

Bankole: Don't give up on the future of black boys

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(Photo: Clarence Tabb Jr / Detroit News)

Charles A. Davis Jr., the principal of Old Redford Academy Preparatory High School, one of the largest charter schools in Michigan, speaks with passion about the need for black boys to see standards of excellence so they can serve as worthy examples to others including those in their own community.

That's because Davis sees the problems of absent fathers or male role models first hand at his school where more than 80 percent of the black male students enrolled in the 800 member student body don't have a father figure in their lives.

He said most of the boys in the mixed school come from single parent homes and Davis, as he puts it, is their "daddy" from 7:30 a.m. to 2:35 p.m. when they are in school.

"What we are doing here in the school is a black male movement because these boys don't have examples of standards of excellence. So we have to create standards of excellence and put things

in place where students can learn integrity and character,” Davis said. “We have a 99 percent graduation rate.”

Mentorship and reading are keys to ensuring the students succeed, Davis said, because “most of our kids don’t read books.”

The emphasis on reading and looking for tools to further enhance their growth is what drew Davis and his students to a recently released book “Don’t Give Up, Don’t Give In: Wisdom and Strength for Young Black Men,” written by Curtis Ivery, the chancellor of Wayne County Community College District.

The book, which reads like Socrates’ “The Unexamined Life is not Worth Living” speech, forces the young men to examine their lifestyles and question whether they are living productive and impactful lives at home, school and in the larger community.

It also discusses topics like self respect and esteem, courage to explore opportunities, believing in oneself, controlling one’s anger, having a backup plan and the challenges of growing into manhood.

WCCCD has established a male engagement program with several area high schools. About 80 students from those schools met with Ivery on Feb. 29 at the WCCCD campus to discuss the book and how it addresses issues in their lives.

“Think of me as an experienced old friend with a lot of down-home, tried and true, hard knock lessons. I want you to benefit from what I’ve done (or not). I want these lessons to be your conscience, mentor and guide as both my parents were for me because I care deeply about so many boys growing up today without the guidance that they need,” Ivery offers in the book’s introduction.

On May 9, 20 black male students from Redford Academy returned to WCCCD for another conversation as part of the program.

“I use to fight a lot when I was younger. I would disrespect my mom and dad. I had bad grades in school. But now I feel good because I have improved a lot in behavior and my grades are good,” said Tayon Effinger, 15, an 11th-grader. “I feel the book is a guide for African-American boys who are facing challenges.”

Desi Smith Jr., 17, a senior who plans to attend Western Michigan University, said it’s often wrong to think that most black boys coming from single parent households like him won’t succeed.

“Where I am coming from does not mean where I am right now, and what I’m going to be in the future,” Smith said. “When I was growing up with a single parent I used to look up to my cousins for

reference. But they did not set a positive path for me. What is important for me right now is taking care of my mom so she does not have to work anymore. That is why I'm on my way to college.”

Emmanuel Eze, 16, an 11th-grader, said Ivery’s book highlighted the need to be positive about life despite the difficulties that lie ahead.

“In order for us to succeed it is important for us as black men to drop the negativity. We’ve all had issues and we’ve all been laid astray at some point,” Eze said.

Another student, Malachi Mosley, 17, was recently accepted into the A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan on a full scholarship.

Davis, his principal, said the award was rare because students normally wait more than a year to be accepted into the prestigious program.

Mosley said despite being bullied in school growing up he’s made it thus far.

“When I was growing up I did not know who I was. I was taught to follow my heart but I did not want to have a bad influence around,” Mosley said. “I used to get bullied until I went into the fifth grade because kids picked on me and said I was anti-social. Now I feel good about myself. My family is happy and my grades are good.”

Craig Burns, 18, who is headed to Kentucky State University, said he’s also had negative influences but did not allow them to deter his goal in life.

In the book, Ivery urges black boys to see life as a boxing match and challenges them to choose courage, citing former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali who once said: “He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.”

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