



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

Center on Race & Social Problems

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	iii
I. Introduction.....	1
II. What a Quality Education Looks Like.....	5
III. Barriers to Educational Opportunities.....	20
IV. Key Programmatic Supports for Black Family Academic Success.....	33
V. Recommendations for Educational Practice with Black Families.....	38
VI. Conclusion.....	42
VII. Appendices.....	43

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 (outings, 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.

FULL REPORT

I. Introduction

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 inequalities 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 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). PCAA students often come from oppressed and working-class communities serviced by under-resourced schools, and collectively PCAA programs have provided an array of rigorous academic, enrichment, financial, and social capital supports for Black student achievement and access. In the face of these socio-historical barriers, the programs report that the academic impacts of their efforts are high: 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, PCAA partners have adapted programs to help families meet basic needs (food, utilities, mental health care) so that students and families can attend to academic aims.



Yet despite the opportunities available through the PCAA organizations, PCAA reports that many eligible families from Pittsburgh's economically disadvantaged and historically oppressed African American communities do not participate in available opportunities in their programs or, as is more often the case, even know that these opportunities exist. Moreover, beyond its programming, PCAA has seen that too many African American families in our region do not have access to the information, personalized preparation, and social networks necessary to successfully navigate the racialized challenges of educational institutions for long-term academic and career success. These long-standing challenges facing African American families were both exposed and further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated systemic inequalities that existed between Black and White families in our region and nationally. Black families on average have felt a larger burden associated with the pandemic, including higher levels of infections, mortality, economic hardships, and school closures associated with this public health crisis. Parent involvement in education has presented a unique set of challenges during the pandemic; as such, both parents and supportive educators and programmers have sought ways to navigate the crisis while continuing to ensure Black student success.

In essence, the past three years have presented *two educational journeys for Black families to navigate*: pre-pandemic conditions and long-standing socio-historical inequities, and then the pandemic condition, which exacerbated those challenges for Black students, caregivers, and the educators serving them. In efforts to further understand barriers to participation and best practices in advancing Black families' educational aspirations, PCAA partnered with the Race and Youth Development Research Group at University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems and School of Social Work to conduct a "listening tour" to investigate parent and student perspectives on the aspirations, supports, and barriers affecting African American youths' ability to access and succeed in effective college-preparatory experiences. Focus group conversations with parents, students, and alumni stakeholders occurred largely before the pandemic, then were

recently supplemented with additional conversations with more parents and also PCAA program staff to give voice and attention to COVID-19 impacts on Black families' and service providers' educational experiences.⁸ 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 Black parents and students must make between 1) the well documented structural limitations of under-resourced schools serving Black and Brown communities,⁹ and 2) racially isolating and often more overt discriminatory experiences in White private schools. In either case, Black families are also more likely to simultaneously be managing limited economic resources at home. Opportunities provided by PCAA agencies have been pivotal to that navigation, and these families' experiences hold recommendations for larger racially equitable educational initiatives and schooling.

Although the findings here are largely limited to the experiences of PCAA parents, students, and alumni, PCAA's hope is that these constituents' truths from can be a catalyst for moving forward a collective agenda for Black family educational supports here in Greater Pittsburgh and more broadly. The hope is also that this effort will increase advocacy for high-quality educational opportunities in both public and private spheres, and spotlight and support best practices in family involvement in the educational process. Ultimately, the findings and recommendations here can help schools and programs with similar aims as PCAA's to substantially increase higher education access and completion for more African American students in Greater Pittsburgh and beyond.

The report proceeds as follows. First, we present parent and student responses to PCAA's central questions regarding what a quality education looks like, as well as how families approached parental involvement to ensure the academic success of their children. Pictures of a quality education both before and during the pandemic are presented, and, where relevant, the researchers note how these parent and student perspectives are consistent and divergent with existing research on the Black family educative experience. Next, we present Black families' perspectives on barriers to a quality education in Greater Pittsburgh, including long-standing barriers related to under-resourced public school experiences; racialized experiences in mostly White private schools and society at large; financial barriers

disproportionately faced by Black families; and the intersection of the three, which we liken to a *triple quandary of Black family educational involvement*. Pandemic-related barriers are also discussed, including both exacerbated iterations of existing injustices, as well as new challenges posed by mental health impacts and virtual learning under pandemic conditions. Finally, we present families' perspectives on what they perceived to be key program supports before and during the pandemic, what challenges remained in both cases, and what they believe schools and academic programs can do to better support Black families' historically remarkable record of educational resilience and engagement in the face of historical and contemporary oppressive forces.



Table I: 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

II. What a Quality Education Looks Like

Respondents' beliefs about what a quality education looks like can be broken into three overarching categories: (1) desired outcomes for personal traits that they believed formal education should develop in youth, (2) the quality of the educational environment in which the students should be learning, and (3) what Black parental involvement looks like in support of educational excellence.

Desired Outcomes from a Quality Education

Desired outcomes for a quality education in general included interest in practical, *utilitarian outcomes*; *character-building and self-actualization*; and *critical thinking skills*. When the pandemic struck, however, *families sought more basic provisions* from their children's schooling.

Utilitarian Academic Outcomes. Across the groups, a wide range of ideas surfaced when participants were asked what a quality education entailed. In general, there was universal agreement across focus groups that the practical, utilitarian outcomes of education were important: college preparedness, future job readiness, preparation for gatekeeping tests, and the ability to successfully handle academic rigor at future levels. As one youth respondent noted succinctly, "A high school's job is basically to prepare you for college." In this same vein, parents also commented frequently on *independence* as a key outcome of a quality education. Parents wanted students to be able to be self-sufficient as adults, not depending on others to live a comfortable life. One NEED parent mentioned, "**I don't want them to have to live check to check, or to have to depend on any system to get them what they need for their life**, so I think that if they're able to achieve the job that they want to do, or go on the career path that they need to go on, and be able to take care of families."

Academic Capital. Related to this idea of utilitarian goals for education were outcomes that elsewhere have been called *academic capital*, or knowledge of the often-unwritten rules and student habits for succeeding in education.¹⁰ These skills included time management, how to study, setting priorities, and having concrete knowledge of the pathway to one's desired career. One parent from The

Neighborhood Academy cautioned regarding high school workloads, saying 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. ... So time management is important, and prioritizing, I think that prioritizing is very important.



Character and Self-actualization. Participants also frequently noted the need for a quality education to help students develop the *character* qualities that would make them good and productive members of society, while also helping them to find their own “voice” personally and professionally. Among character traits, work ethic and *respect for others* were mentioned repeatedly to be among the key traits they hoped their children would learn in the educative process. Charity and giving back to the community were also commonly named as important outcomes. One parent from The Neighborhood Academy noted that at the school:

They do a lot of community service, they're involved all throughout this area, the churches. It teaches them life skills, respect. I mean, I'm seeing it with the kids who have already graduated that, uh, what they learn here they take forward. And their character is just above so many other young people just because of what they learn here.

