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The NASBE Interview

Dr. Vermelle D. Greene, longtime educator and a member of the Maryland State Board of Education, chaired the board's Task Force on Achieving Academic Equity and Excellence for Black Boys, which released its report, "Transforming the Culture of Maryland's Schools for Black Boys," in April. Dr. Miya T. Simpson is the board's executive director. They were interviewed in June.



What sparked your interest in the education of Black boys?

Greene: Although I began my educational career teaching high school, it wasn't until I became an elementary school administrator that I first became aware of inequities with the treatment and education of boys. Since I worked in Prince George's County, which has a majority-minority school population, the inequities I witnessed were predominantly between Black boys and Black girls. I remember walking the halls past the talented and gifted classrooms, and I saw mainly girls. Then I would go past the special education rooms, and I saw mainly boys. One day, I had assigned several students to in-school suspension for a variety of rules infractions. As the coordinator lined them up to go into her classroom for the day, I saw boy, boy, boy, girl, boy, boy, boy, girl. I wondered, "What's happening with our boys? They're not stupid, and they keep getting in trouble."

I began to do some reading and happened upon author Michael Gurian [who wrote] *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. I thought, "Wait! Boys and girls learn differently? No one ever told us that." During undergrad and graduate work, seminars, and workshops, we talked about multiple intelligences and about visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory learners, but we were never taught that the way that a boy's brain processes information—in other words, the way he learns—is different from the way a girl learns. Later, I viewed brain scans of both sexes—the male brain, when doing certain mechanical and spatial tasks, for example, shows increased activity in certain areas. Not so much for those same areas when the female brain does the same tasks. On the other hand, when you look at scans of the female brain during language-related tasks, areas of her brain will show much more increased activity than the same areas in the male brain. My research eventually led to my epiphany: There is a difference in the way our boys learn, but they are being taught the same way as our girls. Could this be why the boys are not succeeding as well as the girls?

When I retired, I began to imagine starting a school only for boys, where teachers are trained in how boys learn and where we can tailor our instruction to the way they learn best. I knew my pastor wanted to start a Christian school, so I presented my proposal and received unanimous church board approval to proceed to open a program just for boys.

Not wanting to reinvent the wheel, I contacted the Maryland State Department of Education and asked, "Can you refer me to another K-8 school where they're educating boys, where I can go and get ideas?" To my amazement, the person I talked to in the

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nonpublic school office told me, “A school for boys? Kindergarten to grade 8? There are none.” Despite having no model for either curricula or operation, we set out to forge new ground, started S.A.C.R.E.D. Life Academy for Boys, and successfully educated boys for 14 years before limited finances forced our closing.

Years later, I was invited to speak at a teachers conference in Virginia attended by over 300 administrators and teachers. I asked them, “How many of you have ever taken a class on how boys learn differently than girls?” Maybe 25 hands were raised. Even to this day, there continues to be minimal professional development or training available in boy-girl learning differences for our teachers.

Generally, data demonstrate that our boys are underperforming when compared to their female peers, especially in reading and language arts. However, when data are disaggregated by race as well as by gender, the lowest performing group of young people in our schools nationwide are Black boys.

When I began on the [state] board, I would often ask, “Can’t we get this testing and discipline data disaggregated by gender?” I wanted my colleagues on the board to see that if data are disaggregated by gender—not just by poverty, disabilities, or race—the disparities in the performance for our boys, especially our Black boys, would be glaringly evident.

During my first year, I was asked to head a task force on student discipline. We worked for six months, looking at discipline policies of districts and the state and school-to-prison pipeline reports. Through it all, I kept saying to my task force members, “You know what’s at the root of this? We have boys who are not being successful in school, who are acting out because they’re not learning.” It is not the boys on the honor roll who are fighting and getting suspended or the boys getting straight A’s who are disrupting class. It’s the boys who are failing, who can’t read. Instead of being embarrassed because they don’t know or understand the material, they’d rather become the class clown or confrontational and defiant. That’s at the root of the discipline issues.

Someone who knew of my constant and vocal advocacy on behalf of our boys in Maryland

schools gave me a copy of the “Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland’s African-American Males” that was published in 2006. That task force worked for over three years and had a wonderful set of recommendations, packaged in a nice glossy cover, with beautiful pictures. Three years later, the department convened a work group to study how the recommendations could be implemented. That was 2010, and in 2020, the problems persisted—growing discipline, decreasing achievement.

