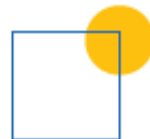




THE BLUEPRINT

Virtual Town Hall



Education:

Challenges and Solutions for School Engagement of Black Fathers

The Blueprint Virtual Town Hall

September 29, 2020

Transcript

Moderator: David Miller

Speakers: Jason Allen and Ron Walker

David Miller ([00:10](#)):

So we are super excited to be hosting a panel today to really look at education and school choice, but more specifically, we want to have a deeper conversation about the role of parents in education, and all too often when we talk about the role of parents in education, that can be a slippery slope, particularly when we begin to think about the role that black fathers play in supporting the educational development of their children. My name is David Miller. I hailed from the great city of [inaudible 00:00:45]. Now I'm currently living in Washington, D.C. I'm a former Baltimore city public school teacher in my earlier life. Now I train teacher sand also write children's books. We have two esteemed presenters today, and I'm going to give each of our presenters a brief moment to introduce themselves. Let me start off with Jason Allen.

Jason Allen ([01:10](#)):

Hello everybody. I am Jason Allen, special education teacher and community builder for Profound Gentlemen, which is an organization that supports the recruitment and retention of male educators of color. Nice to be here.

David Miller ([01:24](#)):

Thank you. Thank you. Now we'll go to Ron Walker.

Ron Walker ([01:29](#)):

Hello everyone. Glad to be here on this session. Ron Walker, I'm the founding executive director of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color. We are a national organization that looks at the affirmative, social, emotional, cultural, and academic development of boys and young men of color. Happy to be with you.

David Miller ([01:51](#)):



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Thank you, Ron. Thank you, Jason, and so gentlemen, today we are tasked with unveiling and really having a deeper conversation about the role of black fathers in education, and so I have a series of questions that I want to ask you guys to really tease out the role that black fathers play in education. Oftentimes we hear that black fathers are not engaged in school based activities. I don't necessarily think that that's true, but today we're going to have a robust conversation, really figuring out what the role of black fathers is as it relates to educating their children, and for both Jason and Ron, get a better understanding based on the work that you do, how we can do a better job of highlighting the role that black fathers play in their children's' education. And so the first question, gentlemen, what are some of the educational factors that impact black fathers today? And I'm going to start with Ron. Welcome.

Ron Walker ([02:50](#)):

Well, I think the paradigm of how school was conceived and constructed is one of those things. I mean, when we think about schools were designed and constructed years ago, it's based on the agrarian calendar. It's based on kids coming back to school after Labor Day, or in the South, earlier than that. It's based on the fact that it was also constructed to be more maternalistic or paternalistic. The father was the breadwinner, the mother did her thing in taking care of home, family, and so it's no surprise that most fathers didn't assume that their place was in school. I know my father didn't. He said, "I bring home the bread, your mother goes to school with you and sees what you're doing in school," but what we do know is that for the black father and for black families, they have a place in school.

Ron Walker ([03:43](#)):

I remember as an educator, lifelong educator of 52 years, one day I went to school dressed in my jeans and baseball cap and I hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and at that time I was the principal of a school myself. So I went to school to see how my children were doing, and particularly my daughter, who was having a little bit of a challenge with one particular teacher, and so I went in and introduced myself and sat down. My wife was home. She said, "You go to school," and the teacher began to talk about my child's behavior and so I said, "Well, what about this, this, and so on?" So the teacher said, "How you know about that question?" And so I continued on and she continued on and I said, "What about this, this, and so on?" And the teacher said, "How do you know that?"

Ron Walker ([04:36](#)):

I said, "Are you looking at the way I look, or are you hearing what I'm saying?" So she had consigned me to a particular role because I didn't look like I might know what I'm talking about until the principal of the school came in and introduced himself to me and he knew I was a principal, but it shouldn't be like that. It doesn't matter what I look like. The fact is I was concerned about what my child was doing and that we need to make sure that all fathers, black fathers, have that same opportunity to ask the right question. A key question I think that we should be asking, as black fathers, is what should my son or my daughter know, understand, and be able



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to do by the time they leave your classroom? That's an easy question, but most of our fathers might not have come prepared. Our job is to help to prepare them to enter the school space.

David Miller ([05:32](#)):

So same question, Jason, what are some of the educational factors that impact black fathers today?