In this case, the parent explained that students are learning charity and civic responsibility at TNA, and that what they're learning seems to have the desired long-term effects on the youths' personal development.

Many of the responses also addressed an interest in *self-actualization*, or youth being able to be who they want to be without personal or environmental barriers, or pressures of conforming to narratives regarding economic prosperity. Students in particular seemed to prioritize enjoyment over money when discussing their future interests and conceptions of success. One student noted that success was “having something, you know, that you like to do, and being under that every day, you know, and actually enjoying yourself. It doesn't really matter how much you have.” Parents also wanted their children to see the journey of life, and academic experiences more specifically, as valuable in its own right. One FAME parent noted, “One child's success may not look like another child's success.” Another followed up, “That's important for me, for my daughter to be well-rounded and, also, to be doing what she's happy and passionate about.”

Critical Thinking. Families across multiple focus groups described *critical thinking* as a key outcome of student learning. A FAME parent said, “When I think of a quality education, I think of an education that really challenges children to think critically, and, also, education exposes them to ideas they normally wouldn't come in contact with. So, challenging and exposure.” Social-emotional skills were also discussed, in the context of promoting what are often considered “soft skills” versus practical or informational knowledge.



“That's important for me, for my daughter to be well rounded and, also, to be doing what she's happy and passionate about.”
- FAME parent

Quality Education during the Pandemic: A Shift to Basic Needs. Although these long-term educational outcome interests likely persisted for families throughout the pandemic, the pandemic also brought a severity and intensity that forced programmers, students, and families alike to prioritize basic needs, at times over notions of self-actualization and more lofty personal development. As one program administrator noted: “Education doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It’s about the whole child. And actually, for us, it’s about the child and the family. ... If you’re hungry or if you’re feeling bothered or if you’re scared, you’re not going to learn, you’re not going to be able to access quality education even if it’s right in front of you.” In other words, as one parent vividly expressed, “What is the point of giving students laptops and you might not have electricity?”

It is well documented that the health and economic outcomes of COVID-19 have been especially challenging for Black communities. In response to these needs among their constituents, **PCAA programs expended current funds and secured additional specialized funding to cover families’ basic household expenses such as electric and gas bills and rent costs.** At least one program offered unconditional cash funds, saying that they trusted families to use the funds as best needed. Multiple program administrators also mentioned assisting with food for students and families. At The Neighborhood Academy, students already regularly received free breakfast, lunch, and dinner on campus. Yet

with the advent of virtual learning and pandemic lockdowns, school administrators pivoted to deliver meals to homes, including food for siblings, and snacks for TNA community-wide TV-watching events occurring via Zoom. Several other programs mentioned donating grocery store gift cards to families. Also, in addition to direct provisions, programs and schools operated as mediators between families and other necessary resources during difficult times. One program operated a referral phone number to connect families with food banks, housing availability, or other resources. Others worked with a cable provider to supply laptops and internet service to households for free.

The pandemic reoriented families and programmers around what a quality education means when operating in what some called “survival mode.” As one program leader said, **“This is unlike any other time in our nation’s history as far as educationally. And these kids are dealing with responsibilities and changes of habits that are not ... supportive of quality education. We are in survival; [the pandemic] made me see it. That was the picture. It allowed me to see that we are in survival as a school, as a country, educationally.”** Through it all, the aim here was to ensure that African American youth and families at the heart of the COVID-19 crisis had enough of their basic needs covered to give the students a fighting chance to effectively pursue the more enduring aims of a quality education.



Desired Educational Environment

PCAA parents' and students' ideas of a quality education often focused on what they perceived to be the key environmental factors in educational institutions and programs. These environmental qualities generally centered around notions of *academic rigor*; *personal relationships with teachers*; *achievement-oriented peer relationships*; and *diverse representation* in school staff, peers, and curricula. During the pandemic, educational environments shifted significantly toward effectively managing virtual learning demands and realities.

Academic Rigor. First and foremost, respondents wanted educational environments that featured opportunities for *academic rigor*. One parent, who herself was a public school teacher, noted how preparing students with the right approaches to rigor was a distinguishing characteristic in her daughter's independent school:

I teach in [a local public district], and my daughter could have gone to [public high school], and she would get a great education and she would learn, but I think, if she went to [public high school], she would be missing out on learning how to be independent, learning how to advocate to herself, learning study skills. ... I feel like an independent school teaches you all the steps and scaffolds it so that you learn how and why to get to the point of being able to do the things that are rigorous.

This type of appreciation was common among parents, even if it was at the expense of their children's social lives in potentially socially isolating settings. Many parents of private school children in fact noted that their choice to enroll in schools that were often extremely White was a conscious choice to prioritize *academic rigor over social experience*. 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 other parents, as discussed below, described how rigor was often inconsistent in their local public schools, and that a lack of rigor generated a secondary issue with student behaviors among capable but unchallenged students. Overall, issues of rigor were central to discussions of desired educational environments, whether parents were sacrificing socially to access it, or struggling with its absence.



Personal Relationships with Teachers. In addition to opportunities for rigor, there was a strong desire for *personalized educational experiences and relationships* between teachers and students among PCAA families. Parents wanted teachers to be inspiring and “truly supportive” of their children. 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.’”** They wanted their children to be treated humanely and with grace and empathy in times when the children were struggling personally or emotionally. Parents and students alike wanted *smaller K-12 schools* with more involved teachers than many of them previously reported experiencing. Youth in particular noted that *encouragement* was a key quality they desired from their K-12 and post-secondary learning environments. One student shared personally how a lack of educational encouragement had failed his brother and contributed to him wanting to drop out of college:

I feel like encouragement, because, um, my oldest brother ... like, my family encouraged him, but he didn't have anyone else besides that. ... He didn't have anyone else that, like, kind of believe in him, and, like, it caused him to just like be very unmotivated, and, like, and kind of give up on his views because he didn't have enough encouragement, and he felt like he wanted to leave.

Another current student in the Crossroads program noted how a personalized approach helped him and his brother turn things around when they were heading down the wrong path:

They've helped, like, my family and me do a lot, and, um, they push me more than, like, I don't say my family, but they kind of do, and, like, they opened me up to a lot of new, like, things and really showed me how to get my life together, because, um, I was kind of following the same footpath as my brother, same path as my brother, which it wasn't really that good, and we both really were not doing well, and this was a bad path, and they helped both of us kind

of like start getting better grades and looking more towards the future.

