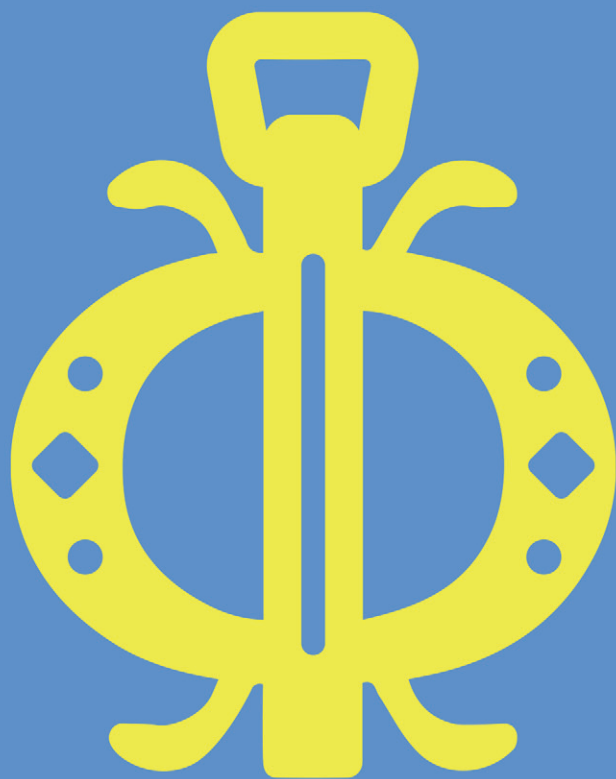


# **The Black Male**

**Educator Guide to Thriving**



**Dr. David Sandles**

# **The Black Male Educator Guide to Thriving**

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**David Sandles**



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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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In addition to being a family man and a self-proclaimed comic book nerd, Dr Sandles is an Oakland native who served as a long-time K-12 teacher and is currently the Southern California Regional Director for CalStateTEACH, California State University, USA. Dr Sandles' interests include working out, reading, promoting Black male educator agency, and listening to old-school hip-hop and R&B music.

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# FOREWORD

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Over a decade ago, I received one of the most jarring and frightening phone calls from my oldest son's high school. The Vice Principal informed me that the County Sheriffs were en route to arrest and take my son to a juvenile detention center due to a violation of one of their zero-tolerance policies: fighting on campus. Fortunately, when I arrived at the school, the officer opted not to arrest my son because the district policy was too excessive, even for the County Sheriff's office. Two years before our encounter with law enforcement, our son's school district encouraged interdistrict transfers from neighboring communities to enroll in their schools and benefit from its highly touted and reputable college-going culture. The district did not inform prospective transfer students that it was experiencing declining enrollment and that increased enrollment would benefit its yearly budget through average daily attendance. Simultaneously, the district school board approved a restrictive and punitive zero-tolerance policy designed to exercise control over the newly enrolled students, especially Black male learners transferring into its schools. Although my son was a Howard University scholarship recipient and recognized by the College Board as a National Merit Scholar, to the school district, he was just another Black male learner who needed to be governed by the strictest policies. Hence, he was continuously targeted and profiled by district administrators, teachers, and staff.

My wife and I frequently reflect on how schooling systems sought to deprive our two Black male sons of Black boy joy. Over time, we witnessed our loving sons become hardened by deficit-oriented educational practices that suppressed their voices and denied their existence. Their schools and district criminalized them before they were conscious of their black identities, compelling them to be more guarded each time they stepped foot on campus and grew older and self-aware. There were very few people at school, and in the district office, my sons could trust. It was a Black male Vice Principal who called the sheriffs to arrest my son. My wife, sons, and I worked relentlessly to survive despite the strenuous circumstances that beset us each academic year. Praise be to the Most High God; we successfully raised Black boys,

but did not do it alone. It required collective action from our village to ensure their safety and well-being and to protect their spirits. Today, both sons are God-fearing, self-aware, critically conscious, HBCU-educated Black men—two beautiful and loving souls.

Unfortunately, there are far too many Black boys who are deprived of the opportunities to experience joy at K-12 institutions. Educational institutions are often assaultive and violent, undermining the endeavors of Black boys to become socially responsible and conscious Black men. I've witnessed institutions perpetuate a psychological attack against Black male students, as some of these learners enter school systems with the highest ambitions but exit believing they lack the intellectual capability to thrive in society. Many of these Black boys relinquished the aspirations that they once possessed as hopeful children because the schools hardened their hearts, compelling them to smile and laugh less. There was no sense or experience of joy in their classrooms.

