

2014

SUMMITS AND TOWN HALLS ON EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

SUMMARY REPORT: ATLANTA, GA | MARCH 28–29 AND JACKSON, MS | APRIL 25



WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE ON
EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR
AFRICAN AMERICANS

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (WHIEEAA) is coordinating four summits in 2014. The purpose of these town hall meetings is to raise awareness about the importance of investing in African American educational excellence, highlight best practices, and support community engagement. Throughout the summits, young Black males are intentionally engaged to participate on panels and encouraged to share their stories. This report summarizes the themes and provides the unvarnished voices of the Black males who participated in the Atlanta, GA, and Jackson, MS, summit sessions. The young Black men who participated in Atlanta and Jackson ranged in age from high school freshman to college seniors. As a group, these young men are quite successful and have distinguished themselves at their academic institutions and/or in their communities. They all speak about the value of being well educated and the support that family members, other individuals, and/or programs have provided to help them develop, learn, adapt, and excel.¹

“These are probably among the most important discussions that we will have. Far too frequently people talk about Black men and boys without allowing us the space to articulate what is it that we feel, what it is that we think, and how it is that we are already working to change our schools and our communities and our country.”

— David J. Johns

- I was an avid reader of civil rights as a child. I feel that if I don't educate myself, the people who gave up their lives for my rights will have died in vain.
- Modern day education is the only thing that people can't take away from you . . . People can take away everything physical, but when you have your education, people can't mess with that . . . If you can't work, you can't live.
- As a young student, school was confusing and I stayed in trouble, but I realized without an education it was hard to navigate this world.
- My family communicated to me at a very early age the importance of education. Until I got to high school, I didn't know that people didn't go to college.
- My appreciation for education began with my mother, but without an education you aren't truly living. In reference to the Negro consciousness, you have to have an education to adapt to your environment and survive.

¹ All of the bullet points that follow are the voices of the young Black males. These points were directly transcribed from videotapes or captured by note takers during the sessions.

PANELISTS

Morehouse College

MILES EZEILO
 JOSHUA YOUNG
 THABITI STEPHENS
 F. KEITH SLAUGHTER
 OTHA THORNTON, III
 TIMOTHY SPICER

Jackson State University

BRANDEN DELOATCH
 RYAN GRIFFIN
 E.J. BRODIE
 DEVONTA STEWART
 KIYADH BURT
 DARIAN ATKINS

Nick Chiles, Author/Journalist; Jeff Johnson, Communications and Strategist Specialist; and David J. Johns, Executive Director of the WHIEEAA, have moderated the summits. The moderators initially posed a series of questions and then opened up the conversation to include questions and comments from the audience.





EXPERIENCES OF RACISM²: HOW RACISM IMPACTS THE IN-SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK BOYS

While none of the young Black males on the panels reported experiencing the more overt, heinous, and diabolical acts of racism chronicled in decades past, these young males, nonetheless, provided example after example of their contemporary experiences of racism. Be they conscious or unconscious acts, the racism and bias³ that these young Black males experience happens in public places where they should be safe; it is perpetrated by people who do not share similar skin tones and histories and by people who do. These young Black males encounter being

singled out and looked down upon and clearly articulate grappling with public and often negative perceptions about Black men and boys. The misconceptions about them run the gamut: drug dealer, rapper, lazy, uneducated, dangerous, lacking in aspirations. What is clear is that the imagery and impact of such racist experiences and biased perceptions remain vivid. What is most important is acknowledging that in spite of these obstacles many young Black boys continue to achieve and succeed in school and in life.

Sometimes it happens in schools . . .

- *Personally, I don't really feel safe in school because it is not a safe environment. It is more of a judgmental environment. So wherever you go you get a general basic education and information and if you don't abide by those simple rules, then you're out. It's a one-strike thing.*
- *We are expected to barely get by or to fail . . . For Latinos or Asians, it is to get all A's or be valedictorian . . . If you are expected to fail, you are not going to want to try as hard. If you are expected to do great things, you are gonna work harder at it.*
- *Even though I'm in a place [school] where I'm supposed to be accepted, I still have to face these problems.*

² Racism is a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the White race. These beliefs and behaviors are conscious and unconscious; personal and institutional; and result in the oppression of people of color and benefit the dominant group, Whites. (National Conference for Community and Justice)

³ Unconscious or implicit bias describes discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes that are outside of an individual's awareness or intentional control. These biases are different from the ones that individuals may choose to conceal because of pressures to be socially or politically correct.

