EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools & Organizations Cultivating Excellence in Los Angeles Black Youth

TRAVIS DUMAS, PH.D.
JALEEL HOWARD, M.ED.
ANGELA JAMES, PH.D.
TYRONE HOWARD, PH.D.
INTRODUCTION

Historically, educational institutions in the United States have not been inclusive of Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Since the turn of the 20th century, Black students have been located on the periphery of educational opportunity in the U.S. and relegated to structurally inequitable schools within an overarching system not intended to truly serve them.

The result is that Black students continue to disproportionately attend underfunded schools (Pitre, 2014; Shedd, 2015); are subjected to hyper-punishment and policing compared to their peers (Noguera; 2008; Wolf and Kupchik, 2017); have less access to college preparation (Delpit, 2012; Howard et al., 2016) and career development opportunities (Arbona, 2005; Castro, 2013; Medvide and Blustein, 2010); and are typified using deficit-based notions of academic ability (Douglas et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2008).

In 2019, UCLA’s Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) released Beyond the Schoolhouse: Overcoming Challenges & Expanding Opportunity for Black Children in Los Angeles County, which documented academic, social, and environmental patterns of Black students across L.A. County. In 2021, CTS revisited that analysis with a more detailed examination of 14 districts with considerable Black student enrollment. The resulting report, Beyond the Schoolhouse: Digging Deeper | COVID-19 & Reopening Schools for Black Students in Los Angeles, additionally documented promising practices,
BRIGHT SPOTS: Schools & Organizations Cultivating Excellence in Los Angeles Black Youth

both in and out of school, for fostering academic success for Black students. Despite the pronounced structural disadvantages affecting Black students—many of which have been exacerbated by pandemic-impacted educational conditions—these schools and organizations represent “bright spots” that have a history of illuminating paths toward academic success for the Black students they serve. As such, their strategies are also illuminative for practitioners and scholars concerned with charting a course toward broader equity within educational systems.

In this report we offer a focused analysis of these bright spots, expounding the practices, approaches, techniques, and collaborations that sustain these sites’ effectiveness in supporting Black students. The bright spots include public schools and community-based organizations that are well known for their long-standing reputations of offering quality educational services in Los Angeles and were selected because of their strong reputations and a review of Black student academic outcomes. Table 1 provides a list and brief description of each organization.

Each of the organizations engage predominantly Black and Brown student populations. In a city where Black people constitute less than 10% of the overall population, Black students constitute 22-68% of the population served by these schools and organizations. The schools and organizations highlighted in this report are located in high-poverty communities where over 80% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and the despite the challenges of racial and economic inequality, each school and organization has remarkable histories of fostering student achievement.
Table 1: Bright Spots

These are brief descriptions of the bright spots highlighted in this report.

**Baldwin Hills Elementary**
K-12 School

Academic outcomes meet or exceed state averages in Math and English Language Arts. Student population is **77% Black** and **71% economically disadvantaged**.

**Ninety-Ninth Street Elementary**
K-12 School

Strong academic performance despite extreme social-economic challenges. Student population is **22% Black; 29% English language learners; 95% economically disadvantaged**.

**King/Drew Magnet High School**
K-12 School

Strong college-going culture and outcomes with **97% of the freshman cohort graduating and 68% of the graduates meeting UC/CSU requirements for admission**.

**Community Coalition (COCO)**
Community Organization

Many youth programs and supportive programs, including academic counseling, writing assistance, and college and career preparation.

**Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI)**
Community Organization

Central mission of leveraging education as a tool of empowerment. Offers students a social justice-based learning curriculum, participatory youth action-based learning opportunities, and academic tutoring.
KEY FINDINGS

1. HOLISTIC SUPPORT OF STUDENTS

Our sites do not divorce academic preparation from the non-academic or socio-emotional needs of Black students. Rather, each of the ‘bright spots’ utilize approaches of holistic support in which academic resourcing is paired with practices that promote the overall well-being of students, creating a comprehensive network of support.

