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LIFT EVERY VOICE AND LEAD:

African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform

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African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform

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Lift Every Voice and Lead is the second report in a three-part series on African American perceptions of K-12 education. *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education* was the inaugural report in the series.

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Foreword

This study, *Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform*, is critical to UNCF's core mission: helping students of color get the college education that they need and the 21st-century economy demands.

Authored by three researchers at UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, *Lift Every Voice and Lead* is, an authoritative assessment of the potential for African American[i] community leaders—a group of clergy, local politicians, business leaders and education leaders often described as "grasstops" to parallel community members at the "grassroots"—to garner support for K-12 public school reform. But, just as important, *Lift Every Voice and Lead* is a call to action for these leaders to help their communities exert their necessary influence on education reform.

Why is UNCF, an organization whose core mission is to send students to and through college, taking a national role in K-12 education reform? Because, for students of color, as for all students, college success depends on students receiving a pre-college education that prepares them for college coursework. And far too many of the schools that serve minority and low-income neighborhoods do not give their students adequate preparation. In 2015, for example, only six percent of ACT-tested African American students who graduated from high school met college readiness benchmarks in each of the four primary subjects: English, reading, math and science.

Many of the cities and states with substantial minority populations have robust education reform movements. But although the primary beneficiaries of reform are communities of color, the movements tend to be led by whites. And more than seven decades of social action has taught UNCF that reform movements succeed and endure only when the intended beneficiaries have a seat at the table—often at the head of the table.

. . . Lift Every Voice and Lead **is a call to action for these leaders to help their communities exert their necessary influence on education reform.**

[i] "African American" and "Black" are used interchangeably throughout this report.

> ***. . . Lift Every Voice and Lead*** **finds that grasstop leaders, who have strong ties to their communities and documented willingness to involve themselves in an issue as important as educating children, can be "critical sources of information, inspiration and empowerment."**

A previous Patterson Research Institute study, *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*, documented parents' strong desire for better schools for their children. It found that these parents want African American community leaders, along with other parents who have successfully guided their children through the education landscape, to provide guidance on education reform issues. And now this report, *Lift Every Voice and Lead*, finds that grasstop leaders, who have strong ties to their communities and documented willingness to involve themselves in an issue as important as educating children, can be "critical sources of information, inspiration and empowerment."

UNCF believes that "a mind is a terrible thing to waste, but a wonderful thing to invest in."® I invite readers of *Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform* to invest their time and attention in examining the report and understanding its implications for giving our children a better education. And I urge leaders and educators—"grasstops" in our terminology—to contact UNCF for tools and materials that can inform their support for education reform, and to act on *Lift Every Voice and Lead*'s information and insights by investing their leadership and influence in improving the education provided to the children in their communities. These children, and the teachers, lawyers, ministers, doctors and nurses and other college-educated professionals they will become, are the return on these investments. They are our dividends.

Michael L. Lomax, Ph.D.
President and CEO
UNCF

Introduction

K-12 education reform: the mere mention of the term causes angst among education administrators and advocates and passive indignation in the urban and rural communities it is supposed to help. Working primarily to improve education outcomes for low- and moderate-income African American and Latino children in underperforming schools, education reformers rarely incorporate the voices of those that education reform is designed to help. UNCF gave rise to these voices in *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*, and one of the key findings was that these parents want African American community leaders, along with other parents who have successfully guided their children through the education landscape, to provide guidance on education reform issues. Given the vast achievement and opportunity gaps in the educational landscape, true K-12 education reform is long overdue.

The education achievement gap between African American students and those from other racial groups should be alarming for the country at large. Studies have shown that, among those who do not complete high school or earn a GED, an overwhelming majority are African Americans or Hispanics who live in cities where concentrated poverty is prevalent.[1] In 2015, only six percent of African American students who graduated from high school met college readiness benchmarks in each of the four primary subjects: English, reading, math and science.[2] To help bridge the academic achievement gap and better prepare African American students to compete in an increasingly competitive global market, engagement of African American community leaders (a group often referred to as "grasstops" to parallel those at the "grassroots") is imperative.