... in communities

- *Most people think we are what you see on TV—sagging pants, fighting, violent . . .*
- *Most people think that we lack substance, that we are not about anything and everywhere we go we are there to serve . . . I was at the Marriott in Crystal City during spring break . . . I was wearing a suit and someone walked up to me and asked, “Are you checking bags?” . . . My answer was, “I don’t work here.” We are just ‘space fillers.’*
- *Last week we were in California on spring break . . . [We were staying with] my relatives [who] stay in Chevy Chase Country Club . . . me and three of my college friends . . . we decided to go in the Valley . . . as we are pulling out of the neighborhood . . . we were surrounded by three police cars from Glendale County.*
- *The expectation is that we will be nothing.*
- *People think that we are dangerous, uneducated, and we have no dream of leaving small towns.*
- *People think that Black males like living in poverty.*

... by Whites and Blacks

- *I feel like too many times teachers, usually White teachers, will be more defensive toward me in asking me where I’m supposed to be when I’m just out in the hallway, as opposed to a White student.*
- *Even Black, African Americans are scared of me. African American women tend to clutch their purse when they see me.*

... and inside of themselves (internalized oppression and bias)

- *We allow racism to belittle us. We call ourselves ****s and *****s when we are truly kings and queens.*
- *Even I find myself sometimes looking at another African American male . . . I have to get ‘bulk’ . . . I have to get ‘tight’ on him . . . make sure he knows that I’m not someone that he should play with. That scares me that I know the stereotype . . . but I still use it for other people. I don’t like the stereotypes at the same time . . . I can’t help it . . . it’s natural . . . It’s just the media and stories and how we portray ourselves and how we view ourselves that we come off that way and have that mindset . . . It’s sad.*

The comments regarding public and popular perceptions of Black boys and the impact of racism compel us to consider how to disrupt false, negative narratives. Dispelling myths and highlighting true, accurate narratives and images of Black men and boys may work to remove structural barriers to academic success and workforce preparedness.

“Your skin color is nothing but greatness on you.”



EVERYDAY COURAGE: HOW YOUNG BLACK MALES RESPOND TO RACISM AND BIAS

The young Black males described how they try to work hard to resist the stereotypes, rejecting the unconscious and conscious racism and bias with everyday acts of courage. These young Black males described the physical and mental contortions they go through to be seen and accepted for who they are. Whether they deliberately

dress and act to dispel the negative stereotypes, code switch, show deference to authority figures, look to each other for support, or hide their feelings, there is still no guarantee that they will escape racism and bias. But they have strengths that they draw upon.

Sometimes they put on masks . . .

- *I feel like I do need to put on sort of a mask sometimes when I'm going out to places so that I don't come off as "dangerous" . . . It's a constant mask that I have to put on to make sure that I don't end up some place I shouldn't be.*
- *At the time, I knew we did nothing wrong. It was more so "Yes Sir, No Sir" [to the police], get home and tell my parents.*

. . . rehearse comeback lines, express themselves, and adapt

- *Definitely . . . that is one of the things that crosses my mind while I'm getting dressed . . . people are going to ask me if I'm there to work or what can I do for them . . . while I'm getting dressed I think of what kinds of responses I can give people . . . It does [bother me] . . . It's 2014. We are way past . . . that type of mindset for people to be thinking like that.*
- *I feel like I can do that [express myself] very well.*
- *I feel like, why not have the opinion of a Black boy . . . my opinions . . . on politics and things that happen . . . The Darker Lens.com [is my blog].*
- *Whatever position you are put in, you need to be able to adapt to the position . . . I'm in ROTC.*
- *You give me a problem and I'm going to find the most efficient way to solve the problem.*

... recognize their own self-worth

- *If you are grounded in who you are, nothing else matters. We are living a double consciousness as DuBois said. We have one set of notes for being American, and one set of notes for being Black.*
- *Being Black is an honor. We built a country that has made us feel foreign. This is an honor and a privilege that only African Americans can understand. Your skin color is nothing but greatness on you.*
- *I have a shoe company . . . produce and design canvass and leather shoes for men and women . . . I started it my sophomore year in Morehouse . . . For every pair of shoes we sell we provide meals for children in shelters around the city of Atlanta . . . can change the world through businesses. Now we have "Steps by Stevens."*

