



# The Impact of the African American Male Achievement Initiative on High School Success and Implications for Advancing Equity at a District Level

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RESEARCH SNAPSHOT | OCTOBER 2019

The [African American Male Achievement](#) (AAMA) program, part of the [My Brother’s Keeper](#) initiative in Oakland, California, is the first program in the nation to embed a culturally-centered curriculum specifically targeted to black male students at the district level. AAMA launched in 2010 and is a leading example of [targeted universalism](#) in education.<sup>1</sup> Targeted universalism is a concept developed by John Powell that recognizes universal goals for all people, but also acknowledges that people are situated differently in society and therefore emphasizes the need for strategies that meet the unique needs of groups based on how they are situated relative to institutions, resources, and opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

This study builds on prior qualitative research on the AAMA and related programs. Research by Vajra Watson<sup>3</sup> and Jarvis Givens and Na’ilah Suad Nasir,<sup>4</sup> for example, both informs this study and complements the evidence presented here. Specifically, these reports found that positive changes coincided with the implementation of the AAMA in Oakland, including improved relationships between students and teachers, improved trust between families and schools, and improved grades and lower suspension rates for black males. The present research is the first quantitative examination of the AAMA program’s causal impact and the first evidence of effectiveness for the investments made as part of My Brother’s Keeper.

## STUDY DESIGN

The centerpiece of the AAMA is the “Manhood Development Program” (MDP) class (and, more recently, a set of elective courses) led by black male instructors who are carefully selected based on their history of involvement with the black community, understanding of youth development, and teaching experience. The class meets daily and is embedded in the regular school day, rather than taking place episodically in an extracurricular context. This design provides students with sustained relationships, affirmation, high expectations, and belongingness *in school*, a setting in which black males are often minoritized.

The courses emphasize broad academic mentoring, including leadership and character development activities, personalized support (e.g., transcript evaluation and guidance counseling), and field trips that expose students to colleges and careers.

## KEY FINDINGS

Access to the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) program increased the one-year school-persistence rate of black male students by 3.6 percentage points (i.e., from 91.5 percent to 95.1 percent). This corresponds to a 3.2 percentage point increase in the high school graduation rate for black males who have access to the AAMA in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Access to the AAMA also seemed to have “spillover” effects for black female students, who saw a 1.8 percentage point increase in their one-year school-persistence rate (i.e., from 93.6 to 95.4 percent).

## RESEARCH TEAM

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## SAMPLE

This study utilized records from the California Department of Education that report counts of enrolled students and the number of students who dropped out by the subsequent academic year. The researchers used data from a 12-year period – academic year 2005-06 through academic year 2016-17 – for the nine regular, comprehensive high schools in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD).<sup>1</sup> Overall, the longitudinal dataset contains 15,250 student-year observations of black male students and 14,713 student-year observations of black female students in grades 9-12. On average, 49 black male students and 47 black female students were enrolled in each grade level each year.

The courses use a culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, relying on materials and instructional methods that align with students’ lived experiences. Finally, the courses promote peer-support by emphasizing unity among all students and by clustering students with diverse achievement levels in the same classrooms. Outside of school, the program also features conferences, community gatherings, and a summer internship program. AAMA also works with district leadership to provide professional development for teachers and engages parents to support their child’s college readiness.

The researchers point out that the program draws in key

## MINDSET SCHOLARS NETWORK

The Mindset Scholars Network is a group of leading social scientists dedicated to improving student outcomes and expanding educational opportunity by advancing our scientific understanding of students’ mindsets about learning and school.

“active ingredients” from traditional social psychological interventions (e.g., fostering positive identity formation and sense of belonging in order to counter pervasive negative stereotypes of black males). As mentioned above, it also draws on models of culturally relevant pedagogy by placing a special focus on students’ critical understanding of society and their place in it.<sup>5</sup> This is accomplished through community-based projects and units like, “The African American Holocaust,” “The Struggle for Liberation and Dignity,” and “The Black Male Image in American Media.”