Clergy, local politicians, business leaders and education leaders are often intimately involved in trying to address the issues that provide a larger frame for what is taking place in schools: poverty, community development, tax reform—to name just a few. In fact, the contextual environment surrounding schools plays a significant role in academic achievement as crime, high poverty, local-level representation, neighborhood environmental hazards and health have all been shown to have an effect on student performance.[3]

Additionally, it is important to involve minority leaders in addressing local challenges—including education reform issues—as they often have strong ties to their communities and are frequently viewed as a voice for their problems and concerns.[4] Community-based organizations and local leaders are critical sources of information, inspiration and empowerment, especially in disenfranchised communities where long-standing social and economic inequalities have not been alleviated.[5] In communities where local organizations and engaged parents are an integral part of their respective school districts, benefits are substantial. For students who attend schools in engaged communities, performance on standardized tests is comparable to the national average, college and career readiness benchmarks are more likely to be met and aspirations of earning a bachelor's degree are above the national average.[6]

Despite this evidence, some leaders may argue that few black grasstops from these sectors become deeply engaged in shaping their local schools.[7] This may be the due to the fact that leaders are often asked to engage in multiple community initiatives, and deciding which opportunity to engage in can be an arduous task in addition to managing various priorities. Leaders may not have enough time to engage in a deep or systemic manner. Additionally, leaders may want to see a direct improvement in outcomes immediately after their involvement or investment; education is such a complex policy area, however, that it may take time to see promising results. Nevertheless, it is important to unpack the nuances of grasstops' engagement with education and perceptions of the field. This monograph summarizes African American community leaders' perceptions of K-12 education reform and provides recommendations for their increased involvement and promotion of meaningful change nationally and at the local level.

The education achievement gap between African American students and those from other racial groups should be alarming for the country at large.

Study Scope and Methods

UNCF conducted this study to shed light on African American grasstops' perspectives toward education reform and how they work to develop community-centered strategies to address disparities in schools. One narrative about the lack of engagement by local grasstops in education reform is that they do not care or are not informed about the topic.[8] Such perceptions of apathy may not bode well for collaboration with communities or schools and could thwart progress for reform efforts. As such, UNCF wanted to investigate this phenomenon in greater detail.

This study explored three areas of interest, which are followed by their guiding research questions:

- Problems affecting people within the community: What are the serious issues affecting people in your city and community? What should be the highest priority in improving your community?

- Perspectives on education: How are public schools doing in preparing African American students to attend and graduate from college? What are the top priorities for improving the educational landscape for African American students?

- Barriers to student success: How well are African American leaders doing in responding to the educational crisis facing African American students? What most affects the quality of education in your community?

African American community leaders who reside in cities with populations of at least 250,000 and a significant African American presence were targeted for participation. Many cities with this profile have robust education reform efforts underway or are grappling with education challenges that prevent large numbers of African American children from maximizing their potential. While these are not ideal circumstances for those living through them, they provide fertile ground for this study. The first wave of data collection occurred from June to August 2013 and resulted in 631 survey responses. The second wave, which involved in-depth phone interviews, was collected from January to March 2014. More details on the methods and data are located in the appendix.

Key Findings

Building upon the work of *Done to Us, Not With Us*, it is evident that concerted efforts between community leaders and African American parents can increase the quality of education and economic outcomes in urban communities. Results from *Done to Us, Not With Us* indicate that whereas, African American parents report having limited flow of information from public schools and low levels of self-efficacy, and often are made to feel inadequate or unwelcome at their child's school, they believe community leaders can facilitate the flow of information and alleviate tensions by increasing their involvement with parents and school districts. This study gauges these leaders' perceptions and engagement in K-12 education. The key results suggest that there is, in fact, fertile ground for collaboration between parents and grasstops as the leaders expressed a strong sense of optimism in their ability to advance educational progress for students. Findings range from perceptions of the state of education for black youth to evaluations of grasstops' role in improving educational opportunities. The results reveal that African American grasstops are informed about various issues in education and would like to be further engaged in education reform work. The key findings are discussed in the next section.

Grasstops listed education as one of the three major problems facing their communities, second only to the economy.

