

Addressing the shortage of African American male teachers in minority-serving school districts with innovative partnerships

African
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teacher
initiative

Jesse Rivers

*Teacher Preparation Program, African American Male Teacher Initiative (AAMTI),
Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, Texas, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper discusses a partnership between Huston–Tillotson University (HT), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and the Austin Independent School District (AISD), a minority-serving school district, both in Austin, Texas, with a grant provided by Apple Inc. (Apple). The purpose of the partnerships is that valuable relationships can increase the number of African American male teachers in primary and secondary education in minority-serving public schools. The African American Male Teacher Initiative (AAMTI) at HT was created as an innovative approach to recruit and select 20 African American males each year of a four-year grant provided by Apple.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviewed the literature on the lack and need for African American male public school teachers. Once the data is established during a three-to-four-year period, a mixed-method approach will be utilized to examine data retrieved from interviews, surveys, demographics of student participants, numerical data and retention and graduation rates. This will establish whether strategic partnerships can successfully increase the number of qualified African American males in public education.

Findings – This paper proposes and provides research evidence that African American male teachers can positively impact all students in the classroom setting.

Research limitations/implications – There is limited data to test a hypothesis on the effectiveness of a partnership between the university and public school to increase the number of African American male teachers through recruitment – selection and retention efforts. Therefore, follow-up research is needed for the first graduating class of 2024.

Practical implications – The broader impact of this paper is to show that partnerships between universities and public schools with corporate sponsorship can positively increase the number of African American male teachers prepared to teach in public schools through strategic recruitment and selection efforts.

Social implications – This paper can serve as a model for universities and school districts to implement. High placement of prepared Black male teachers in public schools can reduce the school-to-prison pipeline and juvenile homicides and defeat generational poverty.

Originality/value – Much research highlights the problems associated with a lack of African American male teachers. This paper includes the challenges but offers a sound basis for practical solutions.

Keywords African American male teacher initiative (AAMTI), African American male teachers, Black males in public schools, School–university partnership, Minority-serving institutions, Historically black colleges, University teacher programs

Paper type Literature review

NAPDS essentials addressed

- (1) A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.

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- (2) A school–university culture are committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community, ongoing and reciprocal professional development

Introduction

According to [Bristol \(2019\)](#), “Black male teachers improve Black boys’ schooling outcomes. Despite this evidence, there is little diversity among teachers in the United States of America. Only 20% of American public school teachers are nonwhite. Only 23% are male” (p. 1). A solution to the Black male teacher shortage is to recruit actively. [Wallace, Bol, Hall, and Cousins \(2022, p. 3\)](#) “Research supports the urgent need for Black male educators throughout the K-12 school environment”. Huston–Tillotson University (HT), Apple Inc. (Apple) and community partner Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Texas formulated a meaningful plan to address the shortages of African American male teachers through an African American male teacher initiative (AAMTI) [1].

HT is a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and the oldest institution of higher learning in Austin, Texas. Previously, the university operated as two separate colleges (Tillotson and Huston). Both were created to teach newly freed African Americans after the Civil War [2]. On October 24, 1952, the two colleges merged to form Huston–Tillotson College with the motto “In union, strength.” 2005, the college officially became Huston–Tillotson University ([The Huston-Tillotson University International Alumni Association, 2007](#)). Throughout the history of HT, the university has prepared educators to teach successfully throughout the United States of America in diverse school districts. The Texas Education Department has recognized the contributions of the Educators Preparation Program for exemplary performance in preparing teachers who identify as teachers of color. Based on HT’s history and the stellar reputation for training educators, the university was well-equipped to partner with AISD to produce quality educators ([Thompson, personal communication, 2022](#)).

