Closing achievement gap requires collaboration

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By Mary Ann Black and Heidi Carter, guest columnists

Wes Moore is a best-selling author, Rhodes Scholar, White House Fellow, decorated Army veteran, host of “Beyond Belief” on the Oprah Winfrey Network and social entrepreneur. Moore is committed to helping the parents, teachers, mentors and advocates who serve our nation’s youth, and he believes deeply that the solution lies in “interconnectedness.”

Moore visited Durham in December as the Dr. Charles Sanders President’s Lecture Series speaker, sponsored by Durham Technical Community College. In his remarks, Moore stressed that, “if you want to address the issue of the young man, you have to address the support given to our families. If you address the support to our families, you have to address the support given to our schools, and our churches, and our service organizations.”

Moore asserts that communities must respond to the urgent need for reversing the abysmal graduation and college completion rates among young men, particularly African-Americans, in urban centers. In his view, it is imperative that the educational experience be tailored to the specific developmental stages and learning styles of these young men – and the unique challenges they face – starting as early as pre-K.

As community leaders, we must take the necessary steps so that all children start school fully prepared to learn: cognitively, physically, emotionally and socially. By closing the pre-K achievement gap, all students, including our African-American males, stand a real chance to graduate from high school and follow their dreams.

Our fundamental challenge is to break the powerful link between social and economic disadvantages and low success rates in school. We must have excellent, effective teachers devoted to helping their students learn. And, since school success depends on what happens outside the classroom, we must ensure our students and families have access to physical and mental health care, dental services, safe homes and neighborhoods, supervised after-school activities and summer working and learning opportunities. Durham needs more programs to supplement these existing ones:

-- Duke Medicine allows Durham teens to experience the complex world of health care. Duke’s partnership with the City of Medicine Academy (CMA) benefits CMA students, Duke medical students and employees who volunteer their time at the CMA through tutoring, internships and financial contributions.
-- Project Search, a collaboration among Duke Regional Hospital, Durham Public Schools and Alliance Behavioral Health, allows special-needs high school students to spend nine months in the hospital to learn skills that position them for real-life work.

-- Each year, Duke Medicine invites 140 high school students to spend part of their summers volunteering in its hospitals to experience the working world.

-- Durham Tech has established numerous programs to ensure its students graduate. In 2014, Durham voters approved a sales and use tax earmarked for education. Recent high school graduates who reside in Durham County are eligible for a ConnectFunds scholarship of $500 a semester, up to four semesters.

-- The Made in Durham initiative works with CEOs of Durham-based companies to create internships for young people. It also works with other local organizations to facilitate systemic changes for Durham’s children. These programs show great promise.

As educators and community leaders, our task is to create even more partnerships with other groups to teach our young people respect for themselves, for others, and for the work place. As Jonathan Black, MSW, eloquently states, “We must collectively address the support given to our families and to young people. Some of our young men of color are seeking guidance and advice. They need us to reach out with kindness to embrace, teach, and provide opportunities for a great education so they may envision their future and seek the great job that awaits them when they transition from education to workforce.”

Closing the achievement gap requires targeting our resources so they reach the people with the greatest need. To effect real change, we need a sustained collaborative effort from business, government, and other community partners to construct the path to a promising future for Durham’s young people. How we educate today’s children determines tomorrow’s society. Our community leaders have heard this call, and we are taking action. But there’s still a lot of work left to do.

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