... patently refuse to back down from a challenge

- *I love being about to kill a stereotype.*
- *I love being the underdog and being able to prove everybody wrong.*
- *I didn't get anybody pregnant and I was the first in my family to get a Division 1 scholarship.*

... choose schools where they will be supported and surrounded by others who excel

- *Since I came to Morehouse College . . . everybody had a 3.7 coming out of high school or 3.8 . . . nine or ten people on just my hall floor had businesses already started . . .*
- *I just wanted to be the best . . .*
- *I'm being taught [now] by mostly White and African American female teachers . . . I don't have a single African American male teacher . . . I get lost . . . I haven't found myself . . . I felt like was more comfortable at Imhotep Academy . . . It's hard to learn in an environment where the teachers don't look like me.*

... and find a touch of "humor" amidst the inhumanity

- *Once I was helping my neighbor get her dog . . . And it turns out on the next street over . . . there [were] some kids and they were throwing rocks . . . hit a window . . . the police came . . . they detained me, put me in handcuffs, put me in the car. I told them it wasn't me, but they said I fit the description . . . Later on when I found out it was pretty funny—since the kids were like in elementary, middle school, and I'm sitting here in high school . . . I smiled and was respectful. I showed them that I wasn't a violent person.*
- *[The police were] searching our bags, asking us what we were doing in the area . . . I found it kind of funny . . . we were taking pictures. Being considered dangerous is one of the biggest misconceptions in our society.*

These comments show the resilience and determination of Black men and boys to succeed despite the obstacles they face. These comments also challenge us to develop comprehensive approaches to support their development. These include better equipping educators with the cultural and developmental coursework, skills, and resources to engage and support boys and men of color.

THE HELP THEY NEED TO SUCCEED: WHAT OTHERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION EXCELLENCE

Despite the everyday racism and bias that they have experienced and the many strategies and skills that they have developed to cope, the young Black male panelists continue to have a strong desire to count on and be accountable to others. They understand the importance of mentorship and demand guidance and support. While family involvement and single moms were identified as key factors, mentoring

was repeatedly cited as one the biggest sources of support that was needed to promote learning, growth, and development. Many of the young Black males seem to apply an asset-based framework: identifying strengths in the people and institutions that are available and those that are missing. Who can be members of the village? What else is needed?



Mothers, fathers, adults, and mentors are needed . . .

- *We need more women leaders.*
- *Black women should continue to do what they have always done, which is pray.*
- *We need someone to hold us accountable. To be a good father is to educate your child.*
- *Mis-education is the worst crime.*
- *We need fatherhood and adult role models.*
- *There's a lack of mentorship . . . especially trying to open a shoe company and get into fashion . . . there was a lot of things I had to learn the hard way . . . If I would have had someone give me more information . . .*
- *We need thriving, two-parent homes or at least a male influence in life. We need to be taught to be a better person for our community. There is no unity in community but that doesn't make sense because it is in the same word.*
- *We need help for the younger generations—those babies that are having babies.*
- *We need to see leadership among young men in the community.*
- *We have to realize that they do not have to look like us for us to get the information. What got me through was my mom, my church, and having a strong foundation. And lots of mentors throughout the years.*
- *Everyone loves to be motivated . . . a support system . . . so we don't stray away.*

... along with comprehensive strategies to provide access to opportunities

- *First off, I think you need to recognize that a person is a whole being—spirit, mind, body. And you can't teach one part of a person without teaching all three parts of a person. When I say all three parts what I'm talking about are the emotional aspect, the physical aspect, and your spiritual aspect.*
- *Let's not make this a race thing but let's build all minorities because that is what MLK was trying to do. He was trying to put us all on a level so we wouldn't have to go through this. So we wouldn't have to worry about every separate education but it would be a main education as America: not as Black, not as White, not as Hispanic, not as Indian—but as a people together.*
- *We need more people to fund programs like this. People don't want to see young men of color make it because there is more money in jails.*
- *There definitely needs to be more [African American] male involvement with the way some of our young boys are turning out . . . more fathers involved with education.*
- *Be an advocate of education. Give back to education. Teach the young ones.*
- *My teacher [African American male] understood me . . . he taught me about my history.*