I recently revisited my passion for classroom teaching at a Saturday School program, Sankofa Village. Recognizing its historical, racialized discriminatory practices, the district school board approved Sankofa Village, which was designed to mobilize and empower Black learners through a comprehensive, African-centered educational experience. The district requested me to teach mathematics to K-8 students and model for their teachers how Black joy can manifest itself in the classroom. My sons' disheartening K-12 learning experiences empowered me to transform my instructional practices. As a young teacher in the late 1990s, rigor was at the forefront of my mind. I wanted to ensure Black learners were prepared and disciplined to change the world. Today, I create lesson plans with joy central to the work. I integrate music into learning activities, provide opportunities for discourse on salient topics, encourage dance breaks as a mindfulness practice, and exemplify my joy through laughter and a sense of humor. Parents, students, administrators, and teachers have expressed that my class is different—students love to learn, enjoy the challenge, and, more importantly, relish the sense of community we co-created. One 4th grader shared, "You actually listen to us." I thanked him because his words helped me to realize that as I am making a difference, they are too. Their Black boy joy inspired and led to my Black man joy.

Dr David Sandles is a leader in this domain. His spirit is authentic—an aura that is endearing, warm, and encouraging. His pedagogy emanates from the Black Panther Party, whose members were astute and proficient in state statutes, regulations, and policy. They were creative and strategic in program design, recognizing the people's needs. Having known Dr Sandles for several years, we often talk about what is required to protect Black boys, and that inspiring them to reclaim and live with joy is imperative. As fathers, we share a common story and experience of what it means for

Black male educators to support Black boys navigating K-12 schools. We grew up in two different regions of California, northern and southern California, but we grew up in historically Black neighborhoods, Inglewood and Oakland, respectively. We experienced the brilliance of Black teachers, Black administrators, and other children who looked like us. Our churches were packed on Sunday, and the local clubs, universities, and sporting arenas had a vibrant Black presence. Consequently, we experienced Black boy joy, and as adults, we often laugh and experience Black man joy. It is our norm.

Sadly, many Black males are void of these experiences, and as I strive not to judge anyone's background, I often grapple with the thought that every Black boy should experience joy. Recently, I watched an Instagram reel of a parent secretly recording her Black male child doing his chores with a well-choreographed, yet impromptu, dance to Atomic Dog by George Clinton, during his 2025 Spring Break. With a broom in his hand, he moved like James Brown, Michael Jackson, and a member of Omega Psi Phi combined. The joy that emanated from the young man went viral, with over 140,000 viewers cherishing the moment with one comment stating, "I LOVE EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS!!!!" The young man's joy became our joy. It reminded me that we must normalize and ensure every Black male feels liberated to express themselves with exceeding and unspeakable joy in K-12 settings. We must restore, protect, and resurrect Black male joy.

Dr Kirk Kirkwood, CalStateTEACH, California State University, USA

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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My family has always supported and inspired me, so I will detail their names and impact on me here. My now-deceased maternal grandmother, Georgia Ruth, remains the bedrock of my nuclear family. When I review my life, I am challenged to find important moments when she was not present and offered words of encouragement. Mind you, those words were always tempered with old-school Black admonishments, such as “...make sure you ask a lot of questions. A closed mouth don’t get fed” and “You betta treat people right. You always catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.” Adages like those are seared into my memory, and I am forever grateful to Grandmama for her life lessons and support.

My parents, David Sr. and Shirley, were incredible. They offered a firm hand in child rearing but balanced that with love, patience, and probity. As children, my siblings and I enjoyed family vacations, weekly allowances, and regular trips to the comic book store, where many of my foundational understandings were sourced. My parents are still family-centered and supportive, always supplying sagacious words and anecdotes.

Mike and Michele, my brother and sister, have always regarded me with circumspection. They had to always be wondering *Are we really related to him?* Despite my obsessive preoccupations with comic books, insects, and cartoons, my siblings protected me and continuously plied me with words of wisdom to keep me safe. “Watch out for...” and “If he ever bothers you, make sure to...” Without them and their reputations helping me navigate the social engagements of my youth, I have no doubt I would have been a street casualty, for East Oakland in the 1980s was no joke!

My wife, Carrie, has been my partner for so long that I cannot imagine a life without her. After our chance meeting at CSU Bakersfield on April 14, 1995, I had no way of knowing we would have a beautiful life together, but I am so content with the outcome of that meeting. As the late great *Prince* once crooned, *Until the end of time, I’ll be there for you, you own my heart and mind, I truly adore you.* It ain’t been easy by any stretch of the imagination, but I believe we were divinely inspired to work together on this journey, and

I am eternally grateful for the partnership. Because of that partnership, we brought our wonderful children into this world, each one a separate and amazing blessing. Daymon, David, Drake, and Daschl all have the best of our qualities, and it is beautiful to watch them blossom.

