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The black male achievement problem bedevils policymakers

By Jim Nowlan

Fewer than half of our black males graduated from high school in Illinois in 2008. But a public residential charter school in Washington has shown how to more than close the gap. Unfortunately, the approach is not feasible for all who could benefit. Yet this school and other illustrations show that disadvantaged black males can succeed if given enough nurturing and support.

The Schott Foundation for Education found that in 2008 only 47 percent of black males graduated from high school in Illinois, versus 83 percent for white, non-Latino males. (In New York State, the graduation figure was only 25 percent!) The gap in achievement between black males and white, non-Latino males is a chasm as wide as the Mississippi.

Nationally, I might note, about 10 percent of young black men are in prison and one in three was expected to be incarcerated in his lifetime, according to a report cited in the Washington Post; Illinois generally reflects the nation statistically on these kinds of measures because our socio-economic demographics are similar those of the nation as a whole.

On rigorous testing by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 63 percent of black males performed “below basic” (failed) on 4th grade reading whereas for

white males the figure was 33 percent (still not good). On 8th grade math, black males were below basic 53 percent of the time while for white males the figure was only 15 percent. Eleven percent of whites performed at the “advanced” (highest) level, but only 1 percent of black males did so.

By contrast, at the SEED School in a rough neighborhood of Washington, D.C., fully 90 percent of the inner-city, mostly black students graduated and 100 percent of the graduates were accepted at four-year colleges and universities.

But extraordinary effort is required to achieve these successes. The SEED School takes 320 6th-12th graders by lottery for its residential boarding school, which is not much different from the fancy boarding schools for the nation’s elite whites. Students come and stay in dormitories each week, going home on weekends only.

At the SEED School, students not only focus from 8-4 on their studies but also learn time-management skills and study discipline; expectations are set high. One-on-one tutorial help is available and homework assignments are heavy.

The key is to take the youngsters completely out of their neighborhood environments, where excelling in school is definitely not cool.

But all the support, from dawn until lights out, takes money, to the tune of about \$35,000 per student per year, about three to four times what is spent on typical public school kids. Although a public school, the SEED School benefits from its own foundation for much of the funding.

Even if the public were willing to spend \$35,000 per disadvantaged black male, we couldn’t put all the young men who would benefit in residential boarding schools. As for spending the money, states and their local governments provide 90 percent of all

school funding. And states like Illinois are finding it necessary to cut state budgets, even for education, because revenues—even with the increased state income tax—are falling short of expenditures.

The SEED Foundation hopes to replicate its model across the country, and I hope a network of the schools succeeds. For the others at risk, we can provide high-quality pre-school education, intensive early literacy, small class size, after-school and summer programming. Additional resources will be needed to work with the parents and grandparents to bring them into the education loop.

Lacking those types of supports, we are consigning thousands of black males to the educational trash heap, and for many a life that leads to prison, where we do spend about \$26,000 a year on them.