



Strength for the Journeys:

Lessons from African American Families on Academic Programming and Educational Involvement in Greater Pittsburgh

A Report to the Pittsburgh College Access Alliance

Compiled by the Race and Youth Development Research Group

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Executive Summary

African American families historically and currently have faced significant barriers to their educational attainment. A long-standing cascade of multigenerational and intentional structural factors have inhibited their access to educational resources and opportunities, such as segregation and restrictive home-buying policies, biases in government benefit distributions, income inequality, and voting disenfranchisement. These and other factors have collectively contributed to an astounding wealth disparity in the United States, whereby White families hold eight times the wealth of their Black counterparts.¹ Meanwhile, interpersonal racism further compounds these structural impacts by way of well-documented biases in multiple domains, including education, health care, and law enforcement. The collective results here in Greater Pittsburgh are some of the worst racial disparities in the country on multiple outcomes,^{2,3,4} and the pandemic has served to further exacerbate and reinforce these existing inequities in our region. Schools today are both a byproduct and reinforcing factor in these structural and interpersonal impediments to racial justice, whereby Black students tend to be overrepresented in under-resourced schools and communities, systematically underexposed to rigorous coursework, overrepresented in subjective disability categories, and subject to intense disciplinary and policing biases.

The sum of these racial injustices presents a significant set of barriers for Black families to navigate in their pursuit of educational success. Yet these realities are not new; over generations, Black families have developed strategies for navigating and overcoming these barriers. At the same time, their own agency has been enhanced through the work of justice-oriented institutions and programs both within and beyond their own communities. In Pittsburgh, one such network of entities with a mission to address educational inequities is the Pittsburgh College Access Alliance (PCAA)—a collaboration of organizations founded in 2017 and focused on increasing access to and success in higher education for Pittsburgh's African American families. PCAA's founding membership included the Crossroads Foundation, the Fund for the Advancement of Minorities through Education (FAME), Higher Achievement, the Negro Education Emergency

Drive (NEED), and The Neighborhood Academy (TNA). Collectively, PCAA programs have provided an array of academic, enrichment and financial support for Black student achievement and access. PCAA agencies currently report that the students who participate in their programs demonstrate better educational outcomes than their non-participating counterparts in terms of high school graduation, college matriculation, and college graduation rates. Moreover, over the course of the pandemic, the PCAA partners have adapted programs to help families meet basic needs (e.g., food, utilities, mental health care) so that students and families can attend to academic aims.

Starting in 2018, PCAA sought to better understand the educational support needs and collective experiences of its families, with the aims of impacting broader educational practice in the region. To do so, the network partnered with researchers at the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems to engage in a listening tour with students and parents. Focus group conversations with parents, students, and alumni stakeholders occurred largely before the pandemic, then were recently supplemented with additional conversations with parents and program staff to give voice and attention to COVID-19 impacts on Black families' and service providers' educational experiences. The interviews provide tremendous insights into these families' truths, challenges, and triumphs in navigating a racialized educational terrain in Greater Pittsburgh. At the heart of the discussion is the challenge of navigating choices many parents and students must make among under-resourced urban schools, racially isolating and sometimes hostile private and suburban school experiences, and limited resources at home. Opportunities like those provided by PCAA agencies have been pivotal to that navigation, and they provide guidance for larger educational initiatives and schooling. The main findings are summarized below and detailed in the full report thereafter.

PCAA Family Perspectives on a Quality Education

PCAA families provided rich perspectives on what they believed were the key components of a quality education for Black children, including desired outcomes, ideal educational environments, and what parental educational involvement looks like for African American families in our region.