As of this writing, our family grieves the loss of our cherished Aunt Lois. Dr. Lois Webster Winston and Uncle Bill Winston epitomize how you do life. I am deeply indebted to Aunt Lois for being my personal cheerleader and for demonstrating how to serve as a leader. When I pass on to the next realm, I hope I was half as impactful as she was with those in my sphere of influence.

Coach Barnett was so much more than a track and field expert. Not only did I listen to him and *mostly* abide by his words, but I also often sought his guidance and actually enacted his suggestions. To this day, I regularly wear neckties because of the example set by Coach Barnett, an incredible representative of Black consciousness and professionalism.

There are so many others who deserve mention here, but I will respectfully call out the following as crucial to my development into manhood and during my transition to a professional: Coach Schwartz, Coach McSwain, Coach Johnson, Coach Jenney, Coach Owyang, Kempton Coman, Wayne Burris, and a host of other important men, women, personal friends and professional acquaintances. I would also like to acknowledge all the amazing men who are members of Freemasonry and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Black male educators seek to thrive. Black male educators want to enjoy positive student outcomes, they want to create powerful connections with the campus and community, and they want to be appreciated. Regrettably, those things are often absent in public school spaces, and Black male educators often find it challenging to endure. Consequently, many leave the profession disillusioned and dispirited resulting from the lack of connection and the absence of appreciation. As a Black man who served in public schools for nearly two decades, I feel compelled to speak to the challenges experienced by Black men teachers and the triumphs and opportunities to thrive that await Black male educators, some of the most vulnerable cogs in the educational landscape. I use the term *vulnerable* very intentionally, understanding that Black men are decidedly few compared to their non-Black counterparts, particularly white women, and because the experiences of Black males tend to be somewhat harrowing in K-12 classrooms. Here, vulnerability, however, also means that Black males who are serving their communities as teachers also leave the profession because of pronounced macro and microaggressions, resulting in part in gaping holes in the number of Black males among the teacher workforce. Yes, *vulnerable* has many dimensions, and it is often coded language that means Black male educators are an endangered species.

I also use the term *endangered species* with intentionality. While I am reticent to do so because of the pernicious, anti-Black historical associations with Black people and animals, the shortage of Black male teachers can be compared to the decline of endangered species in the animal kingdom, where the survival of a species is threatened by systemic factors such as habitat loss, environmental shifts, and exploitation. Similarly, Black male educators are disappearing due to deep-seated issues in teacher recruitment, retention, and support, compounded by a broader societal undervaluation of Black male presence and expertise in educational spaces. Just as endangered species face numerous challenges to their existence, Black male teachers struggle with biases in hiring, a lack of institutional support, and environments

that often fail to affirm their cultural relevance. This creates a cycle in which fewer Black male teachers enter the profession, and those who do often leave at higher rates due to burnout or inadequate support, much like an endangered species unable to sustain itself in a shrinking habitat. The absence of these teachers weakens the diversity of the educational environment, denying students, especially Black and brown children, access to vital role models and perspectives while deepening racial disparities within the system.

To be clear, Black males are as varied socially, intellectually, sexually, spiritually, and economically as any people, so the overall discussion about Black males is only intended to generalize to the degree that Black males are a fledgling population in education spaces. Plus, much of the literature on Black male educators is suggestive of trends in the way they are perceived and treated. By no means does this book assert that Black male educators are homogenous.

### ***Why This Book?***

While this book is conspicuously intended to address the experiences and opportunities of Black male educators in the K-12 sector, some parallels may also be drawn with higher education, as those valuable educators endure untold challenges in securing tenure, being elected or appointed to various posts, and in being awarded research grant opportunities. Although there might be obvious parallels, separate tomes are needed to describe the challenges for Black males in that sector.

Further, while this work conspicuously offers scripted mentorship to male educators, it is patently clear to the author of this work that sexism and paternalism abound within society at large. Unfortunately, instances of discrimination against women are too numerous to name and have existed since time immemorial. Not only do I acknowledge those atrocities, but I also believe that through this and other works, people are actively seeking to disrupt those systems of oppression that continue to constrain and diminish our female counterparts. To be clear, this work is far from antithetically female; it is purposely seeking to lift Black male educators so students appreciate that powerful preceptors come in varying shapes and sizes.

### ***Contextualizing the History of Black Males in Education***

The 1896 adjudication of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case provided a blueprint for separation and, inarguably, legalized inequity in the United States. For perspective, in 1892, a biracial man named Homer Plessy was arrested for traveling in a “Whites only” train. Plessy, who possessed

comparably little Black ancestry, challenged the constitutionality of this law, citing a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy and upheld the notion that *separate but equal* practices could be applied in all quarters of society.

