A SEAT AT THE TABLE:

African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education

UNCF
A mind is a terrible thing to waste®

A SEAT AT THE TABLE:
African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education

Author: Meredith B.L. Anderson, Ph.D.

A Seat at the Table: African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education is the third report in a three-part series on African American perceptions of K-12 education. *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parents Perceptions of K-12 Education* was the inaugural report, *Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions on K-12 Education Reform* was the second report in the series.

UNCF
A mind is a terrible thing to waste®

Suggested citation: Anderson, Meredith, B.L. (2018). *A Seat at the Table: African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education*, Washington, DC: UNCF.

Table of Contents

Foreword

For the last several years, UNCF has been committed to improving the schools our children attend before college. The reason is simple: increasing the number of African Americans receiving college degrees depends in large measure on whether students receive a quality K-12 education that prepares them for college coursework and college success.

And, for just as long, we have been pointing out that necessary changes in K-12 education will not take place unless those who will be the primary beneficiaries of better education, including youth of color, are central participants in the reform process. Without their participation, it will be impossible to ensure that changes are efficacious, impossible to build the community consensus that effective and durable reform requires and impossible to keep those who stand to benefit the most from reform from feeling that reform is being done to them and not with them.

This report, *A Seat at the Table: African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education*, is the third in a series that probes community reactions to K-12 education; its two predecessors, *Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform*, and *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*, addressed the roles that should be played by parents and community leaders. The role to be played by youth is just as important. They are, after all, the stakeholders whose response to reform will determine if it succeeds or fails. Of the three groups, they are the only one with firsthand knowledge of what happens in the classroom. And, all too often, they do not have a seat at the table during reform discussions. This study begins to remedy that omission.

So, what can we learn from our youth about improving schools?

First, contrary to a pervasive narrative that racial disparities in education are the result of disengagement on the part of students, African American youth indicated that success in school was their most important priority among other competing factors. This is important because research suggests that youth who are more engaged and more optimistic about education are more likely to aspire to attend college.

African American youth are also prepared to take responsibility for making their aspirations a reality. Over 90 percent agreed that "it is up to me to make things happen in life." This, too, is important because research has shown that African American students with high levels of self-efficacy also demonstrate high levels of academic self-efficacy and positive school outcomes.

Finally, while youth may lack some of the perspective that parents, leaders and researchers bring to education reform, they are all too clear about the barriers that imperil their educational aspirations. Slightly over a third, for instance, were concerned that their race limits their opportunities. In addition, while 57 percent of youth recognized that the high cost of post-secondary education was a significant barrier to enrolling in or completing college, slightly more than one in five youth admitted that they did not understand how to pay for college at all. (This confirms my experience as president of UNCF-member institution Dillard University in New Orleans; many parents brought their students—many of them the first in their families to attend college and thus lacking the guidance that higher-income students can take for granted—to begin their freshman year having given no thought to how they would finance their education.)

. . . necessary changes in K-12 education will not take place unless those who will be the primary beneficiaries of better education, including youth of color, are central participants in the reform process.

These findings have several implications for both public policy advocates and philanthropy. Meaningful change will not take place unless there are policy advocates who are unapologetic in their endeavors. Students have essentially provided a policy agenda. The question is, are we willing to listen and more importantly, act on what they are saying? They have a strong desire to attend college, yet often lack the knowledge on how to pay for it. The philanthropic community can help bridge this gap and invest in innovative programs that provide broader financial literacy programs for youth while in high school, college counseling and federal financial aid advising. At UNCF, we've implemented programs like the Empower Me Tour that provide youth and parents with valuable information on fiscal health as well as college and career readiness. We need bold, innovative strategies such as these that we can scale and implement for students now. The stakes are simply too dire to wait. And, these investments must be made not only for the highest performing low-income students, but for those who are struggling as well. These interventions can change the trajectory of students' lives and their communities as a whole.

Additionally, the findings show that the high cost of college is for youth themselves, the number one barrier to college enrollment or completion. As such, public policy advocates at the federal level should continue to support FAFSA simplification in the HEA reauthorization. Roughly two million students leave valuable Pell Grants on the table because of difficulties navigating the lengthy completion process. And more importantly, we need to ensure that we are working to make college more affordable for students by adequately expanding the Federal Work Study Program, Pell Grants and the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants.

UNCF issues this report and conducts all its research not as a purely academic exercise, but rather to compile an agenda for action. Our research division, the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, works closely with our K-12 advocacy department to devise strategies to overcome the challenges the study points out. In addition, the department works with parents, community leaders and students to develop and execute strategies to give our young people the education they need and deserve and that our country needs for them to have.

Michael L. Lomax

Michael L. Lomax, Ph.D.
President and CEO
UNCF

. . . African American youth indicated that success in school was their most important priority among other competing factors.

Introduction

There is an enduring crisis in the U.S. education system for black students. Year after year, the data paint a grim picture. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) consistently show gaps between African American and white students in math and reading. And, while the U.S. Department of Education suggests access to quality preschool is important for future success, African American and low-income students are least likely to have access to high-quality early childhood programs.[1] Black students are also vastly underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and Advanced Placement (AP) courses, yet are overrepresented in the percentage of students receiving disciplinary infractions. Opportunities to learn are severely limited. African American students are nearly four times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than their white peers and almost two times more likely to be expelled from school without educational services.[2] Even more alarming is the inequitable distribution of teachers. African American students are more likely than any other student group to be in schools with inexperienced and less qualified educators. On the outcome of high school graduation rates, African American students have made more progress than any other racial group since 2010, but they continue to lag behind white students.[3]

While there is clearly no shortage of statistics and figures on African American students' educational trajectories and opportunities, there is often less scholarship that incorporates their authentic voice and experiences across the K-12 landscape.[4] Student voice research contends that "young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention, but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education."[5]

The findings of this report indicate that African American youth want to be heard, and they offer meaningful commentary on the educational environment and the structural issues that may impede their success. The results dovetail with our previous research on African American parents and grasstop leaders. African American youth consider education a key factor in achieving their life goals and overwhelmingly want a college degree; yet, like parents and leaders, many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, often lack the information needed to successfully navigate the educational landscape. This information deficit often creates barriers to college entry and can have enduring effects on students and communities. This report summarizes the perceptions of African American youth on K-12 education and provides actionable recommendations for improving the educational trajectories of all students.

Slightly more than one-third of African American youth felt race may limit their opportunities in life.

Study Scope and Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of low-income African American youth on education. Too little research includes minority youth voices in a meaningful way. This study explored the following three areas of interest and the associated research questions:

- **Priorities and aspirations:** How do African American youth define success? What role does race and self-efficacy play in their perception of success? What are their aspirations beyond high school?

- **Barriers to achievement:** What significant challenges do African American youth face in school and in their communities? What are the barriers to obtaining a post secondary education?

- **Perceptions of the learning environment:** What are African American youth's perception of their schools? Do students feel supported in school? What factors would improve the learning environment for youths?

This paper utilizes data from *The Inner City Truth 3 (ICT3)* survey. ICT3 is the third iteration of a national survey of 1,700 low-income African American and Latino youth, ages 16-20. Participants were surveyed in the following cities in 2013: Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland, Richmond (CA), Philadelphia, Chicago and Atlanta. Census tracts identified participants with average household income under $40,000. For this report, the sample was limited to African Americans. A total of 797 participants were included for analysis. Descriptive statistics were analyzed to determine the most salient themes. For more information, see the Appendix.

89 percent agree it is important to obtain a postsecondary education.

Key Findings

The key findings highlight perceptions of success, education and future aspirations held by low-income African American youth who report substantial drive and determination, despite significant obstacles and negative narratives regarding their success. Overall, the results illuminate the importance of including youth's voices in understanding aspirations, school-level practices and educational environments. A few key findings are listed below.

- **Education priorities:** Nearly **70 percent** of low-income African American youth indicated success in school was a top priority, and **89 percent** agree it is important to obtain a postsecondary education.

