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## **The MAACK Community Initiative**

Cynthia Reeves

December 2005

Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL)  
at

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PO Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 • 304.347.0400 • 800.624.9120 • fax 304.347.0467  
One Vantage Way, Suite D-210, Nashville, TN 37228 • 615.565.0101 • fax 615.565.0112  
[info@edvantia.org](mailto:info@edvantia.org) • [www.edvantia.org](http://www.edvantia.org)

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## Contents

Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	7
Methodology.....	7
Background.....	8
The Evolution of the MAACK Community Initiative.....	10
Accomplishments of the MAACK community Initiative.....	22
Information Dissemination/Creating Awareness of the Issues.....	23
West Virginia House Bill 4669.....	27
Improved Dialogue Between the Community and the School System.....	28
Expansion of community Youth Programs.....	30
Increased Parental and Community Involvement.....	31
Challenges.....	34
Effective Communications with the School System.....	35
Involving a Broader Range of Participants.....	43
Keeping People Actively Engaged.....	47
The Future of MAACK.....	48
Conclusions.....	51
References.....	53
Appendix	

## Abstract

**Background:** Across the nation, data on school performance indicate that, as a group, African American children and youth are not faring well. Educators, researchers, and community organizations have stressed that community engagement and involvement in the education of these youth is a key element in reversing current trends. Yet, while most educators want to involve parents and community in the education process, few know how to build the collaborative relationships necessary.

**Purpose:** This qualitative case study examines the efforts of one community initiative to mobilize community efforts to improve the achievement of African American students. The purpose of this research was to illuminate the complex interrelationships within the African American community involved with the MAACK and between the community and school system. This case study addresses the following questions:

- How do MAACK participants perceive their capability to advocate for the education of children, particularly African American students of low socio-economic status (SES)?
- What is the format and substance of communication between school district personnel, MAACK participants, and other community members about education?
- What is the format and substance of communication among MAACK participants about education, particularly of African American and low SES children?
- What advocacy efforts MAACK Community members undertake, and what are the results?
- What, if any, effects do teachers perceive the MAACK Community Initiative having on school-community connections?
- What factors are perceived by teachers and MAACK participants as contributing to parent and community involvement or noninvolvement?

**Setting:** The study took place in Kanawha County, West Virginia. Kanawha County School District is the largest and most urban district in the state. In this county African American students make up twelve percent of public school students. Most African American students are concentrated in inner-city, low-income neighborhoods and schools.

**Participants:** For the case study, 22 individuals associated with the MAACK Community Initiative were interviewed, including community members, district and school administrators, teachers and REL staff at Edvantia involved in the project. Additional data were drawn from meeting minutes, reports, and newspaper articles.

**Activity:** The MAACK Community Initiative was an attempt to develop school/community partnerships characterized by two-way communication and true collaboration. The work of the MAACK has addressed two broad goals: (1) inform

policies, programs, and strategies to address the achievement gap; and (2) work with community organizations to disseminate information to parent and students and to expand participation in community youth programs. The primary strategies for achieving these goals included: (1) school/community dialogues and (2) dissemination of information about the achievement gap and about school and community youth programs.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, in this case organizational processes (Yin, 2003). The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context and when an examination of the complex interactions between a phenomenon and its context is desired (Yin, 1993). Data were collected through document reviews and semi-structured interviews. Documents reviewed included meeting minutes, work plans, work logs, Edvantia reports concerning the MAACK project, and newspaper articles. Interviews were conducted with 22 individuals with connections to the MAACK Community Initiative. The data obtained through the document reviews and interviews were coded by theme. Data from multiple sources provided triangulation and ensured a more comprehensive description of the themes identified.

**Findings:** The MAACK has experienced significant success in bringing attention to the underachievement of African American students, increasing enrollment in community youth programs, and establishing professional development schools to develop and implement strategies aimed at closing the achievement gap. However, the MAACK faces a number of challenges in continuing and expanding its efforts. These challenges include (1) maintaining effective communication with the school system; (2) involving a more diverse group of community members and educators; and (3) keeping people actively engaged in the effort.

**Conclusions:** While the flexibility of the MAACK and its ability to take on projects as they arise is a definite strength, the lack of a clear strategic plan to guide its work is a weakness. A strategic plan, periodically updated, with both long-term and short-term goals and objectives would help keep people involved by providing them with specific issues and activities toward which to devote their time and energy and maintaining one of the strengths of the organization, its flexibility. The MAACK Community Initiative now also needs to build on and strengthen the relationships developed during the dialogue process and the subsequent work.

## **Introduction**

The MAACK (Maximizing Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha) is a community organization working to mobilize community efforts to improve the achievement of African American students in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The MAACK began as a part of a larger effort by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) at Edvantia, Inc. to address the achievement gap through instructional improvement and school/community collaboration.

This case study provides documentation of the MAACK's evolution, accomplishments, and continuing challenges. While most educators want to involve parents and community in the education process, few know how to build the collaborative relationships necessary. The MAACK Community Initiative was an attempt to develop school-community partnerships characterized by two-way communication and true collaboration. The Initiative has been successful in some areas and has come up short in others. There are valuable lessons to be learned from both the successes and the shortcomings.

## **Methodology**

This case study addresses the following research questions:

- How do MAACK participants perceive their capability to advocate for the education of children, particularly African American students of low socioeconomic status (SES)?
- What is the format and substance of communication between school district personnel, MAACK participants, and other community members about education?
- What is the format and substance of communication among MAACK participants about education, particularly of African American and low SES children?
- What advocacy efforts do the MAACK Community members undertake, and what are the results?
- What, if any, effects do teachers perceive the MAACK Community Initiative having on school-community connections?
- What factors are perceived by teachers and MAACK participants as contributing to parent and community involvement or noninvolvement?

A case study, an intense examination of one unit (the MAACK Community Initiative), was particularly suited to the purposes of this investigation. The goal of this research was to illuminate the complex interrelationships within the African American community involved with the MAACK and between the community and the school system. The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, in this case, organizational processes (Yin, 2003). The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context and when an examination of the complex interactions between a phenomenon and its context is desired (Yin, 1993). A case study allows for the examination of the complexities of rousing community members to become informed about education and of forming relationships between the community and the public school system.

Data were collected through document reviews and semistructured interviews. Interview protocols received approval from Edvantia's Internal Review Board to ensure protection of human subjects. Documents reviewed included meeting minutes, work plans, work logs, Edvantia reports concerning the MAACK project and newspaper articles. Interviews were conducted with 22 individuals with connections to the MAACK Community Initiative (see Appendix A for interview protocols). The data obtained through the document reviews and interviews were coded by theme. Data from multiple sources provided triangulation and ensured a more comprehensive description of the themes identified.

## **Background**

Across the nation, data on school performance (including academic achievement, disciplinary actions, special education referrals, and dropout rates) indicate that, as a group, African American children and youth are not faring well. In West Virginia, because the African American student population is small, approximately 4.1%, and concentrated in 12 counties, the challenges African American youth face are often overlooked or subsumed into the larger issues of urban or rural poverty.

Without some intervention, these trends are likely to continue or worsen. Schools cannot address all of the issues associated with supporting minority and low-income youth. Community engagement and involvement in the education of these youth is a key element in reversing current trends.

In 2000, Edvantia wanted to explore how networks for encouraging and supporting the academic achievement of youth could be developed within the youths' communities. An understanding that low academic achievement of African American and low-income youth are often exacerbated by a lack of meaningful connections between the schools they attend and their homes led Edvantia to develop the Partnership of African American Churches (PAAC) in Charleston, West Virginia. Because of the important role that churches have played historically in the African American

community, Edvantia saw them as natural allies for educating youth through after-school and summer programs. The initiative was based on the understanding that partnerships between educators and faith communities can help bridge the gaps that often exist between schools and the families they serve. The goal of the partnership was to develop high-quality education programs and services for the communities they served. A participant in the PAAC described the role the church can play in education, as well as the difficulties it faces in becoming involved with the school system:

The Black community had this three-legged stool and the community controlled all legs. Those stools helped to create the community. Now we have two of the legs that are in real bad shape. Where we had two-parent households, we now have predominantly single-female-headed households. That's a broke leg. The schools had African American teachers and leadership. They are no longer leaders in the community. They don't live in the community and no one knows who they are. That's a broke leg. The church is the only leg left. And that leg isn't as strong as it used to be. We are trying to engage the church in education, in areas where we can have positive influence. I go into schools and see youth who are not as disciplined as I would like them to be. They are spending too much time in the principal's office and not enough time on instruction. I can't ignore the fact that the children are not as motivated as they should be, are not as disciplined as they should be. That's a role that the faith community can play. The system is not used to dealing with the faith community. This separation of church and state—the faith community cannot as an entity, cannot come and say they want to be involved. The strongest institution in the Black community is the African American church. We have to do all we can to get children back into the faith community. Research shows that kids involved in religious activity are less likely to be involved in at-risk behavior. They do better academically.

During the inception of the PAAC, Edvantia helped to plan and facilitate meetings, supplied secretarial services, and provided information about faith-based partnerships and educational issues to the partners. The PAAC continues as a partnership, although with no formal relationship with Edvantia. In the early years of the initiative, the churches focused their work on a broader range of issues that included education, but were not limited to education. Edvantia's focus was in helping to build the capacity of local organizations to develop and operate educational programs. Therefore, Edvantia staff determined that it would be more effective to work with individual churches on education-related issues such as after-school programs rather than with the PAAC, which was focused on a broader range of issues. The work with the PAAC laid the foundation for the MAACK Community Initiative, and many of the PAAC churches and pastors became a part of the Community Initiative.

## **The Evolution of the MAACK Community Initiative**

Edvantia staff involved with the MAACK Community Initiative from the beginning described the creation of the MAACK as serendipitous. In 2001, a number of factors converged and led to the formation of two lab projects aimed at improving the achievement of African American students. One became the MAACK Community Initiative and the other focused on culturally responsive instruction. Nationally, concern with the achievement gap between African American and White students, between low-income and high-income students, and between special education students and their mainstream peers would result in the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In West Virginia, negative reports appeared in the media about the social promotion of African American students and the poor performance on state assessments of schools with high percentages of African American students. In addition, the Office of Civil Rights issued a citation to the Kanawha County Public Schools based on the over-representation of African American students in special education and under-representation in gifted programs.

As part of the partnership agreement between the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the Kanawha County Schools (KCS), the district agreed “to give African American parents and community groups the opportunity to provide input to District Administrators and/or the school board regarding matters that affect African American students” (Office of Civil Rights, 1999). The district’s special education director notified Edvantia that she had organized a community meeting to set up an advisory committee dealing with special education. The advisory committee also was one of the requirements of the OCR-KCS agreement. Other KCS district officials had contacted Edvantia for help in developing plans for improving the achievement of African American students. These events, which followed discussions between district administrators and the PAAC, triggered the creation of the Task Force on African American Achievement to address issues of African American students’ academic achievement. The initial meetings of the task force were designed to be dialogue sessions. The purpose was to help develop a level of comfort between the community and the school system so that issues relating to African American students could be discussed openly and the groups could work together to find solutions. The task force later became the MAACK Community Initiative.

