Enhancing African American Youth Academic Success

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Abstract

In the state of Iowa, persistent disparities exist between the academic performance of African American youth and the overall student population. Communities in Iowa thus have a critical opportunity to promote academic success among African American youth. With the goal of addressing these disparities in education, we evaluated how best to collaborate with African American residents to build upon the strengths of families and to create new initiatives or modify existing programs to improve educational success. Community leaders, Iowa State University faculty, and university Extension and Outreach staff recruited 45 parents raising African American youth as well as experienced African American educators living in the community. These individuals participated in a series of study circles and action forums and shared their experiences and recommendations for strengthening educational programming for African American youth in the county. Their guidance informed program content, delivery approaches, implementation strategies, and outreach to the African American community in Iowa. Findings may be transferable to other contexts.

The scholarly literature on academic achievement among African American middle and high school students is vast. Researchers have primarily focused on how individual factors (e.g., effort, attendance, grades, engagement, motivation, and self-concept), family factors (e.g., academic socialization, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, involvement, human capital, cohesion, and social support), school factors (e.g., climate, cohesion, culturally responsive pedagogical practices, and cultural incompatibility), and community factors (e.g., accessibility and availability of youth programming) affect academic performance (Benner et al., 2016; Howard & Terry, 2011; Hudley, 2009; Stanard et al., 2010; Stewart, 2007; Whaley & Noel, 2011). In addition, community agencies and networks have implemented various programs to support school-based programming and to advance academic outcomes among African American students, who are often underserved (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010). Other efforts have focused on institutional change within school districts. Educators have also worked to ensure consistency in program implementation across schools, to enhance teacher effectiveness (e.g., attitudes, encouragement, and expectations), and to cultivate relationships and a supportive school community (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Jackson, 2007; Williams, 2010). Outside of the school context, churches and mentoring networks have made positive impacts on African American youth's academic engagement (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Davis, 2008; Jackson, 2007; Pirtle, 2008). Families have also been key in promoting academic success among youth (e.g., monitoring homework). Thus, programs that help youth connect to mentors and resources and that promote parent engagement are key to youth academic success (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Davis, 2008; Jackson, 2007; Mandara, 2006).

African American youth could benefit from programs and services designed to help them achieve their academic goals. Through Iowa State University (ISU), Extension and Outreach offers programs that provide information and education for building stronger relationships, families, and communities—all of which can help youth throughout their lifetimes (ISU Extension and Outreach Human Sciences, 2017a, 2017b). ISU Extension and Outreach is funded by a variety of sources, including federal, state, and county tax dollars, contracts, grants, and user fees. This organization has vast opportunities to offer culturally appropriate programming and collaborate with diverse community stakeholders to reach underserved groups, like African American residents, and to build community capacity for offering and sustaining effective programs (Zeldin, 2000). Through research and program implementation, ISU Extension and Outreach helps Iowa residents make choices that can enhance their lives (ISU Extension and

Outreach, 2015). Specifically, ISU Extension and Outreach's mission is to "build a strong Iowa by engaging all Iowans in research, education, and Extension experiences to address current and emerging real-life challenges" (ISU Extension and Outreach, 2017).

Transdisciplinary teams are particularly well suited to solve complex problems and to have an impact in communities beyond campus borders (Bazeley, 2018; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016; Stokols et al., 2008; Szostak, 2015). As described in this study, a diverse set of stakeholders— ISU faculty, ISU Extension and Outreach staff, community leaders, and residents—connected to "translate university research into practice for local individuals, families, employers, and communities" (ISU Extension and Outreach, n.d.). This collaboration reflects a commitment to understanding the structural and cultural challenges that affect contemporary families and that place stress on Extension services. By listening to residents' perspectives and experiences, ISU faculty, graduate students, ISU Extension and outreach professionals, and community leaders can work together to "reinvent" Extension, advance inclusive cultures, and strengthen local communities. Extension and Outreach programs can both collaborate with school systems to identify and address practices that undermine academic engagement, and identify practices and policies that help cultivate positive African American development (Hawkins, 2014).

In Iowa, African Americans make up 4% of the state population. This proportion is rapidly increasing; a 199.3% positive change occurred from 1980 to 2018. Polk County, the home of Iowa's largest city and state capital, Des Moines, has the highest concentration of African Americans in the state. Polk County had 34,357 African American residents in 2018; 24,346 of these residents lived in Des Moines, accounting for 19.5% of the state's African American population (The State Data Center of Iowa and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans, 2020). These population trends in Iowa and Polk County are consequential for the public education system. Though African American youth only constitute 6.2% of the state's school enrollment, African American enrollment increased by 70.7% from 1999 to 2019.

In 2019, African American students comprised 12% of the student population across nine school districts in Polk County. In comparison, 6.5% of students enrolled in prekindergarten through 11th grade throughout Iowa were African American (Iowa Department of Education, 2020a). Though the state of Iowa reported a graduation rate of 91.6% in 2020— which can be attributed in part to academic support programs like Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), middle school skill building, and graduation walk—this was not the experience for African American students who had an 80.7% graduation rate (Bowman et al., 2018; Leuwerke et al., 2021; Office of the Governor of Iowa, 2020; United Way of Central Iowa, 2021). Atwell and colleagues (2019) pointed to marginal gains in state graduation rates among low-income students, which is a cause for concern.