While some suggest that the African American community is not concerned about education, studies have shown that African American parents and local leaders believe that education is extremely important, and serves as the gateway to competing in a global market and promoting economic stability within communities.[9] Table 1 shows that nearly 60 percent of black leaders listed education as a very serious problem facing their communities. This is a significant finding, as black grasstops considered education more prominent than many other important social issues such as crime, access to health care and affordable housing. Education has always been a significant issue in the African American community, as many leaders have long engaged in the laborious task of securing equal resources, facilities and opportunities for black students. The results further substantiate the salience of education and the desire to continue the legacy of educational advocacy.

"We need to have a massive reinvestment in education."

Grasstops recognized the state of education as a critical problem because many of the deleterious issues in other policy areas can stem from deficiencies in the education system. The most fundamental problems the African American community faces often have some nexus to experiences (or lack thereof) in education. As such, respondents also listed education as the second-highest priority when it comes to improving their communities. One leader expounded on this point, suggesting, "We need to have a massive reinvestment in education." Sincere and enduring investments in education can yield promising outcomes for communities across various policy areas.

Table 1. Grasstops' Ranking of Important Social Issues

	Very Serious Problem	Fairly Serious Problem	Just Somewhat of a Problem	A Minor Problem	Not a Problem at All
The Economy and Jobs	63%	25%	8%	3%	1%
Education	59%	22%	11%	4%	4%
Crime	53%	27%	13%	5%	2%
Access to Health Care	45%	32%	16%	4%	3%
Affordable Housing	41%	35%	17%	5%	2%
Transportation	24%	26%	28%	16%	6%

The vast majority of African American grasstops believe they have a strong responsibility to help improve the education that African American students receive.

Black leaders have a great stake in the educational careers of students. Eighty-eight percent of grasstops said they have a great or fair amount of responsibility to help improve the quality of education in their communities. One leader asserted, "We are all accountable. It takes a village, so to speak. Local legislators, school board administrators, secretary of education—it should start at the top of the house at the federal level. African American leaders have a huge responsibility in ensuring reforms are put in place. Those leaders need to invest time and money in this."

Eighty-eight percent of grasstops said they have a great or fair amount of responsibility to help improve the quality of education in their communities.

Community leaders believe they have an obligation to help improve education. Ultimately, their involvement contributes to reducing dropout rates and closing the achievement and opportunity gaps between white and African American students. A nonprofit leader explained that ". . . the African American community has to stand up and say that we value education, the schools that provide the education, and we are not going to let that asset not provide the kind of high-quality education we

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think our children need." This sentiment of community and shared responsibility is also substantiated in scholarship. Research has demonstrated that African Americans hold high levels of linked fate, meaning that individual life chances are linked to the racial group as a whole.[10] "Linked fate" often originates from lived experiences and feelings of discrimination in various policy areas, including education. This strong sense of group consciousness can be a driver for collective action among African Americans and for sustaining meaningful education reform.
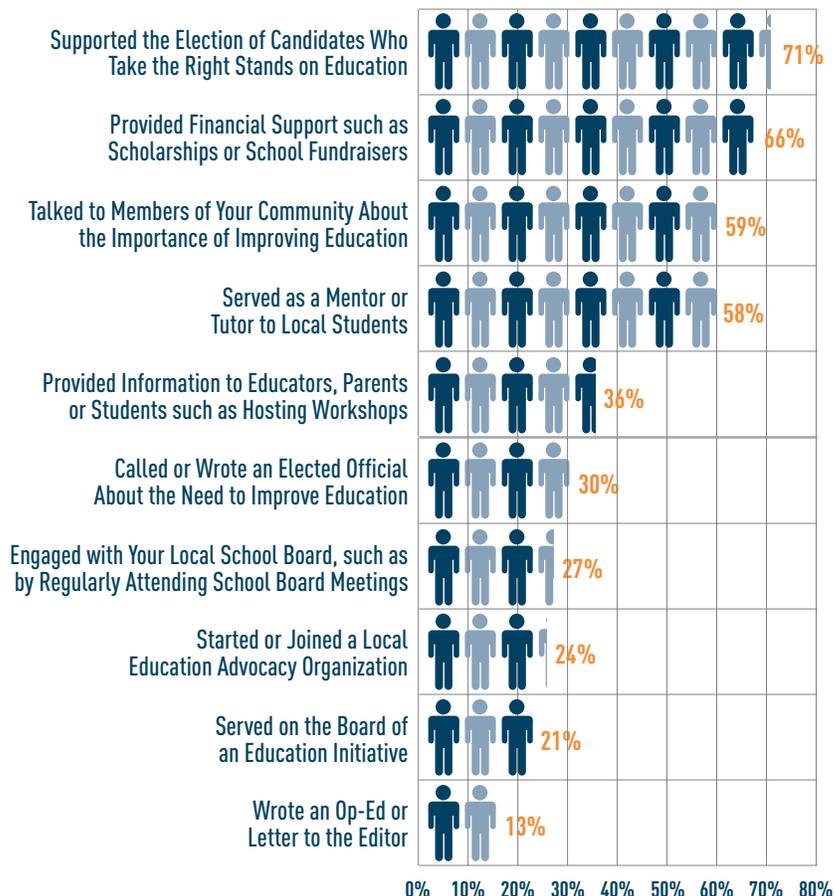
African American grasstops feel that the African American leaders in their communities are not doing enough to improve education.

