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Forum on black men in education focuses on rising dropout rates

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NEW ROCHELLE - More than 500 black students across the country drop out of high school every day. Most are males and, with an absence of hope and with poor attitudes about education, too many end up languishing in prisons, author Baruti Kafele said yesterday.

"There are children who are in first grade, second grade, third grade, and they hate school. They don't want to be in school," said Kafele, principal of Newark Tech High School in New Jersey. "All I have to do is change that attitude - everything else will fall into place."

Kafele spoke to an audience of more than 300 at Iona College yesterday for the African American Men of Westchester's fifth annual "Plight of the Black Male in Education" forum. The gatherings are held to spark discussion on ways to address various obstacles that impede the success of black males in school, said Melvin Burruss, president of AAMW.

This year's theme, "Breaking the Pipeline from School to Prison," focused on the rising dropout rates of black teens and their disproportionate numbers in prisons. The forum spurred a call for action, with panelists and organizers challenging parents to become advocates for students in local government and take steps to keep black males in school.

"Nearly half of black children are not graduating, so where are they going?" Burruss said. "They can't get into college, so the next step is jail or prison. So what are we going to do? Change it."

The challenges facing black males begin early in life and can be difficult to overcome, Cora Greenberg,

executive director of Westchester Children's Association, told the audience.

Flipping through a PowerPoint presentation titled "Tale of Two Counties - Racial Disparities in the Lives of Children and Youth," she highlighted the lower incomes in single-parent households in Westchester and their relation to stagnant academic achievement. She discussed concentrated poverty and how it feeds dropout rates, gang violence and crime.

Those outcomes for young black men are avoidable, said Kafele, the keynote speaker and author of "A Black Parent's Guide to Educating Your Children (Outside of the Classroom)."

In an address that touched on civil rights and a lack of black male teachers, he talked about how he dramatically improved the performance of students at his school by making courses more culturally relevant and helping with social development that goes beyond mastering the curriculum.

"I have Crips and Bloods on the honor roll, imagine that," Kafele said, referring to street gangs.

Devon Pennant, a seventh-grader at Longfellow Middle School in Mount Vernon, was surprised to learn his city had one of the county's highest dropout rates. But, after yesterday, he's determined not to be a part of that number.

"I can do better in school," Pennant, 12, said. "I'm going to try harder."

The Westchester Children's Association and African American Men of Westchester are beginning a campaign to educate parents about how to advocate for children at school board and municipal meetings. To learn more, contact WCA deputy director Allison Lake at 914-946-7676, Ext. 304, or at alake@wca4kids.org.
