

African-American students may improve grades if teachers convey high standards, study shows

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(Phys.org) —African-American students who need to improve their academic performance may do better in school and feel less stereotyped as underachievers if teachers convey high standards and their belief that students can meet them, according to new psychology research from The University of Texas at Austin.

The findings, published online in August in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, contradict a common trend in education of praising students for mediocre work to help raise self-esteem before delivering critical remarks. That method may seem patronizing and could backfire and lower self-esteem, especially when white [teachers](#) praise African-American students, said lead researcher David Yeager, assistant professor of [developmental psychology](#).

In three studies conducted at suburban and inner-city schools, African-American students improved their grades after receiving a simple, one-sentence note from their teachers or an online pep talk. The exercises were designed to dispel students' fears that criticism of their [academic work](#) could be caused by different treatment of African-American students rather than their teachers' high standards.

In the first study at a suburban public middle school in Connecticut, 44 seventh-grade students (22 African-American and 22 white) wrote an essay about a personal hero that was critiqued by their teachers for

improvements in a second draft. The students were randomly assigned to two groups with the experimental group receiving a hand-written note with their critiqued essay that stated, "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know that you can reach them." The control group got a note that stated, "I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your paper."

For African-American students who received the high-expectations note, 71 percent revised their essays, compared to 17 percent in the control group. The findings were even more pronounced for African-American students who had reported low trust in their teachers in surveys, with 82 percent revising their essays in the high-expectations group, compared to none in the control group. White students who received the high-expectations note also were more likely to revise their essays, but the difference wasn't statistically significant compared to the control group.

The second study, conducted a year later with a similar group of 22 African-American and 22 white seventh-grade students, carried the research a step further by analyzing grades for the revised essays. In the high-expectations group, 88 percent of African-American students received better grades on their revised essays, compared to 34 percent in the control group. More than two months after the exercise, African-American students who had received the high-expectations note also reported higher levels of trust in their teachers. White students in the high-expectations group also saw slightly higher grades, but the difference wasn't statistically significant.

The third study was conducted with 50 African-American and 26 [white students](#) at a New York City public high school where most children lived in low-income households. One group of students watched online testimonials that included photos of older students and their advice that academic criticism resulted from teachers' high standards and their belief that students could reach them. One control group saw online

testimonials with vague statements about teachers' motives, while another [control group](#) completed some puzzles.

Over the next 10 weeks, African-American students in the high-expectations group showed higher grades across four core subjects—math, science, English and history. The improvement averaged a third of a grade point increase on a standard 4.0 grade point scale, equivalent to moving from a C- to a C or a B to a B+. White [students](#) in the high-expectations group saw a slight improvement in grades, but the change wasn't statistically significant.

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23937186

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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