- **Race and opportunity:** Slightly more than **one-third** of African American youth felt race may limit their opportunities in life.

- **Safety and discipline:** Only **43 percent** of respondents felt safe at their schools, and several youth experienced some form of discipline in school that removed them from the classroom setting.

- **Preparation for college:** **65 percent** of African American youth felt their high school prepared them for college; however, they also cited their biggest obstacles to college attainment and completion as (1) financial difficulties, (2) concerns about standardized tests and math, and (3) the lack of support services at school.
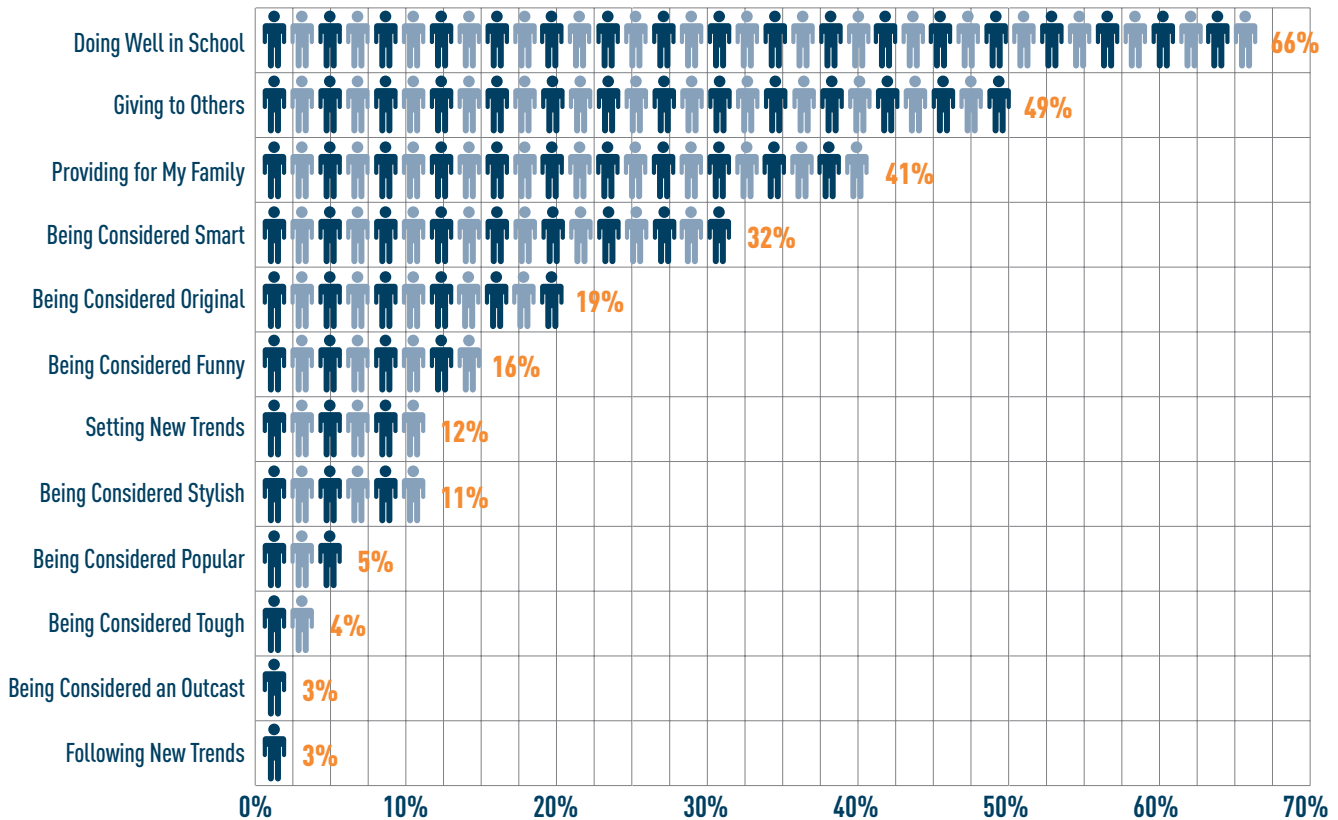
African American youth indicated that success in school was their most important priority among other competing factors.

For decades, scholars and educators alike have debated educational achievement gaps.[6] A pervasive narrative within this debate suggests that racial disparities in achievement are the result of African American students' disengagement or apathy toward education.[7] This narrative is also manifested in the negligence of research and the education community to recognize the structural and economic influences that impede academic achievement for African American students.
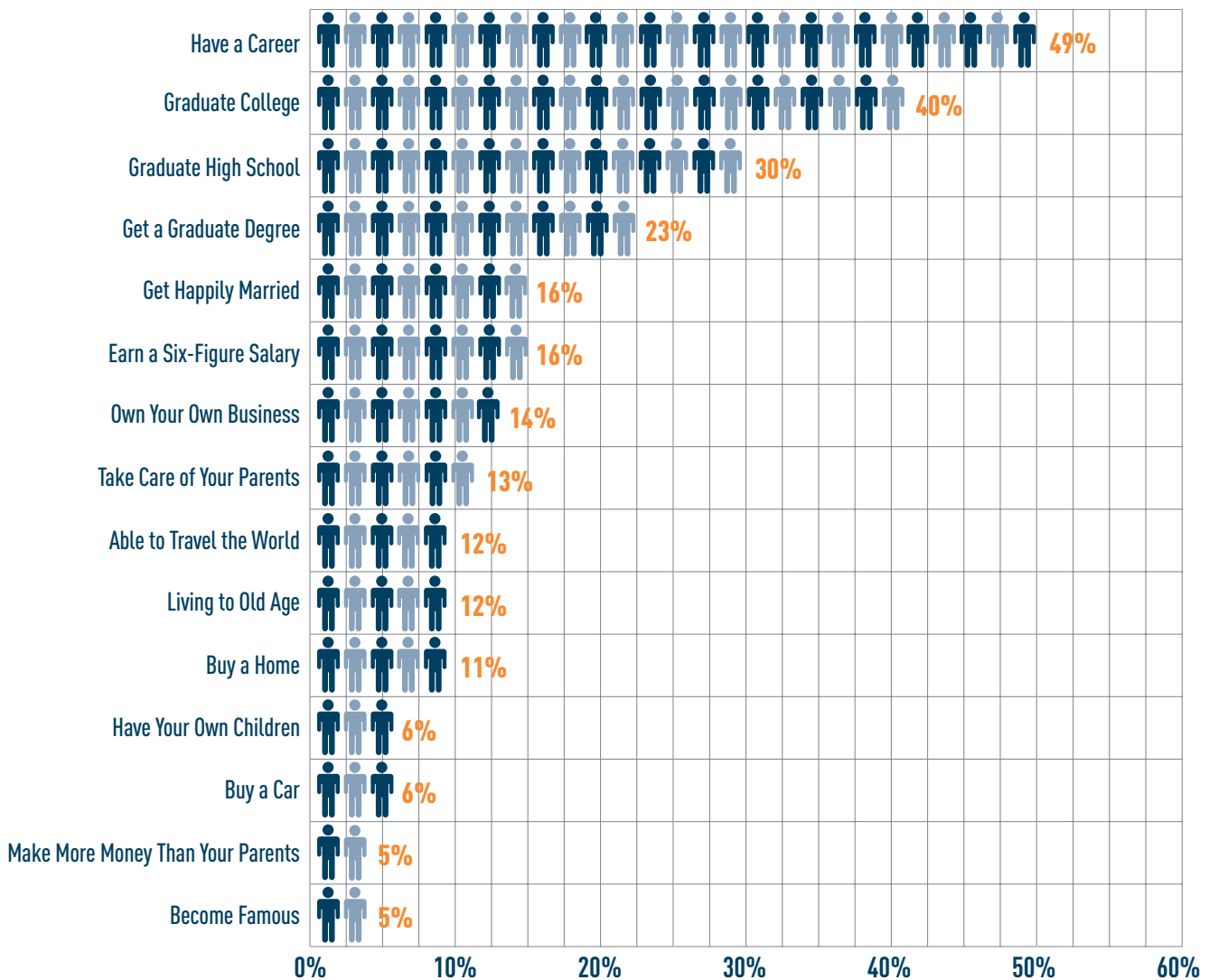
The findings of this study suggest a counter-narrative: nearly 70 percent of African American youth indicated that doing well in school was the priority most significant to them (Figure 1). This result is aligned with findings from UNCF's *Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform*, *Building Better Narratives in Black Education*, and *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*, where overwhelming proportions of African American community leaders and parents indicated that education is a salient issue in their communities.[8] Figure 2 shows that, behind having a successful career, African American youth noted that graduating from high school and college and obtaining a graduate degree were significant factors in defining success. The educational desires of these youth demonstrate the importance of success at every level of education and the desire to pursue a post secondary education.