Relatedly, in 1954, the case of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* was decided. *Brown v Board*, as it will be called henceforth, overturned the *Plessy* decision and declared that separate but equal practices violated the Fourteenth Amendment, creating the theoretical possibility for Black students (all students) to have access to the same learning opportunities as their white counterparts. For many, this important ruling signaled a radical shift in race relations and the chance for educational and economic equality among all citizens. However, it is the intervening years between 1896 and 1954 that are of keen interest here.

In the years before *Brown v Board*, Black educators abounded, and unlike today, Black children could count the many Black educators who had taught them. After the *Brown v Board* decision, Black educators were routinely demoted, dismissed, or forced to resign from their posts, making way for waves of white educators. Estimates are that 38,000 Black educators were displaced from their roles serving students and connecting with communities in the twelve years after the *Brown v Board* decision. These forced changes had an injurious impact on education and the level of service in Black communities around the country. Further, according to Foster, there were approximately 70,000 Black teachers in the years before *Brown v Board*, about half the Black professionals in the United States. Speculatively, some contend that nearly half of those educators were Black men. What is certain is that Black males are presently sparsely situated across the educational landscape. In the decades since 1954, the number of Black male educators has steadily declined. At present, less than 2% of the national teacher workforce identifies as Black males, and the number is dangerously close to 1%.

With that background established, it is important to note that teaching remains a noble, rewarding, and challenging profession, and many Black males enter into the field to positively alter the trajectories of children in underserved communities. However, for Black males, teaching can become challenging for a whole host of reasons beyond planning, teaching, assessing, etc. With comparably few Black male educators in TK-12 public school spaces, the importance of nurturing, supporting, and developing Black male teachers is incontestably vital. Accordingly, this book features a set of guideposts for Black male educators to follow, and it provides educators with suggestions for thriving in this fantastic arena. Those ideas are represented in the magnificent seven chapters described below.

In Chapter 1, readers are provided a backdrop of the expanded roles Black male educators commonly undertake. Teacher, athletic coach, and

resident disciplinarian, among other things, this chapter delves into the stress response to the expectations placed upon Black male educators. This chapter also provides skills for disengagement from John Henryism and healthful alternatives.

Exploring the imagery of Black male educators in popular media, student discipline, and suggestions for co-governing a classroom are examined in Chapter 2, and offerings are made for how Black male educators can effectuate positivity and honor in addressing student misdeeds (working with them to determine consequences).

In Chapter 3, Black male educators are encouraged to develop organic and meaningful relationships with students, peers, and administrators. Suggestions are supplied for how Black male educators can successfully navigate their interpersonal engagements and develop a relational agency that positively positions them to thrive.

In Chapter 4, the power of intentionally crafting classroom culture, student discipline, and co-governing the classroom with students is discussed. As Black male educators are often misunderstood and misjudged by others, it is crucial to have this brand of environment in place.

In Chapter 5, the power of mentorship is explicated. The need for Black male guidance in the educational sphere is immeasurable, so this chapter is devoted to making a case for every Black male educator to have a Black male mentor with experience in the field, and it challenges Black male educators to systematically commit to tapping into the mentoring resource, excavating the relationship for tips and tricks that are visible and invisible.

Chapter 6 examines the racial microaggressions and gendered racism that continuously vex Black male educators. Readers will also learn about recognizing these challenges and the techniques for overcoming them.

Chapter 7 provides insight into how Black male educators might develop the critical thinking agency of their students.

Each of the seven chapters enclosed also comes with anecdotes from Black male educators I surveyed. Over 2 years, I collected data from more than 125 Black male educators to learn their perspectives on a range of topics that ultimately became a template for this book. Each anecdote is in its original form and represents the thinking of the educator surveyed.

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# REAL TALK

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For those who believe our society is post-racial, I must debunk that notion by informing you that society was constructed and maintained from an anti-Black viewpoint. Historically and contemporarily, Black people have been tolerated, contemptuously regarded, and continuously oppressed, repressed, and depressed most evidently since the year 1442. Within educational circles, there has been perfect symmetry with the larger society, meaning Black educators have endured racial indignities, toiled in poor facilities, and received desultory support in serving schools and communities. Even contemporarily, school suspension and expulsion rates for Black children are disproportionate to their population and outpace those of their non-Black counterparts. Unfortunately, Black educators exist within environments where this phenomenon occurs to their own people! As mentioned previously, there are also so few Black educators that a healthy sense of esprit de corps among Black educators cannot fully germinate. There are a host of other issues too numerous to list here, but, regretfully, many Americans intuitively understand those systemic features. Relatedly, according to researchers ([Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016](#)), male educators were perceived as more likely to be gay, viewed as a bigger safety concern, and found less likable than their female peers. These negative gender stereotypes are particularly pronounced among male teachers in the early grades ([Bryan & Browder, 2013](#)).