Jason Allen ([05:39](#)):

So I'll start with this. In my 16 years in education, I have been focused on helping to dismantle the school to prison pipeline, and a big component of that is the negative stereotypes of black males. I'm currently working on my first book called Suits, Swag, and Success, that deals with how we change the negative stereotypes of black males, and so being here in Atlanta, we have such organizations as Fathers Incorporated, Black Dads Read, which is important because our black children don't see black men as fathers. When they turn on the news, they see their black fathers getting arrested. They see them as being criminalized and demonized. When they turn on the idiot box that Malcolm X would say is the television, what do they see? They don't see black dads, because a lot of them aren't watching Blackish or other family sitcoms that portray us as who we really are in society, and so I think that the first dynamic is dealing with the stereotypes of black males in schools.

Jason Allen ([06:59](#)):

As a teacher and former administrator on a district and school level, I can tell you firsthand from many districts throughout Metro Atlanta, that we don't call black dads unless the kids are in trouble, and that is the first problem with the schools. We don't acknowledge black fathers, and then we don't engage them until the child has gotten on our nerves so bad and we can't get ahold of mom that we end up trying to find dad, and/or in place of dad and the absence of black male teachers, we called the SOR, and so I think that it starts with a comprehensive conversation of making sure that we're reaching black males and so they understand their role, not just as fathers, but also as educators, because parents are their first teacher. I think that because education has been led by women for so long, we feel as if it's the woman's role to teach, but how are we teaching our black boys in particular how to be men, more so how to be black men in America. So I think it starts with dismantling the stereotypes and helping establish the role of black males in education.

David Miller ([08:18](#)):

Thank you. I mean, both Jason, you and Ron have addressed the issue of myths and stereotypes associated with black fathers, and particularly Ron with the example that you gave, even when black fathers are in the building, coming to either meet with a teacher, meet with an administrator, or just drop by, oftentimes we are put in a box and oftentimes black dads are viewed as people who are not necessarily engaged at the school level, and so the next question is how can fathers become more engaged in the educational lives of their children? Let's drill down, Jason and Ron, and be very concrete. What are some ways that particularly black fathers can be more involved in their children's' educational endeavors? And I'm going to go to Ron.



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Ron Walker ([09:10](#)):

Well, I think Jason said a lot about debunking these myths. Basic questions black fathers can ask, that might seem trite or simplistic, but, "Son or daughter, what are you learning in school today?" That kind of interactive ... that's sometimes, again, the whole schism between mother and father. We're not supposed to ask those questions, but those questions are right in front of us to ask. I think that the father has to feel welcome into the educational enterprise too, which means that mothers need to encourage fathers. Providing? Yes, but these days, both parents are providing. So join me in the enterprise of learning more about what my son and daughter are doing, so that compliment of husband and wife, a two parent home, needs to take place. I think that's very essential.

Ron Walker ([10:16](#)):

See, there's three elements too, I think that a father wants and a mother wants when they go to school, and when you see it in a school and feel it, you know it's there. Number one, fathers need to feel welcomed. We talked a little bit about that. Fathers need to go welcomed and feel as though if I'm coming to school, they want me to be there, not because I'm the disciplinarian, I'm going to whip a butt or I'm going to chide my son or daughter in front of them, but you want me to be there. That sense of welcome. The second I come into your home, I feel welcome. That's the first element. Second element, fathers want to feel honored for who they are, the assets that they bring. Maybe I can coach, maybe I might work as a volunteer in the cafeteria, maybe I may do something that's going to benefit the school itself.

Ron Walker ([11:11](#)):

So schools need to do that assets inventory, and fathers should feel as though they have something to share as a gift, and I think when they do that, it's honoring component. So you've got welcoming, you got honoring, and if you can do those two things right, if you welcome fathers, and you honor who they are, what they can be, what they can add ... we think about brother Phillip Jackson, who used to do a lot for black men going back to school. Then the third thing is almost natural, they'll join, but sometimes we over complexify what it means. So any school leader can put up the welcome mat. Any school leader can say, "I honor you for who you are, the fact that you're coming. You don't have to be a wrote scholar, but the fact that you are here today, you want to find out how you can work in this enterprise," and then third thing, please join me in this working to educate your son or daughter, and most dads I find it's natural, like a magnet.

