

Grade to Graduation (G2G) A Theory of Action

Background

This project began in the early months of 2014 as a grass-roots effort. It was initiated through informal conversations between Mr. Max Gibbs, a community-based district advocate, Superintendent Teresa Weatherall-Neal, and Drs. Eric Williams and Andre Fields, both from Grand Rapids Community College. Initial discussions revolved around the idea of addressing the gaps in academic outcomes of African American males by providing tutors or mentors from GRCC staff. As the discussions evolved, involvement in the project expanded to include staff representing Grand Valley State University, the Urban League, City Sports, Boy Scouts, Cooley Law School, and others. In the summer of 2014 the G2G team realized that this initiative would eventually need a formal evaluation to determine its effectiveness and impact. The Director of the district's Office of Information Services (OIS) began attending G2G meetings in late summer and guided the group in developing a Theory of Action that would focus their work and provide the basis for determining its effectiveness and impact. This document is the result of that work.

Scope of the Problem

A review of key district indicators shows clearly that there are disproportionate outcomes (gaps) for African American males in comparison to other student groups. These gaps are not unique to GRPS. School systems and communities across the country have been studying this problem and working on solutions. Following is a review of some of the findings from the district's data and from national-level research.

Over the course of the 2012-13 school year, 19% of all Grand Rapids Public Schools students received one or more suspensions. Among African American males, 38% were suspended one or more times – exactly double the district average. Similarly, among all GRPS students, 21% were chronically absent during the 2012-13 school year (absent 10% or more of days enrolled). Among African American males specifically, 32% were chronically absent.

Absence from the classroom – whether because of suspensions, health, choice, or other reasons – has a significant impact on school performance¹. District results appear to support national findings. For example, mean scale scores from the fall 2013 MEAP Reading test are considerable lower for chronically absent students than for students not chronically absent. These gaps range from 5 points in 3rd grade to 47 points in 8th grade. In math, the gaps range from 7 points in 3rd grade to 18 points in both 6th and 7th grade. The fall to spring Conditional Growth Index (CGI) scores on the MAP (NWEA) test in 2013-14 show considerable gaps between chronically absent and non-chronically absent students. The average CGI growth score for chronically absent students who took the MAP reading test in both fall and spring was 0.16. Among non-chronically absent

¹ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

students the average CGI score was 0.43. When converted to percentile scores, these average growth scores place students at the 56th and 67th percentile respectively – a gap of 11 percentile points. In math, these differences translate to a percentile gap of 8 points.

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) identified the following key findings from a six-state study of chronic absenteeism:

- In a nationally representative data set, chronic absence in kindergarten was associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is twice as great for students from low-income families.
- A Baltimore study found a strong relationship between sixth-grade attendance and the percentage of students graduating on time or within a year of their expected high school graduation.
- Chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- Because students reared in poverty benefit the most from being in school, one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get these students in school every day. This alone, even without improvements in the American education system, will drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates.

Studies also show differences in how African American males and females feel about high school completion and their expectations for doing so. Saunders, Davis, Williams & Williams (2004) found that among African American high school students, “females are more favorably oriented toward high school completion,” which translates to higher graduation rates for them versus African American males. Both males and females with positive expectations for passing the current grade had better chances of doing so.²

There are profound personal and societal costs to having large numbers of students fall behind and eventually drop out of high school. Levin, Belfield, Muenig, & Rouse (2007) calculate that if the rate of high school graduation for African American males was the same as white males it would yield a public savings of \$3.98 billion for each annual cohort.³

The difference in cumulative lifetime earnings between a high school graduate and high school dropout has been calculated at \$300,000. For the 249 GRPS students who dropped out of the 2011-12 cohort, this represents almost \$75 million. Each high school graduate, in comparison to a dropout, yields a public benefit of \$200,000 in lower government spending and higher tax revenues. For the 249 GRPS students who dropped out of the 2011-12 cohort, this represents almost \$50 million. In general, high school graduates live longer, are less likely to be teen parents, and are more likely to raise healthier, better-educated children. High school graduates are less likely to commit crimes, rely on government health care, or use other public services such as food stamps or housing assistance.⁴

² Saunders, J. Davis, L., Williams, T., Williams, J.H. (2004) Gender Differences in Self Perceptions on Academic Outcomes: A Study of African- American High School Students, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33(1), pp.81-90.

³ Levin H., Belfield C., Muennig P, Rouse C., (2006). The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children. Columbia University Teachers College.

⁴ The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools. November 2011. Alliance for Excellent Education.

Key Assumptions and Beliefs:

After reviewing a considerable amount of research and discussing the implications for its work, the G2G participants identified the following key assumptions and beliefs:

- High school students need social supports as well as academic engagement. Supports must include parents.
- 9th grade is crucial in ensuring students are on track for graduation. Attendance in 9th grade is the single most significant predictor of graduation.
- Primary causes for the gaps in outcomes of African American males include lack of sufficient support for reading and math, insufficient access to counseling services, policies and rules that maintain the status quo, and systems that hold youth down.
- Self-perception and self-image are critically important factors in addressing gaps in outcomes for African American males.
- The lack of relational learning is a contributing factor. As a result, it is important to engage African American men in the solution.
- Other key factors leading to success for African American males include personal will, grit, and tenacity.
- This problem exists for underserved students, but also affects the community in which we live.
- This initiative has access to a number of resources that can be brought to bear in addressing these gaps. They include the power of belief; political clout; partnerships with colleges, universities, faith-based and mental health institutions; successful African American men from the community; and access to funding from local foundation partners and national granting institutions.

Vision Statement

“Cultivating the next generation of Global Leaders”

Short-term Outcomes

1. Reduce suspension and chronic absentee rates for African American males.
2. Increase parental involvement for African American males.
3. Increase FAFSA completion rates for African American males.
4. Increase the proportion of African American males who enroll in and complete dual enrollment classes.

Long-term Outcome

1. Eliminate all gaps in the outcomes of African American males in the areas of suspension rates and chronic absentee rates.

Strategies to Achieve Short and Long-term Outcomes

1. Recruit and pair 200 personal coaches from the community to work with African American males.
2. Conduct three community events for adults.
3. Develop a data sharing process for coaches to understand the needs of individual students and to monitor their progress.

4. Provide sufficient training for coaches.
5. Document this training and brand it as “The G2G Way.”
6. Provide a support structure for mentors and develop a system of accountability.
7. Fund a full-time G2G Coordinator position to support the initiative.

Evidence for Theory

There are proven, effective, research-based steps school districts can take to support African American males and decrease gaps in outcomes. Less conclusive is research on effective strategies to address dropouts, although a number of promising programs and interventions have been identified. Interventions that can be oriented to the needs of individual students, are grade-level appropriate, and that coordinate with school-wide interventions seem to have the greatest likelihood for success.⁵

Assigning adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out and providing academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance are two targeted interventions that have “moderate” levels of evidence to support their use. Implementing programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills is an intervention that has a “low” level of evidence to support its use.⁶

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⁵ Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs with Appropriate Interventions. National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research (October, 2007). betterhighschools.org

⁶ Dropout Prevention: What Works Clearinghouse (September, 2008). US Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences.

Appendix

Listed below are current members of the G2G team and their organizational affiliation:

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Lisa Butler, Grand Rapids Urban League

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