

Ebony Special Report:

Saving Our Sons

by Nick Chiles

In Part Three of Ebony's "Saving Our Sons" series, Nick Chiles speaks to educators and researchers about how parents can prime their boys for success in the classroom.

If you set out to purposely design a system to ensure the gradual destruction of Black boys, you couldn't do much better than the American public school system.

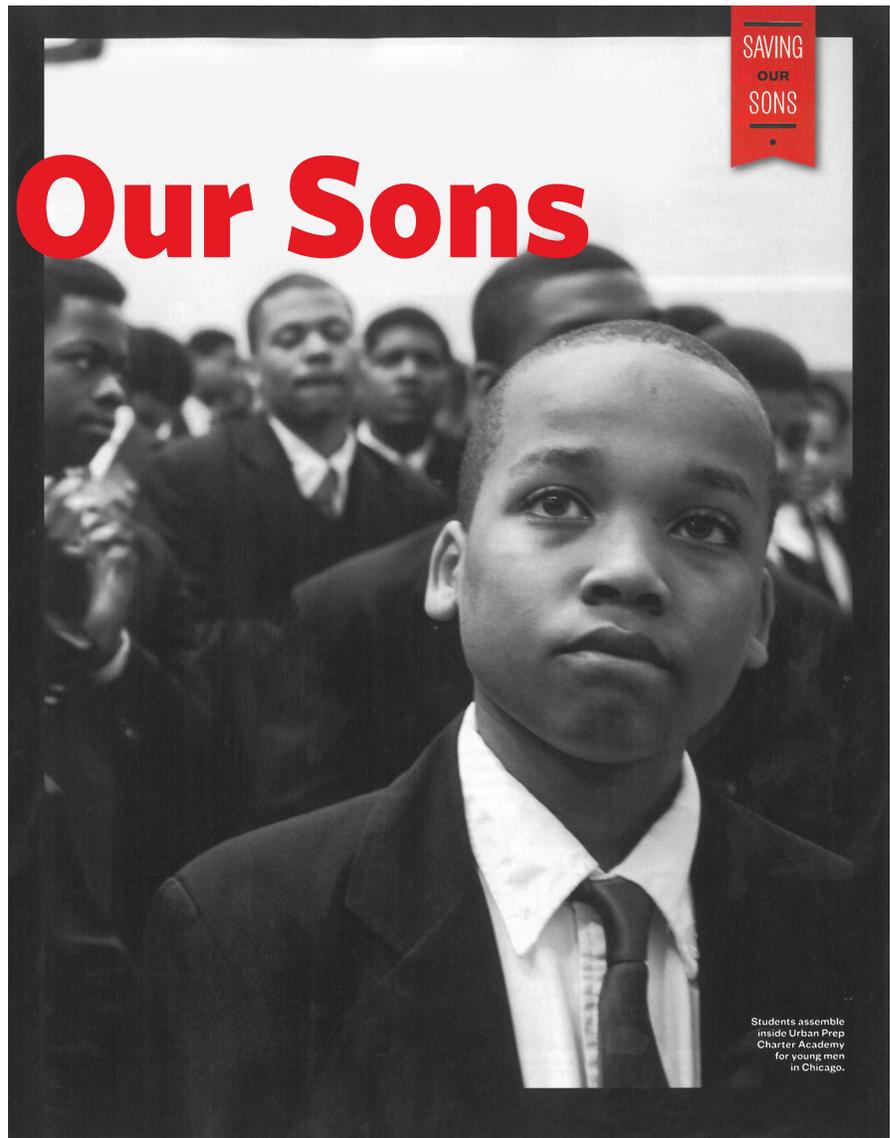
For years, education experts have been studying the struggles that boys of all races are having with school structures seemingly designed to exploit their weaknesses and downplay their strengths. But on virtually every measure where statistics are compiled by schools, Black boys are at the top for the bad stuff (suspension, special education referrals, expulsions, dropout rates, arrests) and at the bottom for the good stuff (standardized test scores, gifted and talented referrals, college matriculation).

In many large U.S. urban school districts, the number of Black boys unable to read at grade level exceeds 90 percent.

While it's tempting to feel hopeless and crushed by the data, many of the educators in the trenches say that would be absolutely the wrong response.

"You can make some decisions driven by data, but I don't think you should become hopeless because of the data," says Tim King, founder of the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, a network of all-boys schools producing astounding results with Black boys. "If we were to take that position as a society, frankly, you would never invest in the future of Black boys because all of the data points to negative outcomes. We have to create a counter narrative for people to be encouraged, to understand that it's possible to find success with this population. It's not too late. We can't just let them go. We can't afford to do that as a community, as a society or as a country."