Indeed, this desire for encouragement in schools is consistent with scholarship on the learning experiences of Black and Latinx youth, particularly in the face of predominant anti-intellectual stereotypes in society. Encouragement has been noted to be particularly valuable to the success of Black students in school settings.¹¹

High Expectations. Meanwhile, parents wanted teachers and counselors to have *high expectations* for their children. One parent characterized the potential impact of expectations: “Expectations that some of the professionals may have towards your child, or about your child, because they are African American, it can affect their accomplishments and their ability.” Indeed, psychoeducational research has long established that negative academic stereotypes, when triggered, can and do adversely affect the achievement of vulnerable groups.¹² Here, this parent acknowledged such potential impact, and several parents tied such beliefs to their own experiences with low expectations as African American youth.



Academically Focused and Safe Climates.

Both parents and youth emphasized the benefits of focused and safe environments, with peers with similar academic behaviors and future aspirations. One student described how they benefited from more focused peers, noting they wanted to be in a learning environment “where, like, other people are, like, serious about it. ‘Cause, like, I tend to like get very unfocused quickly, so, it’s easier, it like, it helps me when, like, other people are focused, and then it’s like oh, I should do that, I want to be, like, where they are, I don’t want to fall behind.” Parents also described wanting their children to be in places with pro-achievement peer norms and where going to college was the expectation for the vast majority of students.

Simultaneously, parents wanted to avoid learning environments with compromised *physical and emotional safety*, and they extended this concern to both the student and teacher levels. As one TNA parent noted, **“I think is important also for me as a parent to feel that my child is safe. And that’s multifaceted, not just safe from, you know, potential violence, but um, just safe to know that if my son has a bad day, he is not going to be penalized more than he should be, he will be talked to, it will be discussed, he will be treated like a person.”** In this case, the parent considers safety not only as it pertains to peer experiences, but also around disciplinary experiences in schools, which have been strongly shown to disfavor Black youth in Greater Pittsburgh and beyond.^{13,14}

Diversity. Parents and students noted different aspects of *diversity* that they valued in educational settings. Part of some private school parents’ motivations was a desire for their children to *experience new cultures* and, as such to find value in unfamiliar settings. A FAME parent explained, “My daughter who has always gone to a school with English as a second language, White kids, Black kids, poor kids, you know, middle-income kids, and I have always decided that it was probably better for her to have that diversity. ... I think, like, the diversity has been a really good help for her, and I think she’s gonna fare better in college and in life.” Preparing children for a world that is not Black was seen as an important point in this regard, and this same parent described a “total culture shock” in her own experience moving from an all-Black high school in Washington, D.C., to a local majority White university as an

undergraduate. Conversely, faculty, student, and curricular diversity were also desired across groups. Parents wanted their children to experience other cultures through social experiences and curricula in schools, and they wanted all faculty to be trained in issues related to diversity. One private school parent expressed a greater need for attention to diversity in their child’s school: **“You know, race, diversity training across the board ... I think, is in serious need. I think that will have a lot of people flourish and feel better with who they are.”** A Higher Achievement student noted that they would like to see more diverse class offerings in their high school, such as “African American history, things like that. I think learning about different backgrounds and different cultures can broaden your horizons and make you think about perspectives and ideas that are different from your own.”

Educational Environments during the Pandemic.

The pandemic dramatically changed how parents and programmers experienced their learning environments. On the whole, most parents and programmers described students across grade levels struggling with the transition to learning from home. As one program administrator noted, part of the challenge came from the lack of space and reliable internet that could support numerous live-streaming devices in students’ homes: “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.”

In virtual learning, students often had to take care of siblings during class, cooking and caretaking for smaller children on screen.

Students' engagement in virtual learning was also impacted by their home conditions and whether their homes were ready to be broadcast visibly to their classes. Another program administrator reported, "You had some students who didn't want to turn on their camera because they didn't want everyone, they didn't want their house to be transparent. They didn't want everyone to see their circumstances or how they live or where they live." Educators noted that these difficult realities obstructed the learning process for some students. Also, because many parents were frontline workers and could not stay home, students sometimes also had to take care of siblings during and between classes, and they could be seen cooking or caretaking for smaller children during class sessions.

College Environments and Transitions during the Pandemic. PCAA students who matriculated to college during the pandemic often found experiences to be very isolating and lacking key socialization elements. One programmer described how parents in her program were disappointed to hear from their children that **"their first semester of college was sitting in a dorm and not seeing anyone and doing everything online. We did see a lot of, 'I'm just coming back home and going to community college. I'm just coming back home and taking a year off.'"** Another program administrator commented, "We can't underestimate the importance of that human contact, that teaching, and particularly, I think, for students just entering the college experience." Yet this isolation was the reality for many college students in their programs,

during a time of particular vulnerability as they transitioned to new and more autonomous environments. There were similar concerns for high school students in PCAA families preparing for college, many of whom were first-generation college students. For these students, there were concerns that the pandemic was cutting off major opportunities for the social and maturation experiences that would prepare them for being the first in their families to enter college life, such as not having the opportunity to participate in student organizations in high school, or never having ridden public transportation to school before.

Parents and programmers noted the impact of this new pandemic reality on higher education enrollment and persistence. As one program leader described it, "The first semester of college life was that of isolation and virtual classes, so they were most impacted and likely to either take a break or switch to community college." By 2021, students and families had learned from the experiences of the previous year. As one program administrator noted, "A lot of (2021 graduating) families said, listen, I'm not paying for you to go to (a distant historically Black university) because you may not even be there. You may be taking online classes, and I don't think that would be worth the money." Overall, the pandemic was seen as substantially compromising opportunities for maturation, socialization, and autonomy, which were seen as key benefits of the college transition. When faced with the reality of virtual post-secondary education, many families chose more economical options, often staying closer to home for four-year schools or enrolling in community college.



Parenting Engagement for Educational Success

Part of a quality education also included a wide array of parent involvement practices that PCAA families associated with supporting their children's academic success. Generally, these practices fell into three main categories: 1) *socializing for educational values*; 2) *home structures and enrichment opportunities*; and 3) *school-based engagement and choices*.

Socializing for Educational Values. When asked what they do to support their children's education, PCAA families frequently cited the instilling of values they believed would propel these African American youth to succeed in school and in life. Chief among these was being a leader, particularly in the context of potential negative peer influences. As one Crossroads parent noted, their major concern for their daughter was, "Peers. I think they're extremely, um, we may downplay it but they're extremely important. The people who they sit and call their friends. Uh, we know, at the end of the day, who the real friends are...that's my concern is who she actually calls her friends and her—as her peers."

A father in the group then concurred, noting that peer pressure can lead to decisions that "They may not be able to get up from." His strategy in this regard was to encourage his children to be a "*groundbreakers*" who did not hold social relationships so close as to compromise who they were. Another parent noted at even at the collegiate level, "There's gonna be colleges that you go to and may have some friends and it be a positive if you do, but there's gonna be time when you're gonna have to stand on those values and those things that we've been raised on and hope that that's enough to keep us." Parents often discussed, in some form or fashion, the need to *affirm their children at home*, so they are not seeking affirmation from their peers in order to feel whole. Parents describing how they affirmed children by telling them they were "brilliant" and that they "deserved" the opportunities for

excellent education they were receiving. One Crossroads parent 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.



