

Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African-American Male Achievement

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“ When I came into high school, I was afraid of everything. I didn’t know what I was going to do... But today I fear nothing. I’m going to college, I know what I need to do and AVID has laid down the foundation...”

Duane Larkins

Introduction

With the powerful message above, a young African-American man whose academic career had been given new life encapsulated many of the primary messages from AVID’s “Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African-American Male Achievement” conference. His eloquent statement of belief in self and future was but one of many shining moments from the AVID student panel discussion, which saw the capacity crowd rise to its feet with applause on many occasions. This session was one of the conference’s last, but the hundreds of attending educators were charged with enthusiasm and positive energy, after two days of inspirational presentations and upbeat messages that focused on actively solving the problems faced by African-American males and connecting these students to a brighter future. The Up Where We Belong conference had laid the foundation not only for this student’s college education but also for renewed dedication to providing African-American males nationwide with the support and guidance that will lead them to success.

AVID, short for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is a fourth through twelfth-grade system adopted by over 3,500 schools in 45 states. The program specifically targets students in the “academic middle;” those who are capable of successfully completing a college preparatory curriculum and attending higher education but who have demonstrated patterns of academic difficulty prior to enrollment. AVID is built around acceleration, not remediation, and

works to promote an improved sense of self-esteem, determination, confidence, and ambition by placing students in the most challenging courses offered at their schools and then providing training and guidance to maximize their ability to succeed. Students enroll in a skills-training elective course; receive specialized tutoring, and engage in motivational exercises and opportunities. The AVID program boasts an extremely high rate of success, with nearly all students who have participated for three or more years earning college acceptance and roughly three-quarters attending a four-year university. A high proportion of these students are the first in their families to attend college, and many are from low socioeconomic backgrounds or minority ethnic groups as well. Each year, 250,000 students in American and Canadian classrooms participate in AVID, building an improved sense of self and coming to realize their true potential.

The AVID organization enjoys a long and decorated history of caring involvement in multicultural education issues. Roughly seventy percent of AVID students come from a culturally or linguistically diverse background, and AVID dedicates energy and resources to ensuring these students' success. One recent result of this dedication was AVID's sponsorship of the "Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African-American Male Student Achievement" conference in Atlanta, Georgia in partnership with the College Board and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). Aware of the specific challenges faced by modern African-American males, AVID, the College Board, and NAGC designed the November 2007 conference as an educational symposium and sounding board for educators, counselors, administrators, researchers, and parents invested in the success of these young men. Nationally recognized speakers and community leaders were invited to attend, and presentations focused on the ways in which educators might help to address the challenges faced by African-American

males, thus helping a greater percentage to achieve early academic success and ultimately earn a college degree. “Today, more than ever, we cannot ignore the achievement gaps that continue to plague our educational system,” wrote Jim Nelson, AVID Center Executive Director, and Gaston Caperton, College Board President, in the program’s welcome letter. This important message echoed throughout the two days of village meetings and panel discussions that followed, invigorating the participants and providing them with new strategies, ideas, and learning opportunities for their home districts and students. To capture the accomplishments of this conference, the following report has been generated.

This summation document is intended to benefit the AVID organization in three valuable capacities: First, it aims to serve as a synthesis document, chartering the common themes and ideas which ran through numerous presentations, keynote addresses, panel discussions, and village meetings. Analyzing these themes allows one to perceive the core beliefs and approaches that many conference participants found central to overcoming the struggles faced by modern African-American males. Second, the document is intended to aid in the expansion of the conference’s messages, both to those who were unable to attend and also to professionals currently searching for new methods of addressing the problems impeding their students from reaching greater heights of success. Third, the report serves as an historical record of the Up Where We Belong conference, preserving for future AVID conference planning committees a detailed examination of featured proceedings and messages, and laying the groundwork for additional conferences in the future. To incorporate each of these objectives, the overarching structure of this document is thus synthetic in nature, examining the core messages of the

Up Where We Belong conference through the lenses of individual presentations and sessions, while seeking to preserve a level of accessibility that will ensure its usefulness and appeal to a broad range of concerned educational professionals.

Virtues and Strengths of African-American Culture

The Up Where We Belong: Accelerating African-American Male Student Achievement conference included discussions on a myriad of topics and themes. Some presenters specialized in academic affairs, and explored the ways that teachers and educational policy-makers affect the lives of their students. Others focused on parental involvement, seeking not only to promote increased advocacy but also to empower parents with the knowledge that would most help them to effectively guide their children. Additional speakers chose to emphasize social effects, highlighting the attitudes and strengths of the African-American community and presenting ways to focus those talents for the benefit of a rising generation. Many spoke about mentoring, role models, and support networks. Others still focused on gender roles, goal setting, and intellectual rigor.

Even with this vast array of specializations and diverse viewpoints present at the conference, several common threads seemed to weave through each of the discussions. First, it was widely recognized that African-American males face a number of serious challenges. “There is no other group in the United States that has been as demonized as African-American males,” Dr. Donna Ford stated. Second, regardless of these trials, optimism for a brighter future flowed strongly through the conference center. Third, nearly every presentation, from Dr. Calvin Mackie’s opening keynote address to the final village meetings, seemingly revolved around a single core focus as a means to realizing that hope: The importance of teaching the traditions and strengths of African-American culture.

Modern African-American males, several presenters noted, have too often been left to “find their own path” without guidance, set loose in a world whose pop-culture messages can lead them astray if they don’t have role models and mentors to help them. “Our current society,” Dr. Mackie argued, “values the value of wealth, instead of the wealth of values.” This theme of passing on an understanding of the traditions and virtues of African-American culture as a guide to successful living returned to the forefront time and time again. Dr. Darlene Willis and Mrs. Marsha Dodson discussed it in their praise for “mean mothers,” who force their children to learn discipline, responsibility, honesty, and faith. Mr. Terrance Dixon and Mr. Gilbert Knowles highlighted it in their praise for the role that Historically Black Colleges and Universities can play in teaching hard work, determination, structure, and achievement mindsets. Representatives from the Atlanta chapter of “100 Black Men” lauded this as well, speaking about responsibility, involvement, and how their support was able to foster a drive to succeed among African-American male students at one of Georgia’s lowest performing high schools.

The traditions and strengths of African-American culture provide a road map that can guide young people to a better future. Which strengths within the culture are we talking about? Which traditions need to be maintained? The speakers from Up Where We Belong highlighted that road map for us. They spoke of having a will to succeed, determination, hard work, honesty, faith, goal setting, a commitment to help others, discipline, structure, positive masculinity, and responsibility. Five of these cultural strengths are most crucial to the fight, and can be said to encompass several others as well. As a result, we will now study these virtues and their benefits for young African-American males by examining them through the lens of village meeting discussions.

