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In African-American education, too, parents key

I never believed that racial desegregation was necessary for black children to excel. In other words, African-American children didn't need to be in the classroom with white children to learn.

My position is the result of my own experience as a student in underfunded Jim Crow public schools. Even with the benign neglect heaped upon us, we had our secrets for success: We had parents and other adults at home who understood the value of education and who insisted that we succeed. We had principals and teachers, whose salaries were much less than those of their white peers, who cared about us.

Our service personnel—food preparers, janitors and landscapers—had children in our schools. They watched out for us. We knew that education was the key to the good life.

No, this is not a column about black history. It's about history repeating itself and about what education can be for black schoolchildren today when caring, wise, dedicated adults are in charge.

This time-tested formula is working at Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, the nation's first all-male and all-black charter high school. For the fourth consecutive year, all of its graduating seniors have been accepted to four-year colleges. This year, there are 167 seniors. They have been awarded more than \$6 million in scholarships and grants.

It's a remarkable achievement in a city of high crime rates where black males are the lowest-performing demographic in public schools.

Tim King, Urban Prep's co-founder and CEO, opened the first campus in 2006 in the violent Englewood neighborhood. One of his main goals was to shut off the neighborhood's school-to-prison pipeline. When the school opened, only 4 percent of the boys were reading at grade level. Most had been written off by their teachers.

A lot of boys still enter Urban Prep socially and academically ill-prepared, but they undergo a metamorphosis. All staff members, from teachers to janitors, have a firm grasp of black culture, its weaknesses and strengths. When I visited the Englewood campus several years ago, I saw what King refers to as the "four R's": ritual, respect, responsibility and relationships.

Many of the teachers are black males, a phenomenon not seen elsewhere in Chicago schools. Staff members address students formally by their last names, and the students wear blue blazers, khakis and ties. Teachers are available after school hours. Students are required to perform community service.

At Urban Prep, "college is not a dream," King said. "It's reality. . . . It's a lot of hard work to get all the seniors into college. It's a combination of things, but I think most importantly, it's creating a positive school culture. From the day these boys come to us, we make sure we focus hard on letting them know that their job is to prepare for college. And our job, as the adults, is to make sure we're doing the right thing to help them along the way."

The school has adopted the nickname "Hogwarts in the Hood," a reference to the school for wizards in the Harry Potter saga.

And there's that other essential factor: parental responsibility. From the initial interview, parents must sign a contract affirming they will be involved in their children's education.

King makes it clear that Urban Prep—where 85 percent of the boys come from low-income families—is not in the business of rearing children. That's the parents' responsibility.

Urban Prep's story is one of hope. It is evidence of what is possible for black children when smart adults who care are at the helm.

SOURCE: Bill Maxwell, April 12, 2013, KearneyHub, http://www.kearneyhub.com/news/opinion/in-african-american-education-too-parents-key/article_b1109eb6-a393-11e2-9944-0019bb2963f4.html



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