These affirmations and accompanying high expectations from parents were often tied to *family membership*: "We excel, that's what we do," noted one TNA parent.

Black parents in White private schools promoted an *education over social life ethic*

Across educational and community environments, maintaining *constant communication* with their children was a mainstay strategy for these parents. This approach was important to helping youth cope with social isolation and/or physical and emotional safety threats. As one parent humbly noted, communication was key in helping their child navigate peer relationships:

Peer pressure, you know, there's always a situation so I guess it's just constant communication. I'm a parent and, obviously, I'm still learning too. I have a teenager so this is new. Teenage age is new to me so I'm kinda learning as I go along too. I always tell him I don't have all the answers but I know a few things. You know, so, yeah. Just keeping open communication with him.

Finally, many parents noted that out-of-school activities like PCAA programs, church, sports, and others could be sources of socialization and social fulfillment when youth were not finding it in schools. One FAME parent

discussed using out-of-school programs to bring racial balance to her daughter's experience:

It feels unfortunate that the better schools are mostly White. You know, so that's kind of a sad thing to say, but I had her in two different public schools, and one was so clique-y with the neighborhood kids that she didn't fit, and the other one was where I teach, which was like, "We love everybody. We include everybody." And that was great, but she started associating with more White kids than Black kids, so I guess my decision was to, like, try to throw her in to after-school activities and things with only Black kids, you know what I mean? And very structured, like, you know, Girl Scouts or, you know, choir or, you know, and that kind of thing, and I think that has helped so that she has a balance, and she is around her [Black peers].

Parents used out of school activities to bring racial balance to children's experiences



Academically Supportive Home Structures.

PCAA families also described many concrete steps that parents took to support their children's achievement through home structures they created. These included ensuring that children have a *comfortable and peaceful home environment*, often juxtaposed to strife they may be encountering in school settings. A *proper workspace* was a priority for many parents, and *routines around academic work* at home were important. Parents *monitored school assignments* whenever possible, particularly when schools were proficient in providing *online access to assignment prompts and class requirements*. Students also reported that parents were diligent in *providing academic help* when needed, either themselves or tutoring supports when parents were not able to help with advanced curricular content. One parent described the value of leveraging supports from FAME even when their child was not struggling:

I used the FAME tutoring program here on Saturdays, and I really believe in addressing issues before they become bigger problems. So the fact that they have all A's and B's does not negate them from coming to FAME office on Saturday and participating in tutoring.

Home-based academic and intellectual *enrichment activities* were also common. One parent described a reciprocal reading routine that she and her children would undertake, taking turns reading to each other. Another described providing extra workbooks and academic activities that her children were required to complete outside of school hours. Parents also utilized academic computer

programs and online assets. Enrichment extended outside of the home as well, with parents—both voluntarily and involuntarily—enrolling their children in enrichment programs they thought would be beneficial, including mentoring, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning, and paid tutoring. Several parents noted that they felt they needed to play “the boss” at times, making sure their children were engaged in promising opportunities even when not desirable to the children. The youth also discussed this experience of being compelled into activities but noted that, at times, even though they did not initially want to participate in certain programs, they were in the end beneficial. A Higher Achievement alum elaborated:

Mom and I were talking, and my job called her and told her about the college and career program, where I take a free college course and I get credits for it and that's money less off. She was like, “You're doing it!” and I was like, “Really? Well alright.” I didn't want to, but she said, “Yeah, you're going to do that to get that, so you won't have to worry about that later down the road when you have all these college bills, that's less to pay off.”

She tied this experience to learning about “getting more now so you don't have to do more later.”



Social Monitoring for Academic Impact. These African American parents also described how social monitoring was a uniquely important aspect of how they supported their children, especially when negotiating their economically oppressed community and school contexts. Parents discussed the need to have early curfews and more restrictions for their children than perhaps other parents use in more privileged neighborhoods. They also spoke of the need to get to know their children's friends so as to offset the chances of poor decision-making, with one parent reflecting, **"Everything bad that I've done in my life, I've never done by myself."** Meanwhile, parents across groups and settings also talked about the need to monitor social media, including regulating device usage (e.g., collecting devices at night before bedtime) and having passwords to their children's social media accounts.

Academic Monitoring during the Pandemic. For parents, the transition to virtual learning during the pandemic added new challenges by thrusting them into expanded roles in terms of monitoring their children's "in-school," academic activities, which were now happening at home. One parent described having to be *"the enforcer"* ensuring that her child completed the otherwise unmonitored in-school work being conducted in virtual classrooms. Multiple parents nodded when another described herself becoming more of a "helicopter mom" during this season. This unprecedented academic responsibility came at a cost for parents, most of whom more fundamentally did not have the basic luxury of being full-time caregivers while their children were at home. As one mother noted: "I did have to make a choice, like, am I going to go into the office or am I going to stay at home? If I don't stay at home, who's going to stay home with my children?"

Yet this monitoring was beyond basic caretaking and required balancing parents' professional obligations with actively overseeing their children's in-school learning. The role was, for many, an even greater struggle than caretaking, filled with difficult tasks and choices. One parent shared about having to step up and actually facilitate learning due to the limitations of virtual classes at her child's school, noting that **the teachers "were kind of, like, on autopilot, so I had to make a shift because I was basically, like his teacher. ... They gave him, like, workbooks to do, basically. There was really not very much instruction because the**

teachers really weren't accustomed to virtual teaching." A program administrator described the burden their parents faced trying to meet the added technology demands required by virtual schooling:

I think 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.

Indeed, in the face of pressing pandemic stressors, one mother expressed to a program leader that this academic monitoring was "a low priority," and there was consensus that it was unrealistic to expect parents to be able to enforce school-day academic demands as schools typically would. Still, in many cases there was no one else to step into this additional role, and as we will see later this broad stretching of parental responsibilities had implications for parents' own well-being.

School-Based Engagement. In addition to socialization and structure at home, PCAA parents commonly described a range of engagements directly with their children's schools and school personnel aimed at supporting academic success. Of prime importance for parents was their proactive presence in these institutions. Parents sought to not only establish rapport with teachers but also meet and engage school staff to let them know they were going to be a present force in the children's experiences. As one FAME parent of a private school student noted:

I have to be there. You have to show the school that you're interested. If they don't see you there, they might just let your child pass on through without giving them everything they do need. But once they see you're interested, they're gonna reach out to you and do what they need to do.

A Higher Achievement parent of a public school student similarly described making it a priority to build relationships at school, even when physical presence could not be regular: “I want to get to know the teachers; I want to know what kind of people are working with my son. I mean, that doesn’t need to be, like, hands on. I’m just not at the school every day. I need to have phone numbers, emails, all of that.” This relational engagement included both ensuring the fair treatment of their children and also advocating for rigorous curriculum for them.

