

RESEARCH BRIEF



Exploring Educational Expectations Among African American Parents

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Education is an increasingly important indicator of quality of life for all Americans. It is therefore important that we isolate and understand various mechanisms affecting educational attainment, especially for underrepresented students. Previous research has positively linked parental expectations to their children's plans for attending college (Davies & Kandel, 1981; Hossler & Stage, 1992) as well as to their actual college enrollment (Conklin & Dailey, 1981). In this research brief, we will examine parental expectations and how they are related to other salient factors as well as discuss important implications.

2003 Parent and Family Education Survey

Data for this research brief is a weighted sample from the 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey, a subset of the National Household Education Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). For this study, the student sample includes African American students in grades nine through twelve who are not home schooled.

Findings

The U.S. Department of Education reports that overall, a higher percentage of girls than boys have parents that expect them to finish college (Lippman et al., 2008). Parental expectations were also higher for students with better grades and for students attending private

schools. Parents with higher incomes also had greater expectations for their children.

For African American high school students in this sample, most parents (62%) expect their children to earn a college degree at either the baccalaureate or graduate level. Income is weakly related to parents' expectations for their children's education; only at the graduate or professional degree level is there a relatively strong positive relationship between parental expectations and household income (see Table 1). However, the relative homogeneity of parental expectations for attaining a baccalaureate degree across income levels is encouraging, especially in the lower strata.

Levels of parental education are moderately related to educational expectations for their children. The strongest relationship is once again at the graduate level with marked differences between those parents with less than a high school diploma, those with a high school diploma and those who are college graduates (see Table 2).

Approximately one fourth of the parents with less than a high school education expect their children to obtain a high school diploma while 60% expect their children to attend some college or obtain a baccalaureate degree. Almost all parents with a four-year college degree expect their children to complete either a baccalaureate degree (42%) or a graduate or professional degree (54%). Surprisingly, nearly 27% of parents with graduate or professional degrees expect their children to attend either a vocational or technical school after high school or to attend only two or more years of college.

An estimated 95% of African American students in grades 9-12 attend public schools with the remaining 5% enrolled in private schools. Considering the costs involved, attending a private school has an unexpectedly weak relationship to parental expectations. A greater percentage of parents of public school students (20%) expect their children to attend college for two or more years than those in private schools (5%). Conversely, more parents of students in private schools (43%) expect their children to

Table 1
Income and Parental Expectations

Parental Expectations	Income			
	\$0-\$25K	\$25,001-\$50K	\$50,001-\$75K	> \$75K
Baccalaureate Degree	28%*	34%	34%	30%
Graduate/Professional Degree	24%	31%	36%	53%

*Percentage of parents at each level of educational attainment.

**Table 2
Parental Education and Expectations**

Parental Expectations	Level of Parental Education				
	Less than High School	High School Graduate or Equivalent	Vocational/ Technical School or Some College	College Graduate	Graduate or Professional Degree
High School Graduate	26%*	14%	6%	0%	0%
Vocational/Technical School	9%	14%	7%	2%	14%
Two or More Years of College	27%	24%	20%	2%	13%
Baccalaureate Degree	33%	25%	34%	42%	26%
Graduate/Professional Degree	5%	24%	33%	54%	48%

*Percentage of parents at each level of educational attainment.

complete a baccalaureate degree than do parents of students in public schools (30%). While the causal mechanism is unclear, the relationship between grades and parent expectations is much as might be anticipated. Educational expectations for students with higher grades (Mostly As and Bs) generally involve at least a four-year degree while those with Cs are expected by their parents to at least attend some college. For those with mostly Ds or lower, parental expectations focus on high school or vocational and technical colleges.

Unlike other data, there is no evidence of a

substantial association between students' gender and parental expectations. Although not addressed here, at the middle school level, parental expectations are somewhat high for low-performing students. However, by the time students reach high school, expectations appear to be more closely related to performance.

What Does This Mean?

The relationships briefly explored in this study have important implications for school personnel in working with both parents and students. Being aware that more than one half of the African American parents in this study expect their children to be college graduates

and knowing that parents across all income levels have college expectations can help eliminate stereotypes and aid school personnel in identifying potential college-bound students. Early and appropriate intervention may be one way to help increase the numbers of underrepresented students in higher education.

**Table 3
Student Grades and Parental Expectations**

Parental Expectations	Grades			
	Mostly Ds or Lower	Mostly Cs	Mostly Bs	Mostly As
Less than High School Diploma	3%*	0%	0%	0%
High School Graduate	50%	9%	5%	5%
Vocational/Technical School	26%	20%	5%	4%
Two or More Years of College	12%	31%	22%	8%
Baccalaureate Degree	10%	20%	41%	31%
Graduate/Professional Degree	0%	20%	27%	52%

*Percentage of parents at each level of educational attainment.

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