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HECHINGER REPORT

A new attempt to answer an old question: Does single-sex education work?

A high school for boys of color in D.C. revives Afrocentric and single sex schooling to close the achievement gap

SOURCE: <http://hechingerreport.org/new-attempt-answer-old-question-single-sex-education-work/>

by [Emmanuel Felton](#) September 24, 2017

WASHINGTON — “I am the pink flower” is not the kind of thing a ninth grade boy usually says with a straight face, especially not in a room filled with other teenage boys.

But the young men in Schalette Gudger’s English class at Ron Brown College Preparatory High School, a new all-boys public school in Washington, D.C., were serious about their roles in “Romeo and Juliet” — so serious, some even said the floral phrase. Teams of students picked a scene, decided whether to use the original script or create their own, and staged a performance.

One team reworked the lines to emulate the language of today’s Washington: “He brought some flowers and he told me to roll out, so I did.” Another team stuck with the original script and had their Romeo belting out his lines while he moved energetically around the classroom, using a ruler as a pick ax to break into the tomb.

“They were able to — well, as much as 14 year old boys will — emote. They were able to make connections with those lines and with those scenes,” Gudger said proudly. “When I told them the last thing they would do for the year was act out ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ they didn’t think they would be able to do it or that it was even a part of what a 14-year-old black boy should be doing”

Ron Brown College Preparatory School, located in Washington’s Deanwood neighborhood, was built to tackle a singular issue: raising the low graduation rates of the city’s young men of color. The school just started its second year; last year it served about 100 ninth-graders. The school, which grew out of a citywide “Empowering Males of Color” initiative, is 96 percent black. Most of its students hail from Wards 7 and 8, severed from the rest of the city by the Anacostia River, and home to Deanwood and many of Washington’s poorest neighborhoods.

The school’s educators are reviving some old-school ideas — single-sex education and the Afrocentric schools movement — that have been dismissed by many experts in education as [largely ineffective](#). The push for a new school designed specifically for boys of color clashes with a simultaneous effort for more integration in this deeply segregated city. But there’s clearly a limit to how far integration efforts can succeed in a city in which so many middle class families, black and white, still opt out of the public school system. And leaders here are hoping that by mixing in some new ideas with research on better ways to teach and support black boys living in poverty, their brand of culturally focused, all-male education can work.

At Ron Brown, boys wear white oxford shirts, khaki pants, blue blazers and gold and maroon ties, but don’t mistake the school for some kind of straight-laced military academy. At the school’s core is what is known as the Culture and Restorative Efforts (CARE) team. The team consists of two teachers and five support professionals — a school psychologist, an empowerment coach, a social worker and two counselors — all of whom are black men. Charles Curtis, the psychologist who heads up the CARE team, thinks that the shared background and experiences of students and teachers allows them to delve more deeply into the issues that confront young black men, in school and out. This intimate knowledge and laser focus is what Curtis is betting will set Ron Brown up for success.

96 percent of the boys attending Ron Brown College Preparatory High School are black; most live in Washington’s poorest wards.

Curtis wasn’t surprised the boys were able to connect with Shakespeare’s melodramatic romance, for instance. Curtis sees getting these young men in touch with the range of emotions they will experience in life as key for preparing them for life after graduation. “These brothers need a lot of affection,” he said. “There is so much fear in the average black male growing up in a city that is covered up as

bravado. But here we'll be like, 'Yo man, you need a hug?' We make affection and feelings something that is safe to access. This place is full of love, even if it doesn't necessarily look like a R&B song."

The number of black teachers across Washington has [declined sharply](#). In contrast, the staff at Ron Brown, like the student body, is overwhelmingly black. "I went to a black college and what Morehouse did for me is they loved me," said Curtis. "What we are doing here is helping them develop a sense of themselves."

The school is still too new for test scores to measure whether the school is producing better results than the district's coeducational campuses, but existing research suggest that, even with its unique approach, Ron Brown faces an uphill battle to help its students beat the odds. A [2014 meta-analysis of 184 studies](#) concluded that, controlling for other factors, same-sex schools don't provide a statistically significant test score bump over coeducational schools. The trio of authors also found insufficient evidence to conclude that same-sex schools are particularly helpful for boys and men of color.

Pedro Noguera, now an education professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, studied single-sex schools for boys and men of color while directing New York University's Metropolitan Center for Urban Education.

"While some of the schools that are successfully educating black and Latino males are single-sex, others are not," he [concluded in a 2012 opinion piece](#) published by Education Week. "Many single-sex schools have been created without a clear sense of instructional supports that the students they serve will need. They also haven't created a learning climate conducive to academic success and positive youth development. Not surprisingly, these schools are foundering, and the students they serve are not thriving. Clearly, there is no magic to be found in merely separating boys of color from their peers."

