strengthen the work of the African American Male Initiative. A special thanks to The Charles Hayden Foundation for their generous grant that allowed us to pilot our first program, Steps to Success, in partnership with The Campaign for Educational Equity and the Institute for Urban and Minority Education of Teachers College, Columbia University. Over the past few years, we have received tremendous support from a number of individuals whom we would like to personally acknowledge.

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Ron Mincy  
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Rosa Smith  
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Kevin Starr  
Carol Van Atten  
John Vaughn  
Ernest Washington  
Michael Wenger

Without their support and guidance, the African American Male Initiative could not be where it is today.

Lorna Palacio Morgan, MSW, LCSW  
Senior Program Quality Advisor  
The Children's Aid Society



April 2008

Dear Colleagues,

The Children's Aid Society is thrilled with the progress that the African American Male Initiative has made over the past three years. Last summer, we were pleased to hire Arkee Hodges as the Director of the African American Male Initiative. Thanks to Lorna Palacio Morgan's vision and Arkee's leadership, in the fall of 2007 we launched Steps to Success, a program for second and third grade boys of Harlem. Recently, we expanded the program to include fourth graders. In the following pages, you can read more about the program model.

On January 25, 2008, we convened the second annual meeting of our Study Group of Experts. Yet again, our dedicated Experts contributed their time and insight to take our program to the next level. A special thanks to Lorna Palacio Morgan and Dr. Edmund W. Gordon who co-chaired the meeting for the second time. A summary of the discussion and recommendations can be found in this report.

As the African American Male Initiative continues to grow, we hope that you will continue your commitment and support in our efforts to help our boys achieve their potential and lead happy and healthy lives.

C. Warren Moses  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Children's Aid Society

# The Study Group of Experts

## Co-Chairs

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Columbia University and Yale University

Lorna Palacio Morgan, MSW, LCSW  
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\*Unable to attend the Second Annual Study Group of Experts meeting.

## **Introduction**

The Children's Aid Society, an organization that has served the needy for more than 150 years, is committed to helping its African American male clients reach their highest potential. Unfortunately, statistics continue to show that African American males have many obstacles to overcome. In the past few years, new reports and studies continue to show that African American males are lagging behind. In 2005, Black/African Americans had the highest percent of children in poverty and children in single-parent families in America.<sup>1</sup> In New York City public schools, Black males constitute approximately 17% of the student population, but 44% of students diagnosed with emotional disturbance, 26% of students diagnosed with mental retardation, and 24% of students diagnosed with a specific learning disability.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, Black males in New York City graduate at a rate of 26%, compared to a rate of 50% for white male students.<sup>3</sup> It is more likely for African American males to be involved with the courts or go to jail than to go to college.<sup>4</sup> While 4% of Hispanic males and 1.6% of White males between the ages of 20-39 are in prison or jail, this is true for 12% of Black males.<sup>5</sup> A recent report from the Pew Center on the States revealed that one in every 100 adults is in an American prison or jail. Although this number is shocking, what is more devastating is that one in nine Black males between 20 and 34 years old is behind bars.<sup>6</sup> Given these statistics on poverty, education, and incarceration, it is not surprising that economic conditions for this population have continued to deteriorate. In 2006, Black male employment in New York City was 60.3%, a 3.7 percentage point decrease from its 2000 level.<sup>7</sup> These devastating statistics are among the factors that motivate our commitment to seek programmatic solutions to better serve the African American male community.

## **The African American Male Initiative**

In 2005, Children's Aid launched The African American Male Initiative to respond to the growing concern for the serious plight of African American males and to bring about change. The initiative aims to: (1) more fully understand the issues facing our Black male clients and (2) create new program strategies that will better address the needs of this vulnerable population.

The first phases of the Initiative consisted of a literature review, consultation with experts and focus groups, and convening the first Study Group of Experts meeting in 2006. At the Study Group of Experts meeting, our scholars and practitioners discussed the problem and recommended solutions. From their guidance, Children's Aid created an Action Agenda, targeting four age groups and offering five program strategies for intervention. To learn more about the 2006 Study Group

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<sup>1</sup> 2007 *Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being*. (2007). The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Holzman (2006) *Public Education and Black Male Students: The 2006 State Report Card*, Schott Educational Inequity Index, Cambridge, MA; The Schott Foundation for Public Education.

<sup>3</sup> Holzman (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Rosa Smith (2002) *Black Boys: The Litmus Test for 'No Child Left Behind.'* Education Week (XXII) 9.

<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Lindsey (2006) *The Impact of Waivers to Adult Court, Alternative Sentencing, and Alternatives to Incarceration on Young Men of Color*. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute. Washington, DC.

<sup>6</sup> Jenifer Warren (2008) *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*. The Pew Center on the States. Washington, DC.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Jones and Mark Levitan (2007) *The Community Service Society in The State of Black New York*. Black Equity Alliance and New York Urban League, New York, NY.

discussion and Children's Aid Action Agenda, you can access the Summary Report at <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/news/publications#aami>.