Hard Work

Dr. Calvin Mackie, author, entrepreneur, and former Tulane University professor, opened the Up Where We Belong conference with a passionate story about his own childhood in Louisiana. Dr. Mackie's youth was typical of many adolescent African-American males, placing education secondary to his dream of a career in professional athletics. After a devastating shoulder injury moved this dream out of reach however, Dr. Mackie rededicated himself to his studies and started working towards a new dream: A college education. His first steps were tiny, but in the right direction, and he remembered thinking that the SAT must be short for the "Saturday test." He squeaked into college however, worked his way through a freshman year of remedial classes, and soon found that intellectually stimulating, academically challenging work was a reward in itself. His grades improved, his confidence rose, and after years of effort and perseverance he earned a Bachelors, a Masters, and eventually a Ph.D, having accomplished even more than he ever imagined. "Kids must learn how to get up each day, work hard, and make good decisions," he told the captivated audience, "They need to understand why hard work is a good thing." Mackie reflected on his parents' involvement in his transformation, recalling that they had taught him two things above all else: Discipline and work ethic. "We've got to put a fire of desire in our children's hearts," he stressed, "make them never stop working."

Dr. Mackie's message of hard work and determination is even more important in the context of our nation's future. He challenged educators to help their students to see the world of possibilities before them, the doors that open with academic success, not for merely their futures but to apply their brainpower to our nation's struggles as well. "African-American kids need to work hard each day, not so they can compete against suburban white kids, but so they can compete against the workers in India, China, and the rest of the world who are going to be their

true competition. He indicated, “In the 21st century there’s two kinds of people, not black and white, but those ‘in the know’ and those ‘not in the know.’” Our nation is but one small corner in an increasingly interconnected world, and Dr. Mackie made clear that just as African-Americans cannot afford to miss out on the benefits, our nation cannot afford to miss out on their talents and brainpower as well.

Dr. Mackie’s lecture was not without warnings however, key lessons of inspiration for all to take to heart. Hard work isn’t easy, he reminded his audience, and too many African-American young men are falling victim to societal messages that encourage an “easier path.” “Something’s wrong when this country takes the most ignorant people it can find and holds them up as role models for kids,” He asked his audience, “It takes a village, but have you seen the village these days?” In response to these challenges, Dr. Mackie levied personal charges to each educator in the room: To recognize that each child has the “potential for greatness” within them, to plant within them a desire for hard work and a will to succeed, and to help them reach their goals by removing the obstacles in their path. “In Africa, lions kill cheetah cubs so they won’t be able to compete,” he explained, “We can’t allow the lions in our kids’ lives to kill them before they can compete either.” Parents, teachers, mentors, and counselors each must teach our young men to set their goals high, and to see hard work as the tool that can make their dreams a reality.

Perseverance

In a conference featuring many talented speakers from the highest levels of higher education, one group of speakers seemed to stand out among them. In this session, the presenters held neither titles nor degrees, and several were still in middle school. This presentation consisted of a panel discussion, where young African-American men ranging from middle school to college spoke about their transformative experiences in which AVID membership had

changed their lives. Many of the young men drew sharp contrasts between their early years in school and their outlook on their futures, with statements such as “AVID changed my whole outlook on life.” “AVID was a definite motivator for me,” Isaiah Moore, a student at Morehouse College recalled, “I think it was put in my life to show me I could do something.” Echoing the challenges of modern schooling, Eric Martin Jr., a student from Frederick Douglass High School, explained:

Before AVID I got more comments on my personality than my academics. I was a happy person. I liked to have fun, but I had to learn that there was a time and place for everything. Before AVID I was just doing enough to get by. I was kind of lazy. I could do it and I knew how to do it, but if I didn't feel that it was urgent, then it would wait.

Now that I'm in AVID, I'm doing better in school. I'm doing better in all my classes and I'm happier with myself.

What changes had occurred, that led these young men to achieve at a higher level?

According to many, the lessons and skill training which AVID provided had enabled them to rise above their underachieving pasts and recommit themselves to success. AVID, they reported, had taught them to set goals, persevere, and accomplish what they'd set out to do. “Begin with the end in mind,” Isaiah Moore explained, “You've got to have a goal. If you don't have a goal, what are you running for?” “Push yourself to be the best, and then keep pushing,” Obsa Aba-Waji, a student at Norcross High School, offered. Isaiah Moore volunteered a particularly intriguing motivator in his life: His willingness to take ethnic underrepresentation in honors classes as anything less than a personal challenge. “I remember my AP classes, there was only one other African-American male in there,” he recalled. “Everyone else was white – the students

and the teacher. That didn't bother me though; I used it as a motivator. If they could do it, why couldn't I?"

Perseverance and determination were raised by the panel in another context as well, that of accomplishing their own goals for the additional benefit of others. Outlining why they were willing to strive so diligently for success, Duane Larkins, a student from Norcross High School, explained that he saw himself as having an opportunity for "laying down the foreground for the people ahead of me." Obsa Aba-Waji explained, "I do what I can to bring others up with me." In remarking on the mentorship and guidance that these fine young men had received from their parents, teachers, and AVID, it was clear that they wanted to do what they could to provide the same for those around them. "You always want a role model, someone to look up to," Ledevon Matthews, a student at South Paulding Middle School, noted, and judging by the degree to which these young men have made hard work, goal setting, and perseverance central to their identities, one can easily see how they have risen to that status themselves.

Discipline

Opening their village meeting with a rousing rendition of Langston Hughes' poem *Mother to Son*, Dr. Darlene Willis and Mrs. Marsha Dodson, authors of *Empowering Parents: A Guide to taking Control of Your Child's Educational Journey*, described the need for discipline and structure in the lives of African-American children. "I'm a living example that not giving up makes a difference," Willis shared with her audience, explaining how her family's support and relationships with her own children have allowed her to reach high levels of success. Dodson echoed these themes, recalling how her father's military background instilled a sense of discipline and an achievement-oriented mindset in each of his children. What children need from their parents, the two argued, were goals, discipline, values, involvement, high standards,

and an understanding of what concrete steps need to be taken in order to actually reach their goals.