Desired Educational Outcomes. Although African American parents and students in this sample valued pure academic knowledge and intellectual growth, they placed perhaps a greater emphasis on the need for *practical learning* in formal educational settings, including topics like knowledge of finance, time management, and prioritizing. One parent noted, regarding high school workload, that if her daughter “can’t manage now with the small bit that she has, in comparison to her college workload, then you know, she might be in trouble.” Families and students also highly valued *character education* opportunities in their programs and schools. Another commonly stated desired outcome included developing independence. College and career preparation was also a critical goal for these families, particularly in seeking economic mobility

Desired Educational Environments. PCAA parents and students believed that educational environments serving African Americans need to be both rigorous and personalized. Rigor was paramount, as many PCAA parents were willing to choose what they perceived to be social sacrifices to have their children in places they perceived to be academically challenging. One Crossroads parent reported explaining it to her daughter this way: “My whole driven point behind you going is your education, not to sacrifice yourself before you even realize the value. And that’s pretty much it. And I told her, I said, ‘If you make some friends along the way, that’s a positive. But if not, take it as a growth and keep moving.’”

Still, the pursuit of rigor went hand-in-hand with a desire for personalized environments that included engagement with teachers that were inspirational, supportive, and encouraging. As one parent shared, “I want her to have teachers who inspire her. Teachers who, when she goes in their class, she can see beyond high school—like she’s thinking ‘Boy, with this, I can do this. I can go to college.’” High expectations from teachers

and like-minded peers with high educational aspirations and habits were also desired by PCAA parents and students alike.

Diversity. The diversity of faculty, staff, fellow students, and the curriculum itself was also critically important to PCAA families, in terms of both the connectedness, belonging, and fairness they associated with adequate representation, and also in terms of exposure to other cultures and the world outside many of their predominantly Black and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Pandemic Educational Environments. During the pandemic, these educational environment interests shifted in the virtual world. Some students had to take on childcare roles while they were home with younger siblings, while others were at times uncomfortable with their homes being displayed to peers due to economic challenges. These and other virtual learning challenges led to pronounced difficulties with virtual schooling. As one programmer noted:

Some of your students are [attending class] in a room with three other siblings, their internet access goes in and out. That’s disruptive to the class, but it’s certainly disruptive for that young person. And yes, their education would be of a much better quality were they at school.

COVID-19 also impacted students’ college choices due to economic considerations within families, forcing many students to stay local or delay post-secondary enrollment.

Table E1: Desired Elements of a Quality Education

Desired Outcomes	School Environment	Parent Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning (knowledge of math, writing, science, etc.) • Utilitarian outcomes (college readiness, employment acquisition, independence) • Academic capital (study skills, knowledge of career pathways, good academic habits) • Character and self-actualization (finding voice, respect for others, meaningful work) • Critical thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic rigor (challenging work, access to accelerated coursework) • Personal relationships with teachers and staff • High expectations • Focused and safe climates • Achievement-oriented peers • Diversity in faculty/staff, peers, and curricula • Affordability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socializing educational values (academic over social priorities, leadership) • Family-based achievement identity • Enrichment activities • Academically supportive home structures (quiet space, peace, comfort) • Monitoring school assignments • Social monitoring for academic impact • Proactive school-based engagement • Responsive/advocacy engagement at school • Financial sacrifice • Deliberate school choices • Accessing social networks
Pandemic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic needs (food, home utility supports) • Mental health and wellness • Virtual social inclusion 	Pandemic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliable internet • Virtual social activities • Adequate technology resources • Technology supports • Mental health supports • Physical social inclusion • Affordability and value at post-secondary level 	Pandemic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-day academic monitoring • Teaching their children • Enrichment and encouragement (outing, spiritual communities, virtual activities for other children)

PCAA Parent Involvement in Education

PCAA parents described a range of involvement strategies for supporting Black children, including socializing around educational values and promoting the need for social sacrifices for educational achievement and opportunity. In some cases, these sacrifices referred to the need (1) to be leaders or *groundbreakers* in the face of negative peer influences as well as in schools that are racially inclusive but don't have strong socio-academic cultures, and/or (2) to promote an *education over social life ethic*, particularly in schools that are rigorous but interpersonally and racially isolating. Strategies to promote this socialization included finding affirming social outlets outside of school for children (e.g., PCAA activities, church, sports) and providing proactive and responsive affirmations and encouragement at home. As one parent of a private high school student noted:

I just build my child up. Let them know that these people here, they're not better than you: Sometimes they have more than you but, by no means does that mean that they're better than you. I just let her—I always tell her 'You can do anything you want. Like your hair'—I was like—'They can talk or treat you or give you looks all they want but you're in the same situation—they're in the same exact situation as you. They're in the same school as you. They're in the same situation.

