

Opinion

The critical shortage of Black male teachers: To close the gap, we have to start them young

By DR. BETTYE PERKINS

Founder and CEO of Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers

Published: Thursday, February 17, 2011 12:05 AM EST

It is not news to readers of the Amsterdam News, especially those with children, that our schools are in crisis. I'm here to tell you that something can be done about it, but that there are no shortcuts to turning things around.

In order for our students to learn and excel, we desperately need more African-American teachers in the New York City Public Schools—particularly African-American males—and we need to sustain and retain them. I work with a group that is making this happen.

We've long lived with the knowledge that our schools are failing to close the achievement gap for African-American students, and that Black boys in particular drop out at twice the rate of white boys. We know that, while Black males make up 5 percent of men in U.S. colleges, they are more than 36 percent of the prison population.

Just this month came even more bad news: a new study of all students found that, while the high school graduation rate is up to 64 percent in New York City, only 23 percent of these students are graduating with the skills they need to enter either college or the workplace—and this figure does not include the large number of students in special education. Some other inner cities are doing even worse than New York, with Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers seeing "less than 17 percent of students" meeting college or workplace standards, according to the New York Times.

These statistics are the shame of our nation and cry out for urgent action, but they come at a time when state and local governments are looking to cut everything, including school budgets. We need to fight to maintain and expand our investment in education, but we need to do it wisely, with ideas and programs that work.

In his state of the union message, President Obama devoted considerable time to a call to making schools places of "high expectations and high performance" in order to prepare students for college and the challenges of our time. He touted his "Race to the Top" initiative saying, "If you show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we'll show you the money."

"Let's also remember that, after parents, the biggest impact on a child's success comes from the man or woman at the front of the classroom," the president said. "If you want to make a difference in the life of our nation—if you want to make a difference in the life of a child—become a teacher. Your country needs you."

No one is more needed in the teaching profession than African-American males. Of the 200,000 new teachers hired each year, only 2 percent are African-American males. As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, overall, "less than 3 percent of the nation's teachers are persons of color, so, during a time when Black children need Black teachers as mentors and role models, we have to make sure our teachers and principals reflect the great diversity of this country."

If we do not do something to correct this imbalance, your child could go through his or her entire 13 years of public school education without ever seeing a teacher of color at the head of the classroom. That's an outrage, and it's not a new problem.

Sixteen years ago I founded an organization called "Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers" to boost the numbers of teachers of color. We did not try to solve the problem overnight by recruiting college graduates of color into the teaching profession—we decided that, in order to develop dedicated teachers, we had to recruit them when they were young and nurture and mentor them every step of the way.

We recruit our future teachers in the ninth grade from racially and culturally diverse and economically challenged high schools. I often get surprised looks from people who think the ninth grade is too young to decide on a career. But whether or not our recruits go on to become teachers—and most do—they receive individual attention and mentoring that will help them no matter what profession they choose to pursue.

Our teacher mentors work with our student recruits all the way through high school and prepare them for college work. We have enlisted colleges to contribute 50 percent of their college tuition and continue to mentor them all the way through college. Then we help them find placements in classrooms in their communities, where they can contribute not just to the achievements of their students but to the strength of their communities themselves.

Our rigorous process is not a passive one where the student gets all the help. Our high school participants become tutors for elementary school students, and our college participants continue to tutor in local schools. They become teachers by having the experience of teaching, with the help of an experienced teacher mentor, every step of the way.

Our program currently serves over 600 high school and college students in three states including schools in the Bronx, Hudson Valley, and Greater Rochester region as well as in Connecticut and Virginia. We are looking to vastly expand our program throughout the five boroughs of New York with a mission to recruit African-American males.

Our program works. The national high school graduation rate for students of color is 78 percent. For our students, the rate is 90 percent. The national college graduation rate is 24 percent for students of color, but 70 percent of our program participants graduate.

Nationally, 33 percent of teachers leave the profession after three years, and 50 percent leave after five. Among those we work with at TSTT, a mere 7 percent leave after three years, and only 10 percent after five.

Our success is no secret. We offer warm, caring, enthusiastic personal interactions for each and every student through mentoring and intensive teacher training and classroom preparation for four years of high school and four years of college—and it does not end when they become teachers.

One of our first graduates was Emerly Martinez, who started with us as a sophomore at Ossining High School in 1995 and has now been teaching social studies there for ten years. He is offering the same support that he received to help close the achievement gap by creating a mentoring program for Latino male students and another to prevent freshmen from falling through the cracks.

Jeffrey Cole, an African-American student, also started with us in 1995 when his guidance counselor and chemistry teacher suggested to us that he was highly capable but unmotivated. His mother said he used to come home and just mope around. But, through TSTT, he started tutoring students in grade school and it became his passion, working every day as a tutor instead of just the two days a week that were required. He went on to earn a B.A. in Music and a Master's degree in Elementary and Special Education from Manhattanville College and has been teaching in Westchester County for ten years, rising to the rank of department head for special education and becoming a member of the principal's leadership cabinet at Seven Bridges Middle School in Chappaqua, N.Y. He strongly believes that "all children can learn," and hopes to lead a school himself one day.

Our program is intensive, with 102 graduates who are teachers and 600 in the pipeline. We are working with 30 high school students in four Bronx high schools and are determined to expand into high schools in every borough to recruit from the 50,000 African-American male students aged 15-17 currently in the schools system.

We can close the achievement gap, reduce the dropout rate, and enrich our schools with highly qualified teachers of color. We just have to roll up our sleeves and stop looking for short-term solutions. That is the promise of Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers.

Copyright © 2011 - New York Amsterdam News