If you set out to purposely design a system to ensure the gradual destruction of Black boys, you couldn’t do much better than the American public school system.

For years, education experts have been studying the struggles that boys of all races are having with school structures seemingly designed to exploit their weaknesses and downplay their strengths. But on virtually every measure where statistics are compiled by schools, Black boys are at the top for the bad stuff (suspensions, special education referrals, expulsions, dropout rates, arrests) and at the bottom for the good stuff (standardized test scores, gifted and talented referrals, college matriculation).

In many large U.S. urban school districts, the number of Black boys unable to read at grade level exceeds 90 percent.

While it’s tempting to feel hopeless and crushed by the data, many of the educators in the trenches say that would be absolutely the wrong response.

“You can make some decisions driven by data, but I don’t think you should become hopeless because of the data,” says Tim King, founder of the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, a network of all-boys schools producing astounding results with Black boys. “If we were to take that position as a society, frankly, you would never invest in the future of Black boys because all of the data points to negative outcomes. We have to create a counter narrative for people to be encouraged, to understand that it’s possible to find success with this population. It’s not too late. We can’t just let them go. We can’t afford to do that as a community, as a society or as a country.”

In fact, though the plight of Black boys in school feels catastrophic, EBONY’s investigation has found educators across the nation who have come up with effective solutions to just about every problem that boys face. The answers are out there just waiting to be shared, broadened and institutionalized.

“We don’t have an innovation challenge, we have an execution challenge and a challenge of public will,” says John Jackson, president and CEO of the influential Schott Foundation for Public Education, based in Cambridge, Mass.
IN PART THREE OF EBONY'S 'SAVING OUR SONS' SERIES, NICK CHILES SPEAKS TO EDUCATORS AND RESEARCHERS ABOUT HOW PARENTS CAN PRIME THEIR BOYS FOR SUCCESS IN THE CLASSROOM.
Early Years

FROM THE MOMENT THEY emerge from the womb. Black boys face more challenges than their female and White male counterparts, particularly in low-income environments. As they move through the preschool years and then into the school system, those challenges continue to mount as academic failure creates a self-fulfilling cycle of insecurity, low expectations, frustration and an estrangement from the education process.

When researchers Betty Hart, Ph.D., and Todd Risley, Ph.D., in 1995 released a shocking study revealing that poor children hear 30 million fewer words by their third birthday than middle-class children, creating a word deficit that has a devastating effect on their school success, for many educators working with low-income Black children it was like they had been handed the Holy Grail. So much of what they saw happening to young Black children in school could now be explained. For Black boys, this word deficit was exponentially worse—what Dana Suskind, a cochlear implant surgeon who started the Thirty Million Words Project in Chicago, calls the “triple whammy.”

Boys talk less and talk later than girls as babies, according to researchers. In addition, studies have shown mothers talk more to their girl babies than their boys, likely influenced by the fact that girl babies typically give them more verbal feedback than boys. And in low-income communities in general, mothers talk much less to their children, as shown by Hart and Risley.

“So here you are, born a boy, and you’re already a slower talker,” says Suskind, also a professor of surgery and pediatrics at the University of Chicago. “What helps you talk is maternal input. Moms talk more to their girls. Then you overlay that with this austere language environment in poor communities. It’s like trying to grow a flower in a dark basement: Nobody is going to flourish. I’ve been realizing we need to focus much more on this population of boys. We can’t start at preschool—that’s too late. Kids from lower-income communities are already behind when they start school and trying to play a game of catch-up but every year falling further behind.”

To tackle the problem, Suskind began working with low-income families to get them to talk more to their babies through her Thirty Million Words Project.

“I hope we can build a social movement around this idea of talking more to your baby,” she says. “We can move this needle. Talk grows your baby’s brain. All we have to do is talk to our kids, give them lots of love and bathe them in language. And the great thing is, talk is free.”

Suskind’s work is part of an increasing focus among policymakers on the youngest children and building on the enormous positive impacts educators have found over the years that preschool programs, such as Head Start, can have, especially on poor children. While the public money hasn’t yet caught up to Suskind’s work, President Obama has focused both rhetoric and money on preschool, saying in his State of the Union address in February, “Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road.”

