

Young black men in Chicago get some positive role-models

A Chicago school is hoping to turn out lots of 'little Obamas'. Could the model work in Britain?

Joanna Head



Of Urban Prep, one of the students says: 'You have teachers who come to school with suits and have higher education, and it makes you want to be like them.' Photograph: Urban Prep

It's 8.30 in the morning and 450 young men in jackets, ties and short back and sides line up looking for all the world like young Barack Obamas. They begin to recite their daily creed. "We are the young men of Urban Prep. We are college bound. We are exceptional – not because we say it, but because we work hard at it. We believe in ourselves. We believe in each other. We believe in Urban Prep."

It's a powerful statement, and all the more so in this school, in this neighbourhood. We are in Englewood on Chicago's South Side, a predominantly black, economically disadvantaged area. Among young black men in Chicago,

45% are unemployed and the leading cause of death is murder. Over half of all black male students drop out of high school. In the US as a whole, just one in 40 African-American boys will complete college, and there are 30% more black males in prison than in college. Against this backdrop, Urban Prep's target – to get all their students through higher education – seems ambitious, to say the least.

For 16-year-old Israel Durley, even making it to school each morning is a challenge. "As of last night, we had four more murders around the school area," he says. "When you have the majority of people around you who don't care about

their lives and their futures, then it's kind of hard to surpass them because they're always pulling you down."

At Israel's previous high school, his most optimistic goal was to get a job at McDonald's. Now that's all changed. So what's so different about the school, and could we in the UK learn anything from its methods?

Urban Prep is a single-sex charter school, a part state-funded school – a bit like Britain's academies. But here, all of the 450 male students are African-American, and 85% come from single-parent households. About 90% of the teachers and all the school leaders are African-American men. The majority of them are young, dedicated, ambitious and inspirational – deliberate role models.

Many, including the principal, didn't have formal qualifications for their jobs when they were appointed. Urban Prep's founder, the charismatic Tim King, was willing to look beyond traditional recruitment pipelines and take risks. The staffing is essential to his vision.

"It's really hard to be something that you've never seen," he explains. "If you grow up in a household where your father is not around, the only role models you have are the guy on the corner selling drugs or the hip-hop artist on the video or the basketball star. We have to provide students with other options of what can be a successful life."

The school has been running for just over three years, but in this time it's had significant successes. When they joined the school, just 7% of students were able to read at the expected grade, yet a within a year 79% were able to pass the necessary courses to graduate, compared with 34% for the neighbourhood. Daily attendance is 93%, compared with 75% locally.

Urban Prep emphasises academic rigour, extracurricular involvement and community service. It has a longer school day than most US schools, and tests students every six weeks. The curriculum

is designed to be culturally relevant to young urban males. In literature week, teachers pitched their book choices to the students, reading excerpts from young urban writers such as Junot Diaz, whose work reflects the students' own lives.

Each year, students design and implement their own community service projects. "We want to prepare our boys to be the leaders in the communities, to take over the world tomorrow," says the school's vice-president, Evan Lewis. "They need to learn compassion and humanity, and this helps them to do so." Not for nothing were Urban Prep's students dubbed the "little Obamas" by CNN.

The barriers to completing high school, let alone college, are more than academic. "One of the reasons black students fail is because they have a lot of personal baggage. As teachers, we need to alleviate that so they can do well academically," says Lewis. The school has created teacher-led peer mentoring groups called prides, which meet three times a day.

"The pride is there to act like a family when times get tough," he says. Many of the teachers have shared the same life experiences as the students and can share their ways of coping with them. Each student has the mobile number of his tutor and can call 24/7 with any problem they are having – at school or in their families or in their neighbourhoods.

"These things can often be hindrances to their own development, and stumbling blocks, and we want to be very deliberate about meeting those needs and addressing those issues so that they can be successful in college," says pride tutor Tre Childress.

Krushawn, one of the students, was – in his words – a "bad boy" when he came to Urban Prep. At first, he couldn't cope with the strict, disciplined regime and the high expectations. He went back to regular high school. But a few months later, he was back at Urban Prep. "In regular high school you have teachers who just do what they get paid to do," he says. "At Urban Prep you have teachers who come to school with suits and [have] higher education, and it makes you want to be like them."

As a charter school, Urban Prep enjoys similar flexibility to Britain's

academies. But, unlike in the UK, it makes full use of this autonomy to address the complex needs of its students, from the curriculum and timetable to staff recruitment.

Here in the UK, just 33% of African-Caribbean boys achieved more than five GCSEs at grade A*-C including maths and English in 2008, compared with 44% of white boys. On top of that, African-Caribbean boys are three times more likely to be excluded from school than white boys.

In urban America, the stress is on finding teachers and leaders representative of the school population. In the UK the general population is 91% white, so it's hardly surprising that 94.3% of teachers are white. But in areas like Newham, east London, where fewer than 12% of pupils are white, 71% teachers are white.

The argument for seeking out role models seems uncontroversial in the US, but in the UK it hardly gets a mention. Here, the debate about the lack of opportunities for black and minority ethnic (BME) teachers focuses on equal opportunities for teachers rather than on providing role models for children.

Rosemary Campbell-Stephens runs Investing in Diversity, the largest programme in the UK for aspiring BME leaders, and is adviser to the National College (formerly the NCSL) on diversity issues. "The role-model debate isn't talked about here because the BME community of leaders don't want to be pigeon-holed in this way," she says. "We don't want to get the reputation that we can only have an effect on certain groups of children – but in reality we know that black leaders can have a better effect on the achievement of black boys."

Under the UK Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, local authorities are allowed to target underrepresented groups and are legally obliged to monitor and promote equal opportunity. But, according to Campbell-Stephens, it's not happening. "This legislation just isn't being used by local authorities. It's being ignored."

Academies in the UK have the same autonomy as Urban Prep, but they have not so far taken similar advantage. "When academies first started up over

here, we were excited because we saw it as an opportunity to create black schools that could promote black teachers and offer education to black children," says Campbell-Stephens. "Academies have the power to appoint untrained heads ... but that just wouldn't happen here. You do need to take risks on people in order to encourage diversity – but few are doing so here."

In the US, the creation of high-performing urban public schools like Urban Prep will, it is hoped, boost the number of black men and women who complete college, and increase the pool of potential teachers exponentially.

The school has been running for only three years, so Tim King has yet to see if his students will get to college, let alone graduate, but he's already successfully raising their aspirations and expectations.

At the end of the school day, as Israel Durley swaps his jacket and tie for a hoodie and slips back out into the streets of Englewood, he's optimistic about his college prospects. "There's no doubt in my mind that I'm going – that I'm going to pursue a professional career and that I'm going to succeed in life."

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