Responsively, many parents described ways they needed to advocate for their children at school, often regarding issues of race. One private school parent described experiencing multiple incidents in this way:

If the rich girl—they’re in the hallway fighting, and then they’re in school the next day. And you get in a yelling match with a girl, and then they try to suspend you for three days. ... There’s a teacher there that called my—that referred to Black girls as “negress.” I’m like, “Who says that?” ... The only time I’ve seen words like that is in books by Booker T. Washington. ... There’s a lot of stuff that goes on at those schools, and it’s like, you gotta be, you gotta be diligent. You gotta be on those teachers at the schools ‘cause some of them are very, very classist and racist.

Another private school parent described experiencing “deep-seated racism” in his son’s private school; thus, he is compelled to both counsel his child on navigating it and to be diligent in responding to racial strife. One incident raised by another parent centered on a curricular decision to ask students to defend Manifest Destiny in American history. In his words:

My youngest daughter’s social studies teacher gave an assignment which I wouldn’t have saw if I wasn’t looking in her computer. It was an assignment on—they had to write an essay defending Manifest Destiny, which is basically White supremacy, so I didn’t understand how you could put that burden on a child to defend White supremacy, so my wife and I got a bunch of other parents together and—that were also angry about it—and

we had a big meeting about it with the principal or head of school and let them have their take at them, and I’m not sure if you really understand this, just the depth or if the teacher understands the depth of what/how our children learn—just the sensitive things that they’re being marginalized to. And I told them, I said, “Look, if you were to give an assignment about Nat Turner or the Haitian Revolution, you’d have a different set of parents in here, so you really have to be careful about the things you’re assigning to children that they’re reading. And if you’re going to teach this and this is the assignment, then you always offer a counterbalance to it. This [current approach] is not just the answer.

Overall, parents in public and private settings felt the need to be diligent about school-based engagement as both proactive rapport builders and as responsive advocates for their children, with racial considerations cited. When these school-based involvement strategies were not working, both private and public school parents reported being willing to change schools as needed, even reverting to home schooling to ensure that their children were receiving adequate and fair educational experiences.



Social Networks as Primary Sources of Information. One of the more surprising findings from this study was that nearly all parents reported finding out about PCAA programs through informal social networks rather than formal sources. A NEED scholarship parent, for example, talked about how her son was told about NEED “by one of his mentors. But his mentor had nothing to do with the school. So, people don’t know. If you and I love NEED, but if you go into schools and ask about NEED, they are like NEED what?” This parent and many others noted that in public schools in particular, staff tended not to know much about PCAA programs. In contrast, families with children in Catholic schools, independent schools, and some public charters did report school-based information-sharing for their PCAA program, perhaps because many PCAA offerings connect families to private school networks. Regardless, most parents shared narratives about how they found out about PCAA opportunities through personal relationships. As one parent described, **“It seems like a lot of valuable programs are kept, like, in a secret society in Pittsburgh, like, only a certain known people or a certain kind of people knew about programs.”** One consequence of the largely informal way that families were receiving information is the potential this

process has for what has been called *opportunity hoarding* in education, whereby limiting the spread of information or access to opportunities keeps it available to a privileged few. One FAME parent acknowledged this kind of threat, noting that:

I heard about (FAME) from a friend who heard about it from a friend, and she—her daughter wasn’t old enough, but it felt like, once she told me, she regretted it. It’s almost like people don’t want you to get a leg up, and it was like the best kept *secret*.

It should be noted, however, that this perception of scarce PCAA resources is incongruent with the perceptions of the programs themselves, which are generally looking for more families to take advantage of their resources.



Parenting Strengths and Resilience during the Pandemic.

Despite the enormous financial, health, and mental health demands of the pandemic and their disproportionate impact on Black families, PCAA families reported remarkable strengths and resilience during this time. Students, as noted above, were helping care for their younger siblings while simultaneously juggling virtual academic demands during the day. As a school administrator at TNA noted, "I would go into classes, different classes, in the Zoom platform, and it blew me away from what I saw. I saw young infants. I saw kids third grade and under on the screen playing in the background. I saw kids listening to their instructions and cooking lunch for their siblings." Meanwhile, parents worked to offset the social isolation students were feeling by starting clubs and providing virtual classes to students on cooking, yoga, and coding.

Another parent unapologetically described safely but intentionally navigating the pandemic shutdowns and risks to ensure that her large family remained encouraged and engaged in enriching activities:

We lived during the pandemic. I did not shut it, especially because, as I mentioned previously, my daughter needed that sense of community. My children needed that. They needed to be around other people being in the house. There are eight of us in here, okay? So, shutting down, staying in here for a year and a half, that was never, ever going to work. ... When they shut everything down, of course, there was not much I could do. But when they opened it up, we went out, we went to church. So, they still get their Bible education. We went running. We went jogging. We went to the park. We did it all. I tried to make sure that because the pandemic was scary, right? It wasn't just scary for adults. It was scary for kids.

Still another mother went as far as to express not only resilience, but a general positive outlook on the pandemic experience:

The pandemic was a blessing for us because I was able to stay home, I was able to work virtually. It did not affect me economically. I spent more time with our sons. And other than having to go out and go grocery shopping with maskless individuals and unvaccinated individuals, the pandemic was a blessing. I cooked, I ate, I got a few pandemic pounds, but it was really a blessing.

Faith-based activities were consistently noted as a major source of strength and encouragement for families during the pandemic as well, and parents were able to stay connected to their congregations by attending services virtually. As one parent noted, "Being able to still see their church home online through Zoom was huge for a lot of individuals because that's a staple within the Black culture and community, and it's important we value that community." Another described, "Hearing a message of motivation and encouragement. Understanding that regardless of what we were going through, they had a message from someone they knew and they trusted within a community, almost, you know, a person they looked up to spiritually."



Table 2: 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 (outings, spiritual communities, virtual activities for other children)

III. Barriers to Educational Opportunities

African American students and parents shared a great deal about the barriers they perceived to be obstructing pathways to obtaining a quality education for their children. The obstacles they most consistently described fell into four general categories: (1) school institutional barriers, with distinctions between what they faced in public and private contexts; (2) racial barriers that related directly to families' social positioning as African Americans in the United States; (3) financial barriers that tended to compound all other challenges; and (4) barriers related to the pandemic that both exacerbated existing issues and raised new challenges.

School Institutional Barriers

School institutional barriers related to limitations and problems with the educational opportunities and experiences that were available to PCAA families and their African American peers. Generally, the school institutional barriers could be further parsed out into two categories: challenges related to structural and material limitations in majority Black, *under-resourced urban public schools*; and interpersonal and social marginalization *penalties in more affluent but majority White private schools*.

Under-Resourced Urban School Barriers.