Therefore, I proposed to our state board that another task force be charged to study the problem and develop a new set of recommendations to address the underperformance of Black boys and young men in Maryland’s schools. However, this time, we would take a different approach.

I wanted experienced, career educators who knew what it was to stand in front of 35 youngsters and teach, even if some of them didn’t want to learn. We recruited 22 members for our task force who collectively had over 435 years of education experience, including as superintendents, board members, teachers, principals, and instructional specialists.

Key recommendations addressed the need for our teachers to be trained on how to educate Black boys. Also it was vital that our boys are taught to read as well as our girls. Overall, our students are not doing well in reading and language arts, and a key reason for their poor performance is how they’re being taught. We strongly recommended implementing systematic, explicit phonics instruction.

What makes you hopeful that implementation will be different than it was for previous task forces?

I told task force members we didn’t want “pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by” recommendations. Instead, we wanted strategies and methods that are attainable for school districts and doable in the typical classroom. We had educators on our task force who knew how to make it work. Also, we knew that the Maryland state board members were supportive and going to monitor [the implementation of recommendations].

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We wanted to make sure that we had accountability built into the report. When the state board had given its approval of the final report, I told the task force members, “You have to be there at board meetings from now on, saying, ‘Wait a minute. In the report, didn’t it say that you’re going to be doing this? But we don’t see that happening.’ You can’t give up the fight. You have to hold the state board accountable.”

The report’s next steps are key to implementing the recommendations. An advisory council will be formed to assume the leadership for the initiative and begin the implementation phase. We knew Dr. [Karen] Salmon was retiring in June, and there was talk that maybe we should wait until our new superintendent comes in July. But when these students—especially our boys—come back after being out of school for a year and a half, they’re going to be even more of a challenge for schools and teachers trying to reorient them to new school environments with new expectations. What better time than this for a new beginning?

The president of our state board, Clarence Crawford, said, “Vermelle, you’re going to have to include some schools to pilot these recommendations for proof of concept.” So early in our process, I began to reach out to principals, asking them if they would be amenable. I later invited them to attend our meetings and provide input as we formulated the recommendations.

Proof of concept is the driving force behind the implementation of the recommendations. The goal of our pilot schools is to see suspension rates coming down. We want to see improvements with report cards and GPAs and in formative and summative assessments. We want to receive positive anecdotal data from teachers, administrators, and parents.

We currently have 14 pilot schools representing 8 school districts. Each school was required to form an implementation team—five to nine people, including a building administrator, teachers, counselor, a community or business leader, and a parent. In addition, we asked the high school teams to include a student.

These teams have the responsibility of overseeing the recommendations at their respective schools. Furthermore, the advisory

council will assist team members to provide professional development, supplemental training, and help schools with monitoring and assessing the recommendations.

Will pilot schools report back?

Absolutely! That’s going to be key for proof of concept. We provided detailed instructions describing the roles for the implementation teams along with the responsibilities for pilot school principals to ensure accountability. We limited the number of pilot schools to start, because the advisory council members wanted to have a manageable number of schools that we could effectively oversee, that we could visit and review their data. A member from the Office of Research is on the advisory council. He will be working with the district-level data collection offices.

We’re also asking the pilot school principals and their staff to help spread the word. Several of these strategies may be unfamiliar for some parents. For example, we have one school that wants to have single-gender classes. Title IX guidelines must be followed to the letter, which takes a great deal of administrative preparation and advance communication with the parents, who may not understand how those classes will work and the benefits for the children. Most importantly, the teachers will need initial and ongoing training to be effective.

It will be vital for our pilot schools to begin to change the culture and environment of their buildings. The teachers must have a heart for their boys, gain their trust, and gain their respect. I tell teachers that when you’ve bonded with a boy, he will jump through hoops for you. He will work hard. He will be committed to success because he wants your approval. This is especially true with our Black boys, who often feel disrespected by some teachers and sometimes by society. They must feel that you respect them and that you want to help them succeed. But at the same time, I tell teachers not to lower their standards but help their boys to rise to the standards. They don’t need you to feel sorry for them. These youngsters need teachers to equip them with the skills needed for success in school and in life.