Around the same time, a conversation between one of the pastors involved with the PAAC and an Edvantia staff person provided the impetus for a broader focus beyond issues of special and gifted education. The pastor described that conversation:

Normally, what everyone else is talking about is not what the problem is. It’s probably something a lot more complicated than that. And people talk on the surface in conversations. I’ve been going into public schools and started doing mentoring back in 1987, and so I was seeing first hand what was happening—discipline problems, I was seeing low academic performance and achievement among African Americans, particularly among African American males. So, about some time . . . I don’t remember exactly when, they started about the

achievement gap and it really surfaced, initially, with the over-representation of minorities in special education. This was discussed by a lot of people. The Office of Civil Rights cited Kanawha County and a couple of other counties. And that received a lot of attention . . . , And I told [Edvantia staff] that this is a smoke screen. This is not the problem . . . . And, my personal experience told me that the problem is in the regular classroom, it's much larger than in special education . . . . What I was saying is that the kids in the regular classroom are not being educated and they're not doing well. And [Edvantia staff] requested from the Kanawha County Schools that they disaggregate the data. I said you are looking at the wrong place . . . . The problem is the kids in the main classroom are not achieving and they're not motivated. It's a combination of factors when if you compare their academic performance with that of White peers, you're going to find that there's going to be a problem. That's why she suggested they disaggregate the data. And everybody was all surprised. I'm not an educator, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see kids couldn't read. I could see that kids couldn't read. Kids in my church and public schools couldn't read, kids in programs we were working with could not read, and the report cards were dismal. And that's really what started the whole thing, the disaggregation of the data.

Another pastor agreed more succinctly:

We want to grab the babies that are floating down the stream, but we also want to see who is throwing them in the stream.

As the first pastor explained, the initial meeting of the task force led to the school district disaggregating their data by race and to a focus broader than special and gifted education. At this time, NCLB had not yet been implemented, so there were no federal or state laws that required schools and school districts to disaggregate their data.

The MAACK Community Initiative was one of two projects that grew out of the task force. The evolution of the initiative is best described as occurring in three phases: the dialogues, committee structure, and community leadership.

**Phase 1.** The first phase of the community initiative involved the dialogues, which were organized as a way of developing some comfort level between the district and the community and of developing relationships so that they could work together to find solutions to the problem of African American student achievement. The process was described by a lab staff person working on the project:

The model was to get school people and community into a room to talk about issues. And AEL's role was to bring research to the discussion. What does the evidence say? That took the discussion away from how people feel . . . . A lot of those early meetings were a

lot of talk. But that talk was educating people. It's not just exchanging opinions.

Beginning in May 2001 as the Task Force on African American Achievement, district administrators and community leaders participated in a series of monthly meetings or dialogues. Invitations to participate in these dialogues were extended from the district superintendent and an Edvantia staff member who had significant contacts within the African American community. The participants included central office administrators, principals and other school administrators, church leaders, directors of youth programs, university professors, and retired teachers, among others. Some school board members and state legislators also attended. Occasionally there were people who came not as a result of written invitation but by word of mouth. The individuals who participated in the dialogues were mostly professional. According to a lab staff member, decisions about invitations to community people were based on several considerations: "We needed people who could be available in the community. We needed people who had some social capital." Participants were selected because of their place in the community, their work with African American youth, and their ability to communicate effectively with school personnel and to convey information back to their community. Moreover, the meetings were held on weekday mornings, effectively excluding anyone whose job or schedule did not permit them to attend. One MAACK member explained participation in this way:

The district people would show up because the superintendent told them to; it was part of their job. The community people were primarily pastors or people who had the kind of job that would allow it.

For six months, the dialogues focused primarily on gathering and sharing information. Community leaders shared their concerns about the experiences of African American students in Kanawha County schools, their perceptions of the schools and school personnel, and what teachers needed to know and do to support high achievement by African American students. District administrators shared data on student achievement and information relating to district and school policies.

In addition, during these early meetings the Task Force was working to define itself. The important first step was to identify the problems. Next, the group needed to determine how best to approach the problems and the role the group could play in implementing possible solutions. The task force viewed its role as a liaison between the school system and the community, sharing information and concerns. The district superintendent described the group as an "advisory board" that assisted the school system in developing strategies to address issues of African American students. The name, Maximizing Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha (MAACK) was adopted in September 2001 to reflect this purpose.

In early October 2001, the MAACK held a press conference to present the recently disaggregated data on student achievement in Kanawha County schools. Those

participating in the early dialogues believed that this information should be broadly known. The findings they presented included the following:

- The graduation rate for Black students was 86.8 % and 93.7 % for White students.
- Eleven percent of Black students were enrolled in honors classes, compared to 15 % of White students.
- On the Stanford-9 Achievement Test, given to all West Virginia students in Grades 3 through 11, 44 % of Black students scored higher than the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, compared to nearly 70 % of White students.
- Only 8 % of Black students took the ACT (accepted by all West Virginia colleges and universities), compared to more than 80 % of White students.
- Fifteen Black Kanawha County students took the SAT (required at many out-of-state universities), compared to 233 White students (Smith, 2001).

In the days immediately following the press conference, the superintendent and other MAACK members appeared on local television and radio programs to discuss student achievement data, district actions, and MAACK plans. This media blitz was the introduction of the MAACK to the larger community.

While the Community Initiative was meant to be community driven, the lab was instrumental in terms of inviting participants, providing data and information, and organizing and facilitating early meetings. Much of the initial organizational work was done by an African American Edvantia staff member who left Edvantia soon after the community took over leadership of the Initiative. The former staff member wanted to devote more time to the efforts of the MAACK and to work as an advocate for change; however, she continued to contract with Edvantia as a consultant on the project until June 2005.

Through the dialogue process, community members raised many concerns about the education of African American students. They felt that the children needed

- more support for academic, not just athletic pursuits
- teachers who could help students develop self-discipline by being both strong and nurturing
- higher expectations and a more challenging curriculum
- instruction that incorporates African American culture, history, and literature
- a closer connection between people from the African American community and people in the schools

- recognition and development of their leadership potential

Overall, the community perceived that predominantly White educators were making decisions about Black students, yet knew little or nothing about their lives. They saw the MAACK as an opportunity to educate the school district about the lives and experiences of African American children and youth. Both community members and educators perceived the dialogue process to be an important step in building positive, working relationships between the school system and the African American community.

When asked about the relationship between the African American community and school system prior to the MAACK, community members and school personnel described that relationship as strained or non-existent. One MAACK member explained:

There wasn't one. There was no relationship. Because I don't think Kanawha County Schools had that much respect for the Black community in being an entity that had people who were concerned about public education. And so there really was no real relationship. There were a few individuals, I think, who had developed some relationships, but it was very minimal.

Another MAACK participant added:

It wasn't a positive relationship, trust me. Every time anything happened, it was always negative. There was never a time where you go to the school just to sit down and have an open forum with the parents. Even though they had PTA and LSIC [Local School Improvement Councils],<sup>1</sup> I don't think the parents participate in that. Without that participation, they had no voice.

Regarding the relationship of the African American community and the school system, a teacher had this to say:

I would say in some regards it was strained. Things were not brought to the forefront, kind of sidestepped. By things, I'm referring to test scores, the fact that some students' needs were not being addressed, that there was a disparity. I don't know that it was ever brought to people's attention. Don't know that there was conflict over behavior or discipline. But I think there was a separation. The subjects were touchy, and people didn't want to go there.

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<sup>1</sup> Local School Improvement Councils (LSICs) were mandated by the West Virginia Legislature in 1993. These councils provide parents with an opportunity to be part of the process that reviews school and district policies, offer input, and suggest possible alternatives of change with the school their children attend.

A school administrator also responded about the relationship:

Distant. It remains that way. I believe that's indicative of the types of relationships that exist in most African American communities and the high schools across the county. I believe that has to do with the nature of consolidation. Segregation [sic] was achieved by closing the Black high schools and moving all Black students into the White schools. How intense, how strong, how profound is the affection with which people speak of their schools. They would challenge any consolidation for any reason—even if the school is falling down. It's their school. It's a type of provincialism, exclusive of new ideas. You have a segment of the community that embraces their school and they haven't invited anyone in. There are all sorts of people in there, but they are not welcome.

As a district administrator put it:

I think there was a sense that they [the African American community] felt probably that the schools or the schools' treatment of African American students was not equal to White students or other students in the school system. They had a feeling that they [African American students] were disciplined more, weren't accelerated enough, and didn't receive as many opportunities.

When asked about the impact of the dialogues, participants spoke about the importance of open discussion and the need for the school system and the community to get to know each other. A MAACK member responded:

I think, at least, people are talking. There has been some frank discussion and some brutally honest discussion, you know. And I think that KCS is starting to see that there are people in the Black community that are passionate, that are willing to sacrifice, that want to be involved, that have something to contribute. They want to be part of the solution. I don't think they believed that before. They're not used to it.

One district administrator had this to say about building trust:

We went into African American churches and sat down with community members. A lot do not feel comfortable coming to the school steps. We worked on developing a relationship with the school system and the African American community. We spent about a year having dialogues. It was a trust building process. We had to get away from—"if you work harder as parents" and "you all are all White and you don't care what happens with our students"—to work towards a common goal.

A district administrator also said:

We are trying to give the community a sense that we really do care and that we are here for their children, that we want their children to succeed, that we are open for them to come . . . . I don't think they felt that way in the past.

From the issues and concerns raised through the dialogues, the group developed the MAACK Work Plan. It included six objectives:

1. Increase school personnel's understanding of what the experience of schooling is like for African American students and their families.
2. Help close the academic achievement gap between African American children and non-African American children.
3. Help decrease the number of African American children classified as behavior disordered, emotionally disturbed, or mentally impaired.
4. Improve collaboration between special educators and African American families.
5. Mobilize the African American community around issues of education.
6. Develop a dialogue between school personnel and community members about racial issues.

**Phase 2.** The second phase of the MAACK Community Initiative was characterized by the formation of a committee structure. In many ways the committee phase was an extension of the dialogue phase. For the most part, the same people were involved, and the group continued to meet on weekday mornings. The primary change was a shift from a focus on identifying issues and problems to a more formalized structure within which to address those issues. After six months of discussion about the academic performance and education experiences of African American students, the MAACK formed six subcommittees, one to address each of the six objectives. The subcommittees were composed of school district and community members and assisted by Edvantia staff.

After three months, committees were reformed as the Reading, Special Education, Political Action, College Bound, and Community Mobilization Committees. The activities of the committees covered a broad spectrum of topics.

One subcommittee, with Edvantia's assistance, developed a survey for students based on the comments made during the dialogues. The committee wanted to learn whether students' perceptions differed from those expressed in the meetings.

The Reading Committee held a Blueprint for Reading training to provide MAACK participants with tools to help children. The committee also recruited eight sites serving African American children to implement the Summer Freedom School Reading Curriculum, a curriculum that included books written by or about African Americans.

The Special Education Committee created a brochure for parents of children in special education that explained the special education process. It also conducted a workshop on the parent's role as a team member in the special education process.

The College Bound Committee worked with community organizations to provide ACT prep classes and to disseminate information about those classes to students and parents.