Other involvement strategies included *constant communication* with children about their experiences, creating structured home environments for academic activities, setting boundaries with peers, leveraging PCAA programming, and making sacrificial school choices. One mother even reported giving up her home and moving in with her parents to afford her children's college education expenses. Students were aware of and motivated by these parental sacrifices. As one student described his mother's efforts: "She takes two jobs, and I understand that, cause it's like at the end she knows that me and my brother and my sister, we are going to be successful with our education and helping her out in the long run."

The pandemic presented highly challenging obstacles for parent involvement. School closures often meant that parents, many of whom were essential workers, could not go to work and leave children unattended, creating impossible choices. Moreover, virtual schooling often forced parents to take on academic monitoring and teaching duties that would otherwise have been handled by school faculty on site. As one program administrator described:

For parents, it's like pressure to have all of this technology and Wi-Fi or an iPad or laptop. And I know some schools provide that, which is great, but also pressure to make sure school is being done. Make sure you're logging on for these classes. That's just already a lot on top of everything that parents have to deal with.

Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated immense strength both pre- and mid-pandemic. Some started online yoga and cooking classes for students. Others found ways to engage in enriching active lives while the world shut down. Still others leveraged virtual supports like faith-based activities, cultural programs, and PCAA to maintain strength and encouragement. Throughout these journeys, these families found ways to continue moving forward for the sake of their children's education and well-being despite compounding challenges.



Barriers to Black Families' Educational Success

Parents, students, and staff described educational barriers to Black student success across both public and private school sectors. In under-resourced urban schools and historically oppressed communities, PCAA families often highlighted structural issues with various aspects of school quality, including overcrowding, poor funding, low expectations, peer distractions, teacher burnout, and a lack of rigor. As one current student described:

In low-income areas usually the quality of the school decreases, so, like, worse administration, and worse teachers, less programs, fewer opportunities. So like, that can definitely be a major hindrance for like trying to get a better, more advanced education.

Some parents attributed these critiques of public school options to society at large, broader racial structural inequalities, and the greater public's commitment to quality public education. As one parent noted, "They don't care about our community and our kids, because they are closing all of our schools down, cramping them all in one classroom...which is unfair. Like she said, how's your children supposed to learn?"

For PCAA parents who found ways to afford them, private schools had the potential to address some of these structural concerns, but they also presented their own racialized perils, particularly regarding interpersonal racism and classism. Issues in these settings included racialized social isolation, racially biased behavioral disparities, intellectual biases, and even diminished extracurricular opportunities. One parent described dress-code enforcements at her daughter's private school in this way:

There are some teachers who are kinda—or some administrators are kinda—very adamant about the dress code. So my daughter might have on a hoodie over top of her uniform shirt, or a sweater or something, and they'll give her an infraction, but there'll be 50 other White kids walking around the hallway with a hoodie on, and I'm like, you can't—she thinks she can do what they can do, like, you can, but your consequences will be different.

Concurrent with school-based barriers, Black families were also often grappling with economic challenges that transcended context. Parents made many sacrifices for their children's education, but in some cases simply could not afford the opportunities they desired for their children. As one student described:

My like family has made a lot of sacrifices, because I've lived with my mom, and my grandma, and they've both had to pay for my tuition, and so that can be hard because like, sometimes one can't afford their side of it, so then the other has to pay for a lot of it. And also, I have a lot of siblings, and you have to pay for them too, and it gets very overwhelming, until, sometimes like, I had to transfer schools, because they couldn't afford the school I was at.

These economic challenges were felt at the post-secondary level, especially during the pandemic, when families were making choices such as having to delay college or go to school locally so that they could work and contribute to family incomes, which were compromised by the crisis.

