ADDRESSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP:
The Impact of Mentoring African-American Males on Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors

Yvette M. Wingate, MPA
STAR Fellow, University of North Texas Health Science Center, Fort Worth, Texas 76107
Tarrant County Public Health, Fort Worth, Texas 76104

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. African Americans may lack medical, living neighborhoods and have little access to healthy foods. Among individuals who have 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 health education. In order to turn this around, it is critical for effective interventions and best practices to be developed and implemented. There have been several studies that identified 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 research will be developed on 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.1 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 economic, social and community cost that created a health disparity specifically affecting males, which is estimated at $148 billion annually.2 Research has shown that an individual's education is linked to his or her health outcomes, personal achievement and societal involvement.3

Addressing the widening achievement gap is imperative to closing the on-going poverty gaps endured by boys and young men of color.4 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.5 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.6 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.7 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.8

Recently, many schools, churches, youth-serving organizations are developing programs, strategies, social support systems and opportunities to increase their foundation for academic success.9 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.10 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.11 Mentors who receive regular training and support increases effective communication, builds cultural competence, fosters a sense of responsibility outside of the box health disparities research initiatives that change health outcomes of under-served populations. These efforts will lead to stronger, healthier communities in Tarrant County.

REFERENCES

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Yvette M. Wingate, MPA
Health Equity Coordinator
The Center for Health Equity Tarrant County Public Health
Phone: 817-321-5318 / Fax: 817-321-5323
Email: ymwingate@tarrantcounty.com
Website: http://health.tarrantcounty.com

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