In 2020, Polk County had a higher graduation rate (94%) than the state average (91.6%), but again, fewer African American students in Polk County graduated (90.7%) compared to the overall student population (Iowa Department of Education, 2020b). This graduation gap can affect earnings, students' likelihood of enrolling in higher education, and their prospects of earning college and professional degrees (Blackman et al., 2005; Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; The State Data Center of Iowa and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Closing education gaps will help African Americans overcome the disadvantages associated with being poor, being underemployed, and having lower median household and personal incomes (The State Data Center of Iowa and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans, 2020).

In light of the research on African American youth academic achievement and the opportunities available through ISU Extension and Outreach, we sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences and educational goals of African American families in Iowa related to youth academic success?
2. What are families' recommendations for using family strengths to promote educational success?
3. How can programs be adapted to advance academic success among African American youth?

Method

The authors leveraged their varying personal experiences, disciplinary trainings, and professional expertise to conduct this study. Half of the team members identified as African American,

two were White, and two were White and Latino. All reported being middle-class. Among the four African American team members, two were educated in Polk County, Iowa, and two were not. The former also raised African American children who attended Polk County schools. Among the White team members, both were educated in Iowa, but only one attended Polk County schools. Neither had raised children who were educated in Polk County schools. One, however, raised children who attended another county's public schools, and the other supported the education of a biracial relative who attended Polk County schools. Between the two team members who identified as White and Latino, one was educated in Polk County schools, and the other raised children who attended another county's public schools in Iowa. All but one team member had experience with supporting African American youth academically.

Team members first met in August 2017 at the Polk County Extension Office for orientation and training. In the following meetings, team members met via Zoom videoconferencing to plan next steps and assess progress. In October 2017, Hurt received institutional review board approval from ISU to conduct the project.

Recruitment

Team members used personal contacts and knowledge about Polk County to recruit African American adults and youth to the project. Advertisements about the project were placed in community advertisements (e.g., Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans, ISU Extension and Outreach) and displayed at community events and programs. The authors asked Polk County residents who identified as African American *or* who were raising an African American child and were willing to participate in a group discussion to contact Hurt by either phone or email to enroll in the project. Participants were not required to be a parent or to have children currently enrolled in school. In the group discussions, participants reflected on not only their previous experiences but also their current lived experiences in the community. The authors used this purposive sampling approach to narrow the group and communities to whom the results and recommendations may be transferable (Guba, 1981).

The authors modeled this project's approach after the community engagement, participation, and reflection methods used in Mid Life and Beyond, a project that used community-wide dialogues to identify ways to make communities better places for people to live during middle age and beyond (ISU Extension and Outreach Human Sciences, 2017c). These dialogues occurred in the context of study circles and action forum discussions.

Next, we describe the participants in the present initiative's study circles and action forums. Our goal was to enroll different participants in each activity so that the perspectives would be unique to each group. One woman, however, took part in both a study circle and an action forum, as the facilitators of the action forum were not aware that she had previously participated in a study circle. We acknowledge that there may be redundancy in the information she shared.

Study Circle Participants and Procedures

All 22 of the study circle participants were African American, including 14 adults (11 women, three men) and eight youth (three males, five females). Among the adults, the youngest was 35, the oldest was 79, and the average age was 49. Among the youth participants, the average age was 13 (with a range of 12 to 16). Four adults were single, eight were married and living with their spouses, and two were widows. Adults had an average of two children ranging from 1 to 8 years of age. Most had completed some college or technical school training (ranging from a high school diploma or GED/HiSET to an advanced degree). Adults resided in households with average annual incomes ranging from $50,000 to $59,000; individual incomes ranged from $40,000 to $69,000 or more. Adult participants had lived in Polk County for an average of 31 years (ranging from 7.5 to 70 years). Among the youth participants, the average highest grade completed was eighth grade (ranging from seventh grade to 12th grade). Most youth had lived in the county for their entire lives (ranging from 7 years to one's entire life).

From October 2017 through December 2017, 22 adults and youth participated in four study circles at a centrally located family resource center that was familiar to participants. Two team members facilitated each group with at least five residents, all of whom provided consent before participating in the project. The purpose of the study circles was to listen to residents' experiences and to learn about their educational goals, ideas, and needs related to promoting young people's academic success, and the authors worked together to develop a list of questions that aligned with the project's goals. The groups' small size helped to ensure that all participants had an opportunity to

share their ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the study circles, adults reflected on their personal experiences with school, their hopes for their children, and educational programming in the community. Youth spoke about the significance of adults, their plans, and youth programs. Appendix A documents specific questions and probes. All youth and adults described their experiences, shared their opinions and ideas, and suggested possible approaches for educational programming in the community. Anyone could refuse to answer any question without penalty. Each study circle lasted about 75 minutes, and the authors compensated each adult and youth participant with a $25 Walmart gift card and a meal.