Figure 1. Most Important Factors to Low-Income African American Youth

Factor	Percentage
Doing Well in School	66%
Giving to Others	49%
Providing for My Family	41%
Being Considered Smart	32%
Being Considered Original	19%
Being Considered Funny	16%
Setting New Trends	12%
Being Considered Stylish	11%
Being Considered Popular	5%
Being Considered Tough	4%
Being Considered an Outcast	3%
Following New Trends	3%

Note: Percentages do not total 100% because respondents selected their top three items.

Figure 2. Low-Income African American Youth's Perception of a Successful Life

Category	Percentage
Have a Career	49%
Graduate College	40%
Graduate High School	30%
Get a Graduate Degree	23%
Get Happily Married	16%
Earn a Six-Figure Salary	16%
Own Your Own Business	14%
Take Care of Your Parents	13%
Able to Travel the World	12%
Living to Old Age	12%
Buy a Home	11%
Have Your Own Children	6%
Buy a Car	6%
Make More Money Than Your Parents	5%
Become Famous	5%

Note: Percentages do not total 100% because respondents selected their top three items.

An overwhelming majority of African American youth agree it is important to obtain a post secondary education.

Acquiring a credential beyond high school is extremely salient in an ever-competitive job market. In fact, 99 percent of all the jobs created after the recovery went to workers with at least some college education.[9] By 2020, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require a post secondary education or some kind of training beyond high school.[10]

African American youth understand these trends. Figure 3 shows that nearly 90 percent of respondents agree that it is very important to obtain an education beyond high school, a finding that is congruent with other national-level research.[11] Not only did respondents agree that higher education was important, but 80 percent also indicated they were planning to or were continuing their education after high school. When asked what type of school they aspired to attend, 53 percent of African American youth surveyed indicated they wanted to attend a four-year university, whereas only 13 percent wanted to attend a two-year college.[12]

Figure 3. Importance of Receiving an Education Beyond High School for Low-Income African American Youth

Strongly Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree and Disagree	No Answer
89%	7%	2%	2%
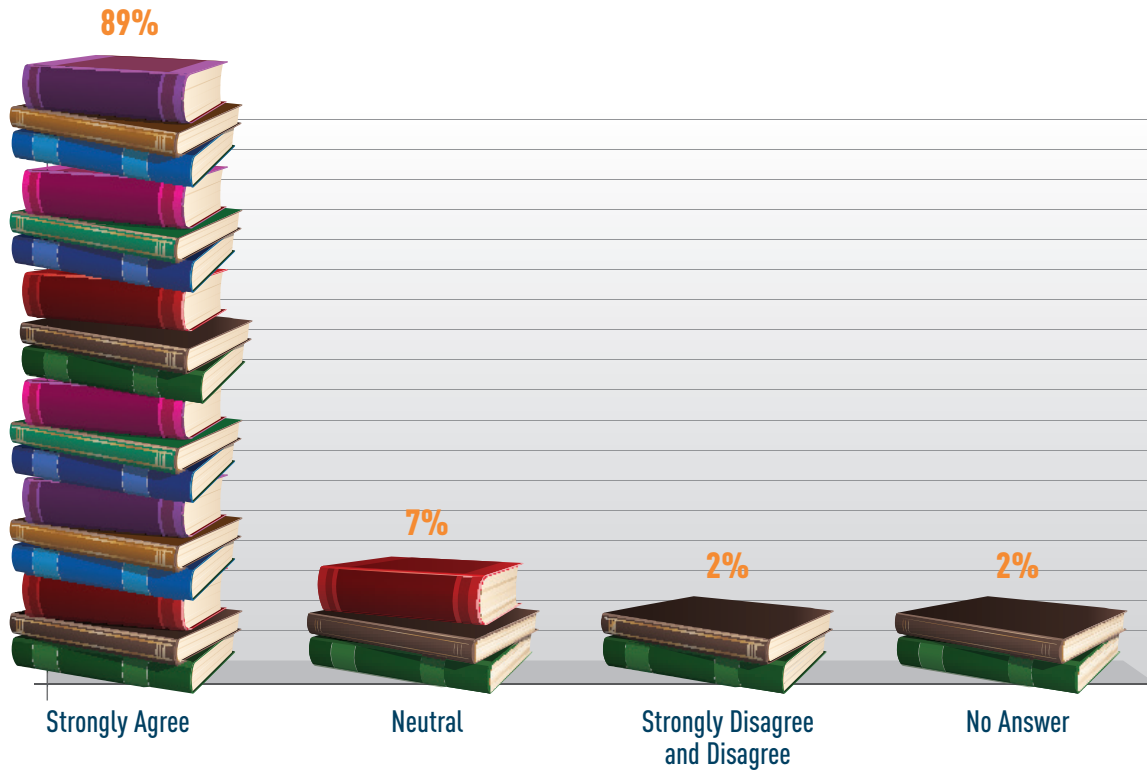
African American youth's post secondary aspirations are similar to those of African American parents and leaders. In UNCF's *Done to Us, Not with Us* nearly 90 percent of African American parents said that they wanted their children to attend and graduate from college. Moreover, the results in *Lift Every Voice and Lead* show that 90 percent of African American leaders wanted African American students to attend and graduate from college as well. Despite the narrative that "all students are not college material," our research and other studies consistently show that African American communities overwhelmingly want youth to attend college, but many encounter academic and information obstacles that hinder their academic preparation for higher education. Such rhetoric undermines a concerted focus from states and districts to ensure an equitable, college-ready education for all students.

Despite the narrative that "all students are not college material," our research and other studies consistently show that African American communities overwhelmingly want youth to attend college, but many encounter academic and information obstacles that hinder their academic preparation for higher education.

African American youth report that the biggest obstacles to obtaining and completing a college degree were financial issues, math difficulties, standardized testing concerns and a lack of support services at school.