At my school for boys, the grades were A, B, or do it over again until it is an A or B. I would have boys say, “Wait a minute. At my school last year, we could get C’s.” I said, “Honey, I’m going to tell you something. A ‘C’ is average, and in this world, a young Black man can’t afford to be average. You’ve got to do your best, and you can do your best. I will help you. I will support you. But I’m not accepting anything less than your best.”

By helping our Black boys, we are going to help all our students. Furthermore, it’s not just Black boys that are underperforming. The underperformance of boys when compared to their female counterparts transcends race and ethnicities. That’s not happening only in Maryland but across the country. I want our girls to do great, but it’s not a zero-sum game.

In Maryland, we’re starting with the children that are doing the very worst, and that’s our Black boys. Once we have proof of concept and implement the successful strategies in more schools, we can begin working with other groups who are not doing well, who are failing in disproportionate ways. As educators realize what can be done, I believe they will do it.

Why is the Maryland state board well positioned to do this work?

The key part was having the data disaggregated, not just by race but also by gender. Many state boards aren’t doing that. They only follow the reporting requirements of the U.S. Department of Education, [which] doesn’t require the data be disaggregated by gender for [school] report cards. Unless state or even local boards begin to drill down into the data in all forms, the problem with our Black boys will be less obvious to policymakers and parents.

The Maryland state board members I’ve worked with over the past three years have been phenomenal. When they started analyzing the same data I had been requesting, they were disturbed and wanted to do something. I commend our board president at that time, who supported the proposal and placed it on the board agenda for discussion and approval. Our current board president, Clarence

Crawford, shared how he had come through high school and couldn’t read because he was dyslexic. Despite his disability, he overcame and excelled. [Superintendent] Salmon could see that same data, so it was relatively easy to get her support. Two members of our board, Dr. Joan Mele-McCarthy and Senator Gail Bates, came to me without my even asking and offered their assistance.

After the board’s approval of the final report, Dr. Salmon asked me a question that no one has ever asked me in all my years as an educator: “How much money do you need to make it happen?” I was speechless. She allocated \$1 million to start, and the other \$2 million will come in years two and three. The [pilot] schools will be getting their notice of grant award soon and then will begin to write their action plans and budgets. Someone once told me that to make anything happen, all that is needed is money and a maniac. While I wouldn’t call us maniacs, we *are* passionate. Now we have the money and the determination to make it happen.

The task force report presents a recommendation, a roadblock, and a strategy for overcoming it. Why was that important?

I borrowed that format from the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse. It’s very practical and user-friendly. I appreciate that the approach is not to only tell me the problems I’m going to have but suggest approaches to circumvent those problems. Don’t just give me recommendations; give me ideas, strategies, and ways to make those recommendations work.

Those suggested approaches and strategies are designed to prime the pump, so to speak. Teachers and administrators are extremely creative and know their populations. When they look at our strategies, they might say, “Instead of doing it that way, perhaps we can take that little piece and do it this way and put our own slight twist to it.” We wanted to give them something practical that they weren’t merely going to look at and put into a filing cabinet. To the contrary, we want this [report] to be an often-used

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resource book, filled with handwritten notes, Post-it notes, and paper-clipped pages.

Do you see this work as primarily about changing boys' behavior or adult skills and behaviors?

Our boys don't need to be fixed or changed; they need to be understood and educated. If any fixing or changing needs to occur, it's our teachers and administrators that need to fix their instructional methodology or change their policies. They need to revisit their pedagogical skills. The children our parents send to our schools are the best they have. Unfortunately, too many parents are being told that there's something wrong with their son because he won't sit still, can't focus, doesn't do his homework, won't cooperate. Well, we need to look at our instructional methods. Do we teach him like he's a boy?

A prime example of the boy-girl behavioral differences that manifest in the classroom is how they relate to their teachers. When I used to substitute teach, I'd walk into the class, and little girls who have never seen me before start drawing me pictures and bringing me candy, because they're trying to bond with me. Most girls want to please the teacher and want the teacher to like them—boys, not so much. Boys bond differently, and the wise teacher will realize that in order for their male students to be receptive to their instruction, they have to bond and earn their male students' respect. Many boys are not going to be able to be taught the same way as girls and still be successful. The data show this.

The report includes a COVID appendix on using federal relief funding to accomplish some of the goals. Where do you see this work leading?