Over the next year, between October 2001 and September 2002, the MAACK met regularly on a weekday morning each month. Committees reported on their work. In addition, discussion continued around issues of African American students' school experiences. Topics included Ebonics, district policies, parent involvement, community involvement, and review of school report cards. These meetings continued to be organized and facilitated by laboratory.

From the work of these committees, two separate projects emerged. Edvantia and KCS began a three-year technical assistance effort to reduce the achievement gap in four Kanawha County schools. This effort became known as the MAACK Pilot School Project. In the fall of 2002, the Community Mobilization Committee spun off to become the MAACK Community Initiative.

While participants in the dialogues and committees believed the sessions were productive, participation started to wane. A lab staff member working on the project reported:

There was the feeling that we are doing lots of talking and nothing's changing. Some people got disillusioned. They wanted action. We had a kind of falling away. What we could have and should have done was to have a community project for people to work on specifically.

In the fall of 2002, the decision was made to move the meetings to evenings so more community people could participate, effectively excluding district personnel; however, there were two reasons for changing the meeting time. First, community representatives felt the need to talk frankly and openly to one another about what they were and were not doing as a community. In addition, they were concerned about the appearance of being co-opted by the school system. Holding meetings in the evenings, on their own, was a way of exerting their independence from the school system. While district and school personnel were not excluded from the meetings, they were not formally asked to attend. The meeting time was changed to the evening so anyone who wanted to attend could do so. However, when the meetings were held during the day, district personnel attended as part of their jobs. Community members were aware that

attendance at evening meetings would be voluntary, making it less likely that district administrators would attend.

A MAACK Community member explained:

The community initiative group said that they should start meeting in the evening. It effectively excluded the district people. They didn't have to come, and they weren't really wanted anymore. There are things that we need to say to one another—how parents and community are not living up to their responsibilities.

**Phase 3.** Beginning in December 2002, the MAACK Community Initiative was led by two co-chairs from the community. This marked the start of the third phase of the MAACK's evolution, which was characterized by a shift from lab leadership to community leadership.

At the same time, the tone of the relationship between the MAACK and the school system changed and became more confrontational. District and school administrators were no longer meeting regularly with community members. When meetings between the two did occur, they tended to take on a more confrontational tone.

The early dialogues were focused on voicing concerns and gaining information. When the evening meetings began, the district personnel stopped attending. Through their actions, the MAACK members began sending the message that they would be monitoring progress made by the district to improve the achievement of African American students and they wanted to help and cooperate with the school system. However, they also felt strongly that they had a different perspective, and they were not willing to compromise in order to be cooperative. They would not be satisfied with a little progress.

In describing the shift from the dialogues to meetings attended primarily by community members, one MAACK Steering Committee member explained how this change contributed to a regression in the relationship between district staff and the community:

The superintendent and those who were committed to this process, and now had these relationships, felt that they [community members] were now talking among themselves: What are they saying? Are they going to attack? They felt turned on. This is a tension that is unavoidable . . . . Once the outcomes aren't predictable, it's like you are either with us or against us. Those feelings are now coming out and being worked through. Relationships are forming again and forming more honestly.

A lab staff member discussed one meeting in particular:

The meeting before Christmas [2004] got openly critical, and the superintendent got angry and talked about how when we had the dialogue sessions, the pastors stopped coming. He felt as if they had abandoned the effort.

One of those pastors was invited to the next meeting. At that meeting he explained to the superintendent that the pastors' absence was not a sign that they had lost interest; rather, they were working in their neighborhoods to support students' learning.

The perception of district administrators appeared to be that if they didn't see people at their monthly meetings, then those folks were not involved. As a district administrator explained:

One thing that I have seen, at the beginning of the project, we had a large number of African American ministers involved. Over the past few years, I have seen a significant decrease, and I'm not sure why. We have raised that concern. They play a pivotal role.

MAACK members explained that, yes, African American pastors do play a pivotal role. However, they tend to work in the community instead of attending meetings.

A MAACK member described a meeting between the MAACK and four principals:

That was an interesting session. They painted a picture that everything is rosy at their schools. We challenged them on it. We got them to look at, hopefully, that we weren't going to accept any explanation when there were still those glaring gaps.

One of the principals present at the meeting described it this way:

I've sat in meetings where the principals will sit on one side and the MAACK team will sit on the other. It's almost like they're going at each other. And sometimes, that's the way people want to approach it. I don't want to approach it that way. I want to be right in the middle. I want us doing what's best for the kids. When you start talking about race, it's a very hot issue.

The structure of the MAACK Community Initiative can be best described as fluid and flexible. At the monthly community meetings, it had become difficult to conduct business and allow parents and community to discuss their concerns. So, the MAACK co-chairs and lab staff agreed in January 2004 to form a steering committee that would deal with the specifics of planning activities and events. The monthly community

meetings were reserved for discussing topics of concern to community participants. The initial invitations to be part of the steering committee were extended by the former Edvantia staff member and the co-chair of the steering committee. One MAACK member stated:

The steering committee came into being because there was a realization that at the regular MAACK meetings people were getting frustrated with just coming and talking. People who had been recognized as leaders were asked to be on the steering committee.

A MAACK member reported:

However, it's a very informal process. People who have taken on leadership roles come [to steering committee meetings] and are welcome.

The steering committee is made up primarily of people with strong educational, financial, and other backgrounds that can be used to drive the MAACK and to assist in building capacity within the larger African American community. As one MAACK participant explained:

Leaders are willing to connect because the MAACK is safe. The reasons why the MAACK is safe is because you have middle class people working together trying to pour back into the community, or there is a perception . . . . The community people take pride that there are these Ph.D.s who are willing to go to battle for us. We have someone who is a Ph.D. statistician. We can generate our own data. We can fight the battle on the level we need to fight it.

Another participant stated:

Any movement requires a grassroots effort. And that's what the MAACK has been. And because of the high skill level in the organization, they are also able to interact with the higher echelons of education. It's been major—a major, major initiative.

The steering committee meets monthly with the superintendent to maintain the contact and communication between the two groups that were started with the dialogue sessions. Within the MAACK, the steering committee works to keep the group focused and on track, to keep the work organized and moving forward. As one participant said, "the steering committee starts doing things. That's the moving and shaking." The Steering Committee is the core of the organization, yet it continues to rely on a network of community organizations and individuals who can be called on to help the MAACK steering committee in the efforts. A MAACK member commented on the group's convening function, stating:

Anyone who says they are a MAACK member, they are one. If you need a group to show up at a particular time and place, you can get one. A presentation was made at a Board [of Education] meeting. Word went out to MAACK members and their churches, and three quarters of the room was filled with African Americans. (MAACK member)

You lose people. People float in and out. We had a young man work with us and he talked about the fact that we have to think of ourselves as . . . instead of some solid structure, a loose group. There are times when we might swell, and there are times when we might collapse. If there is a need, we can call on people in the community and they will come and do what needs to be done. It's a coalition, a loose coalition of people. You find out when there is a critical issue and people show up. You haven't seen them for six months, but they are there. We are going to use a couple of radio stations that we know people listen to get the message out about kids going to school. That and the churches are the only organizational structure we have.

The consultant who worked closely with the MAACK project through the entire process describes it more as a movement than an organization:

It is a movement. The group has a charge to educate others and to keep the issue [achievement gap] in front of decision makers. To do what they can in the community. To support children, not the schools, but the children. And to support the schools when they are supporting the children. To monitor progress, to advertise it and to advertise it when there's not progress. The informal connections allow that to happen, not formal structures. The Steering Committee is that core group of people who are staying the course. The Thursday night MAACK meeting is a place where parents can come and talk about what they see happening . . . . We deal with issues as they arise. We are not focused on specific objectives. It works primarily as a discussion of an issue brought to the table. There is a considerable amount of discussion. If a person brings something to the table, and there are people who want to work on it, they do it. There is no vote, no agreement of all.

A MAACK member discussed farther the role of the steering committee:

We have a steering committee that is made up of people who work with community programs. Kind of directors like. They come and discuss and take it back to their particular groups. They might invite some of the people from MAACK to their churches. What we like is to spin off into different groups and work on this. Children are all

over and we can't be all over, especially after-school programs. We don't necessarily ask them to preach MAACK. We talk about what some of the needs are and they work on those things.

Another MAACK member commented:

Some of the steering committee, they really make their own decisions. Each person can propose whatever and then make it happen and that builds capacity.

In July of 2004, the MAACK created two part-time coordinator positions. The coordinators had broad contacts within their communities and have used those contacts to organize meetings to provide community members with information to help them effectively oversee their children's education.

One of the coordinators explained her work with one elementary school:

My first thing was I went to an elementary school. I wasn't supposed to go every day, [but] I went every day. I went into classrooms, and if the teachers needed help, I helped. I worked with the Black kids to get them involved. I had a reading group, a peer group. I had the children in fifth grade who were discipline problems, but not bad students, to help the first graders. You wouldn't know they were discipline problems. I did that for one year. The principal did not like the MAACK team, but she liked me.

### **Accomplishments of the MAACK Community Initiative**

The primary efforts of the MAACK have been in two arenas. First, the MAACK, apart from the lab, has worked to put pressure on the school system and the state legislature to develop policies, programs, and strategies to address the achievement gap. They have done this through dissemination of information about the underachievement of African American students, through discussions with district administrators about their concerns, and by lobbying the legislature in support of a bill (HB4669) to create professional development schools in districts with substantial African American student populations. Second, the MAACK, with assistance from the lab, worked with community organizations to disseminate information to parents and students and to expand participation in youth programs such as after-school tutoring programs and ACT and SAT preparation classes.

MAACK community members and school personnel interviewed for this study cited their roles in creating awareness of the issues of African American student achievement and their lobbying effort in support of HB4669 as the areas in which they

have been most effective. These areas have received the most attention and publicity. The group's work with youth programs has not received as much attention, but is likely to have an immediate and direct impact on African American student achievement. As the MAACK works with community organizations to support students who are currently struggling, they hope to lay the groundwork for systemic changes within the school system to address the achievement gap.

As one MAACK member explained:

The MAACK group itself developed a pretty clear game plan for what it was trying to do. Number one, to forge a mutually respectful relationship between the Black community and Kanawha County Public Schools, with the MAACK trying to facilitate that relationship. Secondly, to mobilize parents in the Black community to become more knowledgeable of the educational system and the process.

### **Information Dissemination/Creating Awareness of the Issues**

The accomplishment most often cited by MAACK participants, as well as school personnel, was the role of the MAACK in creating awareness of the minority achievement gap in Kanawha County schools. Community members, with assistance from lab staff, used the opportunity presented by the Office of Civil Rights citation to examine broader student achievement data and to bring attention to the poor performance of African American students in all areas and at all grade levels. It started with a press conference in October 2001 that made public the fact that White students were outperforming African American students at every grade level. Moreover, African American students were over-represented in special education and under-represented in gifted programs and AP and honors courses.

As a MAACK member explained:

MAACK has changed that [relationship of the African American community to the schools]. Asking the hard questions, expecting results. I think before, if something happened, if someone had the nerve to ask a question, the school board would tell them something and they would say "OK." MAACK has a lot of credibility. It has been persistent in not accepting any answer. The MAACK was inclusive of everyone in the community. It brought a lot of credibility, people in the community who have standing.