The rising cost of college has been a critical policy issue for some time and African American youth are most likely to need financial aid to help cover college expenses, more so than any other group.[13] The findings reflect this reality. Figure 4
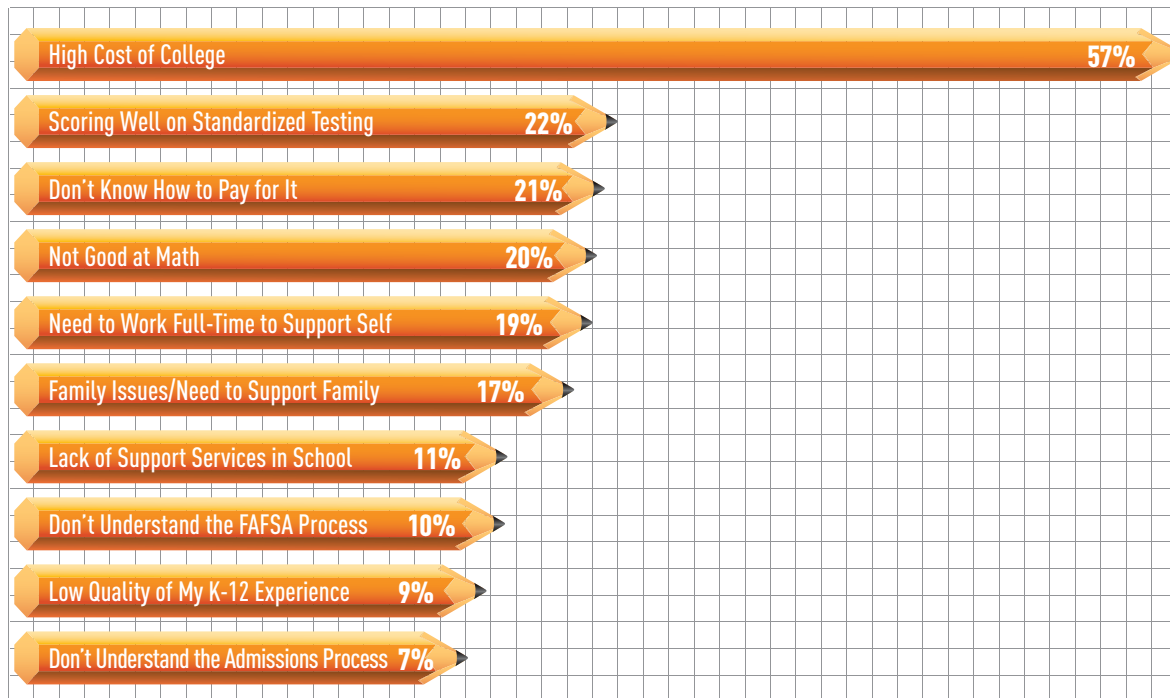
shows that 57 percent of youth explained that the high cost of higher education was a significant barrier to enrolling in or completing college. Even more troubling, slightly more than 1 in 5 respondents explained they did not understand how to pay for college at all. This information asymmetry may stem from a lack of support services at schools, a factor that respondents also noted as a barrier to college enrollment and completion. Support services may include college advising, financial literacy, counseling and various other direct services. Personnel such as social workers, school guidance counselors and psychologists play a critical role in student success, yet far too often these essential personnel are inadequately present, especially on campuses with large African American populations.[14]

While financial barriers to college have been well documented, less attention has been paid to low-income, African American youth's actual perception of their academic performance. Low-income youth explained that academic factors— particularly concerns about standardized tests (22 percent) and low confidence in math (20 percent)—were barriers to attending college. Given the importance of assessments in schools, it is likely that students may experience significant internal and external pressure, which could influence aspirations for college. Research also substantiates these concerns; scholars have demonstrated a link between negative stereotypes and adverse testing performance among African American youth.[15] When administered correctly, standardized tests should be a means to adequately assess student progress and address pertinent areas of concern. However, students may become disillusioned when tests are administered in excess or they are not given adequate feedback upon completion of the testing cycle.

Research shows that in some instances, African American youth have high self-efficacy in math, yet performance scores may not always match enthusiasm.[16] Additionally, given that schools with high black student enrollment have less access to high-level math and science courses than schools with low black student enrollment, some black students may not be fully confident in their math abilities.[17] This is troubling as research also shows that placement in high-level math courses can boost self-efficacy in math.[18]

Figure 4. Low-Income African American Youth's Biggest Obstacles to getting into or Finishing College

Obstacle	Percent
High Cost of College	57%
Scoring Well on Standardized Testing	22%
Don't Know How to Pay for It	21%
Not Good at Math	20%
Need to Work Full-Time to Support Self	19%
Family Issues/Need to Support Family	17%
Lack of Support Services in School	11%
Don't Understand the FAFSA Process	10%
Low Quality of My K-12 Experience	9%
Don't Understand the Admissions Process	7%

Note: Percentages do not total to 100% because respondents were allowed to check multiple responses.
Note, the top 10 out of 16 responses are listed.

Personnel such as social workers, school guidance counselors and psychologists play a critical role in student success, yet far too often these essential personnel are inadequately present, especially on campuses with large African American populations.

African American youth felt their high schools provided them with a quality education that prepared them to do well in college.

Despite common depictions of inner-city schools, nearly two-thirds of youth surveyed felt they were adequately prepared for college. African American parents tend to hold favorable perspectives of their child's school as well.[19] In fact, in *Done to Us, Not With Us*, 80 percent of African American parents and caregivers rated their children's school as excellent or pretty good.

While some youth have, in fact, received an adequate education, there could be an incongruence between student and parent perceptions of their schools and actual academic outcomes. Data from the Council for Great City Schools indicates that less than 23 and 30 percent of large, urban districts were performing at or above state proficiency in reading and math, respectively.[20] Moreover, *The Condition of Career and College Readiness 2015: African American Students* indicates that ACT-tested African American high school graduates are nearly twice as likely as the average student to not meet any college-readiness benchmarks. African American students are less likely to be exposed to a college-ready curriculum and are more likely to take remedial courses than other student groups.[21]

Students' feelings about the adults in their building could temper feelings of preparedness for college. Seventy percent of African American respondents agreed that there is an adult at their school who follows their progress and cares about their success. This is a significant finding as research shows that students who have these investments are more likely to pursue a college degree.[22]
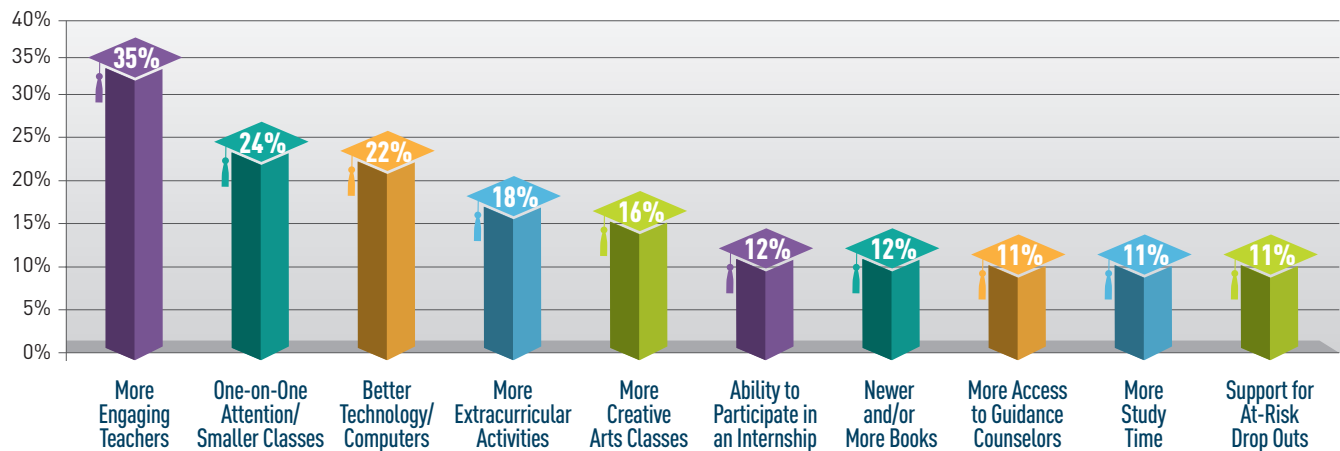
Seventy percent of African American respondents agreed that there is an adult at their school who follows their progress and cares about their success.

Despite positive perceptions of their high schools and teachers, African American youth still ranked more engaging teachers, smaller classes and better technology as the most important factors necessary to improve their high schools.