David Miller ([12:15](#)):

Okay, Ron. And Ron, I'm going to ask you a follow up question before I go to Jason. So Ron, what would you recommend for those dads who are in a co-parenting situation and that mom and dad might not always be on the same page? Dad might not necessarily know what's going on at school. What would your advice be for those dads who are in a situation where they're co-parenting, mom has primary custody, and dad never gets information about the PTA meeting, he never gets a chance to see the report cards. What kind of advice would

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you give to dads in that situation?

Ron Walker ([12:52](#)):

Well, I think, again, you never stop at least putting the olive branch out to say to your spouse ... and the relationships might not be the way they should, but what we're saying is that we brought this son or daughter into the world together and I want to be involved. So first of all, to encourage that kind of outreach to the spouse to say, "We're living in the time of COVID, we're living in a time where society is breaking up all around us, and I want to feel comfortable that as a father, I can at least do something to support what you're doing." So part it is conciliatory, but part of it is outreach. The other thing is if a father ... and I if there's some kind of court order that says he absolutely can't be involved in school or that the school has to contact the mother, you have to understand what the parameters are before you're divulging information.

Ron Walker ([13:51](#)):

You don't want to create another dynamic that says, "You overstretched your boundary. You wasn't supposed to be here." So I think conciliation is the first step, or asking questions of educators. It's nothing wrong ... I mean, fathers used to do it to me, used to call and say, "I am not in my son or daughter's life, but what would you advise? What kind of communication could you, as the principal, give to my wife to show her that I'm serious about wanting to be?" So you have to do it in a way that's safe and [inaudible 00:14:28], respectful, but any steps necessary that might work, and there might be another third party who can help to do it in counseling. Maybe it's a counselor who might be the navigator between the two parents to say that let's work together for the sake of the child.

David Miller ([14:47](#)):

Thanks, Ron. Jason, same question. How can black fathers become more engaged in the educational lives of their children?

Jason Allen ([14:54](#)):

Okay. So I was taking great notes when Ron was talking. That's why I love these live podcasts, because you're able to give information, but also receive it. I'll answer the question in this way. I have seen success in black male engagement in schools with mentoring, tutoring, and coaching. Ron spoke to the fact that there are legal parameters and barriers. We just had a conversation about co-parenting, but then also the stigma of a lot of our parents not finishing school. So that's something that I have experienced. If I had a horrible K through 12 experience, I did not graduate from high school, I didn't get a chance to go back and get my GED, I'm in my late twenties, maybe for some parents, mid thirties for others, and I've struggled being black in America and not having the resources, including the educational support to advance so that I can take care of my children the way that I need to.



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Jason Allen ([16:02](#)):

And so it's the combination of mentoring for parents, where we are recognizing as educators and organizers and activists that we have to provide social emotional support parents as well, because if a mother is not healed from what her family has gone through, regardless if the dad has custody or not, or has access to the child or not, that's still going to be a barrier, and we have to have the right support in schools to meet that. So that's the mentoring piece for parents, and then helping the children through social emotional learning, but then you have tutoring and coaching. And sometimes, really to be honest, most times these things do not happen in the school building, and this is where I encourage school leaders and also black fathers to get engaged, because you may not have finished high school or may not have that degree or advanced education, but you're good at doing something, whether it's fixing a car, that's tutoring your child right there.

Jason Allen ([17:02](#)):

Tutoring is also a form of teaching. So I like to give that example so that black dads can say, "Hey, I found my niche." Another example, with one of the elementary schools I supported in Atlanta, actually in my neighborhood, I rounded up those single dads, dads who wanted to be engaged but had never been reached out to, and we did all types of programs around STEM for our kids. So at [inaudible 00:00:17:27], we had fathers from in the community come in and teach boys how to build a bicycle, and you think about, well, so that's really not helping them pass a test, or that's really not helping them with their reading or Lexile score, but it is, because critical thinking is a part of every discipline that we teach in school, and that's what you have to do when you're showing someone how to build the bikes.