Action Forum Participants and Procedures

From February 2018 through April 2018, 23 residents took part in four action forums informed by the key points raised in the study circles. Action forum participants were recruited using the same procedures that were used to enroll the study circle participants. Residents reviewed ideas and recommendations developed by the study circles and endorsed the best programs and approaches for enhancing African American youth's academic success (ISU Extension and Outreach Human Sciences, 2017c). The authors scheduled four action forums on weekday evenings and Saturday mornings at the centrally located family resource center. Two authors facilitated the action forum discussions. On average, five residents participated in each action forum, and the authors compensated each resident with a $25 Walmart gift card and a meal.

At first, 18 adults and 11 young people enrolled in the action forums. However, the authors could not reach four of the adults and two of the youth, so these six individuals did not ultimately participate. In total, 14 adults (two men and 12 women) and nine youth (one male, eight females) participated. Eleven of the adults were African American. Among the three other adults, one declined to identify their race, and two were White women who were raising African American children with African American coparents. The mean adult age was 53 (ranging from 34 to 82), which was older than the average age of the study circle participants. Eight adults were married and currently residing with their spouses, three were single, and three were widows. Adults had an average of three children (number of children ranged from 1 to 6) and had completed some college or technical school (ranging from a high school diploma or GED/HiSET to an advanced degree). Adults resided in households with average annual incomes of $40,000 to $49,999 (ranging from $10,000 to $19,999 to more than $69,000). Adult participants had lived in the county for an average of 46 years (ranging from 4 to 75 years). The average age of youth participants was 12.7 years (ranging from 9 to 17), and the average grade youth had completed was seventh grade (ranging from third grade to 12th grade). All but one youth participant reported that they had lived in the county their whole lives; one young participant declined to respond.

Data Collection

The facilitators documented all study circle and action forum discussions with digital audio recorders. The authors uploaded these digital audio files to a secure, university-controlled, password-protected computer server after each discussion. All team members had access to the audio files. In addition, Transcribe Me, a professional transcription service, transcribed all digital recordings. The authors transferred digital recordings to Transcribe Me via a secure electronic process. After the research team received the preliminary transcripts, O'Connor checked the audio recordings against the typed transcripts. Adding transcription as a step in the research process provided another avenue for data analysis and permitted the data to be stored in a different medium. In total, Transcribe Me produced 124 pages of transcripts for the study circles and 123 pages of transcripts for the action forums. The data set included both digital recordings and transcripts that yielded descriptive data about the issues under study, which may facilitate transferability of the project results and recommendations to other locales (Guba, 1981).

Analyses

Hurt reviewed the digital recordings and transcripts and used content analysis procedures to gain a better understanding of participants' perspectives, to identify similarities and differences in their responses, and to draw conclusions about patterns or themes in the data (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2020). Saldaña (2011) defined content analysis as "the systematic examination of texts... to analyze their prominent manifest and latent meanings" (p. 10). This analytic approach was appropriate given the project's goal of learning about the content of the study circle discussions. The analytical procedures involved iterative

sequences of reviewing, categorizing, verifying, and drawing conclusions from participants' responses (Miles et al., 2020).

Hurt drafted the preliminary findings using the focus group recordings for reference. The other authors evaluated the credibility of the findings based on their experiences facilitating the group discussions, their familiarity with participants' nonverbal communications, and focus group summaries. Woods and O'Connor did not facilitate any group, so their analysis of the data represents a dependability audit (Guba, 1981). Through monthly meetings, all authors discussed emergent themes in the data to refine the results presented. Each author made notes about their own self-reflections, thereby creating audit trails to establish credibility (Guba, 1981). Each audit trail included reflections about the preliminary report (Carlson, 2010; Miles et al., 2020). It was important for each author to record their own work to minimize the challenges associated with different authors analyzing participants' responses in dissimilar ways. There were no unresolved analytic differences (Saldaña, 2016). Overall, this analytic process established dependability in coding, analogous to reliability in the quantitative paradigm (Anfara et al., 2002; Guba, 1981).

Results

Study Circles

School Context. Which aspects of the school context are most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Iowa? Residents brainstormed solutions in response to this question. First, they recommended promoting a sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion in all students, even though the students might come from different backgrounds. As a second solution, they suggested hiring and identifying ways to retain educational workers who could help close the equity gap. Such workers would include teachers, support staff, and administrators of diverse genders and cultures, as well as staff with knowledge about positive youth development. These staff could build upon students' abilities and strengths, which in turn could lead to both short- and long-term success. As a third solution, participants described the importance of ensuring that educational materials are interactive, engaging, challenging, and sensible in terms of the skills and knowledge that youth need to succeed in adulthood. Curricula should include content covering the history and contributions of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and this content should be available to parents/guardians. Fourth, participants proposed that there should be assistance to minimize culture shock for culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse youth who are transferring into Polk County school districts.