Noguera and other researchers have faulted these schools for too often reinforcing harmful versions of toxic masculinity instead of working to undermine them. But Curtis thinks undermining these dangerous gender stereotypes is precisely what they're doing at Ron Brown by getting these young men in touch with themselves and their emotions.

Researchers have also ascertained that introducing elements of Afrocentric education into a school's curriculum is no magic bullet. Afrocentric education doesn't tend to move the needle much, found Martell Teasley, dean of the College of Social Work at the University of Utah and a supporter of Afrocentric education. He looked at test scores at nearly two-dozen Afrocentric charter schools and [discovered that those schools rarely closed the test score gap](#).

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Schalette Gudger, an English teacher at Ron Brown College Preparatory High School

Ron Brown isn't explicitly a school for black children, but it borrows several elements from the Afrocentric schooling movement that flourished in the 1980s. Afrocentric schools sought to elevate the history of Africa, emphasizing topics like the pharaohs of Egypt. At Ron Brown, teachers often refer to students as kings. The school's motto is a call to action from civil rights activist and pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois: "Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season."

Many of the Afrocentric schools in the past, both public and private, arose in response to the same concerns that propelled Washington's public schools to launch Ron Brown: Existing high schools struggle to serve boys of color.

In the early 1990s, Detroit Public Schools opened up three all-male schools, Malcolm X Academy, Marcus Garvey Academy, and Paul Robeson Academy, designed as alternatives for the city's black boys. "Clearly the educational structure as it exists has not worked," Clifford Watson, the Detroit principal who first proposed schools specifically designed for Detroit's black boys, [told The Christian Science Monitor](#), in 1991. "All we have to do is look at the horrifying statistics facing African-American males."

85 percent of Ron Brown students signed up for a second year at the school.

Fast-forward nearly three decades to the day Ron Brown opened: Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser made almost the exact same argument to justify the new school's approach. "If you look over the District of Columbia, if we have a group of people that is very vulnerable, it's boys and young men."

Back in Detroit, the three formerly ground-breaking schools still exist, though Malcolm X and Robeson merged to become the Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy. According to Michigan state test data, the schools perform no better than others with similar demographics.

At Ron Brown, leaders are aware that schools that have come before have struggled to meet their goals of uplifting young black men. That's why they're trying to structure their school differently.

Before coming to Ron Brown, Curtis worked on many of the problems that greet black boys as soon as they walk in the schoolhouse door. While in graduate school at the University of Virginia, he worked on a program that targeted needless special education referrals handed out to black boys. Since then, he's been occupied with programs, like restorative justice, that offer alternatives to suspensions, which tend to be meted out more readily to black boys. It's that work that caught the eye of Benjamin Williams, Ron Brown's principal, who crafted the psychologist position for Curtis.

Curtis's days at Ron Brown start as he runs a community circle that includes the entire school, both students and staff. Students can talk about what's on their minds at these circles, which last 35 minutes.

"At the beginning of the year, every week a black man was shot by the police, so we would show video and have overt discussions about it; we just spent a lot of time addressing the world as it is," said Curtis, remembering some of the school's first community circles. "The end goal is helping [students] understand their place in the world. The stakes are high."

"There is so much fear in the average black male growing up in a city that is covered up as bravado. But here we'll be like, 'Yo man, you need a hug?'"

Charles Curtis, Ron Brown's psychologist

But Curtis says the circles also provide a time for students to be kids. "There's a decent amount of horse playing, even with the grown folk around here."

After the morning circles, Curtis turns to running smaller circles between students and teachers who have had conflicts. He and another member of the CARE team take kids out of class to huddle and talk about what happened and how the harm can be repaired.

"Restorative justice looks like proper discipline, but it's better than just discipline. Discipline is where we do something retroactively or even retributively," said Curtis. "We can't punish you into doing better. We can't even strong-arm you into doing better. Instead we can equip you with skills and awareness of yourself so that you can do better."

On one May afternoon, he assembled a circle in response to shoving match. The dispute started with a game of monkey-in-the-middle, played with one boy's shoe. As the boy tried to grab his shoe, he swiped a classmate in the face and what began as horseplay ended as scuffle. Curtis says it was just a misunderstanding between friends: The boy whose shoe was being tossed around enjoyed the game and only inadvertently hit his friend, but the student who was hit didn't think it was accidental. Curtis said the circle presented a chance to impart a serious life lesson to the ninth-grade boy whose shoe was being tossed around.

"You need to use your words," he remembers telling the boy. When a large black male cannot describe his actions or intentions, he warned, "Someone is going to shoot you. Someone is going to be scared and take care of you."