The program first became available in the 2010-2011 school year for 9<sup>th</sup> graders at three OUSD high schools. From there, it expanded to three other high schools and to higher grades within participating schools. At the same time, staffing, leadership, and funding changes resulted in the program becoming unavailable in certain grade levels. The researchers leveraged this staggered implementation of AAMA at different schools and at different grade levels to compare the changes observed among AAMA participants to the changes observed during the same time frame among students who did not participate, using a rigorous statistical method that researchers call a “difference in differences” design.

## KEY FINDINGS

***Access to the AAMA increased the one-year school-persistence rate of black male students by 3.6 percentage points (i.e., from 91.5 percent to 95.1 percent).***

The researchers consistently found that, when the AAMA became available in a certain grade level, the number of black males from that grade who returned to school the following year increased significantly. This finding can also be framed in terms of graduation rates: access to the AAMA during 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades increased the high school graduation rate for black males by at least 3.2 percentage points.

Data also indicate that this impact was particularly large in 9<sup>th</sup> (and, to a lesser extent, 10<sup>th</sup>) grade. Because students’ social identities are particularly malleable during these first two years of high school, this suggests that the AAMA is successful in supporting positive identity development.

***Access to the AAMA also seemed to have “spillover” effects for black female students, who saw a 1.8 percentage point increase in their one-year school-persistence rate (i.e., from 93.6 to 95.4 percent).***

When the AAMA was implemented for the black males in their grade, the number of black females from that grade who returned to school the following year also increased significantly. This increase was smaller than the increase for black males, and was similarly concentrated in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades.

## INSIGHTS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study provides a proof point for high-quality, culturally-relevant curriculum and pedagogy and, more generally, for targeted universalism, which is substantiated here as a promising strategy for addressing equity in a public-school system. Consistent with targeted universalism, OUSD recently introduced programming that targets black females, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander students.

The results are related to empirical literature on the academic benefits of having same-race teachers,<sup>6</sup> attending schools that exclusively serve black or male students,<sup>7</sup> and having access to culturally relevant pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> The AAMA, however, stands apart from these scenarios due to its district-wide scale, its matching of students and teachers in terms of race *and* gender, and its combination of culturally relevant pedagogy with other social-emotional and academic support structures.

As other districts look to the AAMA as a model, it is important to note that the program has benefitted from exceptionally stable founding leadership and key staff, as well as a strong sense of community in Oakland. The cost of the program compared to programs that achieve similar results, though, is quite low. Because it is embedded into the regular school day, the primary costs of implementing a program based on the AAMA are confined to the original development of the curriculum and modest expenses related to out-of-class activities. The non-profit organization [Kingmakers of Oakland](#) was launched to support other schools, districts, and organizations in implementing similar approaches to improve the educational and life outcomes of black males.

Overall, the program can be understood to have substantial long-run social and economic effects, as black males who leave high school face diminished economic prospects and an increased likelihood of entering the criminal justice system. The AAMA addresses these systemic issues not only through direct-to-student work, but by creating a district-wide culture that nurtures the achievement of black males. In turn, the students who participate in the AAMA seem to emerge with a sense of identity and definition of black manhood that elevates a counter-narrative of black educational excellence and that is bolstered by strong, trusting relationships.<sup>3, 4</sup>

## References

1. These schools excluded OUSD’s alternative (“continuation”) high schools and one, small comprehensive high school that has an alternative curriculum and inconsistent data on its AAMA programming.
1. [powell, 2008](#).
2. [powell, Menendian, & Reece, 2009](#).
3. [Watson 2014; Chatmon & Watson, 2018](#).
4. [Nasir, Givens, & Chatmon, 2019](#).
5. [Ladson-Billings, 1995](#).
6. [Dee, 2004, 2005; Gershenson, Hart, Hyman, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2018; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; Holt & Gershenson, 2017; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Redding, 2016](#).
7. [Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Oeur, 2018](#).
8. [Cabrera et al. 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017](#).

## ABOUT THE MINDSETS & THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT INITIATIVE

The Mindset Scholars Network launched a new interdisciplinary initiative in Fall 2016 to explore how learning environments shape the mindsets students develop about learning and school. The project’s aim is to generate scientific evidence about how educators, school systems, and structures can convey messages to students that they belong and are valued at school, that their intellectual abilities can be developed, and that what they are doing in school matters.

Fourteen projects were awarded over two rounds of this initiative. Funding for the initiative was generously provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, and Raikes Foundation.