Professional development is also needed for teachers and other school staff (e.g., administrators and school counselors) related to cultural competency and strategies for developing trusting, positive relationships with diverse youth (e.g., youth of various gender orientations and racial and ethnic groups) and families. Community leaders and directors of programs such as Upward Bound, Youth Leadership Initiative, and Family Connections should collaborate to ensure that these programs are accessible and offered across school districts within the county. School systems must also address problems related to staff effectiveness (e.g., moving too quickly through curricula, tests, and instruction and not fully answering students' questions and concerns). Lastly, school district leaders could explore modifying the school start time to better align with adolescents' needs (e.g., by starting the school day later in the morning).

Support From Parents and Significant Adults. Study circle participants also shared their perspectives regarding important aspects of support from parents and/or significant adults. The adults first emphasized that they wanted to be involved in their children's education. In addition, they stated that this involvement must begin early in their children's lives. Also, parents/guardians noted expectations about both short-term goals, such as good grades, model behavior in school, good study environments, attending classes, getting to class on time, and doing one's best, and long-term goals, like military service, work, or college. Of their expectations, one participant shared:

> To succeed in whatever endeavor they chose to participate in. I just hope the best for them and education is big with me. That's where it starts at. And I don't do the dropout and all that. I don't play that. We got one in college right now and that's my plan but there are other things. And those are my expectations for them, and however far that take them I'll be proud of them.

Building upon these expectations, parents should provide support with study skills; strategies for paying attention, listening, and overcoming frustration; ways of managing peer pressure;

and ways of responding to consequences such as discipline. Though the younger participants noted the importance of study skills, one conceded:

> I remember a program where you actually learned about studying and talked about different ways to study. I didn't really pay attention because I thought I was a pro at studying. [Laughter.] I thought I knew everything about studying but actually, I don't, so I probably should've paid attention to that.

Another youth concurred that various study skills are needed, noting: "Studying is different for all different classes right now. The way you study for biology is completely different from a reading class, intermediate reading or something or writing. And not all studying is the same." Parents should be aware of not only this resistance to studying but also the need for diverse study strategies.

Moreover, parents/guardians stated that they should encourage students to nurture their own desire to do better and improve their standing among other students. Parents/guardians could also make students more aware of individual differences, such as different educational goals or learning styles. Furthermore, parents/guardians could share personal stories about their own educational journeys, including successes and failures.

Program Features. Study circle participants named the program features they felt would be most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Polk County. First, it was important that any programs be held either at a community center or on the ISU campus. One youth recommended:

> Probably, here [centrally located community center] or something or a place where a whole bunch of kids feel safe. I don't know, a place that kids go. I don't know, like the YMCA or something. Maybe they have a room like this or something where kids can go and just talk or whatever. Something like that.

Second, programs must be accessible to everyone, and providing transportation would be helpful. Third, programs could be held on Wednesdays when Des Moines Public Schools have early release from school, on weekday evenings, or on weekends. Offering different types of programs might be useful for working families with various schedules. Fourth, program schedules could first feature a joint parent/guardian and youth session, followed by separate parent/guardian and youth meetings, capped by a final combined parent/guardian and youth session to review the information covered. Fifth, small-group sessions to facilitate involvement and participant interaction would be best. Sixth, facilitators should be qualified, committed, and caring professionals. Seventh, programs should either be free, offered at a low cost, or available on a sliding fee scale. Program administrators should also promote the possibility of adults and youth volunteering time in exchange for enrollment in program sessions. Eighth, program topics might include tutoring, planting a community garden, setting goals with a mentor and developing a plan for achieving them, and establishing parent-youth advocacy or parent/guardian support.

Community Support. Participants commented on aspects of community support that they thought were most important. They recommended using faith-based programs and programs led by community organizations. In addition, they suggested developing stronger connections within the community to provide an improved environment in which neighbors were willing and committed to helping each other. Suggested avenues for community connection included mentoring, looking out for each other's children, sharing information and resources, ensuring the basic needs of all children so that they can be ready to learn and be effective in school, and making resources available to those who need financial support to enroll children in extra learning activities, such as tutoring. Such connections could help support all families, not just African American families. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of regularly offered local events in Polk County, such as Iowa Days, and I'll Make Me a World. The Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans publicizes these annual activities through their listserv along with an African American resource guide. They also discussed the importance of publicizing resources using flyers, social media, referrals, church networks, barbershops, salons, grocery stores, and social service agencies. Building upon the insights that participants shared in the study circles, we next summarize ideas shared in the action forums.

Action Forums

Sense of Belonging. When adults and youth were asked what aspects of the school context they thought were most important for improving

educational success among African American youth in Polk County, there was strong support for promoting a sense of belonging for all students of different backgrounds. Participants admitted that even though living in Iowa is a different experience for many families and children, efforts should be made to emphasize the county's advantages and to create a fair environment for all children. Both adults and youth often talked about the difference between equity and equality. Participants described *equality* as making sure that all students are provided with the same resources; they described *equity* as giving students any additional resources they may need to achieve the same goals as their peers.

School-Focused Areas. With this goal of inclusion in mind, adults and youth discussed four school-related areas—the general context, programs, practices, and school personnel. First, both parents and youth advocated for creating welcoming environments, and they said that school programs and events should include a wide variety of cultures and all families. This approach could help teachers, students, and families learn to appreciate differences in people and to value everyone.