MAACK participants are keeping the issue [achievement gap] alive in the press.

Another MAACK participant agreed:

There is somebody banging the drum at all times.

A school administrator commented:

There needs to be a voice, or voices, that say to the powers that be that what is happening is not good enough. You are going to have to show me that you are going to embrace my issues and demonstrate that you're adequately addressing my issue. Before African Americans didn't have a vehicle to do that. This MAACK initiative is more structured, more focused, and it recognizes that the issue at hand is of the utmost importance, always has been, even more so now given the world that we live in. Economic self sufficiency—you achieve that through education. Without a high school education, you are doomed to live below the poverty line. In the broader sense, there is a tremendous amount of human potential that is wasting away out there.

Increased knowledge of the low academic performance of African American students has raised a number of other issues. One MAACK member emphasized the importance of recognizing that educators hold different expectations for different groups of students:

Getting data and putting it before people. And trying to get people to recognize that students are not incapable of doing the work, that it is not impossible to work with parents from poor backgrounds. These goals we have for the children of excellence are achievable. Sometimes children are shortchanged because people don't have the expectations they have of other children.

Another MAACK member explained that keeping the data in front of people is a way of holding schools accountable:

One of the things we can do as a community is to keep in front of schools what we think should be going on. As a community we just pay the taxes and that's it. We don't require anything of our schools. We don't say that this is not working; do something about it. An organization like MAACK can do that and can play a role.

A teacher concurred:

Because there is awareness, because people know the disparity is there, it has helped the parents to know what to look for, to say this isn't right. It has helped to create a force that is driving education to realize that we can't afford to let kids fall through the cracks. I really believe that.

One MAACK member explained how the availability of student achievement data helped her to try to direct the attention of the Local School improvement Council (LSIC) members to the students:

In several of the meetings, [another MAACK member] and I tried to make sure that they [school personnel] looked at the statistics. At LSIC meetings, overall, they don't want to concentrate on heavy issues. They want to talk about beautification of the school. We had one meeting in which one of the African American parents was running for school board. The incumbent, a White male, was also running. They talked about supporting him because he had been supportive of [the school]. We tried to point out that the school board was all White, and that having an African American person would ensure issues of African Americans would be brought up to the Board. There are things like that that are disheartening. I'm not sure what kind of power, how powerful LSIC is outside of how flowers are planted at a school. They didn't want to address a lot of issues.

MAACK participants have continued their focus on information and data. In the fall of 2004, the MAACK developed a set of indicators of improvement for African American students that included such things as Advanced Placement or honors enrollment, algebra enrollment, discipline referrals, ACT scores, and the like. The MAACK asked the school system to provide the baseline data. These data will be used to monitor the progress of African American students in Kanawha County and to indicate the success of programs and strategies implemented by the district and schools. Also, someone from the MAACK steering committee regularly attends county school board meetings to keep abreast of policies and actions of the district, and occasionally MAACK members make presentations to the board on issues relating to African American students.

One MAACK member described the impact:

I think they [school personnel] are much more conscious now of what is or is not happening to African American children. Now when they look at data, when they look at AP classes and they don't see African American students, the school becomes concerned. We have raised the school system to its responsibility to African American children.

Yet MAACK members understand that the problems do not lie solely with the school system. Parents also need to be well informed about education policies and processes in order to be effective participants in their children's education. To assist parents in gaining this knowledge, MAACK produced brochures on a variety of topics, including graduation requirements and special education. They also produced and distributed parent guides for elementary, middle, and high school. These guides provided information about schedules, test scores, tutoring and extracurricular activities, local

school improvement councils, and parent teacher organizations (PTO). In addition, MAACK held workshops for parents on special education and the IEP process.

MAACK members also made themselves available as facilitators and mediators between parents and school and district personnel. When asked how MAACK has been most effective, a district administrator responded:

MAACK has contributed greatly in many ways. One is having community meetings, sitting down one-on-one with parents. They are our connection with parents who are out there in the community. They have been developing brochures about services, programs and districts on a level that all parents are able to understand . . . . The fact that there is an advocacy group out there for parents who are not comfortable speaking with teachers and administrators. Many times they will call people on the MAACK committee who will contact me and we will sit down to solve their problems. We couldn't have one without the other . . . . In the arena of special education, we have made progress in helping to provide better communication and better understanding of the referral process, SAT process, to make that process more understandable and easier to go through.

A participant also commented on the MAACK's facilitating role:

I've met with . . . there was one semester a couple of years ago, a couple of parents thought their child was repeating a class. I got the assistant superintendent over middle schools to facilitate a meeting to explain.

Another MAACK member reported:

The MAACK availed itself to parents who had a problem or complaint to ensure those parents received due process in terms of a meeting with the superintendent if necessary or the appropriate people within the school system. And actually being willing to attend with parents at those meetings.

By helping parents to solve problems with the school system, MAACK has been able to improve communication between parents and the school system and to help parents learn more about the education process and school policies. Concerning the MAACK's problem solving role, one member reported:

When you say the word MAACK around, they know you are a group that has some concerns and maybe some influence. It is a vehicle for frustrated parents who have nowhere else to turn.

A teacher stated:

I think the MAACK has helped parents believe, but trust is . . . people tend to support the things they themselves create. The empowerment of letting people become a part of it has built trust.

While much of the attention has been focused on the low levels of achievement of African American students, the MAACK also has worked to publicize the positive achievements of African American students. A MAACK participant stated:

They tried to identify any Black kid that graduated last year that got some kind of scholarship, so that they could recognize them. They got them to come into the Capitol and take their picture.

In January 2005, the MAACK was named to the Martin Luther King, Jr. West Virginia Holiday Commission's Honor Roll. Honorees are selected based on their demonstration of characteristics that exemplify the principles for which the Reverend Dr. King stood—human and civil rights, quality, tolerance, and nonviolent conflict resolution.

### **West Virginia House Bill 4669**

In 2003, West Virginia's governor created the Governor's Minority Students Strategies Council "to address the growing academic disparity between minority and non-minority students in West Virginia's school system" (Kusimo et al, 2004). A key community member of the MAACK Steering Committee, also a member of the Governor's Council, along with others from the Council approached a state delegate about creating a professional development school in Kanawha County. Before that meeting ended, the group had drafted a bill to establish three public elementary professional development schools in Kanawha County. These schools would have significant enrollments of disadvantaged, minority, and under-achieving students. The schools would be overseen by the West Virginia Department of Education and would bypass the seniority requirements for filling teaching positions to give principals some control over who they hired. The schools were to collaborate with a college or university. The bill had no funding attached to it.

As the bill passed through the house and senate, the number of schools and counties expanded. The final version of the bill authorized a five-year pilot project and included up to 30 professional development schools in up to 10 counties. The purpose of the project was to improve low-performing West Virginia schools and narrow the achievement gap between Black and White students.

A number of African American organizations worked with legislators to get the bill passed. MAACK organized its members to place phone calls and to meet with legislators. Talking points were provided to assist individuals in making their case to the

legislators. In addition, MAACK organized a large turnout at a school board meeting to express support for the bill, as well as radio and television appearances and a press conference. The fact that Edvantia had no part in this activity is evidence that the community group had developed the capacity to take effective independent action.

The MAACK got community members involved; educated them on the process of getting a bill introduced and passed; and developed a sense of excitement, confidence, and accomplishment. This was a turning point in the evolution of the MAACK. The organization shifted its focus from educating itself on the data and processes of the school system to advocacy, information dissemination, and taking political action. The process of developing and informing the professional development schools bill helped build the capacity of the MAACK through developing the skills of participants and their confidence in their ability to have an impact. This effort also demonstrated to the community that MAACK had influence and could make an impact. As one MAACK member stated:

In my opinion, the MAACK is singularly the most responsible for HB4669, the Professional Development School bill. That's tremendous [HB4669]. This a statewide project. It really had its genesis with the MAACK. I don't think there really would be an enlightened interest among grassroots people in the African American community about education issues and the process had it not been for the MAACK because the MAACK has been relentless.

Moreover, throughout this effort, White people in the community became involved as they saw the potential to address the needs of all low-income children. There was some discussion at that point to renaming the MAACK to Maximizing the Achievement of All Children in Kanawha. However, support for the idea dwindled and the MAACK continued its focus on African American children.

### **Improved Dialogue Between the Community and the School System**

The dialogue process, the bill development effort, and other collaborative activities have brought more open communication between the community and the school system. MAACK members feel more comfortable communicating with district and school administrators about their concerns and district administrators feel more comfortable meeting and talking with the community. One MAACK member stated:

We now have free access to the [school system]. Access to the administrative staff is encouraged. We have had relationships with the schools our kids attend. We've gotten access to data. They [school personnel] are more respectful to the Black community now.

A MAACK member also reported:

A lot of parents had the perception “us against them.” It was not a partnership. They are not treating my child fairly. It was us against them. Students had experiences that they perceived as racial bias from children and from some of the teachers. There was some negativity there. A large hurdle of MAACK is trying to get parents, community, and school to work together to help children. Plus we have a lot of young parents. Their perceptions of the educational process and how to motivate their children are a little different from me and my perspective. For my children, the teacher was right. Now the teacher has to prove that they are right. With a lot of initiatives that MAACK has promoted, we are seeing a bridging of that gap.

A district administrator spoke from a different perspective:

Through my experience both at the school and district level, there were some issues that were never addressed between the two. Perhaps there were some feelings that the school system was not willing to help or was not providing services as they should be to their students. Since the beginning of the initiative, that has greatly improved . . . the African American community believes that the school system is open and willing to listen. That was not prevalent before the MAACK . . . . I think certainly that the walls have come down. For the most part, the community feels that there are people at the district office who will listen. There is a greater trust that was not existent prior to the MAACK. I have friends now, who I would call colleagues and friends, that I didn’t have before, who you can call if you need to network and if you have a question. I think we have a common focus and a united front.

A school administrator commented:

There is an opening up of dialogue. There are voices being heard that have not been heard before, voices that are manifesting themselves that heretofore have been silent. The response I find to be encouraging. These voices have not met deaf ears. Change is slow in many areas. To change a social system requires patience. To adapt, to bring adaptations to culture, that are already established, will be met with opposition, which is naturally occurring . . . . All of the debate and dialogue, the vast majority of it cannot be called contentious in any way. Things don’t happen as quickly as we would like.

## Expansion of Community Youth Programs

Both MAACK members and district administrators cited the expansion of after-school programs as one of the most important activities of the MAACK. While MAACK itself does not operate any programs, it works with existing programs to disseminate information to parents and students. According to MAACK members who work with youth programs, attendance in those programs increased after MAACK got involved. As one MAACK member explained:

I was invited to be part of the group, I assumed, because we served school-aged youth. When I got involved and got to understand the achievement gap, it reinvigorated our work. Specifically, we are involved in implementing in our community after-school tutoring, enrichment, encouraging kids to go to college, and giving them and their parents the tools they need . . . . Our after-school and summer school programs serve about 100 to 150 kids a year. We started a child development center. We are staying the course in terms of academic enrichment. It's a consistent process of encouraging and supplementing what kids are getting in school. MAACK has been important in getting word out to parents.

