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## To Close Gaps, Schools Focus on Black Boys

By [WINNIE HU](#)

OSSINING, N.Y. — In an effort to ensure racial diversity, the school system here in northern Westchester County is set up in an unusual way, its six school buildings divided not by neighborhood but by grade level. So all of the second and third graders in the Ossining Union Free School District attend the Brookside School.

But some minority students, the black boys at Brookside, are set apart, in a way, by a special mentoring program that pairs them with black teachers for one-on-one guidance outside class, extra homework help, and cultural activities during the school day. “All the black boys used to end up in the office, so we had to do something,” said Lorraine Richardson, a second-grade teacher and mentor. “We wanted to teach them to help each other” instead of fight each other.

While many school districts have long worked to close the achievement gap between minority and white students, Ossining’s programs aimed to get black male students to college are a new frontier.

Ossining school officials said they were not singling out black boys, but after a district analysis of high school students’ grade-point averages revealed that black boys were performing far worse than any other group, they decided to act. In contrast, these officials said, the performance of black girls compared favorably with other students and did not warrant the same concern.

The district calls it a “moral imperative,” and administrators and teachers say their top priority is improving the academic performance of black male students, who account for less than 10 percent of the district’s 4,200 students but disproportionately and consistently rank at the bottom in grades and test scores. The programs are voluntary, school officials said, and some students choose not to take part.

The special efforts for Ossining’s black male students began in 2005 with a college-preparatory program for high schoolers and, starting last month, now stretch all the way to kindergarten, with 5-year-olds going on field trips to the [American Museum of Natural History](#) and Knicks and Mets games to practice counting.

Ossining’s unusual programs for black boys have drawn the attention of educators across the country as school districts in diversifying suburbs are coming under new pressure to address what many see as a seemingly intractable racial divide with no obvious solution.

The federal No Child Left Behind law’s requirement that test scores be analyzed for each racial group has over the past decade spotlighted the achievement gap even in predominantly white suburban districts.

Some of the nation’s leading minority scholars have praised Ossining’s approach, but other educators, parents and civil rights groups contend that such separate programs do more harm than good. Last year, the New York Civil Rights Coalition filed a complaint with the United States Department of Education over such

a program at the [City University of New York](#), and the group plans to file a complaint with the state against Ossining's program.

"I think this is a form of racial profiling in the public school system," said the coalition's executive director, Michael Meyers. "What they're doing here, under the guise of helping more boys, is they're singling them out and making them feel inferior or different simply because of their race and gender."

At a time of wider debate over the socioeconomic barriers facing black boys, the focus on boosting educational support has gained traction with policymakers. In Maryland, a state education task force asserted in December that "school, itself, is an at-risk environment for African-American male youth" and issued a 58-page report "to justify fixing it — whatever the cost."

In New York and other large cities, such concerns have spurred the creation of all-male schools aimed at drawing black students. Now, with debate over the achievement gap spreading beyond city borders, efforts like Ossining's — though few as comprehensive — are sprouting up in suburbs nationwide.

In Teaneck, N.J., school officials formed an after-school club for black boys in 2005, with local black businessmen serving as role models. In the Cleveland suburbs, the South Euclid-Lyndhurst district has spent more than \$20,000 a year on clubs that reward black male students for good grades with sleepovers and guest speakers.

And in the neighboring community of Shaker Heights, one of the nation's best-known honors programs for black male students, the Minority Achievement Committee Scholars, has since 2004 received calls from more than 40 school districts that want to copy its efforts.

Here in Ossining, where Sing Sing state prison looms as a reminder that more black men are behind bars than enrolled in college, Latoya Morris, who is black, said that most of her black male classmates dropped out of school before she graduated in 1999. Now the mother of a 5-year-old boy in kindergarten, Ms. Morris, a nurse, said the extra support for black boys makes sense because the statistics are stacked against them.

"I don't want my son to be in jail when he becomes a teenager," she said. "I want him to have the same chances as a white child."

The school officials here noted that it is too soon to measure the impact of their programs with test scores, but that the percentage of black students enrolled in college-level courses in 11th and 12th grades has more than doubled to 55 percent this year from 26 percent in 2004.

In the lower grades, teachers have also reported that disciplinary referrals for black boys have dropped — as much as 80 percent at Brookside — and that the boys are missing fewer homework assignments and paying more attention in class. (Efforts are under way now to begin similar programs for Hispanic boys, who have also not performed well.)

Since Lenox Robinson, a 12-year-old sixth grader, joined the district's mentoring program in October, he has begun saving pennies and quarters in a glass jar under his bed — he has \$10 so far — to pay for college. Lenox failed science last marking period mainly because, he said, he stopped trying after his friends made fun of

him, adding, "I realize I shouldn't have done that."

Programs aimed specifically at black students, and the boys in particular, are a departure from past efforts that sought to erase the achievement gap by raising the performance of every student, but are gaining acceptance in some circles.

This summer, the law firm Sullivan and Cromwell and the investment bank Goldman Sachs are scheduled to convene their third conference of educators and professionals in the past year to brainstorm on "winning strategies for young black men."

While most schools are reluctant to focus on any particular group of students, opposition has lessened.

Some black scholars said that achievement-gap programs must be tailored to the needs of black male students if the programs are to succeed. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#), said that many black boys grow up with few male role models and in high-crime neighborhoods, where being smart in school is not considered cool. "You can't just ignore the needs of a group and say all children are the same," he said.

But Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that advocates for disadvantaged children, worried that such efforts may unintentionally lump together high-achieving black students with low-achieving ones and, in effect, "declare a whole set of kids at risk."

"You do have to worry whether you're creating a stereotype that is as damaging as the one you're trying to replace," she said.

The Ossining district is one of the most racially and economically mixed in the affluent Westchester suburbs: about 16 percent of the students are black and 38 percent Hispanic, and nearly one-third qualify for free and reduced lunches.

A New York Times analysis of state education data showed that, among about 150 districts that tested students in the 2004-5 school year, the most recent available, Ossining's achievement gap between black and white students was in the top fifth. For fourth graders, the gap widened on the English tests from four years earlier, while for eighth graders, the gap narrowed during the same period but was still twice as big as in all the other districts.

Since 2005, Ossining's programs for black boys have cost more than \$50,000, most of it from donations, grants and a student telethon. School officials said they had not received any complaints about the district's use of resources for this purpose.

None of more than two dozen parents who were interviewed directly criticized the focus on black boys, or said that the boys were receiving preferential treatment. But several said the programs should be made available to struggling students regardless of race.

Under the programs, the extra attention begins in elementary school; every black boy in fourth and fifth grades, for example, is assigned a team of teachers to track his academic progress.

The boys also meet black role models, while their parents attend workshops on planning for college. Motivation is emphasized throughout. As part of a recent dress for success contest, high school boys wore suits to school for a month. The two winners received hand-tailored suits.

Last month, Brookside started a music class in which, with teacher approval, black boys are allowed to miss one period a week to learn to play conga drums and sing West African welcome songs. After one recent drum fest, 9-year-old Arthur Stokeley, a third grader, sat down with his mentor, Ms. Richardson, to review his class work.

“So how was school today?” Ms. Richardson said.

“It was great,” Arthur said.

*Griff Palmer contributed reporting.*

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