Unfortunately, the young participants often spoke about ways that they were not valued in school. For example, they noted feeling incapable, not being nurtured, missing opportunities, or not being open to educational experiences. Parents discussed strategies and practices that they gave their children to help them manage these experiences, including advice to ask questions when they do not understand. Youth concurred with this point. One young participant, who advised focusing on grades and the impact of one's grade point average, said:

> How important grades are, stay in focus, and all that, and how important a GPA is. Because some kids don't really know how important that is and what effects that can have on you, good effects and bad effects on your future, like just that little GPA doesn't really have anything to do with your future but it really does.

Parents were in favor of cultivating environments where teachers were equipped with multiple effective instructional methods and in which it would be difficult for youth to fail.

Equal Access. Both adults and youth wanted to make sure that there was equal access to school-based educational programs. They all agreed that when programs keep out certain persons, schools exclude students. Programs should not segregate and force children into a particular racial or deficit group but should provide equal opportunity to all children and focus on skill building for all children who want to improve.

Improved Programming and Communication. Participants supported including more students in school initiatives, encouraging parents and youth to participate in programming, and improving communication among parents, youth, and educators. Parents noted that in low-income neighborhoods, schools were less likely to inform parents about their children's welfare and educational performance. Participants felt that parent-teacher conferences were often scheduled too late, after issues and concerns got worse. Parents were also unhappy that biracial children were required to name only one racial classification in their school documentation, thereby not being inclusive and honoring the racial heritage of one parent. They thought registering such demographic characteristics should be consistent across the districts within the county.

Consistent, Engaging Classes. Participants suggested that another avenue for strengthening academics in the county would be to ensure that classes were engaging, interactive, and challenging. One parent offered:

> I feel like the kids that are coming out now, we have to teach them differently. Where we could sit in school for all day with the teacher lecturing us, kids learn differently now. So having teachers that are adaptable to teach our kids in different ways.

Being consistent in class offerings and teaching practices across the county would help children who might be moving between county schools and districts. This approach could include uniform homework policies, policies related to allowing books to travel home, requirements for graduation, college preparation activities, and tracking or grading systems.

Useful Curriculum Activities. The curriculum must include truly useful activities, and both adult and youth participants thought that aspects of the existing curriculum were repetitive and not interesting. Both also underscored a need for more classroom teacher support. Helping teachers find ways to reach students with different learning styles would be critical for improving curriculum delivery. Making the learning environment more

interesting by appealing to different senses with things like colors or nature sounds would be one way to improve the school experience. Youth noted that they were most excited about learning from energetic educators and doing hands-on activities that allowed them to apply ideas.

Courses That Promote Adult Success. Participants suggested that courses should focus on the skills and knowledge that students need to have success as adults, such as job skills, civic education, financial credit, and the history and contributions of various racial and cultural groups. Adults recalled learning basic ideas like phonics and word construction and thought there should be more learning in such areas to help students with reading and understanding. Implementing tutoring for all students to close gaps in learning and to make sure that students understand the material would be worthwhile. Both educators and older students could help with this.

Caring Educators. Parents/guardians strongly supported hiring educators who truly cared about the students, were personally involved in youth development, had high expectations for children's short- and long-term success, and would nurture students' abilities and strengths. Adults commented that school districts should try to change teachers' low expectations of or lack of enthusiasm or interest in youth, especially those who are underrepresented. This was identified as the largest problem in school employee performance. Educators must meet students where they find them, and lack of engagement with students creates communication problems with parents/guardians. Both adults and youth felt that it was more important for a teacher to care about students than to share their racial/ethnic background.

One way to evaluate whether an educator properly understands diversity would be to administer psychological tests, an idea proposed by action forum participants. Both adults and youth supported efforts to hire educators of diverse genders and cultures because such diversity can improve students' comfort level; ensuring representation among students, teachers, and administrators would make it easier for students to approach educators when needed. One parent added:

> In Des Moines public school[s]... students of color now outnumber White students. But our schools don't represent that, our teachers don't represent that, our administrators don't—so when our kids see, "What can I accomplish by going to school?" What do they have to look for?

We describe the participants' reflections about adults next.

Adult Support. Participants spoke on the most important aspects of support from parents/guardians for increasing educational success among African American youth in Polk County. They stressed the significance of setting goals early in a child's development, being sensitive to individual differences among children, and forming strong parent-child relationships with open communication. Both adults and youth warned against pressuring children too much; increased pressure could result in burnout or in students focusing too intently on one long-term goal, such as college. Since parents/guardians give youth important encouragement, they must be involved in their education. Adults noted the important role of parents/guardians in supporting children with special needs or considerations, such as health challenges or learning disabilities. Recommendations for parent strategies included making unannounced visits to the school, taking time to learn about school programs and activities while transporting children to events, encouraging children to focus on short-term goals, and asking for workshops/seminars that improve parents'/guardians' skills in helping children with homework. These results align with current literature on the topic, which supports the importance of enhanced parental engagement and families' role in promoting academic success among youth (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Davis, 2008; Jackson, 2007; Mandara, 2006). Support from peers and other key adults was also presented; we outline these results next.