Nowhere were these themes more evident than in Dr. Willis' and Ms. Dodson's discussion of "mean mothers," a term which they consider to be "among the highest of compliments. "Mean mothers," they claim,

Make their children eat a healthy breakfast instead of candy, demand to know where their children are, and who they're with, make them do chores and learn to cook, refuse to let their daughters wear makeup before they're sixteen, force their daughters' boyfriends to come inside and meet Dad, set a strict curfew and punish children who break it, and teach their children honesty, responsibility, and faith.

Perhaps most representative of these praiseworthy "mean mothers," however, is that Willis and Dodson reported that these mothers live by the same standards they set for their children. They work hard, they keep their lives orderly, and they set a good example for all those who are looking up to them. Additionally, they remain fully committed and involved in their children's lives and schooling, finding ways to help their children to persevere when the going gets tough, and rise to new heights when the opportunity to demonstrate one's skills is made available. This parental involvement, Willis stated, is crucial to the success of African-American children, because "If you're not willing to invest in your child's education, why should anyone else?"

Dr. Willis and Mrs. Dodson also strive to live by these principles and to help educate others on the need for discipline, structure, and parental advocacy through their work with the Concerned Parents Alliance Inc. and College Bound San Diego, two California based organizations for African-American teens and their parents. These programs emphasize discipline, structure, and self-improvement through courses and activities based on high

standards, confidence, public speaking, African-American history, and college readiness. Even more so, these programs boast a 100% college acceptance rate for involved students, and have helped countless parents who once knew little about their local educational system to gain knowledge and become effective advocates for their children's academic wellbeing. "Parents might not know how to help, or what their rights are," Willis explained, "but once they 'get it' they'll be the very first people to help."

Responsibility

"Responsibility" comes in many flavors: Being responsible for one's decisions, for one's future, for one's duties to friends and family, and for giving back to the community to name a few. Sometimes it centers on making the choices that best allow you to succeed, and sometimes it focuses on helping those around you to succeed as well. Throughout their village meeting, the 100 Black Men of Atlanta chapter told stories which exemplified this second type of responsibility. They presented the case study of their work at Archer High School and its feeder middle school, as an example of how positive role modeling and responsibility to the community can work to benefit academically struggling African-American males.

Archer High School was one of the lowest performing high schools in Georgia, educating a large number of children from low socioeconomic status who grew up in single parent homes. Seeking to give back to their community roots, the 100 Black Men organization decided to adopt this school, and volunteered to personally mentor many of the struggling African-American males. Several of the men described this experience as a form of "surrogate fathering," working to instill the traditions and strengths of African-American culture and teach responsibility while actively demonstrating that working hard in school brings personal rewards and a brighter future. The men organized private lunches with their students, and strove to help the students with life

experiences and overcoming difficulties. They provided tutoring to compensate for academic difficulties and prepare students for the SAT, and hired counselors to address emotional concerns. They developed strong bonds with their charges, and sought to empower them through broadening their intellectual and cultural landscapes. Many even demonstrated their commitment by promising to pay for their student's college educations if the young man worked hard and earned a university acceptance letter. In the end, over 50% of the mentored students began to earn honor roll grades, and thirty of the once struggling students found themselves graduating and moving on to college.

The students were not the only ones benefiting from this exchange however. One member of the 100 Black Men organization spoke of how "The students made us better men," and several others remarked that "I owe it to my community to give back." These men had come to exemplify the values of responsibility and self-giving in the eyes of their young protégés, and one student aptly stated, "they gave you their heart and their time." Giving, as so often happens, can ignite a passion for further work however, and the 100 Black Men spoke openly about their plans for their newest programs and mentorship opportunities. Archer High School, unfortunately, had recently closed, and the 100 Black Men were in the process of forging new relationships with other schools and students. Asked what they had learned from their time at Archer that was helping them in their new endeavors, they offered two suggestions for others interested in establishing mentoring programs for African-American males: First, eighth grade may be too late. The schools are losing many gifted African-American students at even earlier grade levels, and mentoring should ideally begin as early as possible. Second, mentors should insist on a parental buy-in at the time of the initial student interview, ensuring that the messages a child hears from their parents will be consistent with the messages they hear from their mentor.

Teaching responsibility and the importance of having a strong work ethic is a crucial task, and is made much easier when parents and mentors are one the same page.

Positive Masculinity

The fifth thematic message emerging throughout the conference breakout sessions consisted of a strong appeal: To educate and affirm African-American males on the virtues of positive masculinity, rescuing them from the negative societal and media driven images that may otherwise lead them astray. Too many young men, presenters argued, are put at risk by images of masculinity that stress fame and fortune at the expense of family commitments and honor. “Boys need to learn that they must first work to become a man before they can go chasing money,” Dr. Mackie offered, “Being a man is more important than finances.”

One village meeting to especially emphasize this concept was Mr. Terrence Dixon and Mr. Gilbert Knowles’ presentation on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), and their specific dedication to helping young African-American males to grow unto proud, upstanding, virtuous men. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are institutions of higher learning established prior to 1964, whose principle mission is the education of African-American students. Many enjoy long and decorated histories, with a large number dating back to the decade immediately following the Civil War. Although consisting of only three percent of colleges and universities nationwide, HBCU’s enroll eighteen percent of African-American students overall, and thirty percent of African-American college graduates received their diploma from one of these institutions. Hidden within this data however, is the fact that twice as many African-American women graduate from college than their male counterparts, a statistic that HBCU’s perceive as a challenge worthy of special attention. “HBCU’s are about mentorship, guidance, and values,” Mr. Dixon explained, “We sometimes use the slogan ‘Good Men, Good

Fathers.” Mr. Dixon’s personal stories and visual presentation demonstrated just how proudly and seriously he took this mission – both overflowed with vivid portrayals and remembrances of young men who had struggled when they first arrived at college, yet blossomed under his mentorship and had now grown, graduated, and assumed positions of leadership within their families, communities, and fields of employment. Beaming with pride, Mr. Dixon introduced the audience to countless photographs of successful African-American men who once counted on him as a mentor and guide, now pictured with their wives and young children.

Mr. Dixon and Mr. Knowles also emphasized that the stories behind these successes were journeys filled with challenges, in which hard work and discipline were often learned through not only guidance but trial-and-error as well. “There have been plenty of times when a growing man has walked out of my office and I’ve said ‘Oh, I lost him,’” Mr. Dixon reflected, “But they always come back the next day. Boys need structure to succeed.” In addition, the two men proposed that the HBCU focus on mentoring, rigor, discipline and goal-setting forced young men to decide whether to take responsibility for their own achievements or failures, and then to integrate this personal commitment into their identity as a man. As Mr. Dixon stated:

You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. It should be our job to hold his head under water though, and if he still refuses and dies of thirst it’s his fault and he should know that. Boys need to know that. We’re going to help them in every possible way, but *they* need to make the final decision to succeed.