Jason Allen ([17:52](#)):

You're engaging them. You're able to ask questions. You're able to be engaged. You're able to share a part of your personality. A lot of our children miss that with absent fathers and those who are not there, and so mentoring, tutoring, and then the last part is coaching. A lot of our black boys are driven to athletics, and so I encourage coaches to make sure that we are having a strong academic balance. Everybody may not make it to college, but everyone should successfully be able to complete high school so they can survive, and so these are three areas that I focus on with black male engagement, reinforcing the importance of learning outside of the box, because education does not just happen within the four walls of a classroom.

Ron Walker ([18:38](#)):

That's right.

David Miller ([18:40](#)):

And so, Jason, just an additional question. What advice would you give to school administrators around doing more to engage black fathers? I often am at schools and I find that there's absolutely no outreach, no specific



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outreach to dads. Any recommendations you would give administrators and/or even teachers who are going to be joining us?

Jason Allen ([19:07](#)):

I would say this. Here's the reality we noticed across the nation, that family engagement is not a top priority of public school districts. Furthermore, how they're engaging black males, it's almost not even a thought. I was a district administrator in Atlanta public schools and continued the work of Dr. William Shepherd, who helped to build the family engagement program, and he was known as the father of family engagement as the first black male working in the department and he started an initiative to engage black fathers, grandfathers, uncles, et cetera, to be involved in the lives of these black boys who do not have someone present in their lives. I do want to give this stat before I finish answering the question. 43% of our black boys actually have a father figure in their lives, that they're being engaged, but we still have 57% of black boys that we're not reaching.

Jason Allen ([20:03](#)):

They're not being mentored or they're not being coached. They don't have a tutor or someone present in their lives, and so my challenge to administrators would be to act on this data, because as a teacher, I know that school administrators have this data. I know that school board members have this data, and so my challenge to those that are listening and in tune to this town hall is that we become more proactive in ensuring that we are making available the resources for black men to be engaged, that it is more than just a call to action and that we need mentors. We need black males reading in front of their children. We need black males engaged in the community with their children. We need black males going to the museums, going into the history of black Americans in this country with their children, and I feel like the schools and administrators play a big role with that because they have to encourage these things to happen, especially if it's not being encouraged in the communities.

Ron Walker ([21:04](#)):

David, can I add to this explanation that brother Jason gave?

David Miller ([21:09](#)):

Please.

Ron Walker ([21:10](#)):

As an administrator, one of the things that I did on more than one occasion was to declare to my community that you're probably what I would call the community faculty. See, oftentimes we designate the faculty as the fountain of all knowledge, and as brother Jason said, we sort of denigrate or marginalize or minimize the intellectual gifts, the hands on gifts, the mentoring gifts, the coaching gifts that are possessed in the village, and



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that's part of it.

Ron Walker ([21:46](#)):

So any good administrative person is going to map the assets. That's one thing, because you can't teach or you can't work with anybody you don't know. So you really have to do that, but more over than that, I used to declare to my fathers and my mothers who maybe didn't see themselves as essential parts of the school because of their own background, and I said, "No, you are a part of what I call the community faculty. You don't have to be credentialed the way I am, but the fact that you have knowledge that you can share, whether you in a barber shop talking to a young man in their ear, or the beauticians' location and talking to the young lady in their ear, you're providing that wisdom," and as Jason said, schooling, which we sort of designate takes place in a school, in many cases is for compliance. What we're trying to do is provide education for liberation, and that has to come through a whole community, whole village effort.

David Miller ([22:46](#)):

And so our final question, gentlemen, is we're going to ... Ron mentioned a village, and I'm really curious to really understand the larger role that black fathers play in communities, particularly as it relates to helping our children understand the importance of education. So Jason, just talk about on a larger level, why black fathers are important.

Jason Allen ([23:12](#)):

All right. So I'm going to be short with my answer, but I want to say that the role of black males is to lead. We have an obligation to teach, be an example of what our black boys should aspire to be. I mentioned these photos in my background and I showed them in my class and I break down the different roles that black males have played in liberation in this country, and I don't think that enough of our black boys are seeing this because we're not reaching them. I do want to shout out a lot of the organizations in Atlanta that are coming together to support our black boys, because they are being criminalized, and to be honest, with the light of the injustices happening with police brutality, they are a target.