AISD is the fifth-largest school district in Texas. The student population exceeds 74,000, along with 125 schools (elementary, middle, high, early college, magnet and alternative). The district serves 55% Hispanic, 30.1% White, 6.6% Black, 4.5% Asian and 3.8% other. The economically disadvantaged population is 51%, emergent bilingual is 28.2% and special education is 13.4% ([Austin ISD, 2023](#)). The district seeks to increase its African American student population and hire African American teachers for all students.

This article aims to demonstrate the steps in creating innovative partnerships that address the African American male teacher shortage in minority-serving school districts and to build a working model for universities and school districts to follow. This paper addresses the following questions:

- (1) What was needed to create a partnership between Huston–Tillotson University and the Austin Independent School District?
- (2) How does the partnership impact African American male students?

The method and data collection will be utilized and completed when the 1st cohort graduates from the university in 2024. There is insufficient data to accept or reject a null hypothesis based on any selected criterion.

Nine essentials of a professional development school

The need and desire to place 100 Black male teachers in schools through recruitment, raining with financial support from Apple that helps to address racial and social inequality and the

understanding that a university partnership with a minority-serving school district is pertinent to the following of the nine essentials of a professional development school (PDS):

- (1) A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.
- (2) A school–university culture are committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community, ongoing and reciprocal professional development

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The call for African American male teachers

African American males are 2% of the teacher population in the United States of America, while most teachers are White and female (Borowski & Will, 2021). According to Rosen (2018), a Black student with one Black teacher in elementary has a 13% chance of graduating from college and the percentage increases to 32% if students have at least two Black teachers. The AAMTI is not alone in trying to increase the number of African American male teachers. Across the nation, organizations exist to recruit, prepare and retain African American male teachers. The National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) is a nonprofit that promotes and develops teacher residencies to increase the number of black male teachers under its Black Educator Initiative (BEI) (Baker & Scheib, 2021). The Call Me Mister Program at Clemson University was created in 2000, to increase the number of Black male teachers (Jones *et al.*, 2018). The Black Teacher Initiative Consortium at Bowie State works in a collaborative effort with other institutions “to recruit, retain, support and empower Black male educators at all levels educationally and professionally throughout their trajectory” (Black Male Teacher Initiative, 2023, para. 1). The need for African American male teachers is paramount. Adams (2016) conducted a study in North Carolina that showed a Black male teacher in front of Black boys in an elementary school helped reduce suspension rates. Therefore, the goal of increasing the number of African American male teachers in public education is necessary. Most of the pre-service students in the HT cohorts are from underserved communities. They have consciously decided to become difference-makers by becoming teachers. African American teachers taught and influenced a small percentage of these students. Others in the program had no African American male teachers throughout their primary and secondary education. For most of these young men, the opportunity to attend college would not have been possible without Apple’s resources and financial support.

The recruitment and retention of African American teachers are essential for students of color and all students. All students, including white students, benefit from having Black teachers (Rix, 2021). According to Partelow *et al.* (2022, para. 8), “Teachers of color tend to have more positive perceptions of students of color—academically and behaviorally—than other teachers do. A recent study found that African American teachers are less likely than white teachers to perceive African American students’ behavior as disruptive.” Smith, Mack, and Akyea (2004) surmised that students of color could attend 13 years of schooling without having a teacher with the same racial makeup as the student. According to Tillman (1992, as cited in Smith *et al.* (2004), “every public school system should provide concentrated opportunities and constructive purposes for young African American male students to spend quality amounts of time with suitable adult African American male teachers” (p. 79). The low number of African American male teachers engaging students in public education is a cause for concern. The AAMTI is a positive step in the right direction in dealing with this sad reality.