If these traditions and strengths of African-American culture – hard work, dedication, goal setting, discipline, structure, support, positive masculinity, and responsibility – as highlighted by the village meeting presenters are truly a mechanism for helping African-American males to achieve at higher levels, which life experiences present the best opportunities to teach these

virtues? To answer this question, we will next examine effective educational approaches as highlighted by AVID conference presenters.

Effective Educational Approaches

Dr. Chance Lewis, Associate Professor of Urban Education at Texas A&M University, reminded educators that in order to teach African-American males effectively it is critical that teachers remember to “keep it real.” According to Lewis, keeping it real means making connections between the reality of the students’ everyday lives and the curriculum delivered in the classroom. Dr. Lewis discussed how educators could do this in his presentation entitled “African-American Males and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Strategies to Promote Academic Achievement.”

Dr. Lewis described for educators in attendance a variety of different categories of teachers young African-American males may encounter in their schooling. He indicated that “referral agents” in the classroom are teachers who make 80% of the discipline referrals in a school building. “They don’t educate children, they simply refer them.” Lewis indicated that “Instructors” are teachers who honestly admit that they are in the classroom to deliver content. They see themselves as teaching content, not students. “Teachers” are educators who understand both their pedagogy and their students. “Coaches” are the educators who understand their pedagogy, develop an important bond with their students, and maintain a love and respect for the culture of the students. Lewis called upon all educators to examine the coach’s model to develop a quality relationship with students. To emphasize this point Dr. Lewis reminded the group that “African-American males don’t care where you went to school. They care if you keep it real.” He adds, “You cannot teach anyone you’re afraid of, and you can’t fake care.”

Dr. Lewis explained that if teachers want to engage in meaningful conversation with African-American males, they need to walk while they talk, enabling the young man to maintain his space. He suggested, “Eat lunch with your kids. There’s something about food that makes people talk.” With meaningful conversation educators come to better understand the realities of the daily experience. In addition, he asserted that teachers should not “read their school records until you get to know them.” Opening each school year with African-American males should involve beginning with “a fresh clean slate” so teachers do not hold preconceived notions of their students. He suggested that teachers take their students to the public library and expose them to the wealth of ideas and resources available to them, reminding them “you’re not going to the League, you’re hitting these books!” Lewis indicated that it’s important to “know the hood” – to understand the community these young men are coming from. He encouraged teachers, counselors, and administrators to visit the homes of their students in order to better understand what family expectations are for discipline.

Dr. Lewis recently edited a book with Julie Landsman entitled *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms: A Guide to Building Inclusive Schools, Promoting High Expectations, and Eliminating Racism*. Dr. Lewis shared with his audience significant passages from the book to highlight key points in his presentation. He suggested that educators should come to better understand the reality of their students’ lives by engaging in self-reflection and considering the following questions posed by his colleague Robert Simmons in “An Empty Desk in the Third Row: Experiences of an African-American Male Teacher.”

- Do you know what the latest fashions are in your school?
- Can you repeat the latest verse from the most recent hip-hop or R&B album?
- Do you understand the lyrics of the most popular songs?

- Do you know if your students live in an apartment or house?
- Do you know who lives with your students or whether they live alone?
- Do you know who came to school this morning after working late last night?
- Do you know where “sagging the pants” originated?
- Do you know why boys wear those extra long T-shirts?
- Do you know why African-American students wear cornrows? (Morris, 2006, p. 49)

Dr. Lewis discussed in detail how teachers need to strive for incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. In doing so, educators work to take what they know from the students’ culture and bring it into the classroom to address their learning needs. Through such culturally responsive pedagogy, Lewis believes that teachers can change the educational trajectories of their students. Moreover, he asked the participants in his session to consider the following question: “Would you teach this child like your own?”

Lewis reinforced his important message by sharing wisdom offered by another well-established scholar featured in his book. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings authored a significant chapter entitled, “Yes, But How Do We Do It?” *Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.* In her work, Ladson-Billings (2006) proposes, “that teachers must engage in culturally relevant pedagogy that is designed to attend to the context while simultaneously preparing students for the traditional societal demands” (p. 33). She interprets cultural competence in education as “helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have the chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead” (p. 36). In one of the most compelling examples of cultural competence, she highlighted the efforts of forensics coach Tommie Lindsey of James Hogan High School in Union City, California who

uses “culturally specific speeches and dialogues” to help his largely African-American and Hispanic forensics team win local, state, and national competitions. Ladson-Billings indicated, “The students use pieces from African-American and Latino/Latina writers in the midst of a venue that can only be described as upper middle class and mainstream” (pp. 36-37). She celebrates that this outstanding teacher has brought together the cultural strengths of his students with the forensics form and in doing so; these young people are exposed to a broader world without compromising their own culture.

The young African-American males featured in the panel discussion at the conference reinforced the notion of culturally competent educators who hold high expectations for their students. When asked what they saw as characteristics of effective teachers who made a difference in their lives they shared powerful insights that can be translated to contemporary classrooms.

Joseph Tanner, a sophomore at Frederick Douglass High School, explained that he benefited from educators “who have a real passion for what they do and enjoy becoming a great part of a student’s life.” Obsa Aba-Waji saw these individuals as people with a “real love for their profession. Although they do not get put into history books they inspire everyone else to do better.” Duane Larkins highlighted that he held high regard for teachers who “are honorable and respect people.” He indicated that he benefited from teachers “stepped in at the right time” and “push your buttons when you need it.” Eric Martin Jr. spoke of his AVID school counselor fondly as he explained the high expectations he hold for him, “She has that eye. She can see when I’m goofing off and she’ll give me that eye.” Isaiah Moore reflected on his AVID counselor: “She worked like I was her only student. No adjectives can describe what she’s done for me.”

Developing a Scholar Identity in African-American Males

In her keynote address, Dr. Donna Y. Ford, Professor of Urban Education at Vanderbilt University shared with the conference participants a mentoring program she and her colleague Dr. Gilman Whiting recently established at Vanderbilt. These two dedicated educators designed a Scholar Identity Institute, an academic 10-day summer camp for 100 African-American males in middle Tennessee. The objective of the program was to have the young men reach a new awareness of their capabilities to “see that they are brilliant, they are intelligent.” Dr. Ford wants educators as well as gifted African-American males to move beyond deficit thinking to dynamic thinking and realize that “it’s okay to be a Black male and intelligent.” Dr. Whiting indicated that throughout the 10 days, he emphasized that “it’s okay to carry a book bag and it does not affect a young man’s masculinity.” The Vanderbilt professors spent a great deal of time guiding the young men to self-understanding. One participant in the group, Dahjyon Walden, reflected on his new awareness explaining, “ You’ve got to know yourself before you can get out there because if you don’t know yourself, you’re just going to get lost.”

