



My Word: Finding strategies to help young men of color succeed

By Sandré Swanson
My Word
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At a Jan. 20 hearing of the Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color, Bay Area stakeholders came together on behalf of California's greatest asset: our young adults.

Before a standing-room-only crowd in Oakland, a consortium of local legislators, policy leaders, community organizers and youth activists highlighted strategies to support the state's vulnerable young men.

Many boys and young men of color -- including African-American, Latino, Asian and American Indian males -- experience triple barriers of poor families, schools and neighborhoods that keep them from achieving lifelong health, happiness and success.

The stakes for California's black and Latino males in particular are high and unequally stacked. They make up 43 percent of the population -- and 65 percent of the state's prison system. High school graduation rates among both groups are about 50 percent or lower. Homicide is the first- and second-leading cause of death for black and Latino youths, respectively.

Given these facts, a "by-your-bootstraps" model falls short of providing effective solutions that actually can improve outcomes for this vulnerable population. The select committee's mission is to identify these solutions by focusing on five key areas: health, education, violence prevention, employment and wealth, and youth development.

At the Oakland hearing -- the second in a series scheduled across California -- the

committee was presented with key policy

recommendations for bridging this opportunity gap, including:

- Expanding employment and career options by aligning K-12, community college, and postsecondary education and training programs.
- Investing in second-chance programs that increase access to public benefits, jobs and skills training for formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Implementing higher standards of outcomes for juvenile justice and safety institutions that allow youth offenders to successfully reintegrate into schools and communities. The good news is that existing local programs already are showing progress in their communities. The Alameda County Health Care Services Agency teamed with local ambulance company Bay EMT to train former youth offenders as certified emergency medical technicians; so far, three have passed the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians. Oakland Unified School District Superintendent Tony Smith, who testified at the hearing, launched the African-American Male Achievement Initiative as part of the district's "full-service community schools" strategy to create partnerships to provide before- and after-school programs, family support centers, and medical and dental services. These are the kinds of comprehensive solutions that work and need government and public support. For anyone who doubts the value of such investments,

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the proof is in the proverbial pudding: for every black and Latino male high school graduate, the state generates more than \$680,000 and \$450,000, respectively, in additional dollars from increased tax revenue and economic productivity, as well as decreased costs associated with poor health or incarceration. We know our youths want to learn, grow and succeed, and the select committee will continue working with California's legislative, nonprofit and community leaders to move policies that will support young people for generations to come. To echo PolicyLink Founder and CEO Angela Glover Blackwell, "We have to be smart, we have to be strategic, because when we invest in our youth, we invest in California's tomorrow." The Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color in California will host a series of regional information hearings throughout the state over the next year. For information on hearings, contact Angela Haywood at 916-

319-2016.

Assemblyman Sandré Swanson, D-Alameda, is chairman of the select committee. He writes on behalf of Maurilio León, acting CEO of The Unity Council, and Junious Williams, CEO of Urban Strategies Council.

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