“There’s been a strong emphasis on mental health. It comes up a lot in our staff meetings. We focus on that a lot in our schoolwide webinars. We had two wellness days that were specifically about focusing on student well-being. We had a segment focused on it in our Black History Month event. So that, to me, has been the main factor, [it] is that there’s been a big push from administration down. We even hired a second psychiatric social worker, so now we have two to support our students. So, I feel like that has been a positive effort to support our Black students.”

DR. STONE, SCIENCE TEACHER, KING/DREW MAGNET HIGH SCHOOL

2. CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Culturally relevant teaching and engagement strategies are a prominent practice at the sites we studied. Teachers, staff, and facilitators at all our sites identified using culturally relevant curriculum to create engaging lessons tailored to Black students to promote academic outcomes, identity affirmation, and representation within their learning. Ms. Allison, a third-grade teacher at Baldwin Hills Elementary, described how her school’s curriculum supports Black student achievement:

“We are a student-centered, culturally responsive school in our community. And I think that our mission and vision as a social justice school, as well as a culturally responsive school, is what sets us apart from the typical elementary school. As far as supporting student achievement, the curriculum is centered around the children [...] who they are, what they see. We validate them, we value and affirm their culture, we connect well with parents.”

MS. ALLISON, THIRD GRADE TEACHER, BALDWIN HILLS ELEMENTARY
3. LEARNING AS A TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT

A common pedagogical practice at the sites was using learning spaces and activities to empower Black students to be active learners and civil participants. Teachers often leveraged culturally relevant instruction as a means of fostering a critical consciousness for students to employ in their engagement of material, real-world circumstances, and experiences.

“Our work starts with the Urban Scholars Program and YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research). [The program] is fundamental because the YPAR project excites them about education and learning. With the YPAR projects, students are identifying the social ills that exist in their community that they collectively want to be able to study and transform.”

DR. STANTON, INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SOCIAL JUSTICE LEARNING INSTITUTE

4. CO-CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNING SPACES AND OPPORTUNITIES

To promote student engagement and maximize the benefit of applied learning experiences, the sites often co-constructed learning spaces and opportunities with their students. At both school sites and community organizations, faculty and staff were able to identify and describe the immediate benefits students experience when they actively participate in the design and execution of their learning spaces and lessons. Particularly, students were able to apply critical thinking skills, evaluation, and problem-solving as it related to either the structural conditions impacting their communities or personal challenges affecting them as Black youth.

“This generation of students really enjoy anything that centers art. So we have a new art and culture department that focuses on what we call ‘art activism’. It’s the intersection between art and activism, and students talk about their imagination of what the built environment could look like. They talk about the need for green parks and outdoor spaces for cultural programming. They talk about walkability and safety and lighting and community design. That’s a big one. They also love anything around social, and emotional. We have these unity rap groups facilitated by a mental health professional who works with students.”

DR. MASON, FORMER DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY COALITION (COCO)
RECOMMENDATIONS

The specific practices and outcomes presented in this report may have an impact that varies depending on a range of factors in any specific context. We therefore offer the following broad recommendations—informed by our data analysis—for use by organizations seeking to better support Black students. These teaching practices and school policies have been uniquely designed and shown to be effective in promoting the outcomes, experiences, and excellence of Black students.

CREATE PARTICIPATORY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Create dynamic, culturally embedded, and collaborative learning spaces through the use of participatory learning opportunities as often as appropriate to achieve the goal of high academic performance among Black students.

CREATE RESPONSIVE CULTURES OF CARE

Incorporate culturally and racially relevant content and curriculum to create responsive models of care and affirmation designed to support and affirm Black students.

DEVELOP COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Pursue strategic community partnerships with youth-serving organizations rooted and located in students’ neighborhoods, as a method of supporting the outcomes and experiences of Black students.

SUPPORT TEACHER AGENCY

Establish school policies that allow teachers and educators agency to imagine, design, and incorporate teaching elements, practices and content that are culturally sustaining and beneficial to Black students.


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