Acknowledging the importance of education is one thing; however, doing the work to reform it is another. Nearly 80 percent of respondents believed that African American leaders in their community are probably or definitely not doing enough to better the educational landscape. Grasstops recognize there is a crisis in education and that a lack of strong leadership will have dire consequences for black students.

Although leaders feel they are not doing enough to reform education, many are in fact engaged in their communities. Figure 1 shows the various ways grasstops are involved in education efforts in their communities. Beyond supporting candidates based on their educational stance and providing financial support for scholarships, 59 percent of leaders have talked to members in the community about the importance of improving education. Thirty-six percent of leaders have provided information to educators, parents or students, and nearly a third have written to or called an elected official about the need to improve education. Across all activities, clergy exhibited the highest level of engagement. The in-depth phone interviews with grasstops also revealed that they have hosted events at community centers to provide resources, technology and tutoring to students and parents, served on schools boards and education task forces; developed local campaigns to emphasize the importance of education to economic success; and visited schools to talk to students. While grasstops have put forth multiple efforts to advance the educational trajectories of students in their communities, they still felt they should be doing more given the dismal state of education for black students.

Figure 1. Grasstops' Engagement in Education

Supported the Election of Candidates Who Take the Right Stands on Education	71%
Provided Financial Support such as Scholarships or School Fundraisers	66%
Talked to Members of Your Community About the Importance of Improving Education	59%
Served as a Mentor or Tutor to Local Students	58%
Provided Information to Educators, Parents or Students such as Hosting Workshops	36%
Called or Wrote an Elected Official About the Need to Improve Education	30%
Engaged with Your Local School Board, such as by Regularly Attending School Board Meetings	27%
Started or Joined a Local Education Advocacy Organization	24%
Served on the Board of an Education Initiative	21%
Wrote an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor	13%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80%

Though leaders view postsecondary education as important, few believe the public schools in their communities are providing African American students with an education that will prepare them to attend and graduate from college.

This finding is similar to other national-level sentiments from the black community—there is a palpable feeling of disappointment in the educational trajectory of African American students.[11] As noted in Figure 2, only three percent of black leaders feel that schools are doing an excellent job in preparing students to attend and successfully matriculate through college, compared with 41 percent who believe the schools are doing a poor or not so good job. More than half of all grasstops thought local school systems needed major changes but not a complete overhaul.

Figure 2. Grasstops' Perceptions of Public Schools' Ability to Prepare African American Students to Attend and Graduate from College

Specifically, Table 2 shows that grasstops believe that the greatest concerns are below-grade-level performance, dropout rates (especially for boys), ability to compete in the workforce and adequate preparation to attend and graduate from college. These factors embody the overall concerns of the community at large as the inability to persist in school, and perform at grade level and graduate, directly influences the ability to compete in the global workforce and earn comparable salaries to counterparts beyond their community.

