

Are urban black males shortchanged in classroom?

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Credit: Michigan State University

Giving special treatment to young urban black males in the high school classroom runs the risk of shortchanging these students academically once they get to college, indicates a new study by a Michigan State University education scholar.

Chezare Warren interviewed 18 former [students](#) of Nabur High School, an all-male, college-prep in Chicago that rose to national prominence for helping all students in its inaugural graduating class earn admission to college (including the study participants). To avoid a failing grade in [high school](#), the former students said they were given more time to finish assignments, extra credit projects and were allowed many opportunities to retake assignments, exams and quizzes.

But this "handholding," as one study participant described it, only hurt the students once they got to college.

"The inclination in some secondary schools is that young men of color from urban environments need a lot of help, that they're behind, so we give them all of this support that doesn't really challenge them to actually be better," said Warren, MSU assistant professor of teacher education.

Preparing students academically for college involves both instructional and social supports, the study suggests. At Nabur High, administrators and teachers generally created a climate of pride and affirmation (social supports). Students recited and embraced a daily creed, for example, that extols the skills and attributes needed to overcome daily challenges to become successful. The school also hired numerous black male teachers who intentionally built solid relationships with, and served as mentors for, the students (academic supports). The young men said this was very important in shaping their college-going aspirations.

"If you're offering the students supports without actually pushing them to meet high standards for college readiness, those supports are likely just weighing them down. To win a race, you must run faster, not slower," Warren said. "And at some point they will get to college, but the only way for them to stay in college is to have the skills to struggle through the academic difficulties they will likely encounter."

The paper appears in a special issue of *Teachers College Record*, for which Warren was lead editor. While a raft of past research focused on factors that enable the academic failure of young black men, the special issue spotlights key academic and social factors - both positive and negative - that affect black students, through the eyes and in the words of the students themselves.

The issue - titled "Erasing the Deficits: 'My Brother's Keeper' and Contemporary Perspectives on Black Male School Achievement" - also includes a paper from MSU education scholar Terry Flenbaugh. My Brother's Keeper refers to President Obama's initiative, launched in 2014, to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color.

Warren said teachers and administrators need to remember that urban black youth are resilient - and to embrace that resilience and use it to help motivate and push students academically.

"We need to keep the standards high and not be swayed by students' personal circumstances," he said. "But we also need to learn the multiple ways that students have learned to bounce back from adversity they encounter outside of school. When delivering supports we must assume these [young men](#) have important skills and competencies - the result of their resilience - that they can employ to persevere through rigorous learning experiences and ultimately meet high academic standards."

Provided by Michigan State University

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