David Johns, President Obama’s executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, pointed out that Obama backed up his talk in his 2014 budget proposal with a call for a $75 billion national investment in preschool over the next decade.

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that allow them to have a physical release and teach them how to concentrate.”

As more schools do away with recess and cut physical education, Canada describes it as torture for many young boys trapped in their chairs for hours at a time, expected to sit still and focus all their energies on a teacher at a chalkboard.

“We know huge numbers of kids struggle with this, yet we don’t do anything differently as professionals,” he says. “As a result of their failures, boys wind up not valuing education, not seeing themselves as smart, feeling that they don’t understand. So they look for other ways to express their individuality, their self-worth, their self-esteem, and that comes out [in the form of] acts of being tough, being bold, being daring. All kids have a deep need to have a sense of self-worth. If you don’t find it in the school realm, you’ll try to find it in other realms.”

While educators have been discussing for years the tendency of school systems to turn the natural inclinations of boys into problems that need to be fixed, few efforts have been made to alter the basic structure of schools and classrooms.

But schools such as those in HCZ have come up with their own solution: relying heavily on music, arts and sports to keep kids active, involved and find other realms where they have value and can experience success.

As a result, the number of students at the HCZ schools performing at grade level generally exceeds 90 percent every year and nearly 100 percent of them go on to college.

President Obama has invested millions in trying to replicate the HCZ model in dozens of communities across the country, such as Buffalo, N.Y.; San Antonio; Minneapolis; Detroit; and Nashville.

In McComb, Miss., a small town in the southern part of the state, school superintendent Therese Palmertree, a White woman who has had great success in improving the academic performance of the youngsters in her overwhelmingly Black and extremely poor school district, found that she was able to transform the self-worth of her students by using the rich civil rights history of the town where they lived.

“When I got here, I tried to figure out how I was going to use a strength in this community to move forward,” says Palmertree, 61, a Mississippi native who grew up with a yearning for social justice. “It turns out, this community was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, though nobody talked about it. I was astounded. We created a whole curriculum around this [history]. Our children went out and did oral histories; they gave tours; they made documentaries. Our children won almost every award at History Day at the University of Southern Mississippi for one of their documentaries. After they won, their body language was different. The way they talked was different. They said, ‘We thought we were from little Podunk McComb, Mississippi, but now we can do anything.’”

IF ANYBODY UNDERSTANDS the efforts needed to find educational success with Black boys, it’s Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), the $95 million-a-year effort to impact the lives of 12,000 children and 11,000 adults across a 100-block area of Harlem. Possibly the most closely watched education reform program on the planet—with two K-12 charter schools, a “baby” college for new parents, a College Success Office to work with current college students and a panoply of afterschool sports, arts and music programs—HCZ has for more than two decades operated as a giant experiment in the education of African-American children.

Canada says the problems that start in early childhood for Black boys begin to manifest themselves in second, third and fourth grades, when boys are frequently diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder.

“This issue of ADHD is really an epidemic among Black boys,” says Canada, who rose to national prominence as one of the stars of the award-winning documentary, Waiting for “Superman.” “It’s defined as kids who seem unable to focus, to sit, to attend, to pay attention; they’re easily distracted, fall behind quickly. But I think an awful lot of this is that we haven’t really figured out how to engage these boys in ways that allow them to have a physical release and teach them how to concentrate.”

As more schools do away with recess and cut physical education, Canada describes it as torture for many young boys trapped in their chairs for hours at a time, expected to sit still and focus all their energies on a teacher at a chalkboard.

“We know huge numbers of kids struggle with this, yet we don’t do anything differently as professionals,” he says. “As a result of their failures, boys wind up not valuing education, not seeing themselves as smart, feeling that they don’t understand. So they look for other ways to express their individuality, their self-worth, their self-esteem, and that comes out [in the form of] acts of being tough, being bold, being daring. All kids have a deep need to have a sense of self-worth. If you don’t find it in the school realm, you’ll try to find it in other realms.”

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But schools such as those in HCZ have come up with their own solution: relying heavily on music, arts and sports to keep kids active, involved and give them a chance to burn off excess energy and find other realms where they have value and can experience success.

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and we were nobody. Now we know that we're somebody.”