Most families we interviewed had some experience in public school settings, typically in under-resourced schools across the region serving majority Black and economically disadvantaged communities.¹⁶ Although exceptional schools and classrooms were noted, PCAA families tended to view structural issues with school quality in urban public contexts as being a major barrier to quality education for Black youth. 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." Another student noted how financial constraints keep families in struggling schools with less dedicated teachers: "It's cheap for them, so they're stuck in public schools that have teachers that don't really care about learning. Their education is more about just passing them along and getting money." Still another student noted that parents' lack of understanding of school quality could also be a

barrier itself: "I feel like some parents, like, don't really care, as long as their kid goes to a school and graduates; it's not really, like, if it's a good school or not."

Parents expressed similar concerns about school quality. Parents in the Higher Achievement group described several barriers they experienced in the public system, including under-paid, overstressed teachers; school overcrowding; "horrible" school funding; and challenging behavioral climates. Many parents also lamented what they perceived to be a lack of rigor in their children's local public schools, and one parent even described how the failure to academically challenge students had backfired regarding their son and behavioral management:

He's bored, and y'all don't offer [advanced coursework] testing no more to the kids in higher grades, none of that no more, y'all took all that away. My son, when he gets bored, he starts being disruptive classroom, and that's what they put my son down for ADHD.

Here, this parent captures their personal experience with a phenomenon documented in the broader literature, whereby Black children's advanced skills are often invisible in the classroom, and their need for greater academic challenges is instead perceived as a disinterest or inattentiveness.¹⁷ Paradoxically, these behavioral misperceptions can, in some cases, reify teacher beliefs that Black children do not deserve advanced course opportunities.

Parents also offered reflections on the sources of these systemic barriers in urban schools. One Higher Achievement parent connected school funding challenges to an overall lack of public commitment to quality education in Black communities, specifically saying, “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 and, which is unfair. Like she said, how’s your children supposed to learn?” She went on to single out the impact on special-needs students specifically: “Maybe some child in there do have those, a different type of problem, a lot of kids have ADHD, yeah and it’s hard for them now, it’s unfair.” Another parent added, **“I’m so embarrassed, my son is so far behind.”** Several parents expressed feeling trapped in their schools by their residential geography, and although many did note specific urban public schools in the region doing well by Black children, there was still a belief that public investment in schools was directly and inversely tied to the proportion of Black students in them.

For parents who had experienced public and private schools, these experiences were at times contrasted. One parent of a child at The Neighborhood Academy (TNA), which is private but serves almost exclusively working class African American families, compared his daughter’s TNA experience with previous public school experiences in this way: “I think the one thing I think everybody (at TNA) is just that nurturing, one-on-one attention that they get here is something that you can’t, I mean there’s just no comparison to a public school versus this here.”

The limitations noted regarding the quality of many public education options in Black communities are well documented in the research, and has been connected to a long history of economic and social subordination that manifest in schools.^{10,18} Many PCAA families understood these broader issues, at times characterizing these barriers as systemic, and acknowledged sympathy for teachers and other actors working in the system. One parent who had served in public school

leadership raised the concern of self-perpetuating systemic disadvantages in schools serving their children, where “higher-performing schools get more money, and so it goes back to how government structures funding for schools, so it’s a ...” A fellow parent finished his sentence: “A vicious cycle.” Yet even among parents who felt trapped in inadequate public schools, they still showed commitments to resistance and resilience in making the most of such environments. One parent noted that despite these obstacles:

I will make sure my child gets what he needs, regardless, that’s not the teacher’s job, that’s not the teacher’s baby, that’s my baby [in background: “That’s real.”]. He can get what he needs. I’m not going to leave that responsibility in their hands, honestly.



Private School Barriers. Although private schools were often characterized as ameliorating the structural concerns with public school options these Black families faced, these more exclusive experiences were not without their own challenges. In general, parents described how issues of interpersonal racism and classism that were prominent in the private school setting posed challenges to their children's success. One parent described an experience with school discipline that exemplified these issues:

Sometimes at [local private school]—they're 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 'round 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.

Another parent at that same school described a time when the school's debate teacher warned her daughter about race-gender intersectional discrimination against Black girls on the debate circuit more broadly:

She's also on the debate team, and something that the debate teacher actually said to them 'cause they had, like, a little mini—uh—debate camp that the—unfortunately, a lot of—some of the judging is done—the men tend to get preference, and there are, sometimes, a lot of racial—decisions are made according to race as well, and she was, I guess, nice enough or—to let the students know that up front. You know, you may run into some, you know, some racial bias and gender bias as well. So I'm really curious how that's going to go. I mean, I'd hate for her to put so much effort into researching for a debate only to be shut down because she happens to be Black. You know so she was very ma—she was very frightened about that.

These types of racialized challenges in private schools were frequently noted by PCAA parents in private schools. Class issues were also described intersectionally with race for families with children in these settings. One parent described her family's experience with the tension and oscillation between race and class social challenges in private schools versus social acceptance in academically inadequate and/or inconsistent public schools (see page 23 for *The Triple Quandary of Black School Choice: A Case Study*).



The Triple Quandary of Black School Choice: A Case Study

My oldest son...he started at [local K-8 charter school]...he was doing fine but he was—I didn't think he was learning. He was just getting his paperwork checked and writing, for me, is the worst thing. I hate it and they were just checking it, checking it. He's going on—but by time he's in 5th grade, I mean, I'm like "He's not even writing properly"...after their first progress report, I saw he was below and I decided I was gonna take them out, and I did put them in [local traditional public school] and I was so worried about that. My son was—6th grader—was way behind and [the teacher] was worried about him but, by the end of the year, she got him caught up and thought he was great. He went to the middle school. He wasn't in advanced classes. He went downhill and they had him ADD and everything. 8th grade, I said "I can't put him in the high school...I got him in [Catholic high school]. He started out well but, by 10th grade, he was kinda depressed. He was always—there were so many white kids and I felt bad because the other black kids—I was in [public district zone] and so I was kinda—it was kind of a mixed area so the black kids would come around once he was in [Catholic high school] like, when he was in 10th grade, and I was kinda nervous cuz I ain't know what they were into and I didn't wanna be judging them so it's been a hard thing with him and the friends he did have—he had rich, white friends so it was just a pull and I feel guilty because he's not around as many black kids but he seems, if you look at him, he's well-rounded but, for me, I think that he—sometime I'm like "Should I put him in [public district] and kept him in and let him make his way?...Should he be in school with black kids in the public school or keep on trying to put him in the better school?... at the end, he was just like—he seemed worn out, you know what I mean. So—and then his—you know, they're rich—a lot of them are rich and live far out and they have this and that and they're, you know I mean, sometimes he "Why don't we get a new car?" or this and that, you know? I'm trying to pay for all these schools. I mean, 'cause I have [other son] in FAME but the other two are in private school and I struggle to pay for [Catholic school] and [independent school] so..."