A MAACK member who runs an after-school program explained the importance of these programs for African American students:

This is hard for people to accept, but I believe that the problem is so great that the current system is incapable, in and of itself, of correcting itself. And so what we have to do is we have to figure out ways to fund programs like summer enrichment academies and after-school academies. And this is not a racist thing, but are run by Black people. There is a role that only the Black community can play in terms of educating its children. The Black community has proven that it can educate its children, the poorest of its children, in the most hostile type of situation we've ever had in this country [segregation] . . . . What I am suggesting is that we've got to build on the strengths of the model that worked. It takes some resources to do that. And the best we can, we can't do on a shoestring budget. To run a quality after-school program, it takes resources. We've got to figure out ways to get resources to these organizations and hold them accountable and see if we can't close this gap. It's like athletics. You don't get better during the season because you can't experiment during the season. The improvement is made during the off-season through special conditioning. That's when you do special drills, when you prepare your body for the upcoming season. And, I believe that academically, you've got the same thing. That the best you can do during the school year is to keep the kid from falling further behind. So, if you're going

to close the gap, you need more time on task in a more intense environment where you specifically try to deal with the deficiencies. So, we don't even have the right model in place yet to close the gap. The best we can hope for is not to lose more ground. That's not enough. That's not good enough.

During the committee phase of the MAACK, the College Bound Committee identified a lack of counseling and academic advising as an important issue facing African American students. A MAACK member explained:

Counseling . . . is an issue. I have a friend whose daughter had a 3.8. If it wasn't for the mother, she wouldn't have found out about scholarships. This young lady wanted to attend UNC Chapel Hill. The counselor said that there was no need to apply [for a scholarship] because African American students don't get those scholarships. She got into Duke. MAACK met with the district person over counselors. He brought in counselors and talked about the issues.

Their work carried over into the third phase of organization. The MAACK sponsored training for community academic advisors to provide community people with the knowledge to assist students with course selection, college selection and application, and scholarships and financial aid.

### **Increased Parental and Community Involvement**

A primary goal of the MAACK was to get more parents involved with their children's education. Toward this end, the MAACK sponsored workshops on topics such as tutoring and special education and created brochures with information to help parents get more involved. One MAACK member described his objectives:

To get involved by attending MAACK meetings, to get involved by visiting a child's school and getting to know the teachers and the counselors, to get involved by looking at their children's report cards, papers, and also their scheduling, to know what the child was taking and have input to make decisions about what their child would take.

District administrators cited the MAACK's work with parents as improving parent involvement in the county:

Their role in creating awareness and asking for support from parents in the community, that's been a tremendous help. We have seen an increase of parents getting involved. The message that the community can send that we are working together, they have the credibility that for a long time the school system did not have.

One of the MAACK members described growing attendance at community meetings:

There was a meeting in an eastern part of the county [one of the coordinators lives in the area]. There are some race issues there. There is a history of that. The meeting was organized at [a church]. The first [meeting] two or three people came. The second [meeting] 10 or 12 people came. The third, the principal was invited and she brought some of her staff. She sent out a notice to parents and about 30 people attended.

MAACK members were instrumental in organizing a number of events to bring parents into the schools. These events included a fifth-grade graduation ceremony and a Black History Month celebration. MAACK members also organized transportation for parents to school open houses.

At the Black history event, attendees were served a spaghetti dinner and materials were provided for parents to read with their children. A MAACK member described the event:

We had a Black history event at [elementary school] and tied a spaghetti dinner with it. There was probably a hundred parents there . . . We got those parents. They came out. [In explaining that many of the people who attended, don't normally attend school functions, she told the following story:] This mother had a child who is in fourth grade and can't read. We were talking about taking these things home and reading to kids. She said that if she had learned to read, then she could have done so. She wanted to take the boy to Myrtle Beach and realized that she couldn't read the signs and she didn't go.

MAACK members organized a fifth-grade graduation ceremony at a school known for its "problem" kids. A MAACK member explained how the principal was not planning an event for the students because he felt they did not deserve it:

The awareness, especially in the schools we have close contact with . . . and MAACK has been a major player in bringing that about. I'll take a case like [elementary school]. They suspend those kids. There is no one at home. So we got in-house suspension. Nothing happens to them in there, but they are not out in the street. We are in that school. There is a kind of unvoiced pressure. Someone asked about what was going to happen with the fifth-grade graduation, and [the principal] said, "nothing." And she said, "[MAACK co-chair] won't like that." And things got put together. There was a ceremony and [MAACK co-chair] spoke to the kids.

This situation demonstrates that it is not just the parents that are an obstacle in improving involvement. Oftentimes, low-income and minority parents must overcome the perceptions and the prejudices of the school to become more involved. But when that happens, the result can be tremendous.

A MAACK member commented:

That fifth-grade ceremony . . . I noticed several of the students that have been difficult in years previous, they were very proud of themselves. They participated and their parents were there. They just enjoyed being there.

While MAACK has had some success in getting parents more involved, it is a continuing challenge.

A MAACK member explained:

The challenge of getting more parents involved has been ongoing. If they get involved, if a small group of parents can get involved, it can start a snowball effect. I've seen it at middle school. My assistant started sending out e-mails to other parents. She was able to increase the attendance at LSIC meetings from one to two parents to about 20 parents.

A MAACK member commented further on parental involvement:

I think the principal needed to hear from parents of children who attended there. We did some brainstorming. We got a mailing list of all the minority students at the school and sent them information on the MAACK on a regular basis. This past fall we set up the first open house. We arranged with local churches to provide transportation [in their buses]. There weren't that many parents who took advantage of it. The fact that we got information out about the open house, more parents came out.

MAACK members explained that not many parents took advantage of the buses. However, more African American parents attended the open house than in the recent past. Therefore, MAACK members viewed the event as a success. The primary goal was to get more parents to attend the open house, and that goal was accomplished. According to one MAACK member,

at the beginning of the school year, we wanted to be sure that African American parents go to the open houses and meet their children's teachers. We arranged for the churches to have buses to take people. The schools did say to us that there were more African American

parents than before. Even if they went on their own, they got the word. We kind of facilitate in that sense.

A number of MAACK members spoke about the importance of meeting parents “where they are” to encourage them to get more involved. A MAACK member described one effort to reach out to parents,

In our brainstorming, we tried to meet parents halfway. They may not feel comfortable being an advocate for their children academically, but they will [come out] for sports. We planned a tailgate party for homecoming to meet with parents before the football game to give them information about the MAACK. We are trying to meet the parents where they are. We have made ourselves available for questions or to go to the school with them. At the tailgate party, parents were able to ask questions in a nonthreatening environment.

A teacher provided some recommendations about how to get more adults involved in her school:

[What more could the MAACK community do?] Get involved, be present, come to the school. Maybe quarterly, they could set up a meeting with the parents, with the students, at one of the large churches that will house enough parents and students. Get business partners involved. They try to support us financially. Why not physically be involved with students? We have seen the statistics; now what are you going to do? Get involved as a tutor. If you are an accountant, tutor math, be a mentor. Sometimes kids need someone other than their parents or grandparents, somebody else outside of that home environment. They might take it better from another person.

## **Challenges**

The greatest challenges facing the MAACK Community Initiative were summed up by a MAACK member:

The main challenge is the challenge that they have to be extremely effective on multiple fronts simultaneously. That always stretches them too thin. They’re trying to be at all these meetings, interact with the Kanawha County Public School officials, and be at the schools. They’re trying to mobilize parents to get involved and to educate and equip parents, which is a job unto itself. And they’re trying also to work with and engage students in workshops and get them in tutoring . . . . And the MAACK is trying to do all that. With people working full-time jobs and have family responsibilities and so forth, I think that’s a major challenge for them. How can they be effective on the multiple fronts? Because if you do two of them and don’t do the third

one, you're still not going to have success. It all has to work, and they've got to be effective on all these fronts. And I think they understand that. And we're trying to do that. But, at the end of the day we didn't get that done because we didn't have anybody, and we weren't there and we weren't here. I really think that's a major challenge. Another challenge is how you build a true community collaborative in terms of getting parents, educators, business community, social and civic organizations all together to get on same side of issue and let's push together. That is an ongoing campaign that any movement has to continue to build alliances and partnerships.

The major challenges facing the MAACK in its efforts to mobilize the community and to work effectively with the school system are (1) maintaining effective communication with the school system, (2) involving a more diverse group of people, and (3) keeping people actively engaged.

### **Effective Communication with the School System**

All those interviewed for this study agreed that communication between the school system and the community has improved. However, that communication remains strained. Progress toward improved communication made during the dialogue sessions was halted when the MAACK Community Initiative began meeting without school district personnel. The interviews with MAACK members and district and school personnel indicated different perceptions of the problem and different expectations in terms of a timeline for results.

As MAACK members gained knowledge, experience, and confidence, their expectations for action from the school system were elevated. The expectations of the MAACK members often clashed with what district and school administrators perceived to be possible given the constraints of the system. MAACK members expressed a sense of urgency about the current situations of many African American youth. MAACK members said they often feel frustrated. They said the school system does not share their feeling of urgency and is therefore not moving quickly enough in making changes to address the problems.

As one MAACK member pointed out, the school system does not have a positive track record and does not, therefore, inspire confidence in its ability to address the problems. This member stated:

As if we have some trust to believe that they can correct something they have been controlling all these years. So, the 50 years since Brown vs. the Board of Education, we've seen the steady decline of academic performance for low-income Black kids. And they think we believe they can fix it. You know, we have no trust in them. Some of us have absolutely no trust in their ability. If they can fix it, what it

tells us is that for 50 years they have been derelict in their duty. We have Ph.D. Black folk that have done as much research as anybody on the achievement gap, but they've got to force their way to the table. They've got to prove to people that they know what they're talking about. There shouldn't be a meeting about this without them being involved. And their fingerprints should be over anything that is attempted to be implemented and their sign-off should be sought. We won't trust it. We won't trust it because we simply do not believe that those who control the current system will come with the right attitude. It's not being mean spirited. It's just the fact. In my opinion, we are beyond crisis. This is beyond crisis. That's why I'm so passionate about it and so pointed. I've been patient.

I see the full gamut of the best and worst that we're doing. The thing that is frightening to me is that the worst is getting worse, but the best isn't getting better. The problems and issues that young people are dealing with are getting more severe. That's why I'm saying we've got to do better, and we've got to do better faster. So, I tell people, please don't ask me to be patient. Patience is not a virtue when you are trying to save people's lives, literally. There is a sense of urgency that somebody has to have. That urgency will push the process faster.

To say what I'm saying here is hard for people to accept it. They think you're being mean, you're being radical, or you're being militant. It's hard for them to accept that this is not acceptable.

Other MAACK members expressed a belief that the school system looks down on them and doesn't want to hear what they have to say. A member reported:

There are so many egos that you have to deal with. It is so difficult to pull those people together. People in high positions tend to promote their position and sugarcoat any problems. They are not really listening to what little people have to say. If they realize that the community is not their enemy and that we are not trying to take over their job and their schools. We are trying to work with them and the children. Don't push problems under the rug. You have to bring them out and deal with them and find solutions.