While a number of factors contribute to the student learning environment, African American youth noted their classroom experiences as being the most in need of improvement at school. Figure 5 shows that 35 percent of African American youth explained that more engaging teachers would help enhance their high schools, followed by more one-on-one attention or smaller classes. African American youth's chief concerns are often indicative of common concerns in inner-city schools overall. Teachers can provide individualized and more engaging attention to students in smaller classes. Research indicates that such classes provide academic benefits for students.[23]

Better technology and computers were the third highest factor in need of improvement. While technology is not the panacea to academic success, it is essential to 21st-century learning and successfully implementing new online assessments. Per-pupil spending in U.S. states can range from $6,500 to $20,000, with high-minority, high-poverty schools generally falling on the low end of the spectrum, demonstrating the difficulty in improving technology in these schools.[24]

Figure 5. Low-Income African American Youth's Perspective on Most Important Items to Improve Their High Schools

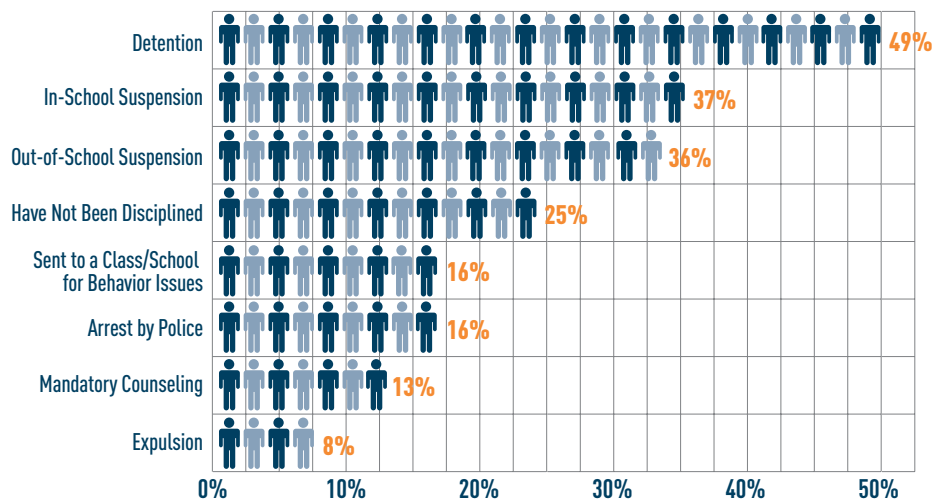| Item	Percentage
More Engaging Teachers	35%
One-on-One Attention/Smaller Classes	24%
Better Technology/Computers	22%
More Extracurricular Activities	18%
More Creative Arts Classes	16%
Ability to Participate in an Internship	12%
Newer and/or More Books	12%
More Access to Guidance Counselors	11%
More Study Time	11%
Support for At-Risk Drop Outs	11%

Note: Percentages do not total to 100% as respondents selected their top three items.

Many African American youth experienced some form of discipline in school, which decreased quality time in the classroom.

Figure 6 shows that nearly half of African American youth reported being placed in detention at some point in their education. Even more alarming, a large number of youth reported experiencing some type of exclusionary discipline that removed them from the classroom, such as in-school suspension (37 percent), out-of-school suspension (36 percent) or an expulsion (8 percent). These findings echo national data from the U.S. Office for Civil Rights that shows African American students are nearly four times more likely than white students to be to be suspended from school.[25] These glaring discipline disparities also begin early. Though African American children only represent 19 percent of the preschool population, they constitute 47 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.

Figure 6. African American Youth's Experience with Discipline

Discipline	Percentage
Detention	49%
In-School Suspension	37%
Out-of-School Suspension	36%
Have Not Been Disciplined	25%
Sent to a Class/School for Behavior Issues	16%
Arrest by Police	16%
Mandatory Counseling	13%
Expulsion	8%

Note: Percentages do not total to 100% because respondents were allowed to check multiple responses.

The implications of these findings are vast. Students who are suspended are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school or become engaged with the criminal justice system.[26] The consistent discipline disproportionality for African American girls and boys not only impedes college readiness, but further reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline. Only 25 percent of African American youth in our study said they did not receive any form of discipline in their educational experiences. While the maintenance of school safety is important to promote teaching and learning, it is also imperative to consider the confluence of implicit bias, zero tolerance policies and the loss of valuable classroom time that impedes academic progress for students.

The consistent discipline disproportionality for African American girls and boys not only impedes college readiness, but further reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline.

Though African American youth felt it was up to them to make things happen in their lives, roughly one-third felt their race may limit their opportunities.

African American youth exhibited a high degree of self-efficacy, with over 90 percent agreeing with that statement that "it is up to me to make things happen in life." Research has shown that African American students with high levels of self-efficacy also demonstrate high levels of academic self-efficacy and positive school outcomes.[27]

While the vast majority of African American youth felt it was up to them to determine their own paths in life, Figure 7 indicates that slightly over one-third were concerned that their race limits their opportunities. Research suggests that African American youth who are cognizant of negative stereotypes, inequities or biases against their racial group may disengage with education and at times perform poorly, whereas youth who perceive more positive views from society about African Americans and have strong racial group pride have a stronger attachment to school.[28] With the vast injustices African Americans have experienced across numerous policy areas (including education), the persistent negative media portrayals, institutional racism and the current racial climate, youth may develop a dismal outlook on their futures. As such, policy decisions and persistent negative narratives about black students' academic performance often have far-reaching consequences for youth. UNCF's, the National Urban League's and the Education Post's research suggests that "building better narratives" for youth of color and their communities is important for self-confidence and academic success.[29] Moreover, research demonstrates that racial socialization practices by parents has been associated with positive academic outcomes for African American youth.[30] It is therefore incumbent on schools and families to address these issues at an early age.

Figure 7. Low-Income African American Youth's Perception of Race Limiting Their Opportunities

- 35% Strongly Agree and Agree
- 28% Neutral
- 35% Strongly Disagree and Disagree
- 2% No Answer
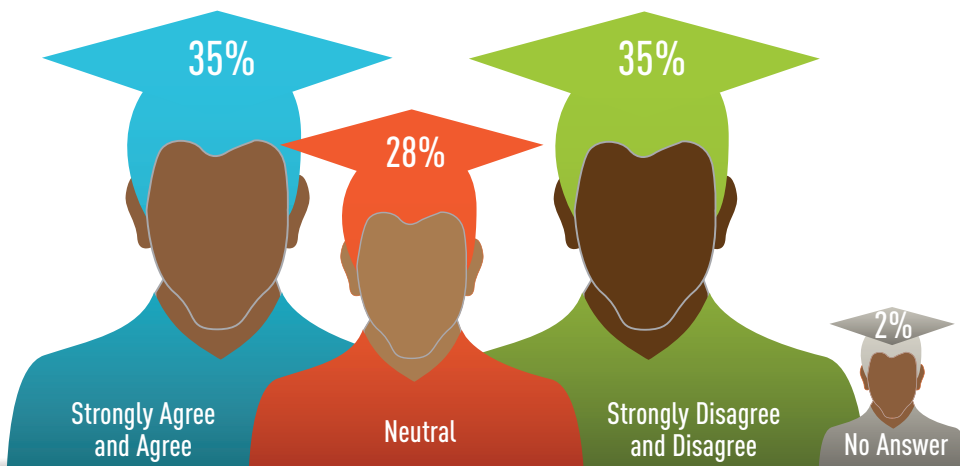
Only 43 percent of African American youth surveyed felt their school campus was safe.
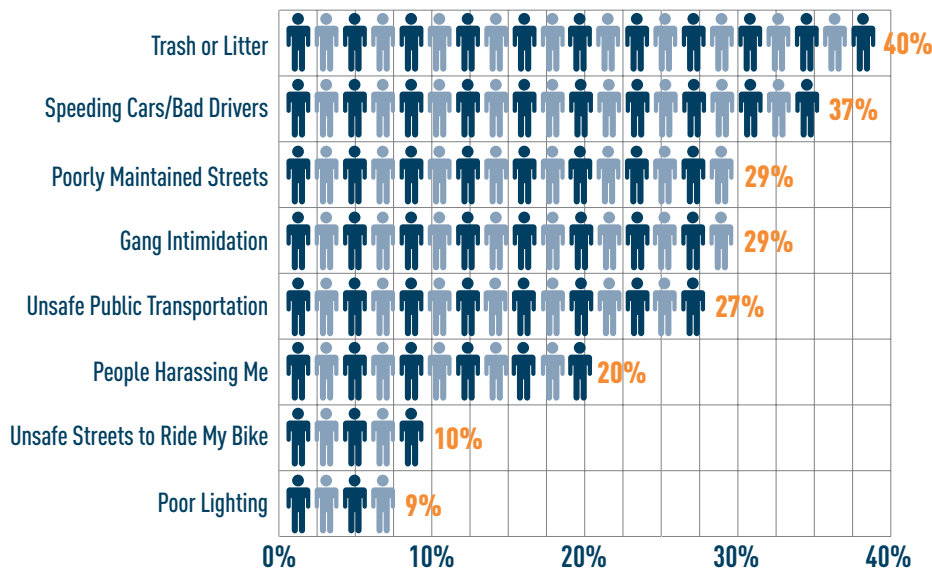
A significant number of African American youth demonstrated concerns about safety on their campuses and when walking to school.