## **Steps to Success**

In the fall of 2007, Children's Aid launched Steps to Success, a program serving second-, third-, and fourth-grade African American males of Harlem. As of April 2008, the full-time program staff consists of a Director, three Life Coaches, and Business Manager. The program provides the following services:

- 1) A **Life Coach**, functioning as a mentor, who will help with the challenges of growing up as an African American male and help to clarify, formulate and implement his life goals. Our Life Coaches are adult Black males, available 24/7.  
Life Coaching is a full-time paid position that works to get the very best out of a young person, enabling them to make decisions to improve their lives. A Life Coach acts as a personal trainer for the mind. Rather than solving problems from the past, a Life Coach works with young people to develop action plans to enhance the future. It is a way of mentoring. The Life Coach looks at young people as creative, resourceful, and capable individuals who can function successfully at school and in life. Each Life Coach will work with each child one-to-one and in a group. It is expected that they maintain a strong relationship with these youth, at least through high school graduation. Coaches are involved with all aspects of the child's life, including school, family, and community. Life Coaches support each family by helping parents navigate the many daunting challenges involved in raising an African American male.
- 2) A **Saturday Academy**, providing cultural enrichment activities highlighting African American history and traditions.  
Every Saturday, *Steps to Success* participants, staff, specialists, and Everyday Heroes come together on the campus of Teachers College, Columbia University for a special Saturday Cultural Academy.
- 3) **Academic support**, twice a week after school.  
Every child has access to quality out of school programming that includes one-on-one tutoring, trained staff and an engaging curriculum.
- 4) **Volunteer, Black males – our Everyday Heroes** – expose our boys to positive role models and staff our volunteer component.  
Adult Black males who are concerned about the academic and social challenges facing African American males serve as Everyday Heroes. They are men of strong character who have positive insights into being a Black male and a demonstrated success in their personal endeavors.



## Study Group of Experts Meeting 2008

In January 2008, the Study Group of Experts gathered in New York City for their second meeting. Over the day, scholars and practitioners discussed “What is, or should be, special about the education and development of Black boys?” reviewed the implementation of Steps to Success, and commented on the evaluation design.

### *What is, or should be, special about the education and development of Black boys?*

1. Support the health and normal development of Black males, which is threatened all too often.
2. Privilege intellectual competence without demeaning physical strength and skill.
3. Develop and hone problem solving skills and strategies such as logical reasoning, communication, conflict resolution, help-seeking, resource utilization, and other non-cognitive skills.
4. Help these youngsters to distinguish between reputation directed behavior (bravado) and behavior that is directed at the achievement of respectability.
5. Give special attention to the good and bad manifestations of masculinity and patriarchy.
6. Teach them to become mature human beings who happen to be Black males in a society that often perceives them as the enemy.

### *Implementation of Steps to Success*

#### *Program Update – Lessons from the first few months:*

- **Community builders:** The Life Coaches are building communities by bringing families and schools together. The Life Coaches talk to the boys, the teachers, the tutors and the parents on at least a weekly basis. Teachers are beginning to call the Life Coaches with academic concerns and accomplishments. Life Coaches are truly community leaders. While the work is greatly rewarding, the responsibility is great and regular support and assistance is provided.
- **Parents:** The parents are involved and they view the program as a resource that will help their boys navigate their way to college. Parents are helping with recruitment, calling the Life Coaches when they are in crisis, and seeing themselves as resources for one another and for their community
- **Academic improvements:** Some boys seem to behave differently in the program than they do in school. Staff report that the program’s enrichment components have been engaging the boys in academic activities inside of school.
- **Clinical Needs:** Staff are concerned about the issues of race, gender, sexuality and trauma facing young boys. A clinician regularly provides additional support for both the boys and the staff.

#### *Expert Responses:*

Experts were moved by the impact that the program has already made. They identified the relationships between the Life Coaches and the boys as central to the success of this program. Three key functions of the Life Coaches were identified: (1) offering a holistic approach to child development by working with multiple contexts, (2) crisis intervention, and (3) providing an emotional anchor through role modeling and mentoring. The Study Group was pleased to hear

about the roles and responsibilities of the Life Coaches, but hope that they maintain a reasonable caseload and are sustained and supported to avoid burnout.

*Programmatic recommendations from Experts:*

*Responding to trauma:* Incorporate a pro-active intervention plan for responding to trauma and loss by (1) working with families to identify and respond to clinical needs (2) helping staff know how to identify clinical needs and refer appropriately and (3) identifying a full-time clinician.

*Becoming economic agents of change:* Help program participants become entrepreneurs through (1) creation of projects, such as starting their own businesses, promote cooperation, leadership and feelings of empowerment and (2) incorporation of more social tasks that the tutors, coaches and boys can do together.

*Health, nutrition and sexuality:* Set the stage for open communications about sexuality, which has a variety of health, social, and psychological implications that can encroach on educational and economic activity and performance as the boys get older. Experts agree that developmentally, the boys are at the perfect age to instill the importance of good nutrition, health, and sexuality. The staff should (1) start having conversations about health and preventative health and (2) integrate existing Children's Aid nutrition and health initiatives, including the Seed-to-table program and Go!Kids.