Given all the preceding information, many Black males weather their tenuous social existence and their often difficult K-12 schooling backgrounds to become educators, regularly citing their desire to appreciably change the school and community as the impetus for their work. According to noted researcher and author Marvin Lynn, Black men view teaching as a powerful opportunity to address and challenge social, political, and even economic injustices. In short, they want to make the world a better place. And, quite frankly, they often do. Black male educators are known for making profound, impactful impressions on students. [Milner \(2016\)](#) found that in one instance, a Black male educator reported on their effectiveness by

constructing learning opportunities for his students based on what the students had taught him. That educator learned, adapted, and even incorporated Hip-Hop and other music genres to facilitate learning opportunities. Their presence in classrooms enhances the educational environment and inspires students who see their own experiences and identities reflected in their teachers. Black male educators also leverage their rich talents to address social and educational discrepancies and cultivate powerful learning opportunities for students. By building strong connections with their students, advocating for systemic change, and introducing diverse teaching methods, they are advancing their careers while also substantially altering the future of education.

The Adinkra symbol , used on the book's cover and throughout, signifies *strength* and *hardness*, for Black male educators have and continue to represent both those attributes. However, the symbol also denotes *perseverance*, a quality that any Black male who teaches must possess. The symbol also embodies a turtle and all its associated traits. Slow, methodical, and unrelenting, a turtle is often referenced in connection with the turtle and the hare fable, one that shows the turtle as a fighter and a champion for perseverance. As the story goes, the hare is endowed with incredible speed and agility, and the turtle is the antithesis. The two decide to race to determine who was better. Armed with hubris and incredible physical gifts, the race begins, and the hare takes the early lead. The turtle steadily plods along, consistently moving at the same pace. Meanwhile, the hare assumes such a seemingly insurmountable lead that it rests on the side of the road. The hare would speed past the turtle, gain a large lead, and rest beside the path. Before long, the turtle's steady pace won out, as the turtle crossed the finish line and the hare was in a state of painful disbelief, unsure how such an occurrence was possible.

The turtle in that fable is loosely analogous to Black male educators. Both push forward and represent endurance, power, and intellect in environments where others might be *perceived* as more talented, smarter, and more trustworthy. Despite those environmentally encoded microaggressions, Black male educators steadily progress toward greatness in connectivity with their students and community, mastery of their content, and development of their professional partnerships.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# THE LEGEND OF JOHN HENRY



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As children, many people were regaled with tall tales, nursery rhymes, and folklore that provide moral guidance, opportunities for language play, and a sense of why things exist as they do. Among the many tales readers may have heard is the one based on John Henry, a tale based on a Black man's physical prowess and exploits. According to legend, John Henry was incredibly strong and large from infancy, and his feats of strength as a child were awe-inspiring. So physically gifted was John Henry that in his role as a railroad worker, he was able to hammer steel into the ground with unmatched power and speed. His legend grew as stories of his ability to outwork machines, like the steam-powered hammer, spread throughout the communities. John Henry was said to be the fastest, most proficient at this job. Known as the *steel-driving man*, John Henry is often depicted with a sledgehammer in his hands and stands as a larger-than-life exemplar for others who endeavor to be great. However, there is a critical aspect of the story that is part of the moral or lesson, for at the end of the tale, John Henry dies, having physically overexerted himself in a race against a steam-powered drill many believed was faster than John Henry. In a hollow victory, John Henry won the contest but lost his life.

In some quarters, John Henry is praised as “the spirit of the working man” and “America’s steel-driving folk hero.” These monikers are symbolic of the perceptions rendered of John Henry and his resulting impact. In juxtaposition, Black males regularly assume duties well beyond their assigned roles

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to combat age-old stereotypes and ignorance of Black males. Erroneous and pernicious notions about the indolence and brainlessness of Black males pervade larger society and cause Black males to take on additional workloads to overcome those ideas. The assumption of extra duties, often more than any one person should bear, is described as John Henryism. Often labeled as a stress response, John Henryism is characterized as a “disorder, disposition, personality trait, or perfectionism” (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 498). In 1994, James coined the term John Henryism, describing it as the convergence of discrimination, overexertion in work, and the health challenges faced by Black Americans, particularly Black American men.

According to James (1994), John Henryism is a particular brand of coping that has adversely affected physical health in Black American adults by intensifying biological responses to stress. Research suggests that among Black American adults, this coping style may correlate with heightened depressive symptoms (Neighbors et al., 2007). It also emphasizes the poor health outcomes experienced by individuals who confront chronic stressors that exceed their ability to cope (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 498). This condition illustrates the significant spiritual, emotional, and psychological burdens placed on the bodies, minds, and spirits of Black men in school spaces.