Curtis says he has already seen signs of promise at Ron Brown. By the end of the school year, the school had only issued six suspensions, two-thirds of which had been handed out to just two students. The suspensions were mandatory under district policy, for infractions involving drugs or weapons in the school building. "But even then we still do our restorative work," added Curtis.

In addition to the low suspension rate, the school that is still too new to have test score data has another metric of success. "We have over 85 percent of students signed up to come back next year and the ones who are departing are leaving because of issues outside of their control," said Benjamin Williams, the school's principal. "That is a big win for us."

Williams and Curtis are both proud of how much they have won over their students, many of whom initially shuddered at the idea of going to an all-boys school.

"A lot of the most outspoken and resistant students back in the fall are now the strongest wardens of the culture," said Curtis. "We are not going to have any arguments about getting in a circle and talking about our feelings or putting on a tie and a jacket."

This story was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

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How a single-sex school in East Harlem offered young women a path out of poverty

Setting a precedent?

SOURCE: <http://hechingerreport.org/how-a-single-sex-school-in-east-harlem-offered-young-women-a-path-out-of-poverty/>

by [Pedro Noguera](#) September 5, 2016

As we continue to identify ways to break down barriers to opportunity and close the college access gap, we can look to an education model that took shape twenty years ago with 56 girls in East Harlem.

When the seventh-graders walked through the doors of the newly formed public [Young Women's Leadership School](#), their parents rejoiced knowing that their daughters would have the kind of high quality college prep education typically accessible only to middle-class and affluent families.

Yet, as with so many moments of progress, there was a backlash. Headlines were made when civil rights groups filed a complaint with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights charging that the school's single-sex public school status violated federal laws. Nineteen years later the complaint was dismissed. However, while it was winding its way through the backlog of the Office of Civil Rights, the school grew in magnitude and impact – and set a precedent to make it possible to open all-boys' public schools, such as the Eagle Academy.

Education reformers Ann and Andrew Tisch, established the East Harlem school as a way to offer low-income families a choice. It was the city's first single-sex public school to open in more than 30 years. The Tisches' idea for the school was sparked by research demonstrating that girls learn better, particularly in math and science, when they are in an all-girl environment. Moreover, they were committed by their belief that higher education can serve as a path out of poverty. This principle motivated them to use their clout and conviction to work intently with the New York City Department of Education to establish the school. I am on the board of the school's parent organization.

Most students will be the first in their family to go to college

The school has a rigorous academic environment where students are challenged to think critically and are exposed to a wide array of electives. In many ways, it is similar to the kind of environment present in many private academies. It offers girls intensive learning and leadership opportunities, in and outside of the classroom. The schools' four pillars emphasize leadership, college readiness, STEM, and health and wellness.

The success of the East Harlem school led to the establishment of four additional Young Women's Leadership Schools in New York City. Compared to their peers, who graduate high school at a rate of 64 percent, students at Young Women's Leadership have a 95 percent high school graduation rate.

Girls have the opportunity to develop their minds and flex their leadership muscles through internships and programs like Young Women's Leadership School Explorers, where girls have created award winning apps that have been recognized by MIT's Dream it, Code it, Win it project.

A collaborative effort with the New York City Department of Education, foundations and individual donors, makes it possible for every school to hire a full-time, expertly trained college counselor. Akin to the best private and middle-class public schools, the college counselors help the girls with college selection, interviews, essays, tours, SAT test prep, financial aid, scholarship resources, and anything else needed to identify and secure the best post-secondary fit.

This June, graduates of all the schools are on their way to college, just as the majority has been since the first school opened in 1996. Most students will be the first in their family to go to college, and many will enroll at some of the nation's most elite schools.

[The schools' graduates earn Bachelor's degrees at four times the rate of their peers.](#) Their example has sparked interest nationwide and blazed a trail for single-sex public education. Today, the schools has 13 affiliates across the country and a host of other all-girls public schools based on their approach. From 56 girls in East Harlem, two decades later this school's network reaches nearly 8,000 girls. Unlike private or parochial institutions, the schools are public and free.

The demand from parents who seek better opportunities for their daughters is high: The newest affiliate, in Wilmington, North Carolina, starts up in September with 100 girls and more than 25 on the waiting list.

Affordable and proven solutions within the public school system are a means of forging a path to educational equity and opportunity. According to the University of Pennsylvania and the Pell Institute, students from the lowest quarter of the income bracket – households that earn less than \$35,000 – represent just 10 percent of college degrees awarded.

Clearly, we don't have time to wait. We must learn from successful schools that promote opportunity and social mobility. Education can play a role in breaking the cycle of poverty if we utilize strategies like those developed at TWLS, which have proven to be effective.

Dr. Pedro Noguera is a distinguished professor of education at UCLA and the Director of the Center for the Study of School Transformation.

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