In Somerset, N.J., Sandra Robinson Binns was so inspired to supplement the top-notch education her 13-year-old son Jahnai is getting at the prestigious Pingry School that she joined with another mother, Almetra Lundy, to start a program called Ujima Academy that inculcates Black children with the majesty of their history.

“I think there’s strength and pride in knowing who you are,” says Binns, who also has 8- and 6-year-old sons at Pingry and is a successful engineer, as is her husband, Rohan. “Living in this country, our children need to know they are just as competent and smart as anyone else.”

Successful educators have found that just as important as a strong sense of racial identity, which researchers have found can actually improve academic performance, Black boys also need to forge meaningful relationships with people who clearly care about them.

High School Years

HIGH SCHOOL AND ADOLESCENCE is when the disaffection and alienation set in. Boys start pulling away at home and at school, making it that much harder for the adults around them to understand what’s going on in their heads. This is a dangerous, precarious time for adolescent boys and their families when their growing indifference to school and the low expectations of everyone around them often send them spiraling—into the streets and out of control. Eventually, the primary concern of adults becomes their survival, not their performance on the last math test.

Christopher Chatmon, MA.Ed., executive director of the Office for African-American Male Achievement, part of the Oakland (Calif.) Unified School District, said he and his staff discovered that the teachers who were having the most success with adolescent Black boys were those who were very aggressive about reaching out to them and keeping the encounters as positive as possible.

“They didn’t get caught up with worrying about them having on a hat or wearing sagging pants,” says Chatmon. “They smiled at them all the time, assumed the boys had positive intents and went out in the hall to greet them before class.”

Successful educators have discovered it is so much easier to reach Black boys when you establish an emotional connection with them.

At HCZ schools, Canada uses sports, arts, after-school programs, after-school jobs—any lure that he can find—to keep the boys interested and focused.

“You have to help boys develop other loves, something they can be passionate about, so they will discipline themselves,” he says. “In my graduating class of boys this year, probably 15 percent are going to graduate and go to college because they loved playing sports. They knew they had to keep a B average to play, so guess what? They kept a B average—not because they wanted to do well in chemistry and biology, which we hope for, but because they wanted to be on teams. The more music, the more arts, the more chess, the more sports, the more employment opportunities you have, the more [reasons] these young people have to self-regulate. They know they can’t drink, they can’t smoke marijuana, they can’t fight, they can’t get a girl pregnant, because they will lose this thing they love.”

And while educators such as King and Canada are quick to acknowledge that a good teacher of any race can do an effective job teaching Black boys, they still make sure the boys have plenty of positive Black men around them.

“I think the fact that we have so many Black males in our schools communicates something special to our students,” says King. “It communicates to them that Black men can run stuff; Black men who are very different can get along; Black males care about Black men, and I mean that in the most platonic, nonsexual way; Black males care about...
what’s happening with young Black males—and should care about it.”

“We think it’s important for them to learn that Black men take care of their community and their children,” says Cana- da. “They’re respectful, they’re strong, they’re athletic—all these things—and they’re also intellectuals, they’re artists, they’re poets.”

In the eyes of many educators, their efforts inside the school building can sometimes be overwhelmed by a destructive force just outside the school walls: hip-hop culture. Canada says he recently assigned his staff at HCZ the task of decoding the meaning behind the lyrics of the top three rap songs—and then comparing them to racist tracts and min- strel lyrics from 100 years ago. The similarities were shocking.

“The words are devastating, just devastating,” says Canada. “What happens when Black boys grow up hearing everyone around them talking about them—Black boys—being thugs, pimps, gangsters, murderers, drug sellers? And your mother is singing it, your sister is singing it, your brother is singing it. And everybody just loves the people who are saying these terrible things? If you don’t have any other place where you can demonstrate mastery, but you could poten-
tively demonstrate mastery by being what everybody says you are. You say, ‘Yes, I can actually live that out. I can be that person. I can learn that set of skills and be acknowledged as a real Black kid.’”

Canada says the influence of hip-hop culture has over-
whelmed middle-class Black boys, too. On a regular basis, he has successful, professional Black parents coming to him and confessing that they are losing their sons.