We came to understand these intersecting challenges to Black families' education as the *triple quandary of Black educational involvement*. Specifically, these families navigated choosing between (1) public schools that could be culturally affirming in terms of peer culture but structurally under-resourced due to structurally racist histories or (2) private schools that provided rigor and opportunity but where social isolation and interpersonal discrimination were more palpable. In either case, families were still managing oppressive economic factors that, on a personal level, manifested in limited family resources and community distress. PCAA programs were seen as very supportive in helping their clients navigate these realities, but families also believed that even more opportunities and knowledge of them were needed to support larger numbers of families.

Table E2: Barriers to a Quality Education Facing Black Families

School Institutional	Race and Society	Financial	Pandemic
Public Schools			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcrowding • Poor school funding • Low expectations • Lack of differentiated instruction • Lack of safety • Teasing and distractions • Lack of rigor • Lack of information about the college process • Racially differential opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racialized inequities in access to resources and opportunities • Lack of role models and examples of success across fields • Being seen as a threat • Fear of Black brilliance (not supposed to be smart) • Survival in oppressed community settings • Criminal justice inequities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic isolation in affluent schools • Ostracizing single parent families • Parents in survival mode • Working class parents with minimal opportunity for traditional involvement • Lack of transportation • Geography, where people can afford to live • Lack of childcare inhibits learning, involvement • Not knowing the process to access resources like vouchers, charter options • Lack of tutoring resources • Can't afford private education • Kid works to help parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having to prioritize basic needs over educational activities and expenses. • Lack of adequate childcare • Challenges to mental health for parents and students • Online learning-related barriers (devices and service, lack of serviceable spaces at home) • Additional duties for students in the home (taking care of younger siblings) • Too much unstructured time with online schedules • Cannot afford distant higher education opportunities • Need to forgo or delay post-secondary education
Private Schools			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation • Lack of support for students of color • Racism in extracurricular experiences • Racial biases in school discipline • Materialistic cultures 			

The Pandemic and Mental Health Challenges

As the pandemic exacerbated a number of pre-existing challenges to educational equity, it also created its own distinct challenges in the area of mental health. Students in PCAA families were experiencing depression, loneliness, and even identity crises related to isolation and grief, particularly with pandemic deaths disproportionately impacting Black families. One TNA administrator noted that among their students, there was a “formal depression that came from the kids not having a social outlet... spending more time by themselves than ever.” Parents also described their children’s difficulties, which were at times compounded by social distancing occurring even within households. As one parent discussed:

I’m a health care worker; I’m a frontline worker. So, I was spending a lot of time at the hospital, and when I was coming home, I was isolating

myself because I didn’t want to come home with COVID and give it to [my son]. So, he was not only missing his peers and his friends, but he was also missing me as a mother. ... So, he was feeling very much alone, and I could see it was affecting his mental [health], it was affecting his schoolwork, it was affecting him all around.

Parents and family caregivers were not immune to these mental health struggles themselves. One parent shared with a TNA administrator, “I’m overwhelmed with life. I’m overwhelmed with life at this time.” Some parents were in therapy for the first time themselves and often transferred that compassion to their children because they were sensitive to their own challenges.

Key Programmatic Supports

In the face of these many barriers to Black youths’ educational success, both before and during the pandemic, parents and students saw many PCAA programmatic supports as providing critical value in overcoming challenges to educational opportunity. Financial benefits were especially recognized given their power to narrow aforementioned economic gaps. One FAME parent described how she stumbled upon the scholarship program for her son through an independent school admissions process: “He got accepted, and the admissions people actually introduced me to FAME for the other part of his scholarship. ... If I didn’t apply for him to go to that school, and, thank goodness, you know, he got the scholarship on their part then the scholarship from FAME, ‘cause I didn’t know how I was gonna pay. I just knew that I wanted a better education for him.”