Only 43 percent of African American youth surveyed felt their school campus was safe. National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice data also indicate that students who attend urban schools were more likely to report feeling afraid of an attack or harm during the school year than students who attended rural or suburban schools.[31] These findings are disheartening, as Gallup's Student Poll research suggest that youth who are more engaged and hopeful about education, which includes feeling safe at school, are more likely to aspire to attend college.

Not only did many African American youth feel unsafe in their schools, but many expressed issues when walking to campus as well. Figure 8 displays the key issues of concern; while 40 percent of youth were concerned with trash or litter, 37 percent expressed concerns with speeding cars and nearly one-third experienced gang intimidation.

Low-income, minority communities are often more likely to be concentrated in areas plagued with environmental hazards, including dilapidated buildings, toxic air and water and poorly maintained streets. Such climates can have a negative impact on overall health and youth performance.[32] The repeated exposure to such environments can influence school attendance and engagement.

Figure 8. African American Youth's Concerns Regarding Commute to School

Trash or Litter				40%
Speeding Cars/Bad Drivers				37%
Poorly Maintained Streets				29%
Gang Intimidation				29%
Unsafe Public Transportation				27%
People Harassing Me				20%
Unsafe Streets to Ride My Bike				10%
Poor Lighting				9%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%

Note: Percentages do not total to 100% as respondents selected their top three items.

Overall, these findings are congruent with the concerns of African American parents. Previous research in *Done to Us, Not With Us* found that parents prioritized a safe, secure and violence-free environment as the most important factor when choosing a school for their child. Additionally, research also shows that African American and Latino parents are more likely to worry about the physical safety of their children than white parents and often indicated safety as the most important quality in determining a great school.[33]

Recommendations

The findings of this research suggest that, while African American youth generally feel good about their schools and are optimistic about their future aspirations, there are several areas of concern. As achievement and opportunity gaps continue to increase, it is imperative that stakeholders strongly consider action-oriented approaches to disrupt the status quo. The following recommendations are concrete solutions to help improve educational outcomes for African American youth.

1. Reduce barriers to college attendance

African American youth indicated that the primary barriers to college attendance are:
- Lack of information about and understanding of the admissions or financial aid processes
- Inadequate support services in school
- Lack of funding
- Concerns about performance on standardized tests and math

There are several ways to reduce these obstacles.

First, reducing information barriers about college will take a concerted effort by students, schools, organizations and parents. School guidance counselors are critical to the advising of students and the dissemination of information about the college process, but schools are often lacking these key personnel. The national student-to-counselor ratio is 491-to-1; however, the American School Counselor Association recommends a 250-to-1 ratio.[34] In fact, African American students are 1.2 times as likely as white students to attend a school where there is a sworn law enforcement officer, but no school counselor.[35] If schools and colleges are serious about increasing college readiness and attendance, advising must be a key priority. Universities must also make it a priority to implement more meaningful college and career training in degree programs for potential counselors. Schools and districts must also emphasize the college-readiness role that counselors play and offer ongoing, targeted professional development.

If schools and colleges are serious about increasing college readiness and attendance, advising must be a key priority.

Second, outreach initiatives encourage a college-readiness culture. School and university partnerships are important for information about and exposure to the college process. College tours for students in primary and secondary school expose them to college at an early age. This is especially beneficial for youth who could become first-generation college students and may have never been to a college campus. It is also incumbent on colleges to partner with low-income schools to conduct college fairs for those youth who do not have the resources to make college visits.

Third, while the price for tuition continues to rise, it is important that students are aware of their options for college. For example, African American students should understand the value proposition of HBCUs. On average, UNCF-member HBCUs cost 26 percent less than comparable institutions and often outperform similar institutions on key success metrics. Yet, some high schools do not encourage students to attend these institutions.[36] Organizations, schools and parents should work collectively to ensure youth have the knowledge base to make an informed decision about college.

2. Address widespread student discipline issues that create unequal opportunities to learn

The discipline findings in this study mirror a national trend for African American students. Rigid zero-tolerance policies often result in students being systematically removed from the classroom. However, there are several ways

Deficit-based rhetoric often permeates the discussion about African American youth achievement. Our findings support a counter-narrative: African American youth aspire to a college education and often define success in ways that center on academic achievement.

to combat these disparities. First, transparent data systems at the school, state and district levels assist in identifying disproportionate discipline practices. These systems should also include surveys to assess the climate of the school or district. If these assessments unmask inequity, appropriate interventions should be implemented.

Second, restorative justice and positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) are two evidence-based interventions that seek to address disparate discipline and climate issues in schools. Both approaches were recommended by the U.S. Department of Education during the Obama Administration. Restorative justice creates a positive school culture by repairing the harm that is caused by misbehavior in schools rather than focusing exclusively on punitive policies. Activities may include small peer groups, mediation, student accountability, classroom discussion and peer juries.[37] The approach has been associated with decreased suspensions and expulsions.[38] PBIS is a preventative, systematic method for addressing discipline that includes positive reinforcement, data-driven decision-making and professional development, all aimed at improving school climate and academic outcomes.

Third, addressing discipline disparities among students will take a concerted effort by districts, administrators, teachers, educational support staff and parents. In particular, schools should implement cultural competency training in order to discuss issues such as implicit bias and the disparate impact of school policies on minority students.[39] School-based personnel such as social workers, mental health providers and counselors should also be available to offer support to students, as some behavioral issues may be indicative of deeper social, emotional or environmental issues.

3. Challenge the deficit narrative about the educational aspirations of low-income African American youth

Deficit-based rhetoric often permeates the discussion about African American youth achievement. Our findings support a counter-narrative: African American youth aspire to a college education and often define success in ways that center on academic achievement. Researchers, non-profit organizations and school leaders should strive to balance the discourse to include better narratives about black excellence and concrete education policy solutions.

Schools should include issues of race, diversity and social justice in their curricula and incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency training for school-based staff to foster an inclusive environment and increase overall achievement.

One-third of the youth surveyed believed race limited their opportunities. While substantial racial inequities exist, we must ensure that our youth do not become discouraged or disengaged with education as a result. Such negative narratives may stymie college aspirations. Schools should include issues of race, diversity and social justice in their curricula and incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency training for school-based staff to foster an inclusive environment and increase overall achievement. Given the current racial climate, tensions and racism apparent in this country, schools should not avoid these salient issues. Race is embedded into the political, social, educational and economic fabric of our nation. Accordingly, youth should have the opportunity to critique and challenge inequitable practices

in society.[40] Unfortunately, institutional practices in the schools themselves may perpetuate racism and discrimination; it is, therefore, important that parents and community leaders not only engage youth on these matters, but hold schools accountable if discrimination is evident.