African Americans are in prison at more than five times the rate of white Americans (Nellis, 2022). Unfortunately, this information is long past being newsworthy. The numbers are too often broadcast to politicize the unfairness of America’s justice system during local

and national elections. However, what happens after the fever of the event or events has transpired? Generally, the plight of African American males is placed on the proverbial back burner until another murder at the hands of police or other social events brings the matter to prominence again. This cycle often repeats itself. The author Michelle [Alexander and West \(2020\)](#) argues that the reality is that too many Black men and boys get lost in the judicial system, and the result is mass incarceration. [Young and Young \(2020\)](#) state, “The presence of Black male teachers as mentors in public schools could moderate the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 329). Therefore, it is necessary to have Black male teachers in the classroom to influence and guide young Black male students in their early development and throughout high school and beyond. The Apple grant enabled the formation of a collaborative partnership between HT and AISD to help address the lack of qualified African American male teachers in K12.

Partnership and financial support

Apple financial support

According to [Smith et al. \(2004\)](#), “partnerships in professional education between universities and industry require the integration of two self-reinforcing learning organizations to maximize educational opportunity and benefit for the learners (p. 7). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are underfunded compared to non-HBCUs ([Greater funding greater needs - UNCF, 2022](#)), and financial support from private industry can be beneficial. Dr Pierce-Burnett established a relationship with Apple through community networking, focusing on racial justice. The relationship led to a four-year financial commitment to increase the number of African American males in the teaching workforce. Apple, in support of HT Racial Equity and Justice Initiative, will invest in “funding, scholarships, technology and professional development” ([Méndez, 2021](#), para. 10). The funding provided full-ride scholarships (tuition, fees, room and board) for African American males seeking a degree in education and a desire to teach in minority-serving school districts. The AAMTI program aims to place 100 qualified African American males into the teaching profession by 2025. The first cohort started in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Apple provided two computer labs for HT classrooms, IPADS for each student selected into AAMTI and ongoing training for faculty to assist students.

School district and university partnership

Any endeavor to tackle the Black male teacher shortage could not be conducted alone. Dr Colette Pierce-Burnett, the president of HT, provided leadership for the initial start-up of the initiative. As a result of her leadership and commitment to excellence, she collaborated with Apple to create scholarships for interested applicants. In addition, she increased the education program by hiring two African American male professors to teach and breathe life into the initiative with their experiences as teachers and administrators in public education. The need for Black male teachers gave the president the confidence to seek a corporate partnership.

Linda [Darling-Hammons \(2009\)](#) argues that “Creating high-quality professional development schools that construct state-of-the-art practices in communities where students are typically underserved is critical to transforming teaching” (p. 43). The partnership with AISD started in year two of the initiative. Professor Fairley, an African American male professor, was hired to be the director of AAMTI. Professor Fairley established contacts with the AISD Human Capital Department in this role. He attended district events and held meetings with district leadership to garner support for the AAMTI. He advocated increasing the number of African American male teachers in the district. The superintendent of AISD, Stephanie Elizalde, permitted a team of administrators within the district to work with the team at HT. The idea was to devise a plan to help support and hire

the young men in AAMTI upon graduation. A series of meetings were conducted, and a working memorandum of understanding (MOU) was created pending approval by AISD and HT. The support for the young men included but was not limited to the following:

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- (1) Meeting with African American male school leaders
- (2) Invitation to AISD special events
- (3) Visiting school sites
- (4) One-to-one coaching
- (5) Professional development opportunities
- (6) Online and in-person workshops
- (7) Summer learning opportunities

The partnership with AISD is an ongoing effort to promote change and increase the number of African American male teachers. The relationship is a stellar commitment from AISD, given that many of these young men are not from Austin, Texas, and the first cohort of participants is two years from graduation. AISD and HT understood that race alone would not determine the program's success, but a viable, continuous partnership was required.

Achievements and challenges

Achievements

The AAMTI is entering its third year of implementation in Fall (2022). The program inducted four students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pandemic) in 2019. The goal was 20 for each year, and due to unforeseen circumstances caused by the pandemic, the university recruited four students for the first year of eligibility. However, these four students represented success despite the pandemic's many academic issues. These students were instrumental in recruiting 20 students in 2020 and 2021. Currently, 97% of the program students are on track to graduate. The overall grade point average is 3.086, encompassing mathematics, kinesiology, physical education, music, general education, history and language arts majors.