One school administrator spoke about the confrontational nature of many interactions between MAACK and school personnel:

Sometimes the school system comes on very strong and sometimes MAACK comes on very strong, and there's not a whole lot of coming together. I have two African American administrators, and they would fall more on the administrative side . . . they are part of the school culture. They're in the school doing it every day. And they are

accused of being prejudiced against the Black kids that are being disciplined. It's a different role for them. They will come in and talk to me about it and how they should handle it, and it's hard. It's interesting to talk to them about MAACK and to get their perspective on it. You have a lot of people in MAACK who have a lot of really good ideas, but that's not the way it is in elementary school or middle school. Unless you are in there doing it everyday, it's hard. And MAACK, I don't, they don't, we just need to work together. We need to work together as a team. If we don't do that, nothing is going to get accomplished. And, again, the kids are the ones who are suffering.

One school administrator, who expressed the same sense of urgency and saw the MAACK as contributing to bringing groups together to address the problems, stated:

It establishes and maintains the dialogue link. It gets everybody on the same page in encouraging our kids. To changing the attitudes of our kids, develop study habits that are effective, avoid at-risk behaviors. We have had 11 shootings on the West Side. All of us should be working to give kids options instead of gang behavior. The community initiative has worked with the legislature on PD schools. Involving government and letting government see this is something they need to be involved in. I think it's starting to snowball, hopefully; it will turn into an avalanche.

On the other hand, school administrators explained that they have a responsibility to all of their students, and they feel that many MAACK members don't consider their position. They want all parents to be involved, no matter their race. Whether Black or White, school administrators emphasized the need to focus on all kids. A school administrator commented:

I would like them [the MAACK] to understand that the decisions that I make are in the best interests of all the students. It's difficult for some of these kids because they are raising themselves, but they have to be respectful and responsible for their actions. And, I would like to have support. I'm an educator. I am a principal in a building with 600 kids. I want to do what's right for all my kids.

This administrator went on to explain that principals and teachers don't always have complete control over what they do and that it is important for the community and school to work together. The administrator added:

I understand that MAACK wants to be involved and what they are about is wonderful, but they have to understand where the schools are and what we have to do as educators and leaders of a building . . . And sometimes we, when I say we, I mean the principals and teachers, we

have to make decisions that we have to make because we are bound to or tied to. And we have to make decisions that sometimes affect kids maybe in a negative way, when we handle discipline or anything like, but sometimes our hands are tied. That's what we have to do. It's not that we agree with it or disagree with it, it's what we have to do. It doesn't seem like there's a whole lot of teamwork. If we don't have that, nothing is going to get done . . . If we're not all on the same page, nothing is going to get accomplished, and that's difficult.

Two school administrators, one Black and one White, spoke about the achievement gap in broader terms than just between Black and White students. One said:

Are we talking about closing the achievement gap between my special education kids, my African American kids, and my low-SES kids. Is that what we are talking about? I'm focusing on all students and making my students the best we can be.

The other school administrator commented:

Some people have limited that to the gap between African American and White. I look at it differently—gap between those students who score poorly and those who score well. It's more pronounced between African American and Whites. I like to look at it as a difference between students who score well and students who don't.

These administrators also talked about parent involvement in broader terms. According to one of the administration,

It's estrangement. Part of it has to do with SES. People, Black and White, who are of means tend to be more involved with their kid's education. They take a very active role. People who are not of moderate income tend not to be, in general, as supportive of the system. They don't vote. However, even the poorest folks want their kids to have a good education—and I want you to emphasize this. They know when they walk in the door, in many places, that they're not welcome. It's like church, everyone is sitting in church, and in walks a street person . . . they are looking for salvation and can't find a friend in the house.

The other school administrator stated:

Parents who are involved, whether they are Black or White, are parents who are involved. When you have parents who are not involved, whether Black or White, that's the issue. I mean, I can't get parents in here. The issue of community relationships was one that I was supposed to address as new principal. But, that was schoolwide,

both my African American and White parents. I want them all involved. I don't want to say Black or White. There are parents who are involved and parents who are not involved. I try not to make it a Black and White issue. I want all parents involved. MAACK wants it [to] be by race. I think there's more of an economic prejudice in education than there is a racial prejudice. It's hard for parents working third shift, whether they are Black or White, to come in to meet with teachers, to be involved. Parents who are tied to a low socioeconomic status are more tied to what they are doing than those parents who are in a white-collar job. There's more flexibility there than if you are working minimum wage at a fast food restaurant.

The African American community is struggling to understand what is happening with its youth. Most of the people involved with MAACK are professionals. They expressed that they do not fully understand the issues faced by many of the African American children. They look to the school system to help, but oftentimes feel that the schools blame them for the problems with African American children and youth. According to one MAACK member,

I watched this thing, civil rights, become a reality—how you can affect things. That background was a big part of my life. I come from a family of teachers. There were seven of us, and all seven went to college. I came from a generation that felt that education was the key . . . I just know that there is nothing that education can't solve . . . [I was watching TV] They were talking about the achievement gap, and it was a shock to me. And I have two children, and they came through the public school system.

It's a big job because there are so many facets of it. Where I went to school, nobody missed school. I don't know how some of these things started.

A MAACK member registered surprise on being told about a student who had dropped out:

I'm amazed; even today one of my kids said, "So-and-so dropped out of school." What do you mean they dropped out of school? What do you do if you don't go to school? It's frightening that there are so many kids who have given up on the system and the system has given up on them. It's not just African American kids, it's poor kids.

A MAACK member commented:

Teachers and administrators also expressed knowledge of the circumstances of many African American students' lives, and a feeling of helplessness in their ability to address them. A school administrator commented:

It's difficult to teach these kids that the decisions they are making now are going to affect them when they are 25. That's a whole cultural thing. I see a lot of good kids. There's a kid at [high school], plays football, gets good grades, all-state. I hear he hasn't been to school since January and that he's out selling drugs now. And he's a good kid. You know, and he's making 5 to 600 dollars a day. This is what kids are coming in saying. And this kid was a 3.0 student, good test scores, mother and father, parents involved. And this kid hasn't been to school since January, staying over in the projects selling drugs. How do you change that? I can't go over and knock on the door, you know. So, he can sit there for two more years and maybe get a college degree and maybe make 35 to 40,000 dollars a year. This is guaranteed money so he can go out and get the clothes and the jewelry and the girls. It's an uphill battle. It's very difficult. And, it's sad because there are so many good kids and there's not parental involvement. You have kids, seven, eight years old raising themselves. They're hungry and their clothes aren't clean. And it's hard to bring them in and tell them that it's important for them to learn the counties of West Virginia when they're worried about where they're going to eat.

Community members explained that much of that work has to be done within the community.

A MAACK member explained,

For Black folks, for the Black community, there are certain things that only we can do for ourselves. Only we can make education a priority every time we gather, every time we meet. Only we can restore this commitment to education that most people had coming out of slavery believing that it was the ticket to truly being free and a real citizen. Only we can do that. No one can do that for us. That's why we have to have that independent group over there. It has to be able to turn around and look at Black folk and say look, you can't be trifling, you can't be slothful. You have got to put forth the effort, and excuses are not acceptable. Because there is no such thing as a good excuse. It can't be good and an excuse. There is a role that only we can play in terms of challenging these Black kids in a way that they will hear it because they know our love for them and our commitment for them. They see us at the same time stand up and fight for them on this side over here, and only the person who fights for you over here can discipline you over here . . . I see that we have got to have a revival in terms of education. Revival suggests that it was something that was alive at one time and it needs to be brought back to life. I think this high commitment to education, to literacy, to academic excellence.

And we've lost that. And we can't totally blame the public school system.

A MAACK member stated further:

Black children are suspended at a rate higher than other children. We know among ourselves, and we have to try to identify the African American adults. What is your responsibility in this? We are starting right now with some of the community activities like little league and the coaches and the role they can play. It's appalling. It's shocking just how much school is missed by children. And parents don't see that they go to school . . . We try to bolster the contact they [adults] have with the kids. They say it's the kids' fault. Some of them are so moved by the fact that you care that they make greater efforts.

At the same time, district and school personnel expressed an understanding that schools must change as well. A district administrator indicated that more needs to be done working with the principals and helping them work more closely with the community but, oftentimes, school policies inhibit the development of closer relationships. According to the administrator,

[Schools need to] demonstrate more of openness, a willingness to embrace all of the communities. They need to do things to bring people into the schools. They need to be more liberal in their restrictions. A parent ought to be able to get on the school bus to come to school to talk to school personnel if they don't have transportation. You should have meetings at night with food, child care, and transportation for people who lack those things. We need an agenda that reflects a conscious knowledge of these groups. We need to focus attention on those groups that heretofore had not been heard, seen, or benefited. There needs to be a demonstrated, not a perceived, willingness to embrace, uphold, accommodate, respond to, empathize with, sympathize with, display understanding.

MAACK members agree. As one stated:

One of the things the school system has got to stop is stop looking at community from a deficit model and start looking at it from an asset model.

They [school district personnel] need to be more welcoming to parents and the community and really mean what they say when they ask for parent involvement. About a year ago, we were upset when one of the school board members said that parents don't care. We encouraged parents to attend school board meetings. They need to really go above and beyond to get parents more involved.

A MAACK member asked about challenges of working with school system said a major challenge is . . . getting teachers in the schools to accept some responsibility. Some will say it's the parents' responsibility. We have a lot of dysfunctional families. For some kids, their only solace is to go to school. Expecting the parents to get involved is passing the buck. I think teachers should accept more responsibility. Teachers need to get out of the habit of assuming the kids are not going to achieve and therefore not waste time with them. [Teachers think,] "If they are from one of the projects, or if they are at my school, then they must be from the projects." Stop making assumptions and stereotyping.

According to a MAACK member,

They've [school personnel] got to spend more time building relationships and gaining allies and also more time in educating the people about what it is they do and how they do it, and why they do certain things the way they do. People don't always understand that. They don't live in that world of education and academia. So they've got to do a better job of just public relating. Because, normally, we hear so much negative about they [teachers] don't make enough money. No one made them go into education, so people really don't want to hear that. They don't do a good job on educating the community about what they are doing, and as I said earlier, how they do it and why they do it and what the role is for the community. And they've truly got to make the schools more parent friendly, more community friendly in terms of how people are treated when they try to volunteer, when they try to get involved. They've got to become less defensive. Sometimes, they've just got to be prepared to let the people vent and learn and hear what people are saying . . . That part just takes effort, you know, but effort takes time. It will take structural changes. We have got to get more people who live in the community teaching in those communities to where they are part of the fabric of the community and they give legitimacy to things that are going on . . . And they've got to hold themselves to a higher standard and quit blaming the parents. They've got the kids for six hours a day.

Two school administrators discussed the need for the White community to educate itself. One school administrator commented:

I had a Black assistant principal. He said the world defaults to White. The White culture is ignorant of Black culture. You only need to know one culture to survive. I have to know yours and mine. The White community needs to educate themselves to learn the Black culture. We don't understand each other's language still.