These findings are discomforting especially given leaders' strong desire for African American students to succeed. Figure 3 indicates that 90 percent of black grasstops feel it is important for black students in their communities to attend and graduate from college. Among all leaders in this study, clergy exhibited the most robust desire for postsecondary attainment for African American students. These findings are similar to the sentiments in *Done to Us, Not With Us,* where nearly 90 percent of African American parents said it was important for their children to attend and graduate from college. Therefore, while there are strong aspirations for college attainment, the black community acknowledges the critical barriers in the public school system that may inhibit this goal.

Ninety-six percent of Black leaders are very or fairly interested in learning more about how they can help improve education outcomes for African American students in their community.

Table 2. Grasstops' Perception of Problems Facing African American Students in Their Community

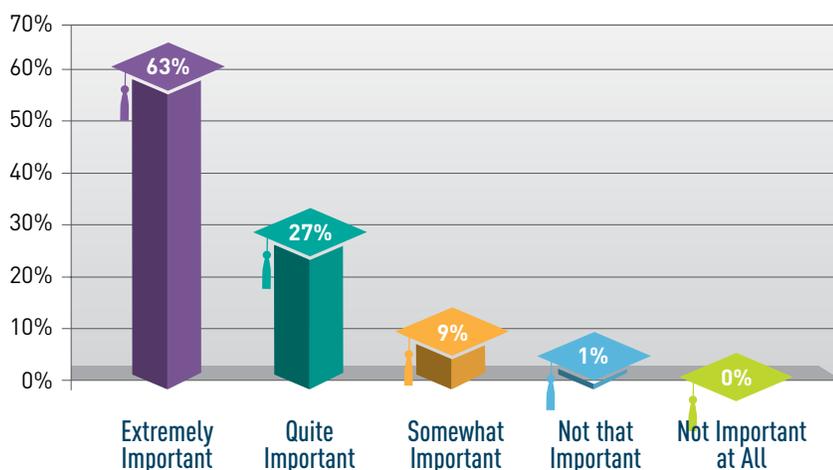|	Very Serious Problem	Fairly Serious Problem	Just Somewhat of a Problem	A Minor Problem	Not a Problem at All	Not Sure
The proportion of students performing below grade level	62%	23%	11%	3%	-	1%
Boys dropping out of school at higher rates than girls	61%	23%	10%	4%	2%	-
Students dropping out of school	57%	23%	14%	5%	1%	-
The proportion of students who graduate from high school ready to join the workforce	50%	31%	12%	5%	1%	1%
The proportion of students who attend and graduate college	46%	34%	15%	3%	1%	1%

Given the problems in education for African American students, grasstops identified important priorities for improving education.

Beyond increased funding, grasstops viewed the following items as the top priorities to help strengthen the quality of education that black students receive:

- resource equity
- teacher quality
- access to quality early childhood education
- parent engagement.[12]

Resource equity was of particular concern. Leaders would like to see disadvantaged schools with high populations of African American students receive adequate funding. Additionally, teacher quality was listed as a key element to improving

Figure 3. Grasstops' Perceptions of the Importance of College Attendance and Graduation for African American Students

Extremely Important	63%
Quite Important	27%
Somewhat Important	9%
Not that Important	1%
Not Important at All	0%

Leaders want more support (both monetary and resource-based) for teachers because they recognize the excellent value they bring to the learning environment. In essence, leaders would like to see teachers be truly appreciated in schools.

education. Leaders want more support (both monetary and resource-based) for teachers because they recognize the excellent value they bring to the learning environment. In essence, leaders would like to see teachers be truly appreciated in schools. One leader illuminated the significance of teacher quality by focusing on the importance of cultural competency training for teachers: "How can they teach black students or all students well if they don't know about these students? But so many teacher education programs don't require teachers to learn about students' learning styles and the way in which race, class and gender shake those orientations. We need to provide more education to pre-service teachers and principals on pedagogies that can be used effectively, particularly with African American students." Moreover, grasstops would like to see more investment that promotes quality early childhood education programs, as they serve as a foundation for successful matriculation through both secondary school and college.

In addition to school-level investments, parental involvement was viewed by black grasstops as one of the top ways to improve education. One nonprofit leader explained, "It is incumbent upon parents and the community to ensure that the community institutions that they value are accountable for those things they say they are supposed to do. . . ." Leaders understand that parents are critical influencers in the education sector, as they give voice to the experiences of their children in local schools. The results show that grasstops are developing critical strategies and identifying key solutions to help close the achievement gap.