*Racial and gender identity:* Tailor resources to the boys' particular familial and school contexts as well as their interests, needs and thoughts about who they think they are. Suggestions include (1) incorporate other programmatic ways to promote positive identity development and (2) include more opportunities for peer-to-peer socialization and group activities.

*The Role of Women:* Involve female volunteers because for young boys to understand what it means to be a man, they need to see men working with women. Currently, the Everyday Heroes component meets a specific need by allowing boys to see a variety of men in professional positions. In addition to family and teacher involvement, (1) female volunteers should be utilized and (2) there should be opportunities for the boys to see men and women interacting in respectful and healthy manners.

### ***The Evaluation Design and Feedback***

*Theoretical Model:* The program and its evaluation is theoretically-based in the belief that child development happens through reciprocal relationships. Positive relationships (including a Life Coach, a tutor and positive, Black male role models) will protect Black males from some of the societal challenges they face including trauma, stereotype threat, and insufficient academic supports and opportunities. This program is also theoretically-based in the belief that working with schools and families will holistically support the development and well-being of each child in their own unique context.

What makes this program unique is that it explicitly seeks to develop the non-cognitive and cognitive skills of the boys. While many non-school based programs solely aim to enhance cognitive skills, Steps to Success recognizes the crucial role that non-cognitive skills play in the social and emotional maturation of the boys. The relationship between the Life Coach and boy is what

facilitates the development of non-cognitive skills. Therefore, this relationship must be carefully measured.

*Evaluation recommendations from Experts:*

- Measure the development of the Life Coaches because it is almost as important as measuring the development of the boys. The two are very interconnected since the growth of the men fuels the growth of the boys.
- Represent the experiences of the boys as they develop ‘normally’ and avoid putting existing paradigms and constructs onto their lives. Be cautious when comparing to a national data set and utilize ‘grounded theory’ to create an understanding of the boys’ actual experiences<sup>8</sup> and to emphasize variability in human development.
- Emphasize narratives of boys and Life Coaches and be sure to tap into the cultural and contextual stories that capture assets and deficits.
- Examine the relationship between the Life Coaches and the boys and the lived experience of each group. The boys and staff are central to understanding the effects of the program.
- Understand the desired developmental outcomes including changes in racial and gender identity, academic performance, behavior, attainment, coping styles, and social emotional well-being to illuminate how the program impacts their lives.

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<sup>8</sup> A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) encourages a look at how the survey results and the identified themes and patterns in the interviews together contribute to and enhance our understanding of boys’ development in the research literature.

## **Recommended Resources**

*2007 Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being* (2007). The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.

*Dellums Commission Background Papers* (2006). The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute, Washington, DC.

Holzman, Michael. (2006). *Public Education and Black Male Students: The 2006 State Report Card*, Schott Educational Inequity Index, Cambridge, MA; The Schott Foundation for Public Education.

*The State of Black New York City 2007*. Black Equity Alliance and New York Urban League, New York, NY.

Warren, Jennifer. (2008). *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*. The Pew Center on the States. Washington, D. C. Accessed March 1, 2008  
<<http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100.pdf>>

This report was prepared by Lorna Palacio Morgan, Senior Program Quality Advisor, and Laura Tomasko, Research Assistant, at The Children's Aid Society, and Monique Jethwani-Keyser, a consultant. For information regarding the African American Male Initiative, please contact Lorna Palacio Morgan at [lornam@childrensaidsociety.org](mailto:lornam@childrensaidsociety.org) or Laura Tomasko at [laurat@childrensaidsociety.org](mailto:laurat@childrensaidsociety.org).

## **Conveners**

### **The Children's Aid Society**

*Mission: To ensure the physical and emotional well being of children and families, and to provide each child with the support and opportunities needed to become a happy, healthy and productive adult.*

The Children's Aid Society is a lifeline and a safe haven to New York City's children and families most in need of assistance. We carry out our mission through a broad range of essential health, education and social services.

The Children's Aid Society, founded in 1853, serves more than 100,000 children and their families each year, often helping them overcome tremendous odds. Our network of more than 100 cutting-edge programs and services provided at over 40 sites in and around New York City supplies a full spectrum of support. Our nationally recognized programs are models of social service practice and have impacted national child welfare policy.

### **The Campaign for Educational Equity**

The Campaign for Educational Equity is the focal point for Teachers College's mission of promoting equity and excellence in education and overcoming the gap in educational access and achievement between advantaged groups and disadvantaged groups in this country. The Campaign reflects the total institutional commitment of the College to promoting educational equity.

Launched in 2005, The Campaign is committed to expanding and strengthening the national movement for quality public education for all by providing research-based analyses of key education policy issues. The Campaign promotes educational equity through focused research, raising awareness of equity issues within Teachers College and to external audiences, rapid dissemination of research and relevant information, and demonstrations of improved policy and practice.

### **The Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College Columbia University**

The Institute conducts research and evaluations, provides information services, and assists schools, community-based organizations, and parent school leaders in program development and evaluation, professional development, and parent education.

Since its beginning at Teachers College in 1973, the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) has been committed to better understanding the educational, psychological, and social development of urban and minority group students, and the experiences in the home, neighborhoods, communities, and larger society that influence their opportunity for development and social mobility.



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