



Transforming Belief Systems in Minneapolis

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After getting input from parents and families, community members, educators, and young Black males themselves, the district launched a program to recruit Black men from the community as content experts, “cultural translators,” and adult role models to teach a class for Black boys.

The Office of Black Male Student Achievement (OBMSA) of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), established in 2014 under the direction of one of the authors (Michael Walker), is one of the first in the country, following the seminal work forged in Oakland Unified Schools.¹ The innovative work of the OBMSA² is centered on student voice

and student thought. In this article, we describe a portion of our journey as a family and – ultimately – a movement.

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- 1 For more on Oakland’s effort, see the article by Chatmon and Watson in this issue of *VUE*.
 - 2 For more information, see <http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/>.

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WHO ARE OUR KINGS?

The OBMSA movement is in the “King building” business.³ In line with our mission, the Kings of OBMSA are front and center as the leading voices in all we do. In our inaugural year, we created our cornerstone curriculum and class, B.L.A.C.K. (Building Lives Acquiring Cultural Knowledge),⁴ with the support of Keith Mayes from the University of Minnesota.

Educators at four high schools and four middle schools selected students to take the daily class as an elective. One student in particular (let’s call him Rasheed) stands out. Rasheed’s backstory is sadly unremarkable for young men like him who suffer the trauma of being Black in the current American educational system. Rasheed was struggling in our school system, voiceless, and lacking any real advocates in his academic journey. He had unplugged from the educational system that had time and time again proven its disdain for him. Rasheed was labeled as a student with special needs, as are 30 percent of OBMSA Kings, compared with our district average of 17 percent. He was referred to B.L.A.C.K by his special education resource teacher.

The very first thing we do in each of our classes is share our autobiographies. Far too often, we dive quickly into content and curriculum without recognizing the humanity among us. Upon his entrance into our classroom, Rasheed let it be known that he was in no way interested in speaking out loud in the class, nor in sharing any of his personal journey. We respected his concerns, welcomed him into our family, and began to tell our stories – personal, raw, and emotional stories about what it was and is to be a Black man in this world.

Our goal is to “create family.” We seek to forge meaningful and genuine

relationships from the outset, seeing the relationship as the most important aspect of education and a prerequisite to learning. We, the adults, hope to become “uncles” to our Kings – not simply the all-knowledge-holding teachers, hoping to impart their content expertise upon students, but rather relatives who will walk this educational journey alongside our “nephews.”

Rasheed was having nothing to do with this relationship building. He told his teachers that he wanted out of our class and would not be sharing any of his personal journey. We convinced him to stay and listen as the other Kings shared their stories, and let him know that if he did not want to share, we would not force him. The metamorphosis began here. Rasheed listened to the stories of the classroom coach and his peers. He was moved that so many of the stories mirrored his experiences, both personally and educationally. On the third day of our autobiographies, Rasheed sheepishly raised his hand and asked if he could speak. He stated, with an emotional and tear-filled voice, that he had no intention of sharing, but that for the first time in his life, he felt compelled to be a part of something. As he told his story, Kings and coach alike were moved. We had become family.

Research shows that Black male students like Rasheed benefit greatly from having a Black male teacher and mentor. When students and teachers share the same race/ethnicity, there are academic benefits, because teachers “can serve as role models,

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3 For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see the article by Chatmon and Gray in VUE no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

4 For an abstract of our course B.L.A.C.K., see http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/b_l_a_c_k_abstract.pdf

mentors, advocates, or cultural translators” (Egalite, Kisida & Winters 2015). A new study from the Institute of Labor Economics also shows that Black primary-school students matched with a Black teacher gain both short- and long-term positive outcomes (Gershenson et al. 2017). Despite this evidence, the MPS teacher force is only 5 percent Black (and one percent Black male), while Black students make up 38 percent of the student body.

THE LISTENING TOUR

From the outset, OBSMA sought to ensure that the voices of the people who were to be impacted were at the forefront of the decision making process. To make sure we had the right voices at the table, one of us (director Michael Walker), with the support of my team, set out on a 100-day listening tour with four key stakeholder groups in mind: parents and families, community members, educators, and the young Black males themselves.

The district’s initial plan for the listening tour followed the traditional course – inviting families and community members to our schools to share their perspective. However, I (Michael Walker) knew that approach would simply garner the same perspective as always – parents and families who were already used to plugging into the system and being heard. We needed to engage parents and families who had previously been disengaged and solicit their uncensored, raw feedback. I used my privilege of being a member of the community to go to local barbershops and hair salons, where you can hear truth, whether you like it or not. I knew that to make real change for our Black males, MPS needed to hear that truth.

On this listening tour, I developed six questions, which were adapted for each stakeholder group:

1. What would you like to see as the mission of OBSMA?
2. What has contributed to the success of your Black male son?
3. Who has influence over your Black male son today?
4. What are some of the challenges you are facing as a parent to support your Black male son?
5. What can MPS do better to support you, as a parent, and your Black male son?
6. As a community member or parent, how will you deem this office successful?

WHAT EACH STAKEHOLDER GROUP BELIEVES

As we captured the conversations during the listening tour, we saw some patterns emerge about the beliefs of each stakeholder group.