African American grasstops are optimistic they can help improve the quality of education for African American students and are interested in learning more about how they can help.

Though black leaders are troubled by the state of education for black students, nearly two-thirds are optimistic that leaders in their community can make a difference in improving the educational trajectory for black students, as noted in Figure 4. In fact, Figure 5 shows that 96 percent of black leaders are very or fairly interested in learning more about how they can help improve education outcomes for African American students in their community. Black clergy members again exhibit the highest levels of optimism and interest in learning more to increase educational opportunities.

Grasstops want to find ways to address the quality of education that black students receive. One nonprofit leader implored African American leaders to "raise people's interest around the value of education, and what it means and what it can do." Despite the challenges, there is still a sense of hopefulness that education can improve and that it is an important tool for social mobility. Education has been a strong pillar in the African American community for many years, and community leaders have worked diligently to ensure that future generations will benefit from a high-quality education.

Figure 4. Grasstops' Level of Optimism that Leaders in their Communities Can Improve Education for Black Students
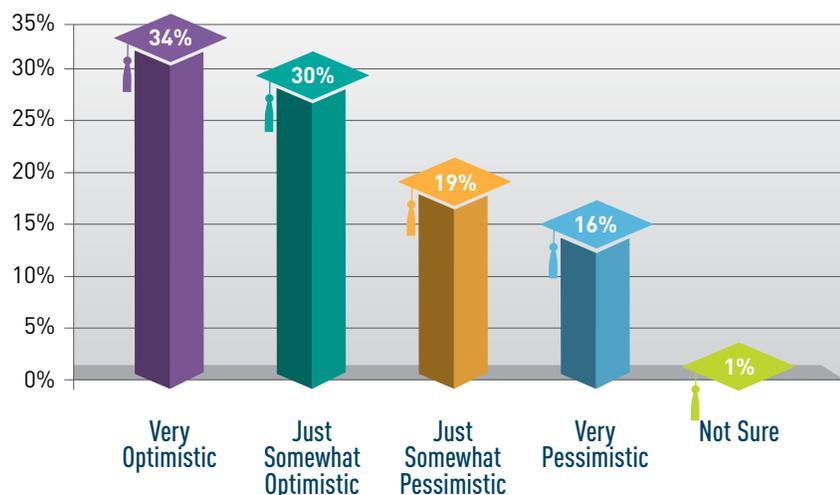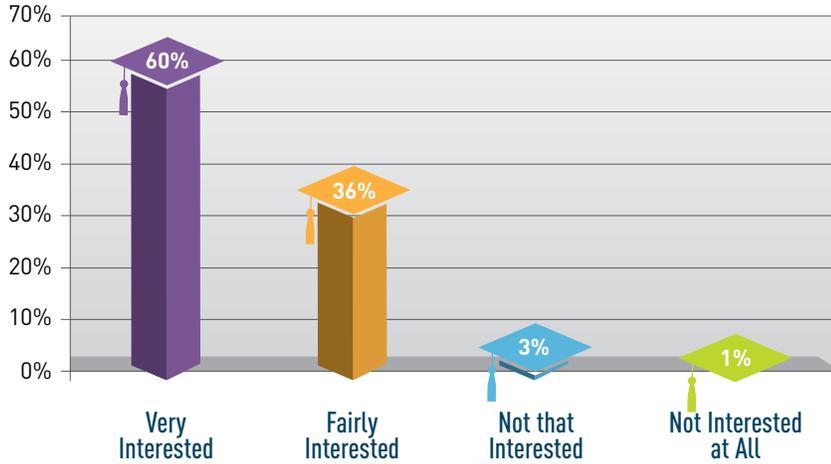
Figure 5. Grasstops' Interest in Learning More to Improve Education for African American Students

Despite the challenges, there is still a sense of hopefulness that education can improve and that it is an important tool for social mobility.

Leaders want tools to help their efforts in improving the quality of education for students in their communities.