In fact, though the plight of Black boys in school feels catastrophic, EBO-



NY's investigation has found educators across the nation who have come up with effective solutions to just about every problem the boys face. The answers are out there just waiting to be shared, broadened and institutionalized.

High School Years

High school and adolescence is when the disaffection and alienation set in. Boys start pulling away at home and at school, making it that much harder for the adults around them to understand what's going on in their heads. This is a dangerous, precarious time for adolescent boys and their families when their growing indifference to school and the low expectations of everyone around them often send them spiraling – into the streets and out of control. Eventually, the primary concern of adults becomes their survival, not their

performance on the last math test.

Christopher Chatmon, MA.Ed., executive director of the Office for African-American Male Achievement, part of the Oakland (Calif.) Unified School District, said he and his staff discovered that the teachers who were having the most success with adolescent Black boys were those who were very aggressive about reaching out to them and keeping the encounters as positive as possible.

"They didn't get caught up with worrying about them having a hat or wearing sagging pants," says Chatmon. "They smiled at them all the time, assumed the boys had positive intents and went out in the hall to greet them before class."

Successful educators have discovered it is so much easier to reach Black boys when you establish an emotional connection with them.

At Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) schools, Geoffrey Canada uses sports, arts,



LEFT: Hallway signs remind students of the Urban Prep Academy dress code.
RIGHT: Tim King, CEO and founder of Urban Prep, greets students.

after-school programs, after-school jobs – any lure that he can find – to keep boys interested and focused.

“You have to help boys develop other loves, something they can be passionate about, so they will discipline themselves,” he says. “In my graduating class of boys this year, probably 15 percent are going to graduate and go to college because they loved playing sports. They knew they had to keep a B average to play, so guess what? They kept a B average – not because that wanted to do well in chemistry and biology, which we hope for, but because they wanted to be on teams. The more music, the more arts, the more chess, the more sports, the more employment opportunities you have, the more [reasons] these young people have to self-regulate. They know they can’t drink, they can’t smoke marijuana, they can’t fight, they can’t get a girl pregnant, because they will lose this thing they love.”

And while educators such as King and Canada are quick to acknowledge that a good teacher of any race can do an effective job teaching Black boys, they still make sure the boys have plenty of positive Black men around them. “I think the fact that we have so many Black males in our schools communicates something special to our students,” says King. “It communicates to them that Black men can run stuff; Black men who are very different can get along; Black men can love other Black men, and I mean that in the most platonic, nonsexual way; Black males care about what’s happening with young Black males – and should care about it.”

“We think it’s important for them to learn that Black men take care of their community and their children,” says Canada. “They’re respectful, they’re strong, they’re athletic – all these things – and they’re also intellectuals, they’re artists, they’re poets.”

In the eyes of many educators, their efforts inside the school building can sometimes be overwhelmed by a destructive force just outside the school wall: hip-hop culture.

Canada says he recently assigned staff at HCZ the task of decoding the meaning behind the lyrics of the top three rap songs – and then comparing them to racist tracts and minstrel lyrics from 100 years ago. The similarities were shocking.

“The words are devastating, just devastating,” says Canada. “What happens when Black boys grow up hearing everyone around them talking about them – Black boys – being thugs, pimps, gangsters, murderers, drug sellers? And your mother is singing it, your sister is singing it, your brother is singing it. And everybody just loves the people who are saying these terrible things? If you don’t have any other place where you can demonstrate mastery, but you could potentially demonstrate mastery by being what everybody says you are. You say, ‘Yes, I can actually live that out. I can be that person. I can learn that set of skills and be acknowledged as a real Black kid.’”

Canada says the influence of hip-hop culture has overwhelmed middle-class Black boys, too. On a regular basis, he has successful, professional Black parents coming to him and confessing

that they are losing their sons.

“What I’ve been trying to get people to understand is there is no genetic condition that’s destroying these Black boys,” he says. “We’re doing it to ourselves, and it’s so debilitating.”

From bathing Black boys in language to counteract the word deficit in the early years, to making meaningful connections with them once they move into the grade school years, to offering them a wide variety of engaging activities that can hold their interest when they enter high school, it’s clear that the power to transform the plight of our sons is in our hands: parents, educators, mentors, community leaders.

Now we just have to find the will to make it happen.



For more information on Urban Prep, contact:

Urban Prep Academies
 420 N. Wabash • Suite 300
 Chicago, IL 60611

312.276.0259
www.urbanprep.org

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