



Editor's Note AIMÉE SIMPIÈRE

Welcome to City & State's new section featuring exclusive content from New York Nonprofit Media. As nonprofits are effectively the primary social services arm of city and state government – and the vehicle through which many government policies reach people – you will find lots within our pages that will flesh out and give context to everything else you read in City & State.

In a state with 1.3 million nonprofit workers, more than any other in the country, whatever the sector does changes New York. So NYN Media uses its extensive connections to cover the leaders, funders, programs and organizations that affect everything from making sure our elders are fed to counseling our children.

Stay tuned for our coverage of the minimum wage hike, which poses a particular challenge to nonprofits that want fair wages but are hamstrung by government contracts that often can't support increased payroll costs. This month, we will also focus on criminal justice issues and the nonprofits that advocate for at-risk youth and help formerly incarcerated individuals successfully re-enter society.

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ELIMINATING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

By AIMÉE SIMPIÈRE

RESearchers, policy-makers and practitioners have worked to reduce the achievement gap for young men of color for decades – but according to the latest research, the gap in graduation rates continues to widen. The Partnership for After School Education thinks it may have a solution: help those disparate groups work together.

“Have you looked at the population you’re serving, have you looked at how successful you’ve been?” said Alison Overseth, PASE’s executive director. “We’ve been doing a whole lot of things that haven’t been working, and if we’re not looking for alternate

ways of addressing serious issues, then we’re just kind of idiots.”

PASE, a nonprofit which promotes and supports high-quality afterschool programs, hosted a sold-out conference on Dec. 12 titled “Pockets of Hope: A Summit on Protective Practices for Boys of Color in Afterschool.” The panelists were academics, elected officials and program leaders from various nonprofits who modeled the kind of collaborative team PASE thinks will finally advance efforts to support the potential of young men of color. They included Assemblyman Michael Blake; Edward Fergus-Arcia, assistant professor of educational leadership and policy with New York University’s Steinhardt School; and W. Cyrus



PASE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALISON OVERSETH, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY STEINHARDT SCHOOL'S ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP EDWARD FERGUS-ARCIA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NEW YORK CITY'S YOUNG MEN'S INITIATIVE W. CYRUS GARRETT, AND BRONX ASSEMBLYMAN MICHAEL BLAKE.



Garrett, executive director of New York City's Young Men's Initiative.

Overseth told attendees her relationship with Fergus-Arcia was cemented when the researcher said he was applying for grants and asked her what she wanted to know. “Actually saying – what are some of the questions we actually need answers to, so that we can do what we do better – is really powerful,” Overseth said.

Research may not be accessible to practitioners, Overseth said. Hence the need to democratize research by better sharing cutting-edge findings directly with practitioners. It's also about researchers becoming partners who develop research ideas with on-the-ground practitioners – rather than just fellow academics. Policymakers must be made aware of the strategies that are working so that they can apply resources to help maximize impact.

PASE is applying this idea to one of the most intractable challenges in youth development: helping young men of color achieve life goals at levels that are on par with other youth.

President Barack Obama trained his attention on this issue when he created the My Brother's Keeper initiative targeting achievement gaps among young men of color in health, academics and employment. The White House modeled its effort, in part, on New York City's Young Men's Initiative, created in 2011. YMI is a public-private partnership begun under Mayor Michael Bloomberg that works to remove policy barriers to the developmental success of young men of color by finding and supporting successful pilot programs,

“WE’VE GOT TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO TURN MOVING INTO A MOVEMENT, AND WITH RESEARCH AND PRACTITIONERS AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS ... YOU CANNOT SOLVE NEW PROBLEMS WITH OLD SOLUTIONS.”

— THE REV. ALFONSO WYATT

making an investment for up to four years, and referring the most effective programs to city agencies for scaling up, Garrett said.

During the summit, Blake pointed out that New York was the first state in the nation to financially support a My Brother's Keeper-aligned initiative. Carl Heastie, the state's first African-American Assembly speaker, allocated \$20 million in the current fiscal year to create a state version of the program.

But barriers to success remain.

Economic hardship can prompt students to undo their own hard-earned successes. Children may intentionally fail so they can enjoy the safety and security of being in summer school as opposed to being on the streets, Blake said. They may even intentionally misbehave during the day just to secure an additional meal provided by the school during disciplinary hours.

PASE, with funding from the Robert Bowne Foundation and in partnership with NYU's Steinhardt School, is addressing some of these challenges with the Boys of Color in Afterschool: Protective Practices Institute. It works to democratize the research by thoroughly embedding effective practices into afterschool programs.

The protective practices are based on the research of Fergus-Arcia, who conducted a three-year study of black and Latino boys attending seven all-male schools across the country. It highlights the importance of properly conceptualizing the questions that inform the research, and of creating a hospitable school climate.

Rev. Alfonso Wyatt, a consultant to nonprofits on techniques for working with hard-to-reach youth, encouraged all stakeholders to become “merchants of hope,” focused on putting out fires, instead of chasing smoke. He recounted attending a picnic where some disapproving older women chastised a young man wearing his pants below his underwear.

“I told my sisters, ‘His pants are not his primary problem, that was merely smoke,’” Wyatt said. “But if we could ever figure out how to get him to pull up his mind – his pants will follow. Fire!” ■

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