Not only are grasstops very optimistic that they can improve educational opportunities for students, but they also expressed a strong desire for tangible instruments to help them do so. Table 3 shows that 66 percent of leaders expressed a desire for descriptions of community-led education reform efforts that have been successful in improving student outcomes and for how-to guides on building partnerships between the community and local schools. Grasstops suggested that talking points about improving education and racial disparities in education would be very helpful as well.

Table 3. Grasstops' Perception of Tools that May be Helpful to Improve the Quality of Education in their Communities

	Very Helpful	Fairly Helpful	Not that Helpful	Not Helpful at All
Descriptions of community-led efforts to reform education that have been successful in improving student outcomes	66%	28%	4%	2%
A how-to guide on building partnerships between the community and local schools so students have more access to career programs and internships	66%	27%	5%	2%
A list of talking points about the importance of improving education	51%	35%	11%	3%
A list of talking points about racial disparities in education	47%	34%	14%	5%
A sample letter for writing to an elected official	40%	33%	19%	8%

Moreover, grasstops often have multiple and conflicting demands placed on them. While they may want to be engaged in education reform, they may not have the time or information to do so in an effective manner. As such, providing practical ways to spur engagement may be the catalyst to establishing meaningful change in the community. One grasstop stated,

"Another 'do' is a lot of leaders struggle to know what they can do. . . . Giving them ideas about little actionable things they can do—show up to a career day to be an example, etc. Provide lists like that. We need a voice or an organization that can issue statements [like] here are five things black leaders can do to improve education for black youth." Nonprofit organizations may provide such tools and can help community leaders become more involved in the local educational issues they care about.

Recommendations

The findings from this study underscore the need for practical strategies for engaging African American community leaders in the K-12 education reform movement. The time to engage leaders is now, as the vast majority of community leaders surveyed are optimistic that they can make a difference in education. The following action-focused recommendations will help link that hope to promising strategies for change, which in turn build more momentum within the community.

Expand community networks

Community leaders indicate that lack of parental involvement is a key issue that must be addressed to help overcome education disparities. Building formal networks where parents and advocates meet to share information and develop effective strategies is critical to reform efforts. This is particularly important because many grasstops revealed that gaps in communication severely limit their influence. In essence, community leaders in this study echo sentiments found in *Done to Us, Not With Us*: collective action between parents and local leaders can improve the quality of education as long as lines of communication with school administrators are open. Community networks help to improve those communication channels.

> " . . . I would also like to see interaction between STEM-related companies and the school system. If we could see big companies partnering with schools and offering internships and summer jobs to get more hands-on exposure, that would be a great sign that we are actually training children for the future."

These community networks can extend to engagement with students as well. Some states are establishing partnerships with both businesses and nonprofit organizations to expose children to career options and job shadowing before they enter college.[13] For example, North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Business Committee for Education offer job shadowing and a "Students at Work" initiative to provide students the opportunity to become familiar with various occupations as early as middle school. West Virginia and California have developed similar initiatives. Such programs not only benefit students, but also help community leaders further learn about the educational realities of youth on a more personal level.

Additionally, *Done to Us, Not With Us* showed that low- and moderate-income African American parents specifically listed churches and church programs as the most influential, trustworthy and effective sources in helping their children to do well in school and get ready for college. In a related manner, this study found that the clergy exhibited the highest levels of optimism and engagement with educational reform for African American students. The foundation for collaboration is clear and evident: both groups understand the imperativeness of partnerships between the faith community and parents in order to create enduring change for students. It will require bridging the enthusiasm of the pulpit with parents and the community in a productive manner. An editorial by a few prominent black grasstops further substantiated this point as well, explaining that "the black church has the power to be a beacon for the education revolution and a driving force in urging meaningful education reforms. If we truly believe that education is the civil rights issue of our time, we must step up to the plate and demand justice."[14]

> "Go back to the community's roots—the church. . . . Churches still top the list of influencers in the African American community."

Provide leaders with the tools to advocate for African American youth

The findings show that African American community leaders are ready to further embark on educational change for students, yet some lack the tools necessary to execute this endeavor successfully. Only one in three community leaders are very confident that they have the knowledge and skills to improve the quality of education that African American students receive in their communities. This is unfortunate and must be swiftly addressed. Nonprofit groups and advocacy organizations can play a leading role in providing useful tools to navigate the educational terrain. For example, one helpful tool might be a community engagement checklist of resources, steps and strategies for launching a successful community initiative. Another effective tool might be training on how the local or state education system works to help leaders understand where they can exert influence.