As educators, it is common to assume duties such as lesson planning, governing the classroom, grading assignments, and delivering effective instruction to students. Among other responsibilities, these are hackneyed expectations. However, it is too often the case that Black male educators strive to outpace the negative societal constructions developed over the past few centuries by taking on added tasks and shouldering more work than their peers. These educators, aware of the historical and ongoing biases they face, often feel the weight of disproving stereotypes and combating the racial inequities embedded within the education system. Their roles extend beyond the classroom, acting as mentors, advocates, and sometimes even surrogate father figures for students who may not have role models who look like them. The added emotional labor that Black male educators often undertake, navigating microaggressions, addressing racial tensions, and striving to serve as visible symbols of success for their students, is frequently overlooked. It becomes a balancing act between fulfilling their professional obligations while also managing the expectations placed on them due to their race. This dual responsibility not only increases their workload but can also place significant emotional and physical strain on them, as they feel compelled to perform at a level that exceeds the norm, simply to be perceived as competent and worthy of their position. It is essential, then, for educational institutions to recognize and support the multifaceted roles that Black male educators play, ensuring they are equipped with the resources, respect, and recognition necessary to thrive in their careers

without sacrificing their well-being. For perspective, A Black male educator shared with me the following tale:

***Anecdote:** Whenever there was something more to be done in the school, I was instantly nominated. Students misbehaving? Send them to Mr. Smith (fictitious name). Need someone to take students for an absent teacher? Send them to Mr. Smith. Need someone to plan for the annual Black History event? Ask Mr. Smith. There was never a shortage of roles for me to take on, and in my first year or two, I never felt I could refuse anything asked of me. It was tough.*

## The Physical Toll of John Henryism

Regrettably, John Henryism brings about inordinate stress and compromised effectiveness, reinforcing the health discrepancies that Black men experience relative to their male counterparts. Health complications abound as a result of this stress response and many Black male educators labor under the crushing weight and cumulative effects of John Henryism. In general, health discrepancies between Black people and other groups lead to differing life expectancies. During the first year of COVID-19, the life expectancy of Americans dropped by 1 year. However, this was overshadowed by the drop in life expectancy for Black people, which declined by 2.7 years (Gilbert et al., 2022). While general life expectancies are also discrepant, this is in part due to structural racism and historical discrimination (Gilbert et al., 2022). Several challenges result from John Henryism, all of which are individually problematic, but spell disaster when taken all together. Issues such as hypertension, depression, and sleep disorders can plague Black males who are afflicted with John Henryism.

Often referred to as high blood pressure, hypertension, Hypertension, a leading cause of death and disability among Black people, is defined as having a systolic blood pressure of 130 mmHg or higher and a diastolic blood pressure of at least 80 mmHg. In the United States, this condition disproportionately affects racial minorities, particularly Black Americans, who tend to develop hypertension earlier than whites. Furthermore, control rates for hypertension are lower among Black Americans, with only 44.6% managing their condition effectively compared to 50.8% of whites. This contributes to serious cardiovascular health outcomes, such as heart attacks, strokes, and renal failure, increasing their overall risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease.

Further, undertaking incredible workloads in already toxic environments can result in depression in Black male educators. Studies investigating suicide specifically among Black men have found that protective factors include advanced age, southern residency, and robust social networks. Conversely, factors such as financial instability, job insecurity, living in areas

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of concentrated poverty, and physical health challenges are linked to higher risks of suicidal ideation and attempts. Notably, one study indicates that Black men with higher education levels may face increased risks for suicidal behaviors (Fernquist, 2004).

According to Adams and Thorpe (2023), suicide is now the third leading cause of death for Black males in the United States. There is ample evidence indicating that exposure to discrimination contributes to elevated rates of depressive symptoms. However, further studies are necessary to determine if a direct link exists between discrimination and suicidal ideation. This research builds on existing knowledge by examining how discrimination is associated with both depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts among adult Black men.

The impact of discrimination on mental health cannot be underestimated, especially when considering the intersection of racial, gender, and socio-economic factors that shape the lives of Black men. Discrimination, whether overt or subtle, contributes to a chronic sense of devaluation and alienation that can severely affect one's mental well-being. Black men, who are often subjected to stereotyping, marginalization, and racial profiling, may internalize these societal messages, which can result in feelings of worthlessness and depression. These emotions, compounded by systemic inequities in education, healthcare, and employment, create a pervasive environment of stress that is not easily alleviated. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health, particularly in Black communities, often discourages individuals from seeking help, leading to an underreporting of mental health issues and, in some cases, an increase in risky coping mechanisms such as substance abuse or isolation.