Support From Peers and Other Key Adults. Along with parents/guardians, both adults and youth in the action forums discussed the role of children's peers and other adults in their community or "village." Other adults in children's lives can help support parents/guardians, especially those who may be parenting alone, by giving them time off and offering support when they have difficult education-related problems. Many of the adult participants recalled being from communities where adults looked out for one another's children and in which the parents/guardians engaged in community parenting. The strength of community relationships like these would be important for improving the culture of the educational system for all children, but especially for African American children. One adult emphasized the importance of aligning with White parents/guardians to

gain information about school activities and programs. This might require attending meetings at community centers in neighborhoods where White families reside. Parents/guardians wanted to receive more resources and information, and they thought that parenting support groups could help them network and be better navigators of the educational system.

Program Formats. Participants offered opinions about types of programs they thought could improve educational success among African American youth in Polk County. First, to remove expense as a barrier and to promote the participation of families of varying economic backgrounds, programs should be either free or low-cost. Second, planners should offer programs at several different times to facilitate the participation of families and children who may be overscheduled. Third, the programs should be fact-based and include topics that are appealing to families, such as human growth and development, cultural identity, and gender identity. Finally, the programs should begin with a joint parent/guardian and youth session, followed by separate parent/guardian and youth meetings, and conclude with a joint parent/guardian and youth session. Although the programs would be intended for youth only, participants agreed that parents/guardians should always be involved so that they could reinforce the information learned in programs and schools at home.

Community Organizations and Relationships. Both adults and youth identified community support as the most important thing for improving educational success among African American youth. Scholars have highlighted the significant impacts of churches and mentoring networks on African American youth's academic engagement (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Jackson, 2007; Williams, 2010). Action forum participants were in favor of improving community relationships to promote cooperation among various organizations that support families, including churches (through bulletins and ministerial alliances), schools, community centers, and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans. Such relationships would help build stronger connections among community stakeholders, publicize programs using social media and announcements, and facilitate the formation of parent support groups early in children's development. Both adults and youth focused on excellence in the community and advocated for including resources and information from more economically privileged

African American professionals in the county (e.g., doctors and lawyers). Discussion also focused on expanding existing effective programs for youth in the county, such as Sisters 4 Success and Jump Start at Corinthian Baptist Church. In summary, a cooperative spirit and effort would ensure that "the best can be given to the most."

Discussion

This project used a transdisciplinary, collaborative approach among scholars affiliated with an institution of higher learning, community leaders, and community-based Extension educators to achieve its stated goals. The project exemplified the principles of engaged scholarship and reflected a mutually beneficial exchange of resources and knowledge among scholars, ISU Extension and Outreach professionals, and community residents. All collaborators had defined roles and participated in the process from its start through its dissemination.

The facilitators enjoyed leading the group discussions with the adult and youth county residents. Team members felt rewarded by the opportunity to meet residents of various ages to discuss African American youth educational success. Observation of the participants in the group meetings was helpful in ensuring the trustworthiness of the data and results (Guba, 1981). All participants described their experiences and their ideas about education in the community honestly, and their eagerness to share their opinions and insights made the job of facilitating the groups easy. Different sources of information were used to triangulate the data collected (e.g., focus group recordings, summaries, and transcripts), thereby ensuring credibility and confirmability of the results (Guba, 1981). Discussions often lasted longer than 90 minutes as residents talked about their own educational journeys; facilitators were effective in keeping the discussion focused on advancing the stated project goals.

These findings corroborate other scholarship that highlights ways to enhance African American academic achievement at the individual, family, school, and community levels (Armstrong-Walker, 1997; Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Benner et al., 2016; Davis, 2008; Howard & Terry, 2011; Hudley, 2009; Jackson, 2007; Mandara, 2006; Stanard et al., 2010; Stewart, 2007; Whaley & Noel, 2011). The themes also underscore the importance of school context and relationships, which has been highlighted in previous work (Brooms, 2019).

This study advances our understanding of how ISU Extension and Outreach can partner with diverse stakeholders (e.g., school districts and community-based organizations that focus on education among youth) to reach African American youth and their families, to enrich educational success, and to build stronger communities (Hawkins, 2014; ISU Extension and Outreach Human Sciences, 2017a, 2017b; Zeldin, 2000). Making gains will be critical to closing known disparities among underrepresented groups whose population is growing fast in places like Iowa (Blackman et al., 2005; Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; The State Data Center of Iowa and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans, 2020). Further, this work highlights notable avenues for future scholars to pursue. For example, scholars could engage parents and youth in dyadic interviews about their educational goals and experiences. Parents and youth could collaborate with school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, and support staff) to discuss innovative ways for students to achieve their educational goals. Communities could cultivate alliances to ensure that various stakeholders are collaborating with each other to promote and enhance youth academic success—a key, complex concern with clear societal implications.

