
AFTERWORD



The barriers to success that black men face have been in plain sight for decades, so it is particularly heartening to see a movement taking shape

that is specifically crafted to address these challenges and change the odds for one of the most disenfranchised populations in America.

I was on the Board of Trustees of the Open Society Foundations when the idea of a black male achievement campaign first came up, and while it was obvious that something needed to be done, we immediately found ourselves facing a philosophical dilemma: Was it right to target just one group when there are others that also need help?

In a country where cultural and racial relations are as complicated as the United States, people are understandably hesitant to publicly announce that they are going to help one group while seemingly ignoring all the others. But we concluded that tailoring an approach that targets a group that has a common history and a resulting common set of challenges is absolutely the right approach. Black men in America—while obviously being individuals—have had a unique historical experience. After decades of slavery, they faced institutional racism and daily indignities, Jim Crow and segregation, public lynchings and disenfranchisement, and a contemporary toxic culture on the street and in the media that glorifies self-destructive behavior.

If we are going to reverse the achievement gap and what the Children’s Defense Fund calls the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” for black boys and men, we need to take into consideration the insidious context of their situation. At the Open

Society Foundations, we came to believe that the success of this targeted approach would inspire other efforts aimed at other specific populations.

As the Campaign For Black Male Achievement (CBMA) has taken shape, we’ve only seen how necessary and overdue it has been. It has begun to catch on around the country, gaining traction as other parallel efforts have emerged. While there is certainly a lot of day-to-day work still to be done on the front lines, the narrative and national dialogue have begun to change. Ignorance and fear are giving way to empathy and intelligent action.

We have a president that has given the imprimatur of the White House to the idea that racism will not be sanctioned or ignored by our society. In the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin shooting, President Obama’s empathetic responses allowed an honest, open, and clear-eyed public discussion of race relations and the stubbornness of racism.

As the CBMA has emerged, it has been joined by promising initiatives both national and local. At the federal level, President Obama announced the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. The Cities United anti-violence partnership is national in scope, while individual cities, such as New York City and Baltimore, have also created robust programs to boost black and Latino male achievement.

As we move forward, I hope some of the successes that I’ve learned about can serve as examples. First is the need for black boys to be surrounded by older, black role models. Every day these boys need to see law-abiding, college-educated men making a good life for themselves through hard, honest work. That’s been a critical

missing element in many communities for these young people. Filling this vacuum, gangs have acted as surrogate families and role models, giving a false promise to scared boys about protecting themselves and navigating life.

Second, young men need jobs and a legal way to earn some money. A teenager who looks around and sees no hope of earning honest money is understandably going to be tempted by the bustling illegal activity that he sees every day on the street in many devastated communities. Instead of simply condemning these kids to the dead end of the criminal justice system, we need to proactively provide them with real and positive alternatives before they drift into antisocial behavior.

The great challenge that lies ahead is taking what we know works and bringing it to scale. Unfortunately, saving a dozen boys, while deserving applause, does not reverse the massive crisis we are facing. We need to go places where there are terrific things happening

on the ground and bring additional resources to bear so organizations can go deeper and expand—that's how we will get the most bang for the buck.

The destructive forces at work within the black community have been festering for decades—it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that the way out will take time. We are moving in the right direction, but we need to keep in mind that our commitment must be for the long haul. We need to scale up our successes and view any failure as a wake-up call to try Plans B, C, or Z.

This country has an unparalleled history of creating economic opportunity—the American dream. But there has been a systematic and singular denial of the means of achieving this dream for black males. The degree to which we commit to tackle these obstacles will lead to the American dream truly becoming available to all.

Geoffrey Canada

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