Academic enrichment opportunities were also highly valued, including out-of-school academic material, achievement-oriented peer cultures, and exposure to college environments. Personalized learning at PCAA programs was also noted to make differences in multiple educational outcomes, including attendance, graduation, and life trajectory. One NEED scholarship alum noted, “If it wasn’t for Ms. Mason, I probably wouldn’t be right here. I probably wouldn’t

even be in college, for real. I don’t even know where I’d be right now. But like, I give all my respect to them. I still talk to them to this day, and they’re coming to my graduation.” During the pandemic, PCAA programs provided additional layers of important supports for students and families, including financial supports for basic needs such as utilities, learning supplies, and cooked meals delivered home. These provisions were essential to PCAA families’ well-being and survival, as captured by this TNA student’s comment:

Before we signed up for being on the food distribution list, food was unpredictable. ... I didn’t know what I was gonna eat or when I was going to eat that day. So, I’m looking after my two younger brothers. ... I didn’t have peace of mind because I was looking at my younger brothers, thinking to myself, they would ask me, “Hey, what are we having for dinner?” I don’t know. I don’t know.

Mental health support provisions during the pandemic were also utilized. PCAA programs brought in counseling supports and made them available to students, connecting families with community providers when possible.

Table E3: Pittsburgh College Access Alliance Programs at a Glance

	Founded	Mission	Population Served	Record of Success
Crossroads Foundation	1988	<i>We envision a world where all students, regardless of means, have access to the educational opportunities and support necessary to achieve their God-given potential.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 700 scholars over history, 160 current students 80% Black, Latinx, or Asian students from economically disadvantaged families 55% First generation college families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% graduate high school on time 98% enroll in college after graduation 74% have earned their BA or are still on track for graduation (class of 2010-2018) 75% take honors or AP courses 75% achieve an unweighted GPA of 3.0 or higher
Fund for Advancement of Minorities through Education (FAME)	1993	<i>FAME's mission is to educate, empower and embolden African American youth to become student ambassadors of today, leaders of tomorrow and stewards of their communities by providing access to college preparatory education at participating independent schools in the Greater Pittsburgh area through the provision of need based financial assistance.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 110 annual participants across two programs African American families in high financial need 3rd through 12th grade students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% of scholars accepted into colleges and Universities Between \$500,000-\$2,000,000 earned in Scholarships annually 85-100% Attendance Participation in FAME Programming for Scholars and Parents Nationally recognized STEM Programming
Negro Education Emergency Drive (NEED)	1963	<i>NEED's vision is to be a catalyst for change that transforms the outcomes of our underserved youth in the Greater Pittsburgh area by developing college bound, civic-minded leaders. We are directing them on the right path through enrichment programs, mentorship, career development, educational trips, scholarship assistance, and socially impactful activities. We are determined to eradicate the factors that lead to systemic poverty by creating safe learning environments and by giving them every tool to succeed. Together with the support of families, churches, alumni, corporations, and in-kind donations we are investing in our youth to ensure the growth, longevity, sustainability of our future and the strengthening of our Pittsburgh region's economy.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41,000 alumni over a 59 year history 1500 students receive direct college and career access services annually Serve African American high school and middle school students and families residing in Western Pennsylvania Following NEED culturally-based program intervention, 100% apply and are accepted into college attending over 300 different colleges and universities across the country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$43 million in scholarships awarded in history The oldest Pennsylvania college access program serving African American students Most Pittsburgh born African Americans who later went on and entered higher education are NEED alumni In 2021, \$812,475 awarded in scholarships and facilitated \$3,986,251 in federal, state, and institutional aid to students in 70 different high schools, representing 9 Western Pennsylvania counties. STEAM and Robotics Programming 35 different communities served Alumni have attended more than 700 colleges and universities nationally Nationally recognized HBCU Tour held annually. In 2021, NEED students were enrolled in 43 different HBCUs.
The Neighborhood Academy (TNA)	2001	<i>The Neighborhood Academy is a faith-based, college preparatory, independent school whose mission is to break the cycle of generational poverty by empowering youth and preparing them for college and citizenship.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thousands of alumni 150 current students Coed grades 9-12, single gender boys in grades 6-8 (coed starting 2023) 70% of our families earn \$30K or less annually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% college acceptance rate 75% of our alumni graduate from college in 5 years or less

Recommendations for Educational Practice with Black Families

Several recommendations emerged that are relevant to PCAA, programs like it, and like-minded schools aiming to complement Black families' agency and striving against oppressive challenges to Black student opportunities and achievement.

