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A different approach to solving the achievement gap

Teach young men to rely on themselves, says White

By **TERRY DEAN**
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Donnell White believes the best way to solve the achievement gap among young men—young black men, in particular—is to encourage them to become leaders in their own education.

The Michele Clark High School teacher recently won the Golden Apple award that recognizes excellence in the classroom.



Donnell White, Golden Apple winner

White says that school districts across the country, including in Chicago, have missed what's obvious. His solution is Proud Young Men, which he launched this year at Michele Clark Preparatory High School, 5101 W. Harrison.

Quick to point out that Proud Young Men isn't traditional tutoring or mentoring, White calls his idea of encouraging self-reliance and self-empowerment positive peer pressure.

The program is for sixth and seventh graders at Clark, which has Hispanic students but a mostly black student population. White, who teaches seventh and eighth grade math, says he wants to reach boys as early as possible.

He began working on the program two years ago. One of the ways it encourages self-reliance is by having boys assume leadership roles in the classroom.

"'Proud Young Men' goes in a different direction by putting the onus on the kids to be more self-empowered," White said. "When they're in my room, they have leadership positions. There's one boy who's in charge of the chalkboard ... Another young man is in charge of the computer. Another young man is leading the lesson.

"They rotate leadership and they learn to lean on each other. I sit back and ... just encourage them."

White says he's already seen improvement in his male students' grades; many going from F's and D's to C's and better.

"It's a nationwide thing that boys are lagging academically," he said. "It's not just an ethnic thing. It crosses cultures.

"It's the African-American male achievement gap-not just the African-American achievement gap-that's been ongoing for so long without real, tangible solutions that it begs for someone to come up with something different."

White grew up in Austin, attending May Elementary School across the street from Clark, before attending High School at Proviso East High School in Maywood. He says school districts have had trouble honestly identifying the gap. Before becoming a teacher in 2002, White was a postal worker I have been in Phoenix for the past few weeks. No, it wasn't a well-deserved vacation, sitting under the hot sun and enjoying the weather of the desert. Instead I went to help a friend get her house ready during her last few weeks of pregnancy.

My friend is going to be a single mother. Like many single mothers who get pregnant later in life, this isn't how she thought she would end up. But for reasons that I cannot answer, her baby's daddy has decided that a child isn't on his agenda and has stepped out of the picture. My friend spent six weeks in the hospital on complete bed rest prior to my arrival. Now with just a few weeks to go, she needed to get her house in order (literally) before the baby comes.

She had just moved into her condominium and was still in the process of unpacking when she had to be hospitalized. So I went to Phoenix and became the handywoman. I did housework, unpacked books, DVDs and even went so far as to not only install closet organizers, but also to build custom shelves to go in a closet whose angled interior corner wasn't conducive to anything pre-made at the home improvement stores. I also painted and did the wallpaper borders.

I got to meet the baby's father just once when he brought over some cabinets that my friend had been storing in his garage. For the short period of time that I spent with him, he seemed like a nice guy, full of conversation, intelligent.

Yet other than to bring over those cabinets, he hasn't once called or come by to check on my friend as she gets ready to deliver their son.

With Father's Day (June 15) just a few weeks away, I challenge any of the males who read this column who have abandoned their children to write in and tell me and all my readers why they did so.

What is it in the male psyche that allows you to walk away from your children and never look back? You don't have to give your real name, but help me and others understand what goes on in the mind of men who create a life and then bounce.

Is not being married to the woman a major reason that men leave? Is it the threat of child support? How can a man who was abandoned by his own father turn around and do the same thing to his child?

Or what about the men who were raised by their fathers and then don't have a problem abandoning their offspring? What about the women who deal with the man who doesn't take care of their kids? What does it say about her and him? Or, do men really believe that they can create a child with a "good woman" and then leave, saying that the "kids will be OK."

Now I know that there are many men who could have left but didn't. So tell us your story as well. Tell us the sacrifices you were willing to make to make sure that you were involved in your child's life, how much "baby mama drama" you had to endure just to be able to know your child.

And to be fair, I know there are some females that have some stories to tell as well. So if the men don't respond, well, let us know the story about how you did all you could to make the child available to its father and the man still stayed away.

contact: westside2day@yahoo.com living and raising his kids in Oak Park. White still lives in Oak Park and said the high school and elementary school districts there have been struggling with an academic achievement gap between black and white students for years.

"The problem that Oak Park is having is they don't know how to label what's happening. And as soon as you label it racially, there's a problem, because Oak Park-with all its liberalness-is still not comfortable dealing with things in that direction," he said.