Throughout the ten days Ford and Whiting facilitated seminars and rigorous hands-on educational activities designed to provide “ skills for the young men to navigate the world.” The curriculum of the 10-day experience consisted of teaching the African-American young men a number of significant theories and approaches to tackling the challenges in school and in life. Ford shared how she and Whiting taught Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. She explained how important it is to have African-American males young men reach an understanding of the “I can do it!” approach to school and life. The two university professors also taught the young men how to establish long-term goals. Also included in the seminar was significant discussion about how important it is to be willing to make sacrifices. She noted that both she and Dr. Whiting shared

personal examples of the sacrifices they have made in their lives. The seminar also included instruction on Rotter's Theory of inner locus of control in order for the young men to understand "I did well in school because I worked hard." The professors also worked on teaching the young men about the importance of self-awareness. Their message for their students: "When you love yourself, you are invincible."

The Scholar Identity Institute included seminars on the need for achievement must be greater than the need for affiliation if African-American males are to succeed in life. Ford and Whiting's instruction also incorporated their explanation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs with an added layer of "the need for education." In addition, they taught the young scholars to understand the meaning of having a positive academic self-concept. They also exposed them to the Cross model of racial pride and stages of racial identity. Dr. Ford indicated that it was critical for educators to help African-American males to see that they must "love the skin they're in." Finally, the institute incorporated instruction on positive masculinity. Ford and Whiting had their students examine questions such as "What are the characteristics of a man?" while underscoring integrity, responsibility, respect for intelligent assertive women.

A second presenter to focus on the formation of a scholarly identity with young African-American males was Dr. James Moore of Ohio State University. Dr. Moore spoke passionately in his session entitled "Young, Gifted, Black, and Male: An Examination of School, Social, Psychological, and Cultural Factors" about his own experiences as a gifted youth in a high school culture that seemed to value his scholarship as secondary to athletics. "My high school had good classes and a good reputation," he recalled, "but more people celebrated my hits and interceptions on the football field than celebrated my grades." Dr. Moore noted that although athletics are an important part of youth and society, what is more crucial to the success of young

African-American males is an understanding that academics are truly their best route to success. All students need discipline, structure, and an emphasis on grades and curricular rigor, he argued, adding that “ ‘High expectations’ has no respective person ... They’re high for everyone.” Supporting his words, Dr. Moore next offered a perplexing question, asking the crowd to name the one place in society where no achievement gap can be found to exist. The answer, he reported, is the military, where all soldiers, regardless of race or class background, are fully expected to contribute 100% and work to nothing short of their full potential.

Returning to a discussion of the school context, Dr. Moore then outlined seven characteristics of “effective schools,” which are able to reinforce the appropriate cultural virtues and set African-American students on a path to success:

1. A sense of purpose within the school and its employees.
2. A rigorous curriculum, to challenge students and push them to succeed.
3. High expectations from their teachers, parents, and community leaders.
4. A school wide commitment to providing a top-notch education to ALL students.
5. Safety, both physically and psychologically.
6. An orderly environment, where students know and understand the rules, and
7. A problem-solving attitude, with an administration and faculty that anticipates problems and responds to them in a constructive manner.

When these conditions are in place, Dr. Moore maintained that schools will finally be in a position to attend each student’s needs and maximize overall success. The key, of course, is that such positive changes require a shedding of old attitudes, and a willingness to confront the difficult problems faced by African-American males head-on. “We have to have some awareness to fix this problem,” Dr. Moore told the crowd. “A lot of schools know that African-

American males are falling through the pipeline, but it's become so commonplace, so chronic, that it's become acceptable." Through the renewed sense of dedication and purpose advocated by Dr. Moore however, currently troubled schools may find an avenue to meaningful change.

Capturing Kids' Hearts

Another strategy offered to the AVID conference participants was Capturing Kids' Hearts, a training program designed to equip educators with the skills and strategies for building relationships and elevating academic achievement in young people. Flip Flippen, the founder of the program maintains that "If you have a child's heart, you have his head." The session presented to the AVID audience highlighted the essence of a three-day learning experience delivered to a school's faculty. The objective of the training is to create a safe, supportive and high-performing learning community. Through such training administrators, faculty and staff learn to build healthy, trustful and productive relationships among themselves and with students. Highlighting the importance of creating schools where teachers are happy, Brian Whitehead, a leadership consultant from the organization explained, "People don't quit their jobs. They quit their bosses. Teachers are the same if they feel they can't succeed at their school, and the students do the same with their classes." Mr. Whitehead provided a wealth of data to support the notion that there exists a strong correlation between a school's level of trust and the academic achievement of the students. His message was consistent with the mission of AVID in that he emphasized that young people need appropriate love and emotional support from adults. Moreover, they need structure in their lives and an occasional sounding board in a caring adult. In addition, he maintained that students need affirmation. The presentation included a healthy dosage of reality as Mr. Whitehead indicated that the teaching profession involves real

challenges. He noted, “You’ve got to go into your classes with your tool belt and hard hat on, ready to work hard and do a good job.”

Developing Academic Strengths Through Advanced Placement (AP) Coursework

A significant educational intervention for African-American males highlighted throughout the conference and celebrated by many of the young males in the student panel presentation was enrollment in Advanced Placement courses early on in high school. Several young men described heavy loads of AP courses they were currently enrolled in as part of their plan to prepare for their collegiate experience. They were grateful for the opportunity to enroll in these courses and also explained how critical the AVID classes were to them early on in preparing them with the academic skills (i.e. note taking, time management) needed for involvement in rigorous accelerated courses in high school. This message from the young men was consistent with two exemplary high school programs presented in the conference village meetings, Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and Hogan Preparatory Academy in Kansas City, Missouri. Ms. Deborah Owens, Principal of Stranahan High School reported how her school received one of three College Board Inspiration Awards in 2007 based on their increase in students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, graduating from high school and entering college. Ms. Ina Gunther, Advanced Placement chemistry teacher at Hogan Preparatory School described how Hogan Prep received a Start Up Grant from the College Board in 2005 to help grow its AP program and became a national finalist for the 2007 Inspiration Award.