Equitable Distributions of Educational Resources

Fundamental to the findings here, and undergirding all of them, is the history of economic subordination of Black populations in Greater Pittsburgh and beyond. This history contributes to the experiences captured here of parents of children in under-resourced public schools, consistently noting how a lack of resources manifested in challenges to academic rigor, teacher stress, school climate, and personalized attention. PCAA parents often saw private education as not ideal but necessary because of the inadequacies of their available public options. At a policy level, such issues would be greatly alleviated by equitable school funding efforts including closing of currently large school funding gaps between more and less affluent locales in Pennsylvania and elsewhere nationally.⁵ These resource inequities are critical to family-school partnership successes in economically oppressed communities. Efforts to close such gaps are critical to Black family support efforts and educational equity aims more broadly. Programs like PCAA and others, which are standing in gaps created by intergenerational oppressive factors in our region, also merit additional support if we hope to close educational inequalities and address the barriers noted by Black families in this study.

Curricular and Professional Development Supports for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

A common experience among respondents in this study included adverse racial experiences in majority White learning environments and/or in schools with teachers and staff who were majority White. Experiences in these families validate the call for increased attention to racial equity in school personnel training, cultural priorities, and school curricula, as families were also concerned about representation, messaging, and impact on their children's outcomes when curricula teach incomplete and non-inclusive narratives of the human

experience. Recent events in our region have elevated concerns about a lack of such representation in training, curricula, and district priorities,^{6,7} even as leading research affirms the value of these approaches to African American student success. As such, equity efforts in schools across sectors should be redoubled to ensure safe, edifying, and academically optimal experiences of students and families of color in their communities.

Enhanced Crisis Response Capacities for Culturally Tailored Programs

Several suggestions came up regarding how PCAA programs and similar organizations and schools could best respond to families during the pandemic, in the process leveraging their already contextually tailored offerings to meet the specific needs of African American families and youth.

- **Formalized crisis intervention supports.** If properly supported, formalized crisis-intervention mechanisms could be established and mobilized to begin supporting more basic need concerns that supersede academic activities or other missional priorities as such needs arise. This type of response mechanism likely requires additional philanthropic and policy support. Program staff specifically described having to cut academic and financial aid offerings to meet clients' basic needs. A challenge for the funding community is to provide such supports so programs can then address primary needs without compromising academic activities.
- **Support groups.** Given the pervasive mental health challenges associated with the pandemic, a useful response from programs and schools was the formation and/or mobilization of support groups for students and families. These groups were and could be in the future convened by the programs to provide mental health supports in the face of persisting crises, whether they be pandemic or otherwise.

- **More checking in and personal communication.** Parents appreciated personal supports and proactive checking in from programs, especially during the pandemic when social isolation was so prevalent and damaging. Parents valued this checking in regarding both mental health needs and proactive academic guidance.
- **Greater voice to the Black pandemic experience.** The voices expressed in this report only scratch the surface of the pandemic experience. A much deeper exploration of Black experiences in this era is needed if we genuinely want to understand and address the disproportionate harm that has been caused by the events of the past three years. The upcoming Freedom Dreaming Project, for example, led by the Pitt Center for Urban Education, aims to robustly voice these Black family experiences.²⁶

Enhanced Supports for Strengths-Based Black Parenting Programming and Networks

Several suggestions and potentially beneficial recommendations pertain to establishing and/or reifying supports for programs and networks that build capacity upon existing strengths in Black families themselves.

- **Educational choice and guidance resources for Black families.** A key finding from this study is the complex challenge that Black families in our region face when making educational choices and navigating systems. Although urban public and private schools were seen to have cultural and academic assets, respectively, rare were the institutions where families thought both were in play. Families would be greatly assisted by guidance and information on navigating educational spaces in Greater Pittsburgh, whether that be through peer-support networks, written materials, or consolidated information sharing from institutions explicitly committed to Black student and family success.
- **Establish and reify Black parent support networks.** In addition to school choice and academic support information, Black families in Greater Pittsburgh would also benefit from participation in support communities that promote best practices in Black

parenting in education and beyond. Some examples include programs like Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Pitt's Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education program (PRIDE), and Parenting While Black, as well as parent networks within PCAA organizations. There is now a wealth of information on the value of ethno-centric parenting practices in overcoming oppressive contexts, which can be leveraged and shared across the region.