Parents often believe they are not given enough credit for their involvement. They do not always show up at conferences or open houses, but that does not mean they are uninterested, uncommitted, or uninvolved. It usually means they are working, and taking time off could get their pay docked. It is also hard for parents to believe in a system that does not support, and has never supported, their needs, as parents or former students themselves. Our disproportionate suspensions and referral rates did not occur overnight – they have been years in the making. Our current parents, when they were students, may well have experienced trauma from these oppressive practices

that have deep roots within the educational system.

Many *educators* believe they do not have the skills, the tools, or the training to do their best with Black males in the classroom. In conversations, teachers have asked us about receiving professional development and specific training to bolster their effectiveness with this population. In one startling conversation, I heard an educator indicate that they do not believe in the young Black men at all.

Various *community members* believe that a larger system works against our young Black men. They have become keenly aware of how the parts of the system fit together, how the young men are struggling to find their place, how the schools are struggling to manage, and how difficult it is for the parents to navigate the system. It was disheartening to hear the lack of confidence the community felt about our school system.

Countless *Black males* believe that they cannot be themselves at school. They perceive that a Black identity is incompatible with fitting in and being successful; they feel pressure to “act White” and “code switch” their language.

BROKEN BELIEFS AND THE BELIEF FRAMEWORK

The unifying theme that came out of the listening tour was that there was a system of *broken beliefs* about others. Parents and families did not believe that the teachers were fair and equitable when it came to dealings with their Black males. The community did not believe that the educational system was serving all students. Educators did not believe that they had the tools necessary to support Black males in the classroom, and, in some

cases, they didn’t believe that they could be successful. Finally, Black males didn’t see academic success in their future. When we looked at our district-wide data on behavior, graduation rates, and standardized testing, it was clear how each of the

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key stakeholders could justify its beliefs. We wondered if these broken beliefs may have found a home in many minds beyond Minneapolis.

This listening tour inspired me to develop a *Belief Framework*,⁵ which formed the foundation for the work of OBMSA. Four key stakeholders – community, parents and families, educators, and Black male students – form the outer ring of the framework. They all need to believe in each other, which is why the arrows on the illustration are circular, having no beginning and no end. Their beliefs need to change and reinforce each other rather than work at odds as they currently do. Students need to believe in themselves. They also need the educators to believe in them. Parents need to believe in the educators. As the parents start to come around, as their beliefs change, the community at large will believe the system is working.

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5 See http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/belief_framework.pdf.

The inner quadrant houses the belief statements as an end goal. We hope to see parents believing that educators are fair-minded and equitable. We want the community to believe the educational system is serving us all. We want educators to believe that Black males are motivated to learn. Finally, we want the Black male students to believe that academic success is in their future.

Beliefs are often considered “squishy” and some readers may not feel comfortable with this approach, but beliefs change motivation, and motivation changes behavior (Dweck 2007). School districts and the key stakeholder groups these districts comprise must adopt and practice a consistent way of thinking, mindset, and language around the notion of achievement.

HIRING THE TEACHERS THAT OUR KINGS ASKED FOR

During the listening tour, Black male students stated unequivocally that they wanted more teachers who looked like them and who could understand their plight, as well as more opportunities to learn about their true history. This desire led my planning, considering the low percentage of Black teachers overall, and even lower percentage of Black male teachers. The second struggle would be creating a more Afrocentric curriculum that could bring forth a more relevant foundation for our Kings.

The next step in the process was finding Black male teachers for the course. From my perspective and experience within the educational system, I looked for teachers who not only were content experts, but who also could build strong, authentic

relationships with the Black male students in their classes.

Finding the people was fairly simple. The difficult part was getting them through the state’s Community Expert process to ensure that the course would be credit bearing. Minnesota statute 122A.25 allows districts or charter schools to hire a person with expertise to teach a particular course or subject area for which licensed teachers are unavailable. The person applies for a license that the district’s teachers union and the state board approve. The application can be a daunting task, depending on the leadership of the teachers union and their stance/philosophy on alternative teaching licenses. All parties must approve licenses annually.

In the first year of the course, everyone was on the same page, and each governing board approved OBMSA using Community Experts to deliver the B.L.A.C.K. curriculum. With a change of leadership at the teachers union, the second year was not as smooth. The new union leadership did not support the use of Community Experts. Fortunately for us, they still approved the alternative certifications that year.

A BELIEF GAP, NOT AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP

What is apparent from OBMSA’s work is that there is no such thing as an achievement gap, only a belief gap. For the past four years, the four community experts have been able to influence the academic trajectory of the approximately 200 Kings who are in their classes each year. We have seen an increase in grade point averages. The percentage of Black males who are

credit-ready for graduation is higher for students who have taken B.L.A.C.K., compared with those who have not taken our course.⁶

Let us revisit Rasheed. He joined our family with an abysmal 1.6 GPA and multiple discipline referrals and suspensions. By the final quarter of the school year, he received recognition as an A/B honor roll student and ended the year with no referrals or suspensions. His teachers praised his turnaround, and his mother described his transition as “simply amazing.” Rasheed found a school family and, in turn, discovered much about himself. At this writing, Rasheed is a senior in our program, holding steady with a 3.1 GPA, and is currently applying to colleges and universities.

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6 For a full version of the impact study we have completed on OBSMA using propensity score analysis, see http://blackmales.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/obmsa_impact_study_2017.pdf.