

## ABSTRACT

Educational attainment is linked to health in various ways, such as practicing behaviors that promote better health. Since 1990, individuals without a high school diploma have experienced a decrease in life expectancy. These individuals may incur lower income earnings, more medical bills, live in dangerous neighborhoods and have little access to healthy foods. Among individuals who have not completed high school, males experience a health disparity due to poor health that costs the United States billions of dollars annually.

Every year, over one million students who complete four years of high school do not graduate. The educational achievement gap is a strong contributing factor of African-American males being disproportionately affected. For many years, young men of color have experienced adverse challenges, i.e., poverty and lack of social support, in their ability to successfully complete their high school education. In order to turn this around, it is critical for effective interventions and best practices to be developed and implemented. There have been strategies identified to address this issue, such as, mentoring. Mentorship has been demonstrated as a pathway to academic success. Research indicates that adults who provide guidance to youth encourage healthy lifestyle behaviors, such as eating healthy foods, participating in physical activities, learning proper study habits and planning for the future.

The specific aims of the proposed research are 1) To identify healthy lifestyle behaviors of African-American male students in high school who are mentored and 2) To understand the perceptions of youth mentors concerning cultural competencies for effectively guiding youth. The expected outcomes are 1) Mentored African-American males will experience healthier lifestyles that lead to academic success and 2) The cultural competencies of mentors will promote healthy lifestyle behaviors that support educational attainment. The results will be used to develop an online mentoring program and comprehensive mentoring training to be piloted within Tarrant County.

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals with a higher education are more likely to experience increased earnings that improve access to healthy foods, better health care and safer neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, individuals with less education are more likely to experience poor health, live for a shorter period of time, are challenged with higher rates of sickness and produce less work.<sup>2</sup> In the U.S., poor health has been associated with a social and community cost that created a health disparity specifically affecting males, which is estimated at \$142-\$148 billion annually.<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that an individual's education is linked to his or her health outcomes, personal achievement and societal involvement.<sup>4</sup>

Addressing the widening achievement gap is imperative to closing the on-going opportunity gaps endured by boys and young men of color.<sup>5-6</sup> For several decades, a disproportionate number of young men of color have lacked opportunities for academic success leading to an overrepresentation among high school dropouts and underrepresentation in college graduates.<sup>7</sup> The national graduation rate for black males was 59 percent, 65 percent for Latinos, and 80 percent for white males for the 2012-13 school year.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of adverse barriers, i.e., poverty, hunger, unsafe environments and lack of social support, male students of color must work harder to attain academic achievement.<sup>9</sup> In the U.S., unless an intervention is implemented, African American males will continue to disproportionately lose their education opportunities due to alarming drop out rates.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, many schools, churches, youth-serving organizations are developing programs, strategies, social support systems and opportunities to increase the foundation for academic success.<sup>11</sup> Mentoring has been one strategy identified to encourage African-American males toward high school completion. Mentoring has

traditionally been defined as a more experienced individual who provides guidance to, advocates for and teaches a younger, less experienced person.<sup>12</sup> Thus, effective mentoring allows young people to personally and directly observe how one can navigate failures, pitfalls and other challenges on the path toward achieving a goal. Research indicates that a positive relationship between the mentor and mentee is key for ensuring successful, healthy outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Mentors who receive regular training and support increases effective communication, builds cultural competence, fosters an empowering environment for their mentee.<sup>14</sup> Although mentoring has been one strategy utilized to foster academic achievement, more research needs to be conducted to address how mentoring relationships affect healthy lifestyles.



Source: Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health. (2014). Education: It Matters More to Health than Ever Before [Issue Brief].

## APPROACH



Source: Journal of African American Men in Education (JAAME), 2015

The **objectives** of this proposed study are:

- To increase the health knowledge, health literacy and behaviors of mentored African-American male students in high school; and**
- To improve the emotional, mental and physical well-being of mentored African-American male students in high school.**

**The long-term goal is to improve opportunities for educational attainment in African-American males.**



Source: NEED: Unlocking the Power of Education, 2011

The central hypothesis is that transformative mentoring will exert strong, healthy lifestyle influences in the lives of African-American male students. Nationally recognized programs, such as Peer Assistance & Leadership, promote leadership and mentoring by youth helping other youth in need.<sup>15</sup> While in Tarrant County, UMOJA is a program of African American men mentoring boys and girls in lower socio-economic, high crime neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup> Both programs are provided in school settings and provide strategies for successful academic achievement by participants. The proposed mixed method study will include a quantitative survey and qualitative open-ended questions in a focus-group setting. The research will add to the body of knowledge as the findings of the study may be used to decrease barriers for academic success, increase the number of effective mentoring programs, improve participation by African-American males, increase funding for mentoring programs and develop policies for enhanced program sustainability.

**AIM 1: To identify healthy lifestyle behaviors of African-American male students in high school who are mentored.**

**AIM 2: To understand the perceptions of youth mentors concerning cultural competencies for effectively guiding youth.**

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The following will be developed upon the completion of the proposed study:



### Online Mentoring Opportunities

- creating safe, productive environments between adults and youth



### Comprehensive Mentor Training

- including cultural competency education

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