Two limitations are notable. First, both the study circles and the action forums took place on weekday evenings and Saturday mornings. These dates and times may not have been convenient for some youth and adults who wanted to enroll. Second, the demographic profiles and experiences of the study circle and action forum participants may not represent the perspectives of all African American county residents. Despite these limitations, these results are likely transferable to other counties in Iowa and similar contexts (Guba, 1981).

Recommendations and Implications

By adapting the framework for evaluating community development impacts and using the qualitative indicators conceptualized by Sero and Lachapelle (2018), we make recommendations in four areas.

Recommendation 1: Advance Awareness About What People Know
- Use various media accessible to both adults and youth (e.g., URBAN magazine, Facebook, and Snapchat) to help market and communicate the goals of Extension and available programs.
- Identify persons in churches, neighborhood associations, and other community groups willing to serve as liaisons between parents of African American youth and academic professionals and to partner with ISU Extension and Outreach to build a bridge between resources and the African American community.

Recommendation 2: Increase Participation and Promote What People Do
- Identify and promote groups of influential African American individuals in the community who can collaborate and promote broad participation in various community initiatives through relationship building.
- Invite African American adults and youth to plan and lead programming to demonstrate respect for their perspectives and contributions.
- Promote parent advocacy and engagement with the community and schools.

Recommendation 3: Foster Opportunities to Talk to Improve What People Hear
- Require safe spaces for adults and youth so they can have honest conversations about their educational goals and interests and learn more about their needs and wants. Explore opportunities for ISU Extension and Outreach to provide in-service training for educators focused on engaging youth as partners and learners, combining youth development principles and practices.
- Ask local politicians (e.g., school board or city council) to speak at African American community events (e.g., Juneteenth, I'll Make Me a World, and Young Men/Women of Color Conference).

Recommendation 4: Build Capacity to Enhance Knowledge About Resources and Activities
- Review diversity of staffing (e.g., in terms of gender, race, and income) and ensure that caring personnel are committed to a strengths-based approach to develop trust and rapport among diverse youth and families.
- Offer opportunities for ISU Extension and Outreach staff and school educators across the county to examine and review their assumptions and expectations of youth and families of various races, ethnicities, and incomes and residing in different neighborhoods.

- Ensure that ISU Extension and Outreach and school curricula across the county are engaging and cover a range of topics (e.g., life skills curricula covering career readiness, youth financial education, communication, and leadership), build on family strengths, and take advantage of contributions of diverse leaders (e.g., in terms of gender, race, and income).
- Collaborate with school districts to confirm that program offerings are fair and enrollment practices for educational programs are consistent across the county to ensure sensitivity to people with diverse backgrounds.
- Ask African American parents and adults and/or organizations trusted within the African American community to partner with ISU Extension and Outreach and county school districts to develop, implement, and deliver youth- and family-focused programs (e.g., Strong African American Families Program, parenting, and family development) and to promote safe and welcoming learning environments.

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Acknowledgment

Appendix A

Purpose of project: Increase understanding of African American families' goals for youth academic success to inform development of, or revision to, Extension programming designed to promote educational success among African American youth.

Research questions:
- What are the experiences of African American families in Polk County related to youth academic success?
- What are their educational goals?
- What are their recommendations for using family strengths to promote educational success?
- How can programming (i.e., 4-H Youth Development, Juntos Para Una Mejor Educación–Together for a Better Education, Strong African American Families) be adapted to advance academic success among youth?

Questions for study circles
Study circles: Questions designed to learn about African American families' experiences regarding their educational goals and initiatives and programs they believe are needed to enhance youth academic success.

Questions for parents:
It could be helpful to first learn about parents' personal experiences with school as their experiences may influence desires they have for their children.
Think back to when you were a child. What was school like?
- *What did you like about school?*
- *What did you not like about school?*

What did your parents or other family members expect of you regarding school?
What were expectations you had for yourself regarding school?

Questions to learn about parents' hopes for their children.
When you think about your children, what do you want for their future?
- *What do you want for them in regard to education?*

What is going well at home, at school, or in the community that will help your children obtain the education you want them to have? (Refer back to responses to previous question regarding what parents want for their children's education.)
What needs to be improved?

If we were going to develop a program in the community to help youth reach their educational goals, what kinds of information would be important to include in the program?
- *What do youth need help with?*
- *What kind of information would be helpful for parents to have?*

Where would it be held?
When would the program be held? E.g., during the week? Weekends?
What organizations in the community do you know and trust that would be good to involve?
How could we help families learn about the program?

Briefly review key ideas that participants shared.
What else is important to know regarding helping children reach their educational goals that we haven't talked about tonight?

Questions for youth:
Think about 1–2 people who have made a big difference in your life. Think about people who have influenced how you think and what you do. Write their names down on a post-it. Then, write down how they influenced you.

After youth have had a few minutes to write their thoughts on the post-it notes, ask youth to read aloud their response as they place their post-it notes on the flip chart paper (heading: People who influence me).

Now, let's talk about the future. What do you want to do after high school?
- *What or who can help you do this?*
- *What or who might make it difficult?*

If we were going to develop a program in the community to help youth reach their educational goals, what kinds of information would be important to include in the program?
- *What do youth need help with?*
- *What kind of information would be helpful for parents to have?*

Where would it be held?
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What organizations in the community do you know and trust that would be good to involve?
How could we help families learn about the program?