Stranahn High School, the second oldest high school in Fort Lauderdale, is a school of 1800 students and serves one of the most diverse populations in Broward County, Florida. Having undergone major reforms in the design of their school’s program, Stranahan implemented a Community of Career Research, Exploration, and Successful Transition (CREST)

Program with all ninth graders. This intervention consists of career days, the facilitation of interest inventories, teams of core teachers working together in “houses” with common planning time, and student goal setting for high school and beyond. With the tenth through twelfth graders, the school implemented four career-focused, student-centered, community-based, technology-enhanced learning communities. Students were guided to select a Learning Community with a specific course of study in their sophomore year. This focus offered students the opportunity to explore career interests through selected electives. These learning communities focused on science and technology; medicine and health professions; the arts, languages and communication; and business, entrepreneurship, and public and human services education. In addition, the school designed a school-wide advisory program to support the students with academic success skills, college and postsecondary counseling, advisement regarding course selection, career exploration and training in life skills.

With the redesign of the Stranahan High School program was an emphasis on increasing enrollment in Advanced Placement courses. Educators there recognized that the best predictor of whether students complete bachelor’s degrees is not good high school grades and impressive standardized achievement scores but the number of intellectually challenging courses a student completes in high school (Adelman, 1999). The faculty at Stranahan also acknowledged that the impact of AP curriculum on college completion rates is especially pronounced for African-American and Latino youth. The Stranahan educators and counselors personally encouraged and recruited freshmen students to enroll in AP Human Geography in ninth grade. With success in this course, they moved on to enroll in AP World History and AP psychology in tenth grade. Early experiences with AP coursework enabled many more students to succeed in AP classes in their junior and senior years at Stranahan. In 2002, 328 students underwent administration of AP

exams. Principal Owens was pleased to share with her audience that in 2007, the number of students taking AP exams had increased to 702. Moreover, in 2003-04 and again in 2005-06, Stranahan High School had the largest number of African-American students in the nation pass the AP psychology exam.

In addition, Stranahan High School provides a 21st Century After school Program which offers students homework assistance, academic enrichment, personal development workshops, opportunities for training in fitness, dance, and recreation as well as audio-visual performing arts options. Students at Stranahan are encouraged to participate in one academic component as well as one enrichment activity each year.

Hogan Preparatory Academy in Kansas City, Missouri is in the eighth year of operation as a charter high school. It is a college-preparatory high school with a values-based mission. It houses a population of 325 students with 98% African-American students enrolled. Ms. Gunther reported that students arrive at Hogan Prep typically two years behind grade level. The students enrolled have succeeded in closing the achievement gap by about one year over the course of the four-year experience. Educators at Hogan Preparatory Academy have incorporated the following nine principles into the AP Program.

- *Encourage students to take AP courses.*

The Hogan Prep program has found success with communicating pertinent facts to students, parents, faculty and staff on the value colleges place on AP courses in admissions decisions. They also recommend inviting graduates who completed AP courses back to the school to share the value with friends.

- *Tailor your AP course to students*

Highlighted in the presentation was strong advice for other school districts to follow the College Board curriculum, however, sacrifice breadth of coverage if students require more time for mastery. Principal described how her AP faculty provide students more guided practice outside of class. She also recommended using the AP Central website for the courses to remain current with the issues.

- *Support the students academically*

The Hogan Prep faculty has provided additional contact time through AP labs (study halls) established for students enrolled in multiple courses. They also offer periodic Saturday morning review sessions and optional brown bag lunch problem solving sessions.

- *Encourage work outside of class*

Ms. Gunther indicated that sharing candid information about the typical AP student and the hard work they complete is important in recruiting successful students to the AP classes. She also indicated that providing free snacks as a motivator for sessions outside of scheduled classes made a difference with students at Hogan Prep.

- *Periodically recognize the AP students*

The administration and AP faculty at Hogan Prep believed strongly that recognition luncheons and ribbons on AP students' lockers, similar to those used to recognize student athletes made a difference in encouraging academic excellence within the school's population. Ms. Gunther highlighted the value of celebrating success.

- *Motivate the students to take the AP exam*

Another important piece of advice offered by Ms. Gunther was to communicate college success rates for exam takers in order to motivate students to enroll in the exams. She reported

that her school paid for all or most of the fee for AP exams which made a huge difference for her school's population. She also described how her school district had been successful in acquiring funding to offer tangible financial incentives to students and their teachers. Students who passed the AP exams received \$100 and teacher received \$50!

- *Recognize and reward the students*

The AP faculty at Hogan Prep believed it was important to display plaques to recognize student success on AP exams. The school has also recognized AP students at the senior honors banquet. Ms. Gunther suggested that schools consider providing a celebratory field trip for all AP students following AP exams. She was happy to report that Hogan's students enjoyed a trip to see a Kansas City Royals baseball game.

- *Build sustainability into the AP Program*

The faculty and administration at Hogan Prep have established an AP Committee that meets regularly to coordinate the program and build ownership of the AP Program across the entire organization and not just AP teachers. Ms. Gunther emphasized that this effort has maintained sustainability for the AP program. She suggested that schools think seriously about extending the AP program into middle schools. She also highlighted the importance of emphasizing and supporting professional development for teachers through summer institutes, attendance at AP National Conference, Equity Colloquium and similar conferences.

- *Build a culture that values academic rigor and the AP program.*

The Hogan Prep teachers have learned to constantly reinforce the connection between academic rigor and the college-preparatory mission of the school. Ms. Gunther pointed out that they share success stories of other high schools that have achieved academic excellence for historically underserved students.

Principal Gunther's presentation concluded with a poem entitled "It's For Him" by Lisa Bankston, an AP English Literature Teacher at Hogan Preparatory Academy. The powerful and poignant message behind the poem reinforced the message of the AVID Conference.

He sits on the back row
Intently listening and learning.
Eager for the limited knowledge
I can hopefully puff into the air
Of noise and so often confusion.

He will excel...or at least
Will give it his best effort.
Climbing from his bed of adversity –
Struggling against the odd-
Colliding with unknown forces
Facing obstacles and never quitting.

He has courage, hope and guts.
A determination to make a difference –
Something that is often flushed down
The gutters of urban America
When "taking it for granted" is the easy answer.
The excuse for ... "I could have, but nobody gave me a break."

So, I gather my dwindling energy,
Tighten my coat of armor and
Go fight the battle another day.
Only this time to be more determined
To face the obstacles and
Share His hope of making a difference.