With these tools, community leaders could use their influence to press for community meetings where advocates and parents are informed about local and national education legislation. Empowering groups to advocate for issues within their own community fosters a culture of accountability and activism that promotes greater educational outcomes well into the future. These leaders have not only the skills and linkages to their community, but they also have experiences with many of the educational issues (both positive and negative) that are prevalent in the educational system today.

Champion the message of positive African American community engagement in education

As mentioned, there is somewhat of a misconception that the African American community is not engaged or fully invested in education. The results of UNCF research suggest that this is certainly not the case. Community leaders should help carry the torch and refute this demoralizing narrative of apathy. The research shows that black grasstops are interested in gaining knowledge on ways to improve education and have a strong desire to help their communities. The data also show that these leaders have keen insights about the educational landscape for students of color. These facts must be conveyed to further embolden communities to get involved with the education reform movement and improve student outcomes.

Make the Ask

Black grasstops explained that they would like to get more engaged with the educational reform movement. However, to put it simply, they would just like to be asked. Nonprofit groups can create entry points for leaders to both partner and engage with communities around improving the educational pipeline for African American students. Leaders repeatedly asserted that organizations should approach them with a clear vision statement and possible avenues to partner with other organizations. They would like to see an action-oriented strategy whose clear goal is improved student outcomes. Black leaders also placed a high value on parental involvement; therefore, any effort to engage grasstops should fully incorporate parent voices. An outreach message grounded in the lived experiences of black parents may help encourage greater involvement among both leaders and parents. Organizations must work to engage this leadership in order to drive fundamental change in their communities.

"Just ask."

Leaders repeatedly asserted that organizations should approach them with a clear vision statement and possible avenues to partner with other organizations.

Conclusion

Understanding the role and ability of community leaders to engage professionals within local school districts provides the framework for establishing community-centered strategies that encourage student success.[15] Parents, students and grasstops can use results from this study to develop community-centered strategies to address disparities and establish relationships within schools and districts. UNCF is a key partner in this work, as it has more than 70 years of history helping African American youth get to and through college. Engaging leaders in K-12 educational reform is a key priority to ensuring that students are *truly* college-ready. Building better futures for African American students is a community-wide effort, and UNCF is working to guide education reform work that embraces collaboration among local stakeholders.

African American parents and community leaders agree that education is key to students' success in an increasingly competitive job market. As the nation moves to a majority-minority population, grasstops will need to be an integral part of efforts to reduce below-grade-level performance and dropout rates. As a consequence of this study, it is clear that leaders recognize their role in the community and are open to forming collaborations with parents, social service agencies and other organizations whose expressed intent is to help reduce barriers that inhibit the success of African American students.

Finally, the findings of this report help to challenge assumptions about black grasstops' investment in education. Even as racial tensions mount and inequality persists in various policy areas across the country, grasstops are still fully invested in finding ways to make their communities better, and as the findings suggest, education is central to this goal. We must all work together with leaders to help engage communities to advocate for what's possible and best for students.

Appendix

Two sampling criteria were used in obtaining responses. Grasstops were surveyed in cities with at least 250,000 African Americans. However, to maximize the number of completed surveys, additional criteria were used, which targeted cities with populations of at least 250,000 residents of which at least 15 percent were African American. In the context of this study, community leaders are defined as nonprofit/education leaders (37%), business leaders (33%), government leaders (17%) and clergy (13%). All of the participants identified as African American, and the average age was 45-49. The gender breakdown of community leaders selected for the study was 54 percent female and 46 percent male.

UNCF enlisted Hart Research Associates to conduct interviews and to administer surveys. Participation was voluntary, and meticulous procedures were followed to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality. The grasstop survey was conducted via telephone and online and received a total of 631 responses from June through August 2013. Community members had to be at least somewhat involved in their communities to participate in the survey. Additionally, Hart Research Associates conducted in-depth phone interviews with 36 African American leaders (grasstops) across the country from January through March 2014. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

Endnotes

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$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$

A B C

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