> **...institutional practices in the schools themselves may perpetuate racism and discrimination; it is, therefore, important that parents and community leaders not only engage youth on these matters but hold schools accountable if discrimination is evident.**

Finally, African American teacher representation may allow African American students to see positive role models in the classroom and increase their self-confidence. Research has consistently shown the academic benefits of African American teachers in the classroom, yet teachers of color only make up 18 percent of all public school teachers.[41] States, districts and schools should be intentional in expanding their recruitment networks to ensure adequate teacher and administrative representation. For example, recruitment from HBCUs and African American professional organizations may provide high-quality, diverse talent beyond existing channels. With students of color now constituting a slight majority of public school students, it is necessary that teachers and leadership begin to reflect their student demographics.[42]

4. Improve school-based practices and partnerships to increase African American student achievement

School-based practices and partnerships are beneficial in addressing student performance as they can serve as key interventions for students. These practices are especially important for areas of student concern like standardized tests and math. Though high-quality assessments are not the answer to fixing all educational disparities, when used along with other instructional items, they can be a helpful tool for students, families and teachers. Schools should inform students and parents about how assessments may be able to promote their academic growth. Schools should also provide additional support before administering tests to struggling students. Schools can partner with several non-profit organizations that offer useful tools and resources on assessments.

To build greater confidence in math, support should be offered to youth early on in their math development. Negative attitudes left unchecked can lead to disengagement and missed career opportunities in the future. As such, all schools should offer rigorous courses in math and science to foster math development; unfortunately, recent U.S. Office for Civil Rights data indicate that African American students have less access to such courses.[43]

Moreover, research shows that school and university partnerships are beneficial in assisting students in their math self-efficacy.[44] Youth should be exposed to various opportunities in STEM fields to spark greater interest in math and in college. For instance, businesses should offer internships, summer work programs and job-shadowing opportunities to students through school or district partnerships.

Implications and Call to Action

Implications for Higher Education

The findings from this study provide several implications not only for the K-12 sector, but for higher education as well. We often ask are students college-ready, but the focus should also be on whether colleges are student-ready. Colleges and universities must be more intentional about restructuring the student experience to address the array of challenges that their first-generation students face. Given these challenges, UNCF recommends the following action items for the higher education community:

1. Invest in effective summer bridge programs that prepare students for the academic rigors of college life and the often complex social transition. These programs can connect students to campus resources and support services, emphasize STEM development and provide quality mentoring. Bridge programs are especially salient for underserved, first-generation college students who often lack these important resources. Middle school students would also benefit from similar enrichment programs that provide exposure to college at an early age.

2. While we want students to arrive on college campuses academically prepared, the reality is that remedial education rates are high, especially for low-income minority students. Given this challenge, campuses need to invest in developmental education in ways that remove stigma for students who need it but also provide more support for faculty teaching these courses. Colleges and universities should use innovative technology to create personalized learning experiences in remedial education. Campuses must also employ intrusive advising so students in developmental education do not slip through the cracks. Quality programmatic support in remedial education can help facilitate a smooth transition into regular college courses.

3. Invest in sustained university and school partnerships that provide opportunities for students to gain exposure to college well before their junior year of high school.

Implications for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The youth surveyed for this report represent the very type of students that typically enroll in HBCUs—low-income African American students who are likely to be the first in their families to attend college. It is therefore important that these institutions take heed of these important voices to increase enrollment, retention and graduation. What can be done?

1. Given that slightly over one-third of youth said that race limits their opportunities in life, HBCUs must promote their deep history of dismantling such deficit-based racial attitudes and affirming their students' race and culture during their outreach and recruitment efforts to youth. In fact, HBCUs can become models for other colleges to promote a positive attitude toward black racial identity.

2. Invest in sustained follow-up efforts with admitted students to ensure they enroll. While applications at many HBCUs are up, the yield is stagnant. HBCUs should invest in outreach to admitted students via student ambassadors, texting services and financial aid and enrollment checklists. The findings indicate that students lack support services on the K-12 level; therefore, these proactive interventions can fill that important gap.

3. Provide programmatic support to students early in their college experience that address issues like financial literacy, including financial aid, time management and career readiness.

Conclusion

This report illuminates the perspectives of low-income African American youth on several key issues in K-12 education. Despite common deficit narratives about African American youth achievement, our survey data reveal that they have high aspirations for college attainment and promising careers. In fact, many felt their high schools offered them a sound education. Yet, they also voiced the need for tangible improvements in schools. Even more concerning, youth expressed trepidation about college degree attainment, with math performance, standardized tests, financial issues and lack of support services in school all being factors of note.

As the country grapples with the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), student voices must be at the center, not in the margins. African American youth provided meaningful commentary on their educational experiences. In fact, our empirical research from African American parents, grasstop leaders and youth all reveal one thing—a robust desire for an excellent educational system that prepares students for a flourishing college experience and a promising career. When our education system fails its students in so many areas, it fails communities. African American grasstop leaders echoed this sentiment with the vast majority citing education as a major problem for their community and second highest priority in improving the community.

UNCF has robust experience in education as it has conducted extensive, national-level research on African American parents (*Done to Us, Not With Us*), community leaders (*Lift Every Voice and Lead*) and now youth. Hearing from these communities provides UNCF with a unique expertise and lens to advocate for students. That is why, in addition to its longstanding history of financial and programmatic support to current and prospective college students, it also developed a K-12 advocacy platform committed to improving the educational trajectory of African American students on the K-12 level. UNCF's goal of getting students "to and through college" also means students are prepared for a rigorous college curriculum when they arrive at campus. When students leave high school unprepared for college, they must often enroll in remedial education, which costs U.S. students and families $1.3 billion dollars every year.[45] However, when communities come together to invest in the lives of children, the return is substantial. Our results indicate that African American youth are driven and determined, yet they also need the tangible support from communities and leaders to help fundamentally improve their educational trajectories. UNCF is calling upon grasstop leaders, parents, non-profits, foundations and policymakers to make a concerted effort to unapologetically advocate for an equitable education system for all students. African American students not only need a seat at the table in these advocacy efforts, but a voice at that table. UNCF challenges these stakeholders to take the time listen to African American students, believe what they are saying about their educational environments and most importantly act to ensure that all students receive the high-quality education they deserve.

African American students not only need a seat at the table in these advocacy efforts, but a voice at that table.

Appendix

The survey was verbally administered in person to low-income African American and Latino youth ages 16-20 in multiple regions of the U.S. by MEE Productions, Inc., personnel over five months in 2013. To assess perceptions from youth from urban neighborhoods in the lowest quintile of the U.S. population for income, MEE utilized Microsoft MapPoint 2013 to locate zip codes that contained census tracts with average household incomes under $40,000 and over-index in African Americans, Latinos or both.

Youth were recruited to participate in the survey by trusted community-based organizations. A total of 1,721 youth participated in the survey. 797 of respondents were African American. Of the African American respondents, 51.5 percent were female and 48.3 percent were male. Seventy-one percent of respondents were ages 16-18 and 28 percent were 19–20 years old. Eighty-nine percent of youth were enrolled in school. 79 percent of youth were in secondary school, 3 percent had a GED or were in vocational school, and 18 percent were in college. A group of experts in the fields of public health, social trends, marketing and branding worked together on design and analysis. All survey questions were pre-tested to ensure reliability and validity of the survey instrument.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

[2] African American and black are used interchangeably throughout the report.

[3] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), by race/ethnicity and selected demographics for the United States, the 50 states, and the District of Columbia: School year 2014–15. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2014-15.asp

[4] Howard, T. (2001). Telling their side of the story: African-American students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching. *Urban Review* 33(2), 131- 149; Rodriguez, L. & Brown, T. (2009). From voice to agency: Guiding principles for participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 123, 19-34.

[5] Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence and power: Exploring student voice in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359-390.

[6] Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). The black-white test score gap. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution; Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). "From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools," *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12; The Achievement Gap Initiative, Harvard University, Retrieved from http://www.agi.harvard.edu/

[7] Ogbu, J. (2003). Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement. New York, NY: Routledge.

[8] Bridges, B.K., Awokoya, J., & Messano, F. (2012). *Done to us, not with us: African American parent perceptions of K-12 education*. Washington, DC: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.; Anderson, M. B.L. (2016). *Building better narratives in black education*. Washington, DC: UNCF; Anderson, M. B.L. (2016), Harper, C., & Bridges, B. K. (2016). *Lift every voice and lead: African American leaders' perceptions of K-12 education reform*. Washington, DC: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

[9] Carnevale, A., Jayasundera, T, & Gullish, A. (2016). "America's divided recovery: College have and have-nots" Washington, DC: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf

[10] Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). Recovery: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2020. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

[11] ACT. (2016). *The condition of college and career readiness 2015: African American students*. ACT and UNCF.