One major success of the AAMTI is the positive exposure students are gaining. HT provides academic support, but the Austin community gives resources and opportunities that would otherwise not be available. The young men attended lecture series with prominent local speakers throughout the year and participated in sponsored events hosted by local school districts. A few community partners significantly impacting the students were the Austin Area Urban League. (which provided the young men with free suits) Moreover, the 100 Black Men of Austin Organization brought adult male mentors as life advisors. In addition, the HT Alumni Association, area school districts such as Manor Independent School District, Pflugerville Independent School District and the African American Male Mentors Program support the students through various avenues. The community engagement with the students has benefitted them tremendously. The role models and mentors shared personal stories with the students of overcoming barriers despite being from poverty-stricken environments. The students benefit from a holistic approach to support their aspiration to teach.

Lastly, the males in AAMTI are active on campus and in the community. They are supportive of other clubs and organizations. The males spend time tutoring students in AISD and are often asked about their availability to spend time reading to kindergartens through 2nd grade. They also have given campus tours of the university to large groups of K-12 students while serving as university ambassadors.

AAMTI student Rhys Richards was featured in a news article highlighting why he wanted to teach and the importance of support and partnership with Apple. Rhys never had a

Black male teacher throughout his K12 school years, and he missed the leadership and guidance of a Black male teacher (Apple, 2023). This is one of the reasons that Rhys wants to become a teacher, and the opportunity afforded to him through the Apple scholarship through its commitment to promoting racial justice and equity is meaningful to him.

AAMTI student Mason Thompson, a native of Fort Worth, Texas, is a sophomore majoring in history education. He currently serves as the secretary for the initiative. Mason is a dynamic leader and stated that HT's partnership with Apple enabled him to attend college and fulfill a lifelong dream of giving back. The support he receives from his fellow members in the initiative and the college professors "have helped him to excel" (Thompson, personal communication, 2022).

The stories of Rhys and Mason are just two examples of the Apple partnership's impact on students attaining childhood dreams. Apple's financial support reduced the cost of getting a college degree. They wanted to teach and give back to their communities.

Challenges

There have been and continue to be worthwhile challenges. Recruiting students and partnerships with local school districts required enormous time and resources. The support systems needed to recruit and ensure retention effectively necessitated a collaborative effort between HT, Apple, AISD, parents and community partners. Bringing this together involved the establishment of goals, time commitments, traveling, scheduling and other non-monetary resources that exceeded the financial impact of the grant. Also, the students were challenged personally as well as academically.

The students were away from home, and high academic accomplishments were expected from each student. They must attend classes, tutoring, mandatory meetings and off-campus community events. Some students, on occasion, would fail to adhere to the standards and high expectations. Failure to follow the rules and procedures would prompt meetings with the program director. The director would help the student determine the support needed or reiterate the guidelines to help retain the student. The support for some students was unsuccessful despite best efforts and multiple opportunities to change. The students, after multiple infractions, were dropped from the program. However, most students rose to the challenges and are now thriving as college students with much understanding from faculty, staff and community partners. The first two cohorts are now centered on culturally relevant teaching practices to become certified, effective teachers in underserved communities while supporting the newest cohort with lessons learned.

The challenge of turnover of leadership is a significant issue. In this case, Superintendent Stephanie Elizalde left AISD in 2022 to become the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) superintendent. An African American male, Dr Anthony Mayes, the then-chief school officer of AISD, was instrumental in promoting and supporting the AAMTI. However, at the end of 2022, he became superintendent of a district near Houston, Texas. Dr Pierce-Burnett resigned as president and chief executive officer of Huston-Tillotson University in 2022. These departures have left a leadership void. There are still vital persons supporting the initiative, but it is yet to be seen if new leadership will continue to provide ongoing support. One such essential person is Dr Ericka Jones.

