

DAILY NEWS

A better way to educate black young men

By HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON and DAVID C. BANKS

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David Banks is president of the Eagle Academy Foundation, which operates schools in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Harlem and Newark, N.J. (Richard Harbus for New York Daily News)

Brenton James, a young New Yorker, received his bachelor's degree in economics, philosophy and politics from the University of Pennsylvania earlier this month. Like his fellow graduates, Brenton applied his keen intellect and studied hard to earn his diploma.

But unlike most of his U Penn classmates, Brenton's early indicators hadn't pointed to an Ivy League education. An African-American raised by a proud, single mom in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, Brenton faced the fears, challenges and low expectations that young men of color commonly confront.

We know that children need love from their parents, the support of their teachers and nurturing from a community that believes in them. But the challenges faced by young men of color require a special level of response. All too often, black boys grow up without their fathers, leaving a void that impacts their transition to manhood. They are left to face a hostile society, frequently feared, even in their classrooms as little boys where they are suspended three times more often than their classmates. As they get older, they have to wonder, "Can I meet a friend at Starbucks and avoid arrest? Can I rent an Airbnb apartment without the neighbors reporting that it's being robbed?"

Indeed, the odds that young men like Brenton will engage with the criminal justice system are higher than the odds that their schooling will open doors to success and prosperity.

But Brenton beat those odds when he enrolled in the class of 2014 at Eagle Academy for Young Men. There he entered an environment where young men feel physically and emotionally safe, where they take the armor off — a place where they are loved and nurtured, pushed but not feared. Brenton would be accepted by 20 colleges and universities and become the Eagle Academies' first Ivy League graduate.

The idea for the Eagle Academy schools was hatched when the New York City chapter of the mentoring organization One

Hundred Black Men read a Columbia University study that — referencing data from earlier research on prison inmates — said that 75% of prisoners incarcerated in New York State prisons came from just seven New York City neighborhoods. This study ignited a response that set out to create quality schools for young men in these communities. Both of us (a then-U.S. senator and a New York City school principal) got involved. In 2004, the first Eagle Academy for Young Men, an all-male, public school, opened in the South Bronx.

The objective was simple: improve outcomes for inner-city young men with a rigorous college-preparatory education, bolstered by strong parental involvement, mentorship and nurturing structures that encourage boys and build brotherhood and community pride.

Today, the Eagle Academy Foundation supports six schools in challenged neighborhoods — five in New York City and one in Newark, N.J. The schools, with grades six to 12, educate almost 3,000 black and Latino young men. Last year, the Eagle Academies registered an 87% graduation rate — 28 percentage points higher than the national graduation rate for young men of color. Ninety-eight percent of Eagle graduates were accepted to college.

Eagle scholars begin their studies in sixth grade, at the age when influences outside school may appeal to inner-city boys. In effect, Eagle competes with the streets, and wins, by focusing on young men's strengths and challenging them where they struggle. Some 68% of black males are raised in households without their fathers, so Eagle makes sure — with its teachers, administrators, alumni and mentors from the community — that all young men have positive male influences. Eagle has learned that when a young man believes he's on a promising path, with strong role models who will stick by him, he will see the light ahead and achieve extraordinary things.

Brenton is a future leader. Now, in his first job, he'll report for work each morning at Bloomberg LP. Because of the success of young men like him, our school and foundation get calls from cities and school districts around the nation, asking for guidance in replicating Eagle's methods and outcomes. We join with cities that provide normal levels of school funding while the foundation raises additional resources to supplement programming and partnerships to meet the specific needs of young men.

We recently launched the Eagle Institute to provide training and scale its know-how nationally. Currently, it is working with the New York City Department of Education at nine Brooklyn middle schools, and also with the Los Angeles United School District, to support the newly launched Boys Academic Leadership Academy.

We hope that governments, businesses and citizens across the country will take heed of the Eagle example and make wise investments in the education of young men of color. When we do, many thousands more will follow the shining example of Brenton James and his Eagle brothers into the halls of higher education and on to the fulfillment of brilliant American dreams.

Clinton is a former secretary of state and U.S. senator from New York. Banks is president and CEO of the Eagle Academy Foundation.