How some groups are building success for Columbus’ at-risk young men of color

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Blacks and Latinos face the greatest barriers to opportunity among boys and, as such, are overrepresented on most educational and social indicators associated with risk and failure. My column last week noted these barriers come from a variety of sources, including structural conditions in neighborhoods and schools, vulnerability associated with poverty and implicit bias.

Demographic trends predict a growing populace with greater needs.

"It's not just a social justice issue, it's an economic imperative," says James Moore III, College of Education and Human Ecology distinguished professor of urban education and director of the Todd Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male at Ohio State University,

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Moore's center and others in our community are working to build success for boys of color. Here's a look at how some programs are expanding opportunity for at-risk young men of color:

**Todd Bell Center**

The center, the only one of its kind housed at a major research university, focuses on the complex issues affecting African-American males in various domains of society. Along with conducting robust research that informs social policy and practice, the Todd Bell Center creates a community for African-American males at Ohio State to ensure their success at college and beyond.

Moore emphasizes the need to improve the educational landscape for black males and notes the absence of competition and engagement inside the classroom. He uses the example of what Ohio State head football coach Urban Meyer was able to achieve last season with his team's third-string quarterback: "He created an environment of excellence. So what we try to do is make the life of the mind important."

The Todd Bell Center holds an Early Arrival Program for new Ohio State students that is focused on the self, gives them familiarity with resources and convinces these young men that
Scholastic achievement is important. It encourages them to seek a tutor when they need it and to be proactive. Additionally, it works with teachers, school counselors, principals and superintendents to help them communicate effectively and consistently.

"Let's find the best teachers and let the best teachers teach all the students. We've got people in the classroom who are not rendering the outcomes that we want them to render. This stuff is so important. You're affecting generations," Moore says.

A middle-school mentoring program is one of the signature outreach efforts at the Todd Bell Center. Undergraduate students serve as weekly mentors to African-Americans at Columbus City Preparatory School for Boys, with a focus on encouraging academic success, building a work ethic, and developing social and behavioral skills and a positive self-esteem in these youngsters.

**LASER**

Ohio State University has a similar initiative focused on Latino students. Frederick Luis Aldama, University Distinguished Scholar, created the Latino and Latin-American Space for Enrichment and Research (LASER) in 2009 to reach into area high schools beginning in ninth grade, readying the growing Latino high school population for college and careers. LASER pairs Latino undergraduate mentors from Ohio State, such as Jose Carillo, with area high school students.

Carillo graduated from Westland High School in the South-Western School District and was a first-generation college student with no older siblings.

"I didn't have anyone to show me the ropes of getting into college," he recalls.

Carillo mentors a Latino student from Centennial High School. He shares with the student, Eddie, the obstacles he overcame and emphasizes that college is a possibility.

"A lot of Eddie's questions have to do with money. We search the Internet for scholarships, we talk about college life and whether he needs to work or if commuting is a good option," he says.

LASER also offers programs on campus for parents of the high schoolers so they understand the importance of higher education. Once students arrive, the program creates opportunities for them to thrive as undergraduates, and it opens doors through internships and other experiences for graduate school and professional careers.

Aldama says if his resources were limitless, he'd start the outreach in elementary school because "even people within the Latino community do not realize the urgency we face in terms of Latino males not making it to the next level."

**MTMBK**

More Than My Brother's Keeper is a program focused on 35 at-risk African-Americans ages 10 to 14 on Columbus' south side and it is funded by Franklin County.

"We know that two out of three young men growing up on Columbus' south side are dropping out of school. They're getting in trouble, they're ending up in places we don't want to see them,
like our jails and our juvenile facilities," says county Commissioner Paula Brooks.

As a result, county government teamed with Ohio State's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Nationwide Children's Hospital and Development For All People on the south side to support MTMBK.

"We want to lift them up and make certain they are the best they can be," Brooks says.

The array of services provided aim to help the young men's families while providing experiential learning that can teach them skills, resiliency and leadership. The program includes emotional and social support to help the boys deal with some of the issues of their life, and it has a mentoring component. The youngsters are exposed to STEM education at Children's Hospital, building bicycles and refurbishing furniture, and the benefits of fitness and exercise.

"We see boys excited about learning, exhibiting leadership and forming bonds with one another," says Jason Reece, research director at the Kirwan Institute who helped develop the program. Despite years of work in this field and being a south side resident, Reece has found the experience eye opening.

"We've had a window into the lives of some of the most disadvantaged kids in our community and see the multitude of challenges they deal with, from food insecurity to not having warm clothes in the winter, to housing instability or the threat of violence," he says.

Observes Brooks: "They take trips to the Ohio State University campus where, perhaps, they've never dreamed of attending and they will see for the first time a future that can be within their reach if they study hard, if they get those emerging job skills."

She hopes MTMBK's success will allow many more children in the county to benefit.

**A call to action**

"By having a more informed perspective about the experience of poverty for children, particularly for boys of color," Reece says, "we can be more strategic in determining the resources and supports that a child needs to succeed."

He believes we are well-poised to deal with the coming demographic changes.

"We're a community that has a good social support system. We're a community that's open. We're a community where diversity and inclusion seem to be a norm that is upheld throughout, so I'm optimistic about the future," he says.

Beyond the collective work we need to do as a community to ensure we have the programs and support available for the young men of color most at risk, Reece says there's a lot we can do as individuals.

"We struggle to find mentors who can make a sustained commitment to develop that deep relationship and deep bond with one of these young men – and that can be a relationship for the young man that could be transformational in his life," he says. "And so, there's many different activities that we need to undertake as a community and they operate at different scales, but now's the time to act."
This is the second of two columns exploring the challenges facing young men of color in Central Ohio. It was written by Linda Kass, who chairs the United Way of Central Ohio's Champion of Children event March 10 that will address this topic.