Sometimes we White people don't have a clue. I would say it has been disconnected before the MAACK project from the standpoint of people not knowing each other on both sides. I truly believe that all parents want what is best for our kids. There has been a disconnect between the Black community and the schools, for whatever reason. The central office is basically all White. There has been attempt to recruit Blacks, but it has not been successful. There is resentment from the Black community, right or wrong, that public schools are doing the sort-and-select function. We had an incident with [a] Black student. The student said, to a teacher, "What's up, dog?" The teacher had never heard the term and went berserk because she thinks she is being dissed. [She asked the coach do a presentation at the next faculty meeting on Black vocabulary.] That was an eye-opening experience.

A teacher responded:

Yes, [the MAACK initiative] it has had an effect on teachers, even in a negative way. Many teachers felt that MAACK is only to help African American students. What about the White students? Many teachers didn't see that if you are teaching it, the whole class is going to see it, not just African American students. They just saw it as this is for African American students only.

### **Involving a Broader Range of Participants**

Community members in the MAACK Community Initiative have been primarily professional African Americans. There has been little or no involvement from low-income Blacks, school administrators and teachers, or non-African American community members. As one district administrator pointed out,

The weakest [area of MAACK] is getting a broader range of participation. The main MAACK committee, it's the same people involved all the time. There is a lot of people out there who haven't participated and have not been on the committee. That's why we went into the African American churches. We would have a meeting on Wednesday evening, and our whole central office would be there. We would have a general forum. We had some honest, open dialogue, then standing around talking to each other. That piece has gone away . . . there may be a point where we go back to those meetings.

MAACK members have been involved with low-income Black parents through school events and helping them deal with problems. However, low-income parents have not been active in organizing activities or events themselves. A MAACK member described a situation in which low-income parents were excluded:

We called for a meeting in one of the low-income housing developments and nobody showed up. We ran into a woman there who had her own group. She was highly controversial. Her style was in-your-face, protest kind of thing. [A member of the steering committee] met with her and her, group and they wanted to form their own branch of MAACK. Nothing ever happened with that. [Another member of the steering committee] was not happy with that at all. He was afraid that they could do some damage.

A MAACK member explained:

I don't think we have done much with parents who, we usually don't know who they are until there is a serious problem with a child. Then you talk to somebody and get some background information. We sit among ourselves and talk about this. Dealing with parents is a very touchy thing. Some parents don't do things because they don't think they can make it work and they don't want to know that they can't make it work. They are afraid to fail. I have had students like that.

Concerning the composition of the MAACK, a member reported:

It [the MAACK] remains a largely middle class group . . . . However, the group sees itself as a voice for those who are voiceless.

Another MAACK member expressed concern over the average age of participants:

What I found interesting too was that, at the meetings, you have older African Americans like the grandparents of the children, not always the young parents. I think that's where we need to get, to have more of an impact.

Through the dialogues, community members began developing relationships with district administrators. However, once the Community Initiative went out on its own, those relationships diminished and the tone of meetings held between the two groups became increasingly confrontational and potentially affected their ability to work closely with the school district. Also, teachers and principals have never been true partners in the Community Initiative. Developing partnerships with educators could help facilitate more involvement with the schools directly. According to a MAACK member,

One of the things we haven't done . . . we have yet to get a perspective from the teachers as to why they are like they are with African American children. We hear from the superintendent and others, but I want to hear from the teachers why Johnny can't read.

A MAACK member commented:

The school system has been working with us. The higher level, meaning [superintendent] and his staff, the higher ups. I know for sure that he wants to do the right thing. I don't doubt that. I can't say that about lower level staff and the principals, teachers, and counselors. They have their own agenda. He can't possibly manage each of them effectively.

Teachers explained that they did not know what the MAACK Community Initiative was doing or that they had only a vague idea. A teacher admitted:

I'm not familiar with what [MAACK community coordinator] is doing. All I know is that she works with the school . . . [The coordinator] works with our principal and doesn't work directly with us.

A teacher reported:

[The coordinator] has come to my classroom and has helped me with a unit. She has said that if I need help to ask. Help, doing what? I don't know what to go to them for. They have had meetings that we were not invited to. I think when they do community things they don't invite teachers in the schools. If they did invite teachers, would they really come, knowing that it's the West Side? They might be afraid to come up here.

Commenting on not being invited to MAACK meetings, a teacher said:

When we first started working with the MAACK [Pilot Schools Project] about three/four years ago, there were about 10 of us that met with Edvantia to discuss closing the achievement gap. We knew they had community meetings, but we didn't know about it. We weren't invited. Our principal went, but we as teachers weren't asked to come.

One school administrator, who did not seem to be aware of what they were already doing, described the things that she would like the MAACK to do:

Working with the community, the county, or school, we could plan monthly meetings—at area churches, at school, to talk about issues. We could have parenting classes. Have speakers come in. Ongoing development, not only for teachers, but for community. Getting people in the schools to help tutor. There is never enough educators in school. Classes are overcrowded. Staff cuts across the county. Just like inclusion, you need more staff . . . One area that I was disappointed in—and I don't put this on the MAACK community—we

could not engage our teachers in relationship with the community. I wish we were able to do a better job in getting our teachers involved.

A teacher noted additional roles for community members:

We need to get them (community) in the schools, need to let them volunteer to be in the building. We have this fear. Once they come into the building, it's because the child has done something wrong. We need to contact churches and have them recommend people to volunteer. They need to be chosen from within the community.

Teachers interviewed by the author expressed a desire for a partnership. They would like to involve more parents and community members, but feel they need help doing that. As one teacher stated,

We need to find out what we need to do to get parents more involved. Do we need to have a social gathering to bring us together before school starts? I know that the MAACK community team has worked with the Board [of Education]. I know that they have come over to Second Avenue Center. But I don't know if they have come there when the parents and children are there. Maybe we need to come out of our suits and ties. Just be a part of the community. Appearance is sort of intimidating. Perhaps we could have in each area, a cookout, on a Saturday, meet your teachers and students. Go to the community instead of them always coming here.

A teacher offered the following strategy for building school-parent relationships:

I would like to make home visits. I know it's uncomfortable for people. If it's allowed to happen, I would like to make, maybe monthly or every nine weeks. I would like to let them know that we are available and they can come to us. I could take someone from the MAACK with us. Maybe we could meet someplace other than their home. Some teachers think it is an invasion of privacy. I'd like to try to do something, more things that could be less threatening than a parent/teacher conference when you don't know what to ask.

A teacher also suggested helping the parents themselves:

I have met with some parents who have been challenged by their education. I give them materials and leave them with one thing to work on. I'd like to have more non-threatening events. Something that would help our parents to see that we are a team. We are doing a lot of work here with these children that goes unseen because of the struggles we have. Maybe we could come up with some ideas with the

MAACK team. Who do we talk to besides [the coordinator]? Possibly a round-table discussion with teachers and MAACK people to discuss ideas about what kinds of things could be done. We could be effective in discussing ways to do things.

One MAACK member expressed concern that the broader community does not see how the lives of community members are affected by poor education:

And the bigger issue that I see, getting people to understand that they really have a vested interest. When you live with something for so long, then you assume this doesn't affect me. That's the way that the problems of Black people are often viewed in this society. That something can affect the Black community, but not really have an impact on society as whole. That's been this country's real dysfunction . . . . People think this is not affecting me. So, people getting killed in Charleston, classic example, 12 people get killed in Charleston in one year's time, but the White community says nothing about it because it all happened on the West Side. And so, getting them to understand that it does affect you. Poor education does affect you because you pay for the consequence in terms of social programs, in terms of over-incarceration or poor people, Black or White, in terms of taking care of children of people who are incarcerated. That's a hard sell to make to people. Every time people talk about raising taxes, you got to get them to see that this whole group over here is not performing well academically; therefore, they're not getting the skill sets to be gainfully employed. Therefore, they're not paying taxes. Therefore, those of us who do pay taxes, we pay higher taxes. That's the only thing that moves this county is when they understand that I'm paying for something, but I'm not benefiting from it. I'm paying for someone and they're getting a free lunch . . . . So getting people to understand, not just talk about it. And getting people to understand just because we spend a lot of money doesn't mean what we are doing is effective or efficient. And we can be efficient and not be effective. We can do well something that's wrong and continue to reproduce the same negative consequence.

### **Keeping People Actively Engaged**

The initial dialogues and the passage of HB4669 were energizing for the MAACK. With the dialogues, people were excited because they felt like their voices were being heard for the first time. Yet, after a few months, participation dwindled. There was no plan for action. HB4669 provided a clear goal, a timeline, and specific actions necessary to meet that goal. Attendance at MAACK meetings peaked during that time. After the bill passed, there was no large project, no clearly defined goal that people could rally around. A MAACK member expressed concern:

There are times when I feel like we are having all these meetings and it's not jumping off. We've been talking about it for months and months, and we should see some action from that. We have monthly meetings and the same people are there. Sometimes we will have stragglers come in. The same people are diligently working on this. There has been some advancement on the house bill. That's one perk. If other things don't follow, then we are just going around in a circle . . . Sometimes I get a little disgusted and frustrated and I am beating my head against a brick wall.

Concerning sustained engagement, a MAACK member said:

I would like to see us set some specific goals every school year and get a strategic plan for what we do and have annual goals and objectives and activities that are followed up on and evaluated, a plan for every school year. All as a part of an overall strategic plan, how we see our kids, how they are performing, parental involvement, an overall five year plan. And maybe yearly milestones of things we want to do and achieve. It's hard to stay focused on what we are doing. We have a meeting and someone has an idea and we go with that idea. Sometimes it's too random. That's good sometimes, but we need to also have an overall strategic plan for the things that we want to accomplish every year.

A teacher also commented on the lack of sustained engagement:

It seems like there is lull in the MAACK. I don't hear much about it. Before, there was a lot about it in the newspapers and television. It needs to stay on the forefront.

### **The Future of MAACK**

The MAACK Community Initiative has gone through many changes over the years. However, lab staff members have always been there to provide support and assistance. What will happen to the MAACK when such support is no longer available?

As one lab staff member explained:

MAACK members need to start talking about what is the future of MAACK. They've got to have a center. They've got to have a place. It's all well and good if there is someone who can spend the time and the money to do those things that the people need done. MAACK people have jobs, and they don't have the money to spend on things like postage. They have got to come to grips with this.

Yet, individually, MAACK members have given the issue some thought.

As one said,

I think that they [the MAACK] have not been more effective because they don't have someone on staff that is paid to do that. It's a full-time job. And, anything that they have undertaken, they have been effective. I think it could have been more effective had there been a paid staffer that everyday was on these issues, communicating and disseminating information, meeting with people, building relationships, and doing all the things that you do to be an effective grassroots organization trying to bring about a specific change . . . . The MAACK will not go to the next level if it does not get to where there is at least some part-time staff. This problem that we're trying to correct is important enough to where there should be a paid staff of at least two or three people. It's important enough. The investment is well worth it.