Maintaining a Proficiency View of African-American Males

The inspirational message from the poem above is consistent with the belief that educators must continually search for strengths in all students. This notion of looking for gifts and talents in young people serves as part of the foundation of a national organization of concerned educators and parents. The Up Where We Belong conference involved collaboration

with the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) whose mission it is to see that “giftedness and high potential in youth are recognized, universally valued, actively supported, and developed.” (NAGC 2004 - 2008 Strategic Plan). Nationally recognized speakers representing the organization offered a panel session entitled “ The Georgia Story: I always knew I was smart. What took y’all so long? Identifying Gifted Children from Underrepresented Groups.” In this session the presenters shared with the AVID audience the critical need to maintain a proficiency view of culturally and linguistically diverse students. This session highlighted the importance of looking beyond poverty and cultural differences to recognize indicators of academic potential in children from a variety of backgrounds.

The first panelist in this session was Dr. Joseph Renzulli, Director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) and University of Connecticut Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of Gifted Education and Talent Development. Dr. Renzulli shared his work that began in the early 1970s when he offered the field a broadened conception of giftedness that challenged the traditional view of this construct as primarily a function of high test scores on intelligence tests. Renzulli’s notion of a broadened conception of giftedness was not well received by the gifted education establishment at that time. His conviction about a broadened view of human potential led him to seek an audience elsewhere, and in 1978, the *Phi Delta Kappan* published his article entitled, “What Makes Giftedness: Re-examining a Definition,” an article which is now the most widely cited publication in the field of gifted education. In this classic work, Renzulli (1978) argued that,

Gifted behavior...reflects an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits – these clusters being above average (but not necessarily high) general and/or specific ability, high levels of task commitment (motivation), and high levels of creativity. Gifted

and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite sets of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance.

The interaction of the three clusters of traits are brought to bear upon general or specific areas of performance and result in gifted behaviors. Recognizing the important role that contextual influences play, Renzulli presented his theory with the three symbolic rings embedded in a hounds tooth background that represents the interactions between personality and the environment. Dr. Renzulli went to design a model of programming to nurture gifted behaviors in young people. Renzulli's Enrichment Triad Model (1977) was developed to encourage the creative productivity of young people by exposing them to a variety of topics, areas of interest, and fields of study. This exposure is accompanied with training to apply advanced content, process-training skills, and methodology training to areas of study chosen by students in order to develop original products that are shared with authentic audiences.

As Joseph Renzulli developed his theory and conducted research in the 1970s at the University of Connecticut, he was joined by a young African-American doctoral student, Mary Frasier who was intrigued with his notion of identifying gifted behaviors in young people in a variety of environmental contexts. Mary Frasier earned her doctoral degree and joined the educational psychology faculty at The University of Georgia where she went on to design innovative approaches to identifying and teaching gifted minority students. She passed away in 2005; however, her legacy in gifted education continues to be carried on by her students and research colleagues. One approach at identification she designed was the Frasier Talent Assessment Profile (F-TAP), a multidimensional talent identification guide and educational development system. The F-TAP supports teachers searching for gifts and talents in young people. It helps to facilitate the collection and display of data from multiple test and non-test

sources of information. From this collection of data educators, counselors, and administrators have the information accessible to make recommendations about a student's particular needs for gifted education services (Grantham & Ford, 2007).

Combined with Renzulli's broadened conception of giftedness, Dr. Frasier's work played a significant role in helping to bring about significant changes in how the field of gifted education identified young people for gifted education programs. The F-TAP provided methods that enabled educators to identify gifted children from diverse cultural, economic and linguistic backgrounds without high expenditures of time in collecting and analyzing data. A profile of a child resulted which provided an effective and efficient method of highlighting data for interpretation. The ultimate goal of the F-TAP was to display all information that teachers, school counselors, and administrators could find on a child in order that appropriate educational placement and programming decisions could be made.

An important component of the F-TAP system involved the observation and referral of children for gifted education programs. Following extensive research studies, Dr. Frasier identified ten traits, aptitudes and behaviors (TABs) that represented what she believed were the core attributes of the giftedness construct. Mary Frasier maintained these attributes should be used to guide teacher and parent nominations or referrals for gifted education screening. Researchers who continue Dr. Frasier's work have examined the TABs and have reported on their significance. Dr. Tarek Grantham and Dr. Donna Ford explained, "According to Frasier, a trait is a relatively persistent and consistent behavior pattern. Aptitude represents the capacity to perform in the future or some future ability. Behavior is any response made by a person" (Grantham & Ford, 2007, pp.2-3). The beauty of Dr. Frasier's work is that teachers and child advocates now recognize a need for a dynamic view of the ways in which traits, aptitudes and

behaviors are expressed among different children in different contexts. Frasier understood that these traits, aptitudes and behaviors may appear different among different children in different environments.

Dr. Sally Krisel, Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning in the Hall County School System in Gainesville, Georgia was a doctoral student of Dr. Frasier and joined her in the landmark research conducted at the University of Georgia by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT). Dr. Krisel explained that in the early 1990s Mary Frasier's research-based assessment project and staff development model were piloted in six Georgia school systems. Krisel described the overwhelming support for changes in the Georgia State Board of Education rule governing eligibility for gifted programs that resulted from the efforts of Dr. Frasier and her colleagues. Krisel highlighted how rewarding it was to see how educators working with Frasier's project grew in their passion for doing what was right for all gifted students. She also explained that these educators and policy makers remained convinced that they could use alternative, flexible identification procedures in ways that were valid and reliable. In doing so, they celebrated that gifted programs became more inclusive.

As a result of this work, gifted education advocates across Georgia relied on Dr. Frasier's NRC/GT findings as they introduced and shepherded through the state legislature a bill requiring changes in eligibility criteria. A change in the statute precipitated SBOE hearings, a statewide task force, and ultimately a new eligibility rule. As a result of the new rule, from January 1997 to October 2005, the number of African-American students participating in gifted education programs in Georgia increased by 200% and the number of Hispanic gifted students increased by 570%, reflecting the changes in Georgia's demographics. Dr. Krisel reported that the impact of more inclusive identification and programming practices combined with a statewide effort to

increase academic rigor for all students is now evident in high schools across the state, with many more students from under-represented groups enrolled in the highest levels of coursework. Krisel noted from 2002-2006, school districts have experienced a 71% increase in the number of African-American students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses and Hispanic participation in AP has increased 180%.