The parent describes her challenge with navigating traditional and charter public options that were available in her geography. In the first instance, the charter school lacked the rigor she desired for her child. In the second, the traditional public school provisions were uneven, whereby the child had a great sixth-grade learning experience, but by eighth grade he was again losing ground and being labeled by the school as having attention deficit issues.

The case study typifies a tension many Black parents feel when they are choosing school options for their children in this region. On the one hand, traditional and charter public school options serving predominant or critical masses of African American students can provide more social affirmation and acceptance based on race and class. Yet parents here often experience a tradeoff around rigor and/or stigmatizing labels that, as seen above, may be related to a lack of challenge rather than the child's attention capacity. In contrast, although the private school options were seen to provide more rigor, one had to contend with more overt discriminatory experiences, feelings of social isolation, and economic inadequacy, including pressure to keep up with friends' material expectations. This mother also described tensions and uncertainty around neighborhood friends, which other parents concurred could be another challenging dynamic to navigate in more oppressed communities where many African American live. Ultimately, this parent saw these various racial and economic forces taking their toll on her child's well-being.

Finally, although relatively few PCAA parents described experiences in mostly White suburban schools, issues in that context were at times discussed in terms of children's and parents' own experiences. One parent of a NEED scholar expressed frustration with what she perceived to be biases in the college guidance that her daughter received in a majority White suburban school in this way:

I watched them do, push the kids, the White girls that played softball, they went and pushed them to get scholarships. ... They weren't marketing our kids the way I feel like they should have, but that's because they are Black again. ... You

would see the kids that they pushed to get the scholarship. Um, both my kids were on an honors society, both of them, um, had, were, they achieved with their grades well, but they weren't given the same opportunities as some of the other kids.

In understanding these intersecting race, class, and school contextual forces, we came to build on the seminal work of A. Wade Boykin on Black youth schooling and here recognize a potential manifestation of his threefold *triple quandary* for Black education.¹⁹ Boykin originally described how Black families had to navigate the needs to affirm their own Black experience, navigate the mainstream White experience, all the while doing so as an oppressed group with limited resources and status. In making school choices in Greater Pittsburgh, these families navigated these same challenges when choosing between public schools that were culturally affirming but structurally under-resourced and private schools that provided rigor and opportunity but where one parent described Black students as a "fish out of water," which manifested in social isolation and interpersonal racism that were more overt; in either case, they were often managing economically oppressive factors that on a personal level manifested in limited family resources and community distress. And although bright spots across these contexts were mentioned, little systemic information exists to access or navigate those places across the area's educational contexts. This point is also taken up in the recommendations below.

Broader Racial Barriers in Society

Hand-in-hand with school institutional challenges, families also frequently described how beyond school experiences, race issues were barriers to success for African Americans in society more generally. When asked about barriers to educational success that families like hers faced, one NEED parent noted:

Just being Black. Especially, and I don't want to diminish the girls, but especially being a Black male. There are so many things that you come up against that I would never want a middle school, or high school kid to have to go through. And, it, it's a shame nowadays we have to tell our kids when you go out and you are driving, if a police officer pulls you over, keep your hands on the wheel. Whereas, a lot of people wouldn't tell a girl that, but nowadays, you still have to tell girls that, just because of their skin color!

This parent went on to describe a paradox she has observed whereby because of physical and intellectual stereotypes, Black males are intimidating even when they are thriving:

If your son is big and he's Black, people are afraid, if you son is smart and he's Black, they're afraid, because they think he's gonna know more than you, and that in their minds, is not supposed to happen. Which in our minds, that's supposed to happen, that's how I raised you, be smart, but be smart about your choices and decisions also. So, that's, for me, that's the biggest.

Still another parent described having to give sobering warnings to Black children that "Kids, you walk out the front door, you may not come back." They went on to say, "We live in a racist society right now, especially right now, with police violence being what it is, being rampant it as it is, you can get shot walking down the street by a cop and you have—can

be completely innocent. So, I think it's important to have these conversations."

It is worth noting that these comments were made before the more recent killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, showing just how endemic these threats are within the Black community. These stereotype impacts were also not limited to law-enforcement encounters. Families captured many of the ills that Black children have to navigate in their under-resourced communities more generally, with one student describing barriers their peers faced: "I'd say, the lack of resources. Not being able to see other than what's around them, seeing different things, and not just the environment that they're in. 'Cause you can come from low income, bad environment, violence, drugs, crime, all that." Parents expressed similar laments regarding neighborhood conditions, including park closures, gun violence, and concerns about human trafficking. When asked about what keeps her up at night, one NEED parent responded, "Just praying that they're gonna stay alive to make and become what they want to be." She went on to add, "I'm honest, just praying that they're still alive and thanking God that they are still alive and they haven't, they have no felony records."

Financial Barriers to Educational Access

Financial barriers to educational access were specifically discussed in depth by study respondents. One current PCAA student described the family's financial challenges and sacrifices in pursuit academic success in this way:

So, I feel like, um, 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. They make a lot sacrifices that way, and they have to take me a lot of places and, like, buy me bus passes for, like, all, for my scholarships, since I have a lot of meetings they have to pay for that. So, it gets really, it gets tough.

In this instance, the student's family was trying to shoulder an overwhelming educational access burden, to the point that the child ended up having to leave school in order to find a more affordable option. We also see the acknowledgement of the burden of ancillary costs associated with academic opportunities like scholarship programs. Parents did what

[My 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...and also, I have a lot of siblings, and you have to pay for them too, and it gets very overwhelming...I had to transfer schools, because they couldn't afford the school I was at.

they could to meet and maintain costs associated with educational access. This same student reported that in their family, their mother "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." These economic sacrifices could be severe. In one case, a family reported giving up a house in order to ensure rigorous and enriching educational opportunities for their children both in and out of school.



Financial barriers were seen not only as prohibitive to accessing quality educational experiences, they were also seen by participants as presenting a challenge to parents' abilities to actually engage in their children's educational processes. In discussing school-based engagement barriers parents face, one FAME parent noted:

Most parents I know who are struggling financially can't take off work to go to school. They just can't. They can't afford it. They're in danger of losing their job. ... Schools do things to try to bring parents in that, sometimes, just aren't worth it. So, is what you're asking me to come to school for: (1) Is it worth it? 2) Are you making it easy for me to get there? If I gotta catch two buses to get there, is it gonna be child-care when I get there to help me with my kids? Are you gonna feed my kids while I'm there?

Here, the parent notes that financial barriers limit parents' engagement ability for a multitude of reasons, including challenges with childcare, transportation, and meal planning. Others echoed similar sentiments across the interviews, particularly in response to negative stereotypes about parent engagement. Overall, both parents and youth were quite cognizant of the financial burdens associated with educational success for families like theirs.