The following were responses to the interviewer's questions "How would you go about that? Where would the money come from?" A MAACK member explained:

Whoever has it. You know, it's amazing, it's really amazing that we always find the money to do what we want to do. If we want to do it, we find the money for it. If it's important enough to people who control the money, then they find the money to do it, you see. I would prefer for the money to come from a private source. I would prefer for the money to come from a private foundation or from the private business sector or private donors so that the MAACK could maintain an independent voice. So that it can be a lobbying voice because you've got to get laws changed. You can't be taking money from the government if you are going to criticize the government. So, that would be the best so that they can maintain an independent voice, but also a voice that can be politically active if necessary. I see three people—someone just to handle with dealing with KCS and those relationships, with the superintendent and the staff and with the principals—trying to clear the way and making sure we are communicating clearly and things. Another person just to work with parents . . . . At the end of the day, there's no replacement for them. We have got to get parents better educated in terms of how to be the child's primary educator. And parents taking more responsibility for overseeing their child's education. At the same time, we've got to realize that some parents won't get there in time enough to help their kids. We won't get them educated fast enough. And kids can't wait. Every day the kid is getting older. We have got to get kids to take responsibility. [we have to say to them,] "You're the one in the

classroom. You're the one getting the instruction. You're the one getting the homework assignments. You're the one who's gotta take the tests."

A MAACK member offered this funding suggestion:

I want to find some grant money, and I want to go ahead and formalize the MAACK. I think the grassroots thing is great. I think it's time we take it to the next level. It's disjointed because it's all volunteer . . . . We need to get more meat. Make the MAACK become the urban league of education; put some money behind us. When there is injustice, be able to have lawyers on standby to go to system . . . . I have seen it happen. I've told a parent who could afford it to bring a lawyer, and she brought a lawyer, in and within two minutes the Board was negotiating with this young kid . . . . If we have to, we are going go to a meeting loaded. We have the resources at our disposal. If we have to go out to public, we have the ability to do it. So our bark will be just as loud as our bite. I don't want us to be whimpering . . . . Once the MAACK can get some full-time people, paid, they can monitor this process. I would have an executive director, a statistician, an advocacy person, a lawyer on standby. I would have case manager—use the model of social worker—but [who] will deal strictly with education-related issues. We're not a counseling organization. We're not a social work organization. We don't want to duplicate services. They are involved in the school system, but it's not their priority. Their priority is the home, the child's safety in the home. This would deal with nothing but education and education-related issues.

To accomplish the kinds of things these MAACK members mentioned requires paid staff or volunteers with the necessary skills. Skills in grant writing, evaluation processes, leadership, and salesmanship are critical to the success of the initiative. The passage of HB4669 helped develop the capacity of MAACK members to advocate for their cause and built confidence in their abilities to do that. However, it did little to assist them in developing grant-writing skills and evaluation skills. The lab's goal was for the MAACK to be a community developed and run organization. To that end, lab staff walked a fine line between providing assistance and performing the tasks not yet fully developed within the organization. MAACK members did not request training in the areas of grant writing, evaluation processes, public relations, and the like, and the lab did not offer that training. It may be that there are community members who have the skills, as well as the time, to take on these roles within the organization. However, at this time, the capacity to move in the direction described by the MAACK members does not exist.

## Conclusions

The MAACK Community Initiative continues to evolve as its members attempt to find the most effective ways to improve the academic achievement of African American students in Kanawha County. The flexibility of the group to adapt and modify its organizational structure and objectives has been one of the primary strengths of the organization. Over the five years of the MAACK's existence, participation has fluctuated. The people who remained at the table became the steering committee, and that group has maintained contacts in the community with organizations and individuals who can be called on as needed. However, it is not necessary that all those who participate in the MAACK attend meetings or be involved in much of the decision making. This flexible structure has worked well for the MAACK. It has allowed for a small, manageable group, the steering committee, to drive the work of the larger initiative, while at the same time maintaining ties within the community on which to draw to help them accomplish their goals. In addition, while the steering committee is a small group, it is not a closed group. Anyone who wants to participate in the steering committee is welcome.

A crucial first step in developing effective means by which to help improve the academic achievement of African American students came through the dialogue sessions. Through these meetings, the channels of communication between the school system and African American community were opened. Open, honest dialogue was critical to the work that followed.

Following the dialogue sessions, the MAACK worked with the school system to disseminate data on the academic performance of African American students. The MAACK's work in disseminating information was important on two fronts. First, the MAACK put pressure on the school system and the state legislature to develop policies and programs to address the achievement gap. Second, the MAACK worked with community organizations to disseminate information to parents, students, and community members to expand participation in programs focused on helping students improve their educational performance. The effects of these efforts are widespread. House Bill 4669 authorized the establishment of professional development schools in 10 counties to narrow the achievement gap between Black and White students. The efforts of MAACK Community members were instrumental in the passage of that bill. Within the community, the MAACK has worked with various organizations to increase participation in after-school programs and to disseminate information to parents and students on a range of topics including special education, course scheduling, and college applications and financial aid.

The challenge now faced by the MAACK Community Initiative is to build on and strengthen the relationships developed during the dialogue process and the subsequent work. Establishing and maintaining solid relationships will help to ensure that the community and the school system work together toward improving the education of African American students.

When the MAACK Community Initiative split off from the larger group, it effectively excluded school personnel from the organization. As we have seen, the result was a regression in the relationship between community members and the school system. The groups no longer met together in any consistent way, and there was not an effective go-between, a culture broker. A culture broker would be someone who understands both the educational work and the African American community, and is seen as credible to community leaders. Within the MAACK, there was no such person. The former Edvantia employee who became a consultant to the project came the closest to filling this role. However, she had not worked with the school system and was viewed by the central office and school staff as an advocate for the African American community, not as a liaison who understood both sides and could communicate effectively about the concerns of the school system. When interviewed, one teacher suggested that the central office hire “an ambassador of goodwill” who could represent the school system to African American communities. While the Kanawha County school district does not have an abundance of African American administrators, there are Black school administrators who could fill this role. An African American school principal, or other school administrator, acting as a culture broker, would provide greater credibility with the schools as well as the community, thereby facilitating a more positive relationship between the two.

Moreover, while the flexibility of the MAACK and its ability to take on projects as they arise is a definite strength, the lack of a clear strategic plan to guide its work is a weakness. A strategic plan, periodically updated, with both long-term and short-term goals and objectives would help keep people involved by providing them with specific issues and activities toward which to devote their time and energy and maintaining one of the strengths of the organization, its flexibility.

In a few short years, the MAACK has been instrumental in broadening the conversation about improving education in West Virginia to include an emphasis on African American students, and to include a more diverse group of participants in that conversation. The issue of the achievement gap, and in particular the performance of African American students, has become much more prominent in Kanawha County. At the same time, the MAACK has emphasized that it is not only the school system that bears responsibility for ensuring improvements in education. The community is an integral part of the process. The MAACK has focused a great deal of attention on disseminating information and putting pressure on the school system, but just as important has been the MAACK work with community organizations to improve their capacity to work with African American youth. Continuation of the MAACK’s willingness and ability to address the issue of the achievement gap on multiple fronts will be essential to the continued success of the initiative.

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## **Appendix**

## Interview Protocols

### MAACK members

1. Tell me about yourself.  
**Probe** on whether native to the area, occupation, whether have children or grandchildren in Kanawha County Schools, other involvement in the community.
2. Why did you get involved with MAACK?
3. Describe your involvement with MAACK.  
**Probe** for involvement with specific activities, committees, meeting attendance, direct involvement with schools.
4. How would you characterize the relationship between the African American community to the Kanawha County schools prior to the development of the MAACK Community Initiative?  
**Probe** on prior activities, outreach by the district and the schools, specific issues of concern to the community and/or to the schools.
5. Has that relationship changed since MAACK? How?  
**Probe** for changes in teachers' perceptions.
6. Describe some of the activities with which MAACK participants have been involved.
7. What have been the results of those activities?  
**Probe** for development of programs and policies, changes in attitudes and perceptions, changes in the relationship between the schools and community.
8. In what areas or activities has MAACK been most effective?  
**Probe** for specific activities, programs, changes in attitude and perception.
9. How do you feel about your ability to effectively advocate for students?

10. Are there areas or specific activities where MAACK has not been effective?
11. What are the challenges MAACK faces in working with schools and the school district to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?
12. How does MAACK plan to address those challenges?
13. What could MAACK as an organization or MAACK participants as individuals do to be more effective?  
**Probe** - to encourage and support parent and community involvement with education?
14. What could the school district and individual schools do to work more effectively with the community to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?

## **Kanawha County Schools personnel**

1. Tell me about your professional background to this point.  
**Probe** on whether native to the area, how long in the district, how long in this position, prior positions held.
2. How would you characterize the relationship between the African American community to the Kanawha County schools prior to the development of the MAACK Community Initiative?  
**Probe** on prior activities, outreach by the district and the schools, specific issues of concern to the community and/or to the schools.
3. Has that relationship changed since MAACK? How?  
**Probe** for changes in teachers' perceptions.
4. What is the role of the school district in the MAACK Community Initiative?  
**Probe** for specific activities in which the school district has been involved, actions the district has taken as a result of involvement with MAACK.
5. What has been **your** specific involvement with the MAACK Community Initiative?
6. What are the main issues the school district faces in improving the achievement of African American and low-income students?
7. Other than MAACK, what is the school district doing to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?  
**Probe** for ways in which the district/schools communicate with the community.
8. How do you see the MAACK Initiative contributing to the improvement of student achievement?
9. What are the challenges the district faces in working with the African American community?  
**Probe** for reasons why parents/community are or are not involved with education.
10. What more could the school district do to encourage and support parent and community involvement with education?

11. How effective has the MAACK Initiative been?  
**Probe** for specific examples of success in improving school/community relations, encouraging parental and community involvement, specific programs and/policies.
12. Are there areas or specific activities where MAACK has not been effective?
13. What more could MAACK community participants do to help to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?

**Lab staff working on the MAACK Community Initiative project.**

1. Describe the history of the MAACK Community Initiative.  
**Probe** why it was formed, what was the original intent, how were members recruited, how has the focus and organization of the initiative changed since its inception, what is the relationship of MAACK to other Edvantia projects.
2. Describe the role of Edvantia's Regional Educational Laboratory in the initiative.  
**Probe** for initial role, current role, and future role.
3. Describe your specific involvement with the MAACK Initiative.
4. How would you characterize the relationship between the African American community to the Kanawha County schools prior to the development of the MAACK Community Initiative?  
**Probe** on prior activities, outreach by the district and the schools, specific issues of concern to the community and/or to the schools.
5. Has that relationship changed since MAACK? How?  
**Probe** for changes in teachers' perceptions.
6. What is the role of the school district in the MAACK Community Initiative?  
**Probe** for specific activities in which the school district has been involved, actions the district has taken as a result of involvement with MAACK.
7. Describe the activities with which MAACK participants have been involved.
8. What have been the results of those activities?  
**Probe** for development of programs and policies, changes in attitudes and perceptions, changes in the relationship between the schools and community.
9. In what areas or activities has MAACK been most effective?
10. Are there areas or specific activities where MAACK has not been effective?

11. What are the challenges MAACK faces in working with schools and the school district to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?
12. How does MAACK plan to address those challenges?
13. What could MAACK as an organization or MAACK participants as individuals do to be more effective?
14. What could the school district and individual schools do to work more effectively with the community to improve the achievement of African American and low-income students?