

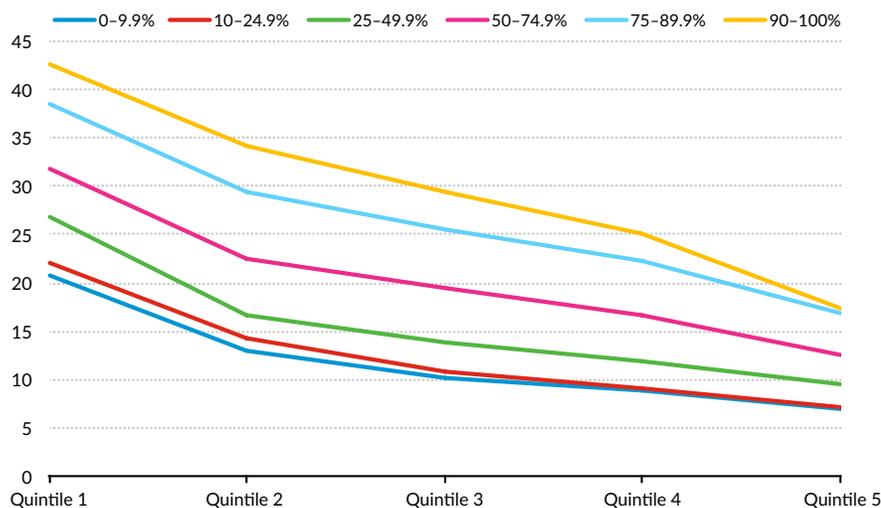
# Improving Outcomes for Boys and Young Men of Color

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Boys and young men of color, on average, lag behind their peers on preschool skills by age 2 and never catch up academically. Changing this pattern will require enlightened public policies and grassroots mobilization. To succeed, boys of color, like all children, need rich early-childhood interactions with parents and other caregivers, skilled and adaptive elementary school teachers, wise school administrators, supportive peers, and engaged policymakers.

## CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR IS BETTER WHEN TEACHING QUALITY IS RATED HIGHER

By share of classroom population that is students of color and quintiles of classroom teaching quality



Notes: Sample size = 30,500 upper elementary classrooms. X-axis unit of measurement is classroom teaching quality quintile (average of captivate, clarify, and challenge scores). Y-axis unit of measurement is percentage responding that student behavior in the class mostly or always slows down learning.

## THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

When boys and young men of color struggle in school, it is often because of problems with person-environment fit. The quality of the fit depends on how well students can assume the roles that teachers, counselors, and administrators expect of them; how willing and able those educators are to adapt to student needs; and whether peer influences conflict with academic requirements.

Problems of person-environment fit can arise from poor preparation in early childhood, adults with negative preconceptions of students of color, school procedures that concentrate boys of color into underperforming classrooms, and peer dynamics that leave young men feeling socially conflicted.

Achieving and sustaining person-environment fit requires well-prepared parents and educators and positive peer supports in the community. These factors play a large role in whether young men of color are academically engaged and ultimately successful.

## IN THE CLASSROOM

Surveys can measure person-environment fit by asking students about their classroom experiences. Tripod® surveys ask students how valued they feel, how challenged they are, how well managed their classroom is, how much they pay attention and behave themselves in the classroom, and so on.

In data from third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms collected between 2012 and 2015, young men of color reported effectively the same quality of instruction as their classmates. However, students in classrooms with a high percentage of students of color

were somewhat more likely to report that their teachers were less caring, less communicative, less challenging, and less effective at managing behavior.

They were also more likely to report that they themselves don't always obey rules, didn't receive good grades in prior years, and are sometimes told they don't pay attention. In short, elementary-age boys of color aren't necessarily treated less fairly by their teachers, but they are more often in underperforming classrooms.

#### THE TEENAGE YEARS

These differences persist beyond fifth grade. Data from the secondary school Tripod surveys show that students of color were much more likely than whites to face a combination of classrooms rated low on instructional quality and schools rated low on safety and teacher-student respect. And students who reported receiving subpar instruction in an unfriendly school environment were significantly less likely to have pushed themselves academically.

Outside the classroom, students of color (particularly young black males) reported receiving less respect from teachers and more negative peer pressure than other students. While students of all races reported a desire to do well in school at relatively equal rates, males of color were much more likely to report hiding their efforts to achieve.

Young men of color often struggle to balance person-environment fit with their teachers and with their friends. Walking this line between conflicting demands can lead them to feel ostracized by both adults and peers.

#### A PATH TO SUCCESS

Preparing young men of color successfully for person-environment fit should entail the following:

- **Parental preparation:** Parents should have access to formal and informal supports from the time that their child is born and, ideally, even before.
- **Birth-to-5 child preparation:** Male infants, toddlers, and preschoolers of color need the same quality early-learning experiences as all other children.
- **K-12 educator preparation:** Educators need more support and training in how to teach and effectively manage classrooms where a large portion of their students may not be socially or academically well prepared.
- **K-12 organizational preparation:** School leaders should make sure disciplinary procedures nurture young men toward intended outcomes. In particular, leaders should ensure that discipline and rewards focus on desired developmental impacts and not simply punishment.
- **Community preparation:** School and community leaders should collaborate to ensure that adults and peers treat the developmental needs of young men of color as a priority at least on a par with any other group.

Several cities across the nation are attempting to address race and gender inequities beginning soon after birth. But it is incumbent on communities to effectively address the needs of young men of color at every age and stage and in ways that account for the special

pressures they may experience.

For more information, see *Aiming Higher Together: Strategizing Better Educational Outcomes for Boys and Young Men of Color* by Ronald F. Ferguson.

## A Case Study

In 2008, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District adopted a multipronged strategy designed to shift student and teacher behaviors.<sup>1</sup> The strategy had three components:

- A social and emotional learning program that helped students in elementary school understand, regulate, and express emotions
- Student support teams that worked closely with students who exhibited early warning signs, such as faltering attendance or behavior
- Planning centers that replaced in-school suspensions and ensured that discipline focused on helping students learn to self-regulate

Between 2008 and 2011, this program achieved substantial gains:

- The number of suspendable behavioral incidents per school fell from 233.1 to 132.4
- Incidents of disruptive behavior fell from 131.8 to 73.9
- Incidents of violent behavior fell from 54.5 to 36.4
- Out-of-school suspensions declined 58 percent

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<sup>1</sup> Osher, David M., Jeffrey M. Poirier, G. Roger Jarjoura, Russell Brown, and Kimberly Kendziora. 2013. "Avoid Simple Solutions and Quick Fixes: Lessons Learned from a Comprehensive Districtwide Approach to Improving Conditions for Learning." Paper submitted to the Closing the School Discipline Gap conference, Washington, DC, January 10.