Furthermore, the pressure to conform to traditional notions of masculinity, which often include the expectation to be emotionally stoic and resilient in the face of adversity, may exacerbate the mental health struggles of Black men. This cultural expectation discourages open discussions about mental health challenges, leaving many to suffer in silence. The resulting lack of social support and emotional expression can intensify feelings of hopelessness and isolation, further elevating the risk of suicidal thoughts.

Another reported effect of John Henryism is insomnia. Many Black men have reported that sleeplessness or the inability to sleep restfully is directly connected to the hyperactivity they undertake in the workplace. Predictably, adverse health circumstances can result when one considers the aforementioned professional hyperactivity and the lack of sleep often introduced into the equation. According to Smith et al. (2007), "When constantly confronted with racism, teachers can become hopeless, depressed, and begin to shut down emotionally" (p. 19). Smith et al. continue by saying, "This can lead to physiological effects such as problems eating and sleeping, hypertension, and other impacts" (p. 19). The cyclical nature of

this issue is concerning, as the toll of consistent emotional and physical exhaustion compounds over time. Black male educators, in particular, are often tasked with balancing the emotional burden of challenging systemic racism while still fulfilling their professional responsibilities. This unrelenting cycle of stress, emotional depletion, and inadequate rest can contribute to a weakened immune system, increased vulnerability to chronic illnesses like hypertension, and a general decline in overall well-being. When sleep is compromised, cognitive function is affected, leading to decreased effectiveness in the classroom, difficulty making decisions, and even challenges in maintaining interpersonal relationships both professionally and personally.

Moreover, the stressors of John Henryism can be further exacerbated by the expectations placed on Black male educators to be strong, resilient role models for their students. This added pressure to uphold a *superhuman* image in the face of adversity can create an internal conflict, where the educator's emotional and physical needs are disregarded in favor of maintaining a façade of unshakable competence. The constant striving to outperform expectations can result in burnout and, ultimately, a crisis of mental and physical health. Therefore, addressing insomnia and other health impacts related to John Henryism is critical, not only for the well-being of Black male educators but also for their long-term effectiveness in fostering positive student outcomes. Creating a supportive environment that recognizes and mitigates the harmful effects of these stresses is essential for Black male teachers to thrive and continue their important work in the classroom.

### **More on Black Males and John Henryism**

To be a Black male in K-12 educational spaces is to intuitively understand John Henryism. In general, the profession is laden with hundreds of daily decisions that would render many people useless. Tasked with detailed planning, managing student behavior, assessing student aptitude, and copious other responsibilities that are typical of teachers, Black male educators are also tacitly expected to manage not only their students but very often those of their colleagues, especially the boys. Even though the disciplinarian role is oftentimes antithetical to the dispositions of Black male educators, this can be the expectation, and negative labels are thrust upon Black males who refuse such undertakings. This added pressure can become a form of emotional labor, an unspoken burden that Black male educators bear, attempting to navigate and fulfill roles that may not align with their pedagogical approach or natural temperament. In many ways, Black male educators are compelled to embody a dual role: a teacher dedicated to academic success and a social enforcer tasked with reinforcing control in a

system that often views them as the embodiment of authority. This mirrors the John Henry myth, where Black men, despite their strength and determination, are pushed beyond their limits, trying to prove their worth in a society that consistently undermines their existence and potential.

The John Henry metaphor is particularly resonant in this context because Black male educators often feel that to succeed in their roles, they must work harder, faster, and more efficiently than their peers. They are forced to outpace the systemic and societal barriers placed in front of them, all while being subjected to stereotypes that suggest they are less capable or qualified than their colleagues. This relentless drive can result in burnout, as these educators internalize the expectation to not only meet but exceed the demands of the job while simultaneously challenging the narrow confines of the roles imposed upon them. Despite their professionalism and expertise, they must prove themselves repeatedly in ways that are not expected of their colleagues, particularly those who do not share their race. In the pursuit of excellence, Black male educators often carry the weight of defying societal expectations and overcoming institutionalized discrimination, making their daily work an embodiment of John Henryism, a fight against exhaustion and systemic injustice that can feel both disempowering and ultimately unsustainable.