Briefly review key ideas that participants shared.
What else is important to know regarding helping children reach their educational goals that we haven't talked about tonight?

Action forums: Residents will review ideas and recommendations from the study circles and advocate for the most promising and impactful programs and approaches for enhancing youth academic success.

Questions designed to learn about residents' perspectives regarding challenges and successes of supporting youth academically:

What is happening in the community that is helping youth do well in school?
- *Why do you think this is working?*

What isn't happening that needs to happen for youth to do well in school?
- *Why do you think it is not happening?*

What kinds of information or support do you think families need to help youth do well in school?

Action Forum Questions for Polk County Participants

In November and December 2017, our team spoke to more than 20 African American adults and youth, and we asked them about ways to improve African American youth academic success in Polk County. People who live in your community shared a number of ideas and recommendations.

Your task is to review this list and vote for the most promising and impactful suggestions to improve educational success among African American youth in Polk County. Let's begin.

Topics and main questions	Recommendations

Which aspects of the school context are most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Polk County and why?	• Promote a sense of belonging and inclusiveness for all students regardless of different backgrounds.
	• Hire and retain more staff to:
	  • close the equity gap.
	  • include more teachers of diverse genders and cultures (e.g., men, Black), support staff, and administrators (i.e., role models, guidance, connection and community).
	  • provide more caring professionals who are invested in youth development and have high expectations for their short- and long-term success and affirm their abilities and strengths.
	• Ensure the curriculum is:
	  • interactive, engaging, challenging, and relevant to skills and knowledge needed to be successful in adulthood.
	  • inclusive of content that highlights the history and contributions of other racial and cultural groups (e.g., civil rights history in Iowa).
	  • communicated to parents (e.g., Why are books not being used when book fees are assessed?).
	• Other resources and supports:
	  • Provide assistance with students transitioning to Polk County schools from other contexts (e.g., large city, racially diverse, more affluent) to reduce the consequences of culture shock.
	  • Raise awareness of different cultural expectations and norms in communication.
	  • Ensure equity in program offerings (e.g., Upward Bound, Youth Leadership Initiative, Family Connections) across districts within the county.
	  • Attend to diverse needs of students who identify as male, female, and other gender identities.
	  • Address deficiencies in school employee effectiveness (e.g., speaking too fast, teaching curriculum at a fast pace, testing students too quickly, not successfully resolving students' questions and concerns).
	  • Modify school start time to better meet needs of adolescents.

Topics and main questions	Recommendations
Which aspects of support from parents and/ or significant adults are most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Polk County and why?	• Must want to be engaged in child's education • Begin early in the child's development • Set expectations about short-term goals (e.g., good grades, model behavior in school, create good study environments, attend all classes, arrive to class on time, do your best) and long-term goals (e.g., military, work, college) for child and follow-up with support (e.g., secure help with study skills, how to remain focused and listen well, overcome frustration, teach how to advocate for themselves in the classroom/promote agency, peer pressure) and consequences (e.g., discipline), as needed • Provide encouragement to promote motivation and a desire to push oneself among youth • Raise awareness of individual differences among children (e.g., different educational goals, learning styles) • Share stories about own educational journey, including successes and failures
Which aspects of program format are most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Polk County and why?	• Hold program at community center (e.g., YMCA, Willkie House, Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families, park) or Iowa State campus. Must be accessible to all. Provide transportation. Plan on Wednesdays (early release), evenings (i.e., Mondays, Tuesdays), or weekends. Varied hours are helpful to allow for working families with unique schedules. • Begin with a joint parent and youth session, followed by parents and youth meeting independently, and ending with a joint parent and youth session. Small-group sessions. • Staff with qualified, committed, and caring professionals Offer program for free, at low cost, on sliding scale, or allow volunteer hours • Areas: tutoring in subjects, plant a community garden, set goals and meet with mentors to develop a plan for achieving these goals, parent-youth advocacy, parent support
Which aspects of community support are most important for improving educational success among African American youth in Polk County and why?	• Utilize programs from community organizations (e.g., Delta Sigma Theta, tutoring at Drake University, Jump Start at Corinthian Baptist Church, faith-based programming, Broad Lawns CNA Program, Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families Summer Youth Program, Brother Brother, Youth Build, Young Women's Resource Center; Triple D: Des Moines Area Community College, Drake University, Des Moines Public Schools) • Cultivate stronger bonds within the community to enrich an environment in which neighbors are willing and committed to help each other (e.g., promote mentorship, look out for each other's children, share information and resources, ensure basic needs of all children are met so that they can be ready to learn and be effective in school, enrich resources available to those who need financial supports to enroll children in supplemental programming such as tutoring). These issues affect more than only African American families. • Highlight regularly offered activities (e.g., Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans listserv, African American resource guide, Iowa Days, I'll Make Me A World) • Publicize resources using flyers, social media, referrals, church network, salons, grocery stores, and social service agencies