

Can All-Male High Schools Boost African-American Boys' Graduation Rates?

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In 2004, David Banks, a former lawyer and assistant principal at a public school in Brooklyn, joined forces with other members of the African-American philanthropic organization 100 Black Men to address what they saw as the appallingly low rates of high school graduation for African-American males in New York City. Their solution: the Eagle Academy for Young Men, a charter school on East 164th Street in the South Bronx that became the first all-male public school in New York City in 30 years.

The school's mission, as described by Banks, was to close both the racial and gender gap in education by reaching out to boys of color who were falling through the cracks. "We're looking for the young men who would be outside on the street corner, outside of the school," he says. "We work with really challenging kids."

Once relegated to the realm of private and parochial, single-sex public schools are rapidly gaining popularity. In October 2006, the U.S. Department of Education instituted new regulations that cleared the way for public school districts to open more single-sex charter schools by no longer requiring that they must offer comparable single-sex options for the other gender. That meant that as long as they offered comparable co-educational options, districts became free to open an all-boys charter school without having to open an all-girls one, and vice versa. Educators quickly took advantage of the new regulations and, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 542 public schools now offer single-sex classes, other than physical education, for both girls and boys, up from only 11 schools in 2002. Approximately 95 of these are single-sex schools, like Eagle Academy, and many belong to the recently formed Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color, or COSEBOC.

Now, Banks is setting his sights on expanding all-boys public schools in the city. Last year, he transitioned from his duties as Eagle Academy's founding principal to president of the Eagle Academy Foundation, an organization that is spearheading plans to expand the model to other locations. The foundation is currently raising money to cover the cost of their extended hours and extensive extracurricular programs like culinary arts and robotics.

At a recent two-day conference at Eagle Academy, attended by approximately 150 mostly African-American educators from across the country, sessions addressed "best practices" in education, like how to develop a successful mentoring program, and issues specific to single-gender education, like how to engage young men in

the classroom. In that session, four ninth-grade boys in immaculate uniforms gave a PowerPoint presentation about student-generated learning, discussing things like blogging and literary circles for their English class. Their teacher emphasized activities in which they can play an active role, explaining that boys can easily grow bored in passive environments.

It is this emphasis on educating young men that drew 15-year-old Travis Tucker to Eagle Academy. "I thought there would be less distractions without girls and that I would learn more because the teacher's focus would be on teaching one gender instead of two," he says. Still, he admits that he misses being around girls sometimes. "It can get a little boring to be only around boys."

Nevertheless, Eagle has proven popular with many parents. According to Osei Owusu-Afriyie, Eagle Academy's current principal, the incoming ninth grade received 2,000 applications citywide, while Eagle Academy's Brooklyn school had 1,200 applications for a class of 80 students. The Academy of Business and Community Development (commonly known as ABCD), another all-boys charter school in Bed-Stuy that is not affiliated with the Eagle Academy network, had 1,100 aspiring middle-schoolers apply for 65 sixth-grade seats.

Both ABCD and Eagle Academy High School got letter grades of B on their most recent publicly available progress reports from the Department of Education (DOE). Banks, for his part, is proud to point out Eagle Academy's high school graduation rate of 82 percent, compared with approximately 51.4 percent of black and 48.7 percent of Hispanic students graduating from high schools citywide.

(Eagle Academy's academic reputation took a hit in June, however, when its teachers charged the administration with instructing them to inflate the grades of some special education students, and threatening to transfer students who were in danger of failing to graduate. Owusu-Afriyie has denied the charges, which are currently being investigated by the DOE.)

The reasons behind any academic gains are unclear. "We have theoretical concepts that boys learn differently and need different things, but we have no real way to measure if separating boys is what is actually making the difference in achievement," says Dr. Lionel Howard, research investigator at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina. "Is it really just a matter of good teachers, good practice? Would you see the same outcomes if this were in a supportive, functional co-ed school?"

Opponents, meanwhile, have charged that single-sex public schools represent illegal discrimination. "We think that single-sex public schools raise serious questions under both the Constitution and Title IX," says Emily Martin, a spokesperson for the American Civil Liberties Union, which is currently engaged in federal litigation in Kentucky over the legality of the 2006 regulations that opened the door to single-sex public schools.

Clyde Cole, ABCD's founding principal and himself a product of an all-boys Catholic school, counters that his students are being failed by traditional mixed-sex education. "Boys of color start getting treated differently around the third or fourth grade," he says. "They're labeled as needing special education; they have more discipline problems." At ABCD, he adds, "It's a 'boys being boys' mentality, and we don't discipline them. Girls are able to adjust better in school. They are neater, better organized, ready to work, and they even have more camaraderie in recent years. Boys aren't doing as well, and they need an environment that focuses on them and their needs."

Cole says that he finds ways to use what others may see as negative adolescent boy qualities—like the tendency to aggressively compete with each other—to his students' advantage, holding elaborate school-wide competitions across the various homerooms.

Like Eagle Academy, ABCD also has plans for expansion. Bruce Copeland, a former public school principal and the current eighth-grade math teacher at ABCD, is hoping to open another ABCD branch somewhere in Brooklyn as early as the 2010–2011 school year, pending approval of the school's charter by the DOE. "One of the things that I like about single-sex schools is the opportunity to help these boys understand the role that a male should assume in society," he says. "They see a lot of crime. They see a lot of violence. They see a lot of absenteeism. Without someone to show them the other side of the coin, it makes it hard for a lot of the guys."