**Anecdote:** *When I was in my first few years of teaching, I used to go home feeling bone-tired. I'm talking about that deep fatigue, the kind you get when you are not just physically tired, but also emotionally spent. I was always trying to please my colleagues and give the impression I was a team player. I also found myself trying to fight racial stereotypes by always smiling and appearing happy. I was a clown. I would also volunteer for every opportunity, every committee available so that I would not appear lazy. The older Black teacher on campus tried to tell me, but I thought I knew better as a young teacher. She pulled me aside one day and gently told me that I needed to take care of myself. "Don't wear yourself thin trying to prove something to people who will never understand what you're up against," she said. At the time, I nodded, thinking she was just trying to protect me from being overworked, but I didn't really listen. I thought I could handle it. But over time, that fatigue started to become all-consuming. I noticed that I was becoming increasingly irritable, my focus slipping, and my relationships with both colleagues and students starting to suffer. Despite my best efforts to appear unbothered, I was carrying a heavy load, mentally, emotionally, and physically. The expectation to be constantly "on" and constantly performing, while also deflecting stereotypes, was wearing me down in ways I hadn't fully realized.*

Many Black male educators report that there is an expectation that they serve as the sports coach or the physical education guru on school campuses. This presents an inordinate challenge when one considers the typical teacher duties for which Black males are responsible, compounded by the

additional responsibilities. Further, Black male educators must regularly participate in Black History or other cultural events in the course of their duties. While many Black educators voluntarily initiate and support such efforts, when added to the other tasks, the weight can compound and lead to frustration, burnout, and health maladies. Relatedly, because there are relatively few Black male educators, there is also the implicit task of serving as the expert on all things relating to Black culture. Apart from the Black tax this imposes, the practice of expecting a sole representative to have complete racial knowledge is wholly burdensome, unreasonable, and patently racist.

### **Learning to Thrive**

Despite the foregoing information, the responsibility of serving as a teacher is an amazing and humbling experience that yields unimaginable rewards. Observing and guiding students' academic, social, and physical development is akin to the parent pride experienced when watching their child flourish. It is truly a noble enterprise. And, despite the potent impact of John Henryism, palpable techniques to overcome the psychological and physiological challenges are real, present, and accessible for Black male educators. Thriving is more than merely existing as an educator; it is enjoying, growing, and appreciating the experience. To do that, fundamentally, Black male educators should actively engage in the following suggestions.

### ***Protect Your Time***

One might ask *How does protected time work?* To thrive in school environments, Black males need to be protective of their time and energy, honoring their wellness while also equitably contributing to the overall success of school initiatives. This notion is antithetical to what our society has practiced and believed about Black men. Societally, we have constructed an image of Black men as beasts of burden, physical manifestations of toiling, who take on and endure more than their counterparts. Whether Black men are professional athletes or school teachers, the tacit expectation remains the same. To thrive in school spaces, to truly flourish, Black males must covet and fiercely protect one thing that has eluded Black men over the expanse of time since Africans were brought to the United States: they must intentionally control their energy, effort, and time. Since the beginning of American Slavery, there has been an almost maniacal fascination with the control over Black bodies and the maximization of productivity in terms of their time. Any perceived waste of time, however erroneous, and charges

of laziness and cheating have been historically leveled against Black males. To thrive in educational spaces, Black males must identify their nonnegotiable time and honor it.

In and of itself, this is a challenge, protecting one's time suggests a selfishness that is atypical of community-minded educators (Remember, on the whole, Black men enter education for altruistic reasons). However, this is an essential skill that thriving Black male educators must possess. Quantitatively, educators spend approximately 40 contracted hours per week serving students and actively engaging within the school community. Beyond that, there are untold hours spent planning, grading, emailing parents/school personnel, etc., but for analysis, I will assign another 20–22 hours per week for that work. In addition, one has to factor in travel time to and from the school site (plus or minus 1 hour), sleep (plus or minus 40 hours), and healthy, mindful cooking and eating (plus or minus 5 hours). Most importantly, family time needs to be accounted for (plus or minus 15 hours). Given that there are 120 hours in a typical Monday-Friday work week, it is vitally important that Black male educators carve out time for themselves. Absent a desire by Black male educators to coach sports, lead campus efforts, or otherwise engage in extra activities, protected time is nonnegotiable to maintain one's psychological and physical wellness.

Black male educators should be judicious with their commitments to the point of selfishness. Added professional activities that detract from personal wellness and enrichment should be minimized or respectfully declined. Again, this can be difficult, particularly when the question of tenure or permanent employment status is at issue. For perspective, in many educational contexts, educators are probationary employees in their first 2 years in a school or district. During that time, school administrators scrutinize their performance to ensure teachers can effectively teach students, engage in professional development, and work well with colleagues, among other things. After the initial 2 years, educators are considered permanent employees. I would contend that Black males should artfully navigate their first 2 years to secure permanent employment. With this suggestion, I mean that Black males should invest in the school community in ways that promote school health while simultaneously deriving pleasure or building personal efficacy from that activity. The investment should be mutually beneficial. For example, if Black male educators are inclined to coach an after-school debate team and there is an opportunity to develop one's skills, leadership abilities, or professional networking opportunities, this role is symbiotic, purposeful, and will demonstrate value added to the school community. Beyond those first 2 years, however, I recommend that Black men become passionate defenders of their protected time.