Dr. Krisel helped the audience to understand how the significant work conducted by educators in Georgia led the way for other states to consider multiple criteria approaches to the identification of gifted students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She referred to a landmark article that Dr. Frasier published in 1989 that essentially helped Georgia educators who fought the good fight remain focused on their efforts. Dr. Krisel referred to Dr. Frasier's use of four A's that needed to be examined in order to break down barriers that impede the identification of gifted culturally diverse youth: attitude, access, assessment, and accommodation. In explaining "attitude," Krisel posed the question, "Is there someone out there who believes so strongly in the rightness of this effort that they will pull other folks along by their own convictions?" When looking at "access," she noted, "You've got to get to bat before you can get a hit" and asked, "How will we know what these young people are capable of doing if we don't provide access to gifted education services?" Dr. Krisel emphasized that "assessment" was critical and explained that educators must look at other indicators of ability other than standardized test to identify ability in students. She highlighted that "accommodation" referred to the need for educators to match programs to student strengths, capitalize on their passions, and use their preferred expression styles to provide appropriate services to gifted culturally diverse youth.

Dr. Krisel concluded her remarks with a story of Troy, a 10-year-old African-American child who was eventually identified for a gifted program through Dr. Frasier's research efforts. Once identified, Troy asked the research team and the teachers in his school, "I always knew I was smart. What took y'all so long?" Krisel reminded the audience that there are many others students like Troy in our schools and that all students benefit when we take a proficiency view of children.

Dr. Tarek Grantham, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology at The University of Georgia, was the third panelist representing NAGC. Dr. Grantham rounded out the NAGC presentation with a discussion of the value of mentoring programs to nurture the talents of African-American males and support their psychosocial development. Grantham explained that strategies to retain African-American males in gifted programs must take motivational issues into account. He noted research studies that revealed inhibitors that undermine the motivation of Black males to achieve and excel in gifted programs. He indicated that given the limited consistent support that many African-American males experience, researchers suggest that without effective mentoring gifted Black males are less likely to believe that they can succeed in advanced-level programs. In addition, they are less likely to invest an abundance of academic effort in school and will not value academically challenging coursework.

Grantham proposed that the key to effective mentoring of African-American males involved helping them to develop strong racial identities. He maintained that the role of educators and mentors is to help African-American males understand racial identity issues in order to make wise choices in school and not compromise the pursuit of intellectually challenging courses and advanced level experiences. He described Cross and Vandiver's (2001) Nigrescence Theory in which Black racial identity is a function of identity types that are

clustered into three major levels: pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. Grantham explained how this theory acknowledges fluid stages of racial identity which individuals experience in life. Whether they regress, become stuck, or progress through the stages of racial identity, depends in large part on the individual's personality, sources of emotional support, resources, and experiences. In order to better understand this issue, Grantham asked the AVID audience to consider two critical questions that gifted African-American males must continually address throughout their experience in school: Which culture should I emulate when trying to fulfill my potential and succeed in school settings? Which belief and value system should I incorporate? The AVID audience heard evidence of this during the conference when Eric Martin, a member of the student panel succinctly described his experience with these critical questions as he explained, "I consider myself bilingual. I can hang with the boys, but when it's time to be professional, I can be professional."

Encouraging Family Involvement

Dr. Donna Ford pointed out in her keynote address, "The African-American family cannot be blamed for everything. We are doing the best we can with what we have." Dr. Calvin Mackie stressed the need for parental involvement in the lives of their children. He believes that parents cannot leave decisions up to their children and expect them to always make the right choices without their guidance and support. He pointed out that too often contemporary parents leave their sons and daughters alone to run their own lives and then these same parents act surprised when young people make the wrong choices. Mackie proudly reported that his parents taught him two important lessons: self-discipline and having a strong work ethic. He noted, "We have got to put a fire of desire in our children's hearts, make them never stop working." Emphasizing, "every child has the potential for greatness within them," Dr. Mackie

recommended that parents need to ask each child what they want to be, and then sit with them and make a plan on how to get there. As Mr. Dyron Ford of Douglasville, Georgia, AVID Eastern Division Assistant Director, introduced the panel of students, he explained that as a parent the AVID conference was “something that runs deep.” He called attention to a large photograph at the front of the banquet hall of a young African-American male in academic regalia on the day of his pre-kindergarten graduation. He explained that this photograph of his son reminded him every day of his responsibility as a parent. He explained, “My vision is that I keep a smile on my son’s face as he moves on from his pre-K graduation to elementary school, to middle school, high school, and on to college.”

The significance of parental guidance and support was most powerfully delivered to the AVID conference audience through the voices of the young African-American males involved in the student panel discussion. During that session, members of the audience had an opportunity to ask questions of the young men. Ms. Darlene Willis of San Diego, California, reflected, “Mothers love our sons and raise our daughters.” She then asked the young men on the panel: What influences have your mothers had on you and what can we as mothers do to assist you in pursuing your educational dreams? Eric Martin Jr. responded:

I have the best mom in the whole world. I’m #2 of nine children, so momma has a lot of motivating to do. She’s so strong. My mom is a rock. It’s hard to explain. She does so much and I really appreciate her. To all the other mothers out there, trust your son, believe in him and let him go through some situations alone. I had to explain this to my mom. Everything I went through my mom wanted to go through it for me so I wouldn’t have to feel it. But you have to experience something to know something.

Duane Larkins shared his view:

It's all about tough love. My mom has always always always been on me. If I didn't do my homework she would be the first one to know. She would always check my homework. I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for my mother. She picks you up when you're down but she pushes you. More than anything, she motivates you.

Isaiah Moore explained,

When it comes right down to it, she is why I do what I do. I refuse to be nothing less than the best. When I think of all that she has been through it seems like my mom has been in the eye of the hurricane and still she is staying strong. She does not just have me to raise. It's hard for a mother to raise a son. There are some things that a mother can't teach a son, but my mother is doing that. But she's doing that with me and she has two other daughters. One of them has just graduated from college. My mother didn't graduate from college. My mother doesn't have the best job in the world. Anybody can tell you that. I do this for my mother. I will not let her live like that any more. I feel obligated as a man to assume the position as a leader of my household and take care of my mother because of what she's done for me. I've never seen a woman like that - to hold me so tight that I never had to feel the negative blows of anything. My mother absorbed all of that. And not just for me but for all of her kids as well.

Conclusion

As a result of the AVID conference's vibrant atmosphere and inspirational messages, participants left Atlanta, Georgia with renewed dedication to supporting African-American males. Many had come to the conference aware of the challenges these young men face, but they left with new strategies and appreciation for the African-American males in their schools. It is AVID's hope that conference participants not only implement these valuable strategies but also

teach them to others in their respective settings. Through emphasizing the cultural strengths and traditions of the African American community educators can truly elevate African American males up to where they belong.

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