- **Remove structural barriers to parental involvement where they exist.** Parents and students suggested ways to remove structural barriers to parental involvement in education, particularly in working-class settings, including making sure that parent-engagement events provide food, childcare, and transportation.
- **Offer more enrichment activities for parents.** It was also noted that developmental and enriching parent-focused activities can help make a school or program a community in which parents want to be involved. These were described as potentially including parenting or education strategy seminars, as well as non-academic activities like self-defense classes. These enrichment opportunities, in conjunction with removing participation barriers like food and childcare, have the potential to make schools and programs more like hubs for family involvement.
- **Create and leverage parent ambassadors.** Oftentimes, program and school personnel cannot reach families that other parents can. As such, a parent ambassador program that calls on ambassador parents to be the point of contact for other parents may also be advantageous. Parents have the moral authority and interconnections that school and program officials often do not, and that can be leveraged to garner support and/or find out what under-involved peer families really may be facing. Parent ambassadors can be helpful in both recruiting new families and in shoring up the commitment of current families.

Better Marketing and Promotion of Existing Opportunities

Parents generally felt that PCAA programs and others like them were not well promoted in the region, with families noting that word of mouth was one of the primary drivers of information not only about PCAA programs but also for “almost every after-school or academic enrichment program that exists in the city of Pittsburgh.” Ideas to better promote opportunities included:

- **Better utilizing social media.** Respondents commonly noted that PCAA programs could do better at using social media to promote their activities. Programs and schools aiming to bring in more families and stay connected should invest in social media as a way to advertise and build communities among constituents.
- **Advertising investments.** Another suggestion was that PCAA programs make financial investments in TV, radio, print, and billboard advertising to promote programs.
- **Alumni coordination and promotion.** It was noted that the alumni of these programs are not leveraged enough for their accomplishments as graduates of these programs, although their stories would be compelling. This is a common challenge for academic programs and can be for schools, too. This lack of systematic tracking forfeits opportunities to cultivate both potential ambassadors and also potential donors to programs and institutions. Investment in alumni tracking may be warranted for programs and

schools looking to keep their beneficiaries connected to their activities on an ongoing basis.

- **Develop a more formal network of partner schools and organizations.** There are schools and community organizations that are already in connection with PCAA programs for recruitment purposes, but it is also likely that many schools or organizations that partner with some PCAA programs would be interested in connecting their constituents with additional PCAA opportunities. Collaborations that cross public and private school lines may require specific effort, but the breadth of PCAA offerings, including scholarships and enrichment opportunities available to the public (not only core program families), provides opportunities for further synergy. Moreover, independent organizations like faith communities, community centers, and other entities are likely to be invested in the entire slate of PCAA offerings as well as like-minded programs and schools. It is likely that a human resource investment may be required for many programs to accomplish these tasks.
- **Clear communication of program commitments.** Another suggestion occurring across groups was that program expectations be crystal clear (such as purpose and requirements for program participants). Students themselves expressed disappointment after seeing peers leave programs because they did not really understand from the beginning what would be expected of them.

Conclusion

Although the findings here are generally limited to the responses of PCAA students, parents, and a handful of administrators, they may yet hold important implications for our region and beyond regarding African American families' educational journeys before and during the pandemic. Families we spoke with provided a vast array of ways in which they supported their children's education despite long histories of intergenerational obstacles. These parents offered some important recommendations on how programs and schools can limit the impact of these barriers. Moreover, the oppressive fac-

tors Black families face were exacerbated by the pandemic, with academic, physiological, and mental health consequences. Yet across these challenges, families were resilient, and PCAA programs and others like it have helped Black children's educational success. Lessons presented here, such as what has gone right and what could be done better, if robustly adopted across the region, can collectively honor and uplift the heroic efforts we have seen for Black families over the past three years and beyond.