“What I’ve been trying to get people to understand is there is not a genetic condition that’s destroying these Black boys,” he says. “We’re doing it to ourse-

From bathing Black boys in language to counteract the word deficit in the early years, to making meaningful connec-
tions with them once they move into the grade school years, to offering them a wide variety of engaging activities that can hold their interest when they enter high school, it’s clear that the power to transform the plight of our sons is in our hands: parents, educators, mentors, community leaders. Now we just have to find the will to make it happen. 

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ANTHONY TRAVIS, 12
IS A STUDENT AT THE EAGLE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG MEN, A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN NEWARK, N.J. I think Black boys have problems in school because people don’t encour-
gage them. People laugh at you if you get a bad grade. Some Black boys haven’t heard encouragement in a long time. At school I used to go to, people would bother me when I was trying to do my work. At Eagle, they don’t do that. There are a lot of distractions at other school buildings, like girls. Girls are a distraction because boys try to impress them. That doesn’t happen at Eagle because there are no girls. It makes boys stay focused on their work.

KAHLIL DUKES, 18
IS A STUDENT AT CAPITAL PREP MAGNET SCHOOL IN HARTFORD, CONN. IN THE FALL, HE’LL ATTEND UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA on A BASKETBALL SCHOLARSHIP. I’m aware of what people perceive young Black teens to be. I feel like I have to act a certain way in public—to act with class, to be mature, to make good deci-
sions—to show that I’m not in this group the world perceives as bad. I know my mom was a single parent, so once I figured out how to believe in myself, discipline myself and pray all the time, I was eventually able to be confident in myself and say, “If I believe in myself, I can get whatever I want done and be what I want to be.”

OLINTON COOK, 13
IS A STUDENT AT THE ACADEMY OF COLLEGE AND CAREER EXPLORATION IN BALTIMORE, MD. I’m normally ranked in my squa-
osh player. I think girls do better in school because they’re not worrying about as many things. They just learn and concentrate in school. Boys are worrying about getting girls, showing off and running around doing bad things. I’ve always wanted to be a basketball player or football player, but I also thought I could be a good artist and sell my work. I thought I could be more from you; they put you on this ped-
estal and, if you mess up, they might be shocked. At school, I’m pretty smart and people know that, so I haven’t gotten the “not-smart” thing. The drawback is, people expect a lot more from you; they pressure you more. When I saw these drawings, it inspires me to do more.

MILES EZELIO, 14
RECENTLY FINISHED EIGHTH GRADE AT THE PAIDEIA SCHOOL, A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN ATLANTA, GA. I’m pretty smart and people know that, so I haven’t gotten the “not-smart” thing. The drawback is, people expect a lot more from you; they put you on this pedestal and, if you mess up, they might be shocked. At school, I’m pretty smart and people know that, so I haven’t gotten the “not-smart” thing. The drawback is, people expect a lot more from you; they pressure you more. When I saw these drawings, it inspires me to do more.

JAHNAI BINNS, 13
NINTH GRADE AT THE PINGRY SCHOOL, A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN BASKING RIDGE, N.J. At Pingry, it’s always a contest to see who can be the smartest. My favorite subjects are math and science. I want to be an engineer (like my parents). This summer, I’m going to participate at the New Jersey Institute of Technology for biomedical engineering. I want to go to MIT. I think my Black friends should be pushing themselves more academically. Last summer, I went to the W.E.B. Du Bois Scholars Institute at Princeton University and learned about Malcolm X and read books by bell hooks. I go to outside programs because I get to know about my history and where I came from. It gives me a purpose.

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SEE PART FOUR OF OUR FIVE-PART SERIES on Black boys, in the August 2013 issue of EBONY. To join this important conversation, visit Ebony.com and follow us on Twitter for live chats.

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BLACK BOYS

5 THINGS TEACHERS CAN DO FOR BLACK BOYS

• Instead of waiting for them to come into your classroom, go into the hall and greet them with a smile and a big “Hello!”

• Don’t focus on fixing sagging pants or hats. Instead, compliment them and use positivity to engage them as much as possible.

• Get to know their parents and tell the parents as many positive things as you can about their boys. Thank them for getting their sons to school every day.

• Find something the boys love, and use it to make a positive and long-lasting connection with them.

• Lift up Black male academic achievement by celebrating Black boys with high scores on standardized tests.

Source: Christopher Chatman, executive director, Office for African-American Male Achievement, Oakland, Calif., Unified School District