Dr Jones, a previous dean of students at HT, is an administrator with AISD. Despite the rapid leadership change in AISD, she is committed to preserving and advancing the partnership between HT and AISD. Dean Jones stated, "The early evidence shows the partnership is worthwhile. We must continue the work that will bring African American male teachers into the District. I will do my part to ensure the partnership continues as we work toward a sustainable MOU" (Jones, personal communication, 2022).

Conclusion

HT is committed to fostering a collaborative culture to meet the demands and obstacles in creating a safe and nurturing learning environment for young Black men. The result will be that children of color will have the experiences and knowledge of teachers who can relate to them and inspire them to achieve their goals in life.

The data in two years is promising, but work must continue if the program is to succeed. Currently, 97% of the students are on track to graduate, according to Professor Fairley, the AAMTI director. This information was based on data from the HT Office of Institutional Advancement ([Institutional Data, 2023](#)). However, data from AISD on whether the initiative is a success is limited, partly due to the recent high turnover in leadership. Besides, even if an MOU were in place, it would not legally bind future university and school district personnel. It is established that, unlike a lawfully enforceable contract where the parties intend to be bound, an MOU is simply an agreement to conduct business ([Contracts and MOUs, 2013](#)). A future recommendation would be to research what other universities and school districts are doing to maintain the partnership regardless of a change in leadership. The research on the sustainability of a partnership where the administration is in flux will likely contribute to the broader PDS literature.

There is a pervasive belief by some that African American males in the classroom will automatically make a difference because of their gender and racial status. [Milner \(2016\)](#) asked, “Are Black male teachers supposed to be role models for students and somehow miraculously solve systemic challenges of districts and schools that fall outside their control or desires” (p. 417). The answer is that more than the teacher’s race is needed to impact students. A collaborative effort between all interested stakeholders is required to ensure the viability and success of the young men in the AAMTI at the beginning of their teaching careers. The professional development, mentor–mentee relationships, culturally responsive practices and innovative school districts willing to hire and support these students will help to determine their success as teachers.

The goal of increasing Black males in schools is a monumental and note-worthy task. A strategic, collaborative and continuous review of the selection and retention data of the students is an ongoing process. The current and continued success of AAMTI is a testament to leadership, industry, partnership with AISD, community organizations, alumni support and parents. The most significant contributor to the success of AAMTI is the student’s willingness and desire to teach kids in minority-serving school districts. In the case of AMMTI, all these entities contributed to the program’s viability and potential for future success. Dr Pierce-Burnett shaped the vision and partnered with Apple. Apple provided scholarships to recruit, retain and help prepare the next generation of African American teachers. With the aid of faculty and staff, HT selected students during and throughout the COVID-19 isolation period. The partner school district, AISD, has been instrumental in promoting education and making these young men feel valued and wanted.

The network of organizations and university programs to fill the shortages of Black male teachers in schools is growing, but more are needed. The AAMTI is a model for other universities and organizations to follow and implement. The student voices give rise to a belief that the program is worthwhile and meaningful, as evidenced by the words of Rhys and Mason.

Notes

1. AAMTI will also be referred as the initiative or program periodically.
2. Civil War in the United States of America lasted between 1861-1865

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About the author

Dr Jesse Rivers is Tenure-track Professor at Huston–Tillotson University. He has doctorate degree in Educational Leadership from Baker University in Overland Park, Kansas. In addition, Dr Rivers has Juris Doctor from the University of Missouri-Kansas City and a Bachelor of Arts from Chapman University in Orange, California. He holds principal certification in Texas and Missouri. He has a lifetime teaching certificate in English in Missouri. Dr Rivers taught English at the secondary level and served as Instructional Coach, Assistant Principal and Principal in Missouri and Rhode Island in diverse urban school districts. Jesse Rivers can be contacted at: jrivers@htu.edu

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