Toldson, I. (2013). The 'acting white theory' doesn't add up. *The Root*. Retrieved from http://theroot.com.

[12] National results also reveal that nearly 60 percent of African American high school completers enrolled in college in the same calendar year they graduated, compared to 69 percent of white graduates. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_302.20.asp

[13] Digest of Education Statistics. Table 331.10. "Percentage of undergraduates receiving financial aid, by type and source of aid and selected student characteristics: 2011-12." Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_331.10.asp

[14] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf.

[15] Howard, K.E., & Anderson, KA. (2010). Stereotype threat in middle school: The effects of prior performance on expectancy and test performance. *Middle Grades Research Journal 5*(3), 119-137.

[16] Pajares, F., & Kranzler, J. (1995.) Self-efficacy beliefs and general mental ability in mathematical problem solving. *Contemporary Educational Psychology 20*(4), 426-443.

[17] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

[18] Usher, E. (2009). Sources of middle school students' self-efficacy in mathematics: A qualitative investigation. *American Educational Research Journal 46*(1), 275-314.

[19] Bridges, B.K., Awokoya, J., & Messano, F. (2012.) *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*. Washington, DC: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF. Saad, L. (2016, August); Five insights into U.S. Parents' satisfaction with education. Gallup Education, Gallop Poll Social Series. Retrieved from http://news.gallup.com/poll/195011/five-insights-parents-satisfaction-education.aspx; Be a learning hero. (2016) *Parents 2016: Hearts and minds of parents in an uncertain world*. Retrieved from https://www.issuelab.org/resources/24360/24360.pdf; National education survey. (2013). Associated Press and NORC Center for Public Affairs Research-at the University of Chicago.

Endnotes

[20] Note, five of the seven cities are represented in these data. Uzzell, R., Simon, C., Palacios, M., Anyiwo, M., Guzman, A., Lewis, S., & Casserly, M. (2012). *Beating the odds XI executive summary: Analysis of student performance on state assessments.* Retrieved from Council of Great City Schools website: http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/BTO%20Executive%20Summary%202012.pdf

[21] Bromberg, M, & Theokas, C. (2016). *Meandering toward graduation: Transcript outcomes of high school graduates*. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust; Complete College America. (2012). *Remediation: Higher education's bridge to nowhere*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/CCA%20Remediation%20ES%20FINAL.pdf; ACT. (2016). *The condition of college and career readiness 2015: African American students*. ACT and UNCF.

[22] Gallup student poll. (2015). *Engaged today, ready for tomorrow*. Retrieved from http://kidsathope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2015-Gallup-Student-Poll-Overall-Report.pdf

[23] Nye, B., Hedges, L. V., & Konstantopoulos, S. (2004). Do minorities experience larger lasting benefits from small classes? *Journal of Educational Research*, 98(2), 94-100.

[24] United States Census Bureau, Education Finance Branch. (2016). *Public Education Finances: 2014* (Census Bureau Publication No. G14-ASPEF). Retrieved from https://www2.census.gov/govs/school/14f33pub.pdf; Districts serving the most students of color receive about $2,000, or 15 percent, less per student than districts serving the fewest students of color. *Funding Gaps 2015*. Education Trust. Retrieved from https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015_TheEducationTrust1.pdf

[25] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

[26] U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding principles: A resources guide for improving school climate and discipline.* Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf

[27] Jonson-Reid, M., Davis, L., Saunders, J., Williams, T., & Williams, J. (2005). Academic self-efficacy among African American youths: Implications for school social work practice. *Children & Schools 27*(1), 5-14.

Smith, E.P., Walker, K., Fields, L., Brookins, C., & Seay, R. (1999). Ethnic identity and its relationship to self-esteem, perceived efficacy and prosocial attitudes in early adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence 22*(6): 867-880.

[28] Howard, K.E., & Anderson, K.A. (2010). "Stereotype threat in middle school: The effects of prior performance on expectancy and test performance." *Middle Grades Research Journal 5*(3), 119-137; Steele, C.M., (1997). A threat in the air. *American Psychologist 52*(6), 613-629; Chavous, T. M., Bernat, D. H., Schmeelk-Cone, K., Caldwell, C. H., Kohn-Wood, L., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2003). Racial identity and academic attainment among African American adolescents. *Child Development, 74*(4), 1076–1090.

[29] Anderson, M. B. L. (2016). *Building Better Narratives in Black Education*. Washington, DC: UNCF.

[30] Wang, M. T., & Huguley, J. P. (2012). Parental racial socialization as a moderator of the effects of racial discrimination on educational success among African American adolescents. *Child Development, 83*(5), 1716-1731.

[31] Robers, S., Kemp, J., Rathbun, A., Morgan, R., & Snyder, T. (2014). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2013*. U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice Office. (NCES 2014-042, NCJ 243299). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014042.pdf

[32] Milam, A.J., Furr-Holden, C.D.M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Perceived school and neighborhood safety, neighborhood violence and academic achievement in urban school children. *Urban Review, 42*(5) 458–467.

[33] The Leadership Conference Education Fund. (2016). *New education majority: Attitudes and aspirations of parents and families of color.* Retrieved from http://leadershipconferenceedfund.org/new-education-majority/

Be a Learning Hero. (2016). *Parents 2016: Hearts and minds of parents in an uncertain world*. Retrieved from http://bealearninghero.org/readiness-roadmap/

[34] American School Counselor Association. *Student-to-school-counselor ratio 2013-2014.* Retrieved from https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/Ratios13-14.pdf

[35] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

[36] Richards, D. A. R. (2014). *Lower costs, higher returns: UNCF HBCUs in a high-priced college environment*. Washington, DC: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

Endnotes

[37] Ashley, J., & Burke, K. (2009). *Implementing restorative justice: A guide for schools*. Retrieved from The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority website: http://www.icjia.state.il.us/publications/implementing-restorative-justice-a-guide-for-schools

Davis, M. (2013). Restorative justice: Resources for schools. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from http://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis

[38] Contractor, D., & Staats, C. (2014). *Interventions to address racialized discipline disparities and school ˝push out.˝* Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity Policy Brief. Retrieved from http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ki-interventions.pdf

[39] In fact, schools must abide by Title IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits unlawful discrimination based on race, even for policies that are race neutral on the surface but have a disparate impact on certain racial groups.

[40] *See* teachforchange.org, tolerance.org and the National Network of Teachers (NNSTOY) Social Justice Book List- http://www.nnstoy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/NNSTOY-Social-Justice-Book-List-1.pdf

[41] Rocha, R., & Hawes, D. (2009). Racial diversity, representative bureaucracy, and equity in multiracial school districts. *Social Science Quarterly 90*(2): 326-44; Roch, C., Pitts, D. & Navarro, I. (2010). Representative bureaucracy and policy tools: Ethnicity, student discipline, and representation in public schools. *Administration & Society 42*(1), 38-65; Meier, K. & Stewart, J. Jr., & England, R.E. (1989). *Race, class, and education: The politics of second- generation discrimination*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press; Dee, T. (2005). A teacher like me: Does race, ethnicity or gender matter? *American Economic Review 95*(2), 158-165. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. (2016). *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf

[42] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Table 203.50. Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2026. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_203.50.asp

[43] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil rights data collection: A first look*. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

[44] Anderson, K. A. (2016). Examining organizational practices that predict persistence among high-achieving black males in high school. *Teachers College Record, 118*(6), 1-26.

[45] Jimenez, L. Saragrad, S., Morales, J., Thompson, M. (2016). *Remedial education: The cost of catching up*. Retrieved from Center for American Progress website: https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/12082511/CostOfCatchingUp-reportINTRO.pdf

Notes

Notes

A SEAT AT THE TABLE:

African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education