... technology and media can help—or not

- *Be conscious of technology and learn how to use it.*
- *Social media works for us, not us for it. Nothing you say on social media can be erased. Whatever you say will catch either you or your ancestors.*
- *Peer mentorship through social media. There is so much negativity, and we need to focus on the positive. We need young leaders to be involved.*
- *Depending on what type of music you listen to . . . sometimes you can tune it out or sometimes it can affect you [in a negative way].*

... and fair policies

- *I love school. I love to be there. It is a great place . . . Students are gonna mess up because we're kids and that's what we do. But let's make sure the rules in place are fair so that when we are ready to get back on the horse, we are ready to ride again.*
- *We need clear language in policy. The AA community needs to accept and follow our AA leaders.*
- *School, in essence, if you're looking at it in a governmental standpoint, is a dictatorship which it should be. I don't have a problem with people telling me what to do and when I should do it as long as what they are telling me to do is right. Schools assess skills and give personality tests but they don't update it or input it into the school at all. They ask me if I learn things by touching and seeing and then I see the same thing year after year after year. So there is no point to it—a waste of time, a waste of paper—it is of no value. I think we also need to change the workload. It isn't too much, but don't ask me simple things on a test when I am learning hard things.*

The young Black males expressed clear goals for the supports they receive and understand that such supports can take them to the next level.

- *Accountability and positive reinforcement. Instilling core values is so important because the way you carry yourself matters a great deal.*
- *Also you [parents] need to talk to your children and make sure they get into extracurricular activities because they do help and they build a strong foundation for you.*
- *Women need to support us and challenge us because they are really the most powerful creatures on earth. You can push a brother to continue or let him give up.*
- *Children will push boundaries to see how far they can go. We need authority figures to steer us back on track.*
- *Personal branding. Schools need to provide opportunities for kids to learn to express themselves and speak.*
- *You can hold brothers accountable by showing your presence and being there in a time of need. "I'm not gonna preach to you, I'm gonna talk to you."*
- *If everyone helped one person get to that next level, who knows where we'd all be?*

These comments highlight the many opportunities educators, parents, guardians and other caring adults have to support the learning and development of Black men and boys. A key approach to support African American educational excellence is to further engage with fathers, minority male educators, and mentors.

“Being Black is an honor. We built a country that has made us feel foreign.”



NEXT STEPS: WHAT WAS SAID AND NOT SAID?

These young Black male panelists speak their truths, their values, and their strategies for moving forward. They speak about the existence and forms of the twenty-first century: everyday racism and their attempts to excel despite the biases against them. While they rarely uttered the word racism, the lenses through which they are often seen boiled down to negative, caustic, and pejorative perceptions of who they are as young Black males. Without exception, their voices provide amazing clarity on the perspectives held by the swath of Black males who excel in schools and/or in communities. The strategies that they reported using to address everyday racism and bias seem very much like the strategies used decades ago. Still, there are issues that remain unclear, among them are the following: Do their experiences or perspectives hold true for young Black males in other regions of the country, particularly the west and north? Are there unique challenges and opportunities in small rural and isolated communities? How similar are these young Black males' perspectives to those who choose not to attend college and/or who have become disconnected from schools and communities? What is needed to reconnect these young men? What are the incremental next steps and how can we learn from history to inform our twenty-first century approaches to improve the outcomes of Black males across their lifespan? Is there a sequence to creating supports and systems that affirm young Black males and help support their holistic growth? Who else is critical to supporting, encouraging, and partnering with young Black males' positive development? Black males have assets and vulnerabilities, gifts and needs; Black males feel and grow, contribute and protect, want and deserve opportunities to thrive!

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– CommonHealth Action, Technical Assistance Mississippi
and
The RPP Alliance for Supporting Excellence in Black Children
at FPG Child Development Institute (UNC-Chapel Hill)

"Students are gonna mess up because we're kids and that's what we do. But let's make sure the rules in place are fair so that when we are ready to get back on the horse, we are ready to ride again."