Jason Allen ([23:58](#)):

In Atlanta right now we have the Atlanta City Council that has now changed the course of their action, but a couple of weeks ago, they had given a call to have bright boys detained for selling waters on the corners of Atlanta because they're living in poverty and trying to survive. Think about organizations like Fathers Inc., Hey Atlanta, which is helping the empowering youth, Lillie's Foundation for Change. That's my family's foundation and we support grandparents raising school aged children. A lot of these black boys that they are wanting to detain are living with grandparents, and they're living with grandfathers that have served their time in America. They have helped build, they have lead, and they're unable to do that right now, and so these black boys are looking for someone, they're searching for someone.



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Jason Allen ([24:46](#)):

The only relief that they have right now are the few black male teachers that are in schools, and then also barbershops, and I want to highlight the work that Fathers Inc. is doing because a lot of these young men would say, "Hey, but I've seen my teacher in the barbershop in there with my barber and they're talking about books and they're like, hey, what are you reading right now?" And so can you imagine going into the barbershop, going into the grocery stores, going into black owned businesses as a black boy who's considered a thug and having a brother that looks like you, coming up and saying, "Hey man, how you are doing? What are you reading right now?" In their own language and real time, and so that's a part of leadership. That's a part of teaching and we have to take the stigma of education is just being done by teachers in classrooms out of the equation, because we all play a role in teaching and reaching black boys.

David Miller ([25:39](#)):

Wow, and same thing to you, Ron, building on what Jason has already said, when we look at the larger landscape, what role do black fathers play in disseminating information about the power of education to our children?

Ron Walker ([25:55](#)):

A huge role. First of all, Jason mentioned earlier in the conversation about the impact of television. We know that television is tell a lie vision. It doesn't tell our vision, and so part of what Jason is saying, and I completely agree with, is the fathers are custodians of the community. They're the disciplinarians. They're the ones that's going to model a value system. They're the ones that's going to question what the societal norms are. This comes from The Book of Life by Haki Madhubuti who you know about David, and that's one subscription I would say that fathers in the village needs to have as kind of a document, The Book of Life, because it talks about what it would look like when fathers are fully engaged, when mothers are fully engaged, but typically the role of the black man, to really share that knowledge, pass on that baton, pass on that wisdom.

Ron Walker ([26:49](#)):

That's essential, because what I'm calling for and brother Jason is calling for in his own way, working together in the space, is what I call a conspiracy of care, because everybody in the village has a role and we know, again, that the black man traditionally has been marginalized, has been dehumanized. So part of our charge as movement members and members of the movement ... I mean, I look at Malcolm X by any means necessary back there. It's the fact that we have to bring up our young men and our young women to understand that it is a value system, particularly now more than ever, when people try to corrupt how we believe. So, I mean I just have to echo everything that brother Jason said, and here's the question and I'm going to give the answer. Is it doable? Yes it is. Now is the time. Tomorrow is too late.

David Miller ([27:43](#)):



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Sure. Well Jason and Ron, man, we could roll for three hours, man, because this is a critical conversation that we're embarking upon, particularly when we talk about the role of black fathers in education, and so I just want to thank you guys for participating in the town hall. You guys continue to be on the front lines and continue to uplift and support the ongoing work that Fathers Incorporated is doing and continue to spread the message that fathers are super important in the educational lives of their children. So I really want to thank you guys for your time and thank you for participating.

Jason Allen ([28:26](#)):

Thank you.

Ron Walker ([28:26](#)):

And thank Fathers Incorporated for doing all the great work you've been doing all these years.

Jason Allen ([28:30](#)):

Yeah, salute to Fathers Inc. I'm hoping that anyone that is watching this and is connected to the organization and wants to know more about it will definitely seek that out, because as we're in close, I just want to put this out here that as we are in this pandemic, a lot of black boys who were suspended last school year are still suspended and expelled. So they don't have anywhere to go, they don't have anyone teaching or leading them, and so let's find these organizations like Fathers Inc. and connect with them and do the teaching in the community. Even if these young brothers are not in school, we can still be reaching them. So please, please, everyone that's watching this, find an organization similar. If not, find Fathers Inc. And let's continue doing this work together.

Ron Walker ([29:15](#)):

Freedom schools.

David Miller ([29:18](#)):

Thank you, thank you, and you guys be safe.

Ron Walker ([29:20](#)):

Thank you.

Jason Allen ([29:20](#)):

Same here.