Black boys were struggling even before the pandemic. Undoubtedly, they're going to be struggling more this upcoming school year. [Presenters at a recent state board meeting] talked about students who were probably

the ones most successful in virtual learning environments: those students who were self-disciplined, independent learners, effective communicators, good at reading and writing and willing to ask for help, highly intrinsically motivated, students with strong time management and technology skills, students with a clear and dedicated interest in online learning, and students with clear structure at home. For those of us familiar with boys and how they learn, those qualities are not often there.

I'm speaking in generalities, because there are some little boys who did thrive in virtual learning. However, when I saw "self-disciplined, good readers and writers, independent learners, strong time management skills," I didn't recognize the typical male learner. [I saw] my little boys, whose moms said, "Okay, Johnny. I'm going to work now. Don't forget to log onto your computer at 10 o'clock." And as Johnny watches his mom get in her car, he switches on his video game or slips out the backdoor to the basketball court.

What can other state boards learn from this work? What obstacles might they find?

One of the obstacles is the fallacy that boys don't need help—it's the girls who need help and are not excelling. But data don't lie. In the 1980s, when girls weren't doing as well in math and the sciences, [states and districts] began to change the curricula. Girls tend to do better in language arts, [so they began] to put more language arts into math. It wasn't good enough to know that 5 plus 5 is 10. The student had to explain *why* the answer was 10 and write the steps they followed to arrive at that answer. Girls began to pull ahead of boys, not just in Maryland but internationally.

However, while math curricula were made more girl-friendly, why couldn't the curricula developers work to make the language arts and reading programs more boy-friendly?

Those are the steps the state and local boards can take: Make sure that they are looking at the data and the curricula, that they're considering some of the biases against boys, such as that boys will be boys and girls are better students, or

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that that's how boys are, and that's how they will always perform.

Simpson: Some of the policy-related potential concerns or opportunities start with the question that opens the report: "Why Black boys?" Just getting people to confront, accept, and then buy in to this whole notion around why this work is important starts to frame the policy discussion. If you have to struggle with people to get them to understand why it's important, then that same resistance is going to be there if and when you start to make policy change.

In Maryland, there is both state and local control, so there are certain things that can be done at the state level, and certain times when the state board will exercise authority, but locals also have a whole lot of autonomy. Finding the right spaces and opportunities to be able to reconcile the two is important.

At the board meeting right after the task force report was presented, there was a presentation from the department about how they had made recommendations for some regulatory changes in the equity regulations and guidebook that Maryland has in place. They reviewed the report and looked for areas where some of those task force recommendations [could be] integrated into regulatory changes and into the equity guide.

Greene: The Maryland school report card that is displayed on the department website shows how well schools have done [by] equity groups. But what isn't shown are [data] disaggregated by gender. In reality, the scores of Black girls have propped up the scores of Black boys. The data are not a true picture of how the boys are doing. So we made the recommendation that the Maryland school report card should show data disaggregated by gender and not just by race. Other states should also consider how their data are reported to their stakeholders.

Simpson: Another [change] was related to the educational equity regulation, requiring deescalation and other evidence-based interventions and training for staff. Another was around including, and building capacity for, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and antibias. You have recommendations around Advanced Placement courses and addressing reduced enrollment.

The task force has been disassembled, but now there's an advisory council that's moving forward. Establishment of the advisory council [was] priority action A in the report. Priority action B, identification of pilot schools, has been pretty much completed. Priority action C, providing guidance to the districts, is part of the work that will be done through the advisory council and the priority schools, but I consider it in progress. Priority action D is the creation of an Office for Achievement of Academic Excellence and Equity for Black Boys. That is still very much part of the immediate next-step priority actions.

Greene: I don't think any other state has an office dedicated to the academic achievement of Black boys. I believe Maryland would be the first to elevate addressing this issue to the state level. The advisory council would then transition into that office.

We want to demonstrate proof of concept in Maryland and encourage other states to replicate our methods. It's not rocket science. It just takes determination, money, passionate people, and commitment. Although the money helps tremendously, many of the recommendations don't require an inordinate amount of money. It primarily requires educators to be creative and to use resources already at hand. It requires a commitment to making a difference in the lives of these young people and steadfastly refusing to allow them to fail. Because if our Black boys are in trouble, so are we all.

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