Securing scholarships was seen as a critical pathway to ensuring educational opportunity at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels. A PCAA student from the alumni group noted that scholarships were the only reason she was able to have the level of educational opportunities she had in K-12 and college: "I think realistically if I had to think about attending [private K-12 school] without a scholarship, that wouldn't happen. And even going to college, if they didn't give me a scholarship, I couldn't pay for that. Just the level of what I want, I couldn't get there."

A matriculating college student in the NEED program also described how finances can lim-

it aspiring college students' ability to fully pursue their true interests:

I would say most people, like how their financial is, their finances are, college isn't really a choice for them. It really depends on how much money one school is giving me. So most people are going to be like I really like this school, but it costs too much, but there's a second school, they're giving me half my tuition off, but it don't really have what I'm looking forward to, but I need to go to college to get some kind of education.

Financial barriers were seen as impacting multiple aspects of the pursuit of a quality education. The barriers to access and engagement noted here occurred concurrently with the previously noted challenges related to community and public school conditions, which in some ways create these access challenges as families aim to escape under-resourced and oppressive contexts in search of better educational opportunities. Through it all, parents frequently wedded the economic challenges they directly faced to the socio-historical context of racialized economic inequality in the United States.

Pandemic-Related Barriers

Pandemic-Related Racial Barriers. For PCAA programs and families, the long-standing racial barriers they had previously reported in schools and society were further exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of African Americans in Greater Pittsburgh. One program administrator used the metaphor of tearing off a bandage, elaborating:

Maybe [the pandemic] just ripped the Band-Aid off of things that were always there, and that you're just trying to put Band-Aids on or cover up or somehow address what hasn't been addressed. Well, then everything's uncovered. So I don't know if things were—I wouldn't call them new. I would just call them magnified or revealed, not filtered, or hidden.

Of particular importance were the well-documented economic disparities between the lives of Black and White families in the region. These disparities were already some of the most severe in the country prior to the pandemic,^{2,4} and they served to exacerbate the aforementioned challenges Black families faced with virtual learning. A single parent lamented having too few resources to provide adequate tech support for her three children at different ages:

For everybody to be in the house at the same time, virtually having a kindergartener and a second-grader at the time, virtual, and then also having, I guess LaToya²⁰ was in seventh grade at the time—it did not work. It did not work at all. It didn't work space-wise, it didn't work as far as trying to find resources to help. In the beginning, it was very hard. I had to take a leave of absence. I didn't know where money was going to come from. I didn't know how it was going to sustain it.

Here, the family's economic challenges posed an initial problem with tech readiness, which in turn required additional adult supervision from the mother, which then required employment risks, which further endangered the family. In this example, we see how economic realities of Black families can interact with other challenges to reify broader inequities over time.

Working-class families of students in more affluent private schools also experienced social challenges in the virtual learning space that potentially impeded learning. Specifically, many students struggled with allowing a window into their home lives, which were materially vastly different from their peers'. As one program officer described:

They're in schools with people who have remarkably different socioeconomic status. So, you have someone who's coming from their large posh house where they've got their beautiful bedroom or their beautiful office. It's just there. And then for our student coming in, where they're trying to position the camera so you can only see a little bit of their room, so you can't really see what the house looks like. I mean, wow. How do you learn when you're worried about that?

Moreover, concurrent with the pandemic was the aforementioned wave of high-profile police and would-be vigilante killings of unarmed African Americans. These events presented an additional burden to parents, programs, and schools because they highlighted a sinister reality of American life that needed to be unpacked for young learners, while also heightening the conversations and visual representations in national media about racial discrimination and racialized violence. One parent articulated how these dueling issues of the pandemic and police killings adversely affected student success:

At the same time that we had the pandemic, we had George Floyd and we had a national—I don't want to call it a conversation because it ended up, it became very polarized and there was a lot of hateful messages that were out there. So at the same time that we have a pandemic, which no one grappled with before, we also have so much vitriol in the air, and that impacted our young people as well and got in the way of them accessing a quality education.

Another parent described their experience as a parent organizer managing the George Floyd killing in conjunction with Crossroads, schools, and other parents:

The George Floyd murder happened with all this, too. And I know that we as the parent organization, we had a lot of talks about racism in the schools. ... But there were certainly some parents who were complaining about a lot of experiences of racism with their kids and not really knowing how to deal with it, not really knowing how to talk about it, not really knowing how to communicate with the school with it. My son didn't have as much, but I was trying to help with understanding some of the policies and stuff around it. And I think it was a really important time for the kids and a lot of really important time for them to be shown that they mattered in the face of everything that was going on. I think [my son's school] was definitely trying. I know Crossroads is trying to be really

responsive, too, but yeah, that was a big thing.

Across conversations, parents and program officers alike remarked on how the police killings and racialized political tensions spilled over into the school spaces and created significant challenges for African American students during what some have called the *double pandemic*.²¹ Implications of these experience are discussed in the recommendations section.

Financial Barriers to College Access during the Pandemic. Given the financial burdens the pandemic placed on Black families, many college-matriculating PCAA students had to seriously weigh the value of attending college and taking on debt for a less than full experience, versus monetarily contributing to their families by staying home and working during a time of great financial need. Multiple leaders and parents shared that students postponed or sacrificed their college ambitions during the pandemic to support their families. As a NEED scholarship administrator noted, for students who chose not to matriculate, "These students could not think about adding another burden, financial burden, to their families, because it does cost while you're in school. You're not necessarily contributing, and there's an additional cost to that." She also echoed the sentiment we saw in the K-12 sphere that pandemic-related financial barriers shifted families' focus to basic needs: "I think the best way I can illustrate that is ... that education was always the value. But when you're coming down to whether or not I can eat or go to college or whether my family eats, and I go to college, students and families are always going to make the decision for the collective whole, what's best for the whole." These decisions about financial priorities for post-secondary students are analogous to the aforementioned concerns in K-12, although in this case considerations regarding desired educational environments (non-virtual) and family financial need pushed students out of post-secondary education in ways that would not readily happen at the more compulsory K-12 level.



The Pandemic and Mental Health Barriers.

During this doubly trying period of the public health pandemic and the high profile killings of unarmed Black civilians, parents and practitioners reported especially pronounced mental health needs for students and parents alike. As with other more basic needs, academics again took a secondary position to students' mental health. Youth in PCAA families were experiencing depression, loneliness, and even identity crises related to social isolation. One FAME parent noted the mental health challenge that the social isolation presented to her son while he was transitioning to a new school:

It was a trying time for us. My son, when the pandemic hit, he was finishing up with his old school, and then he was actually making a transition into high school, which was at [private independent school]. So, with FAME, they offer a lot of programs for the kids to interact socially. And so, of course, all that was shut down. So, he was disconnected socially from friends and from the friends that he made through FAME. As far as his education at the school that he was in.

Another parent noted that mental health became more of an issue as the pandemic's isolation lingered and families had to manage the unpredictable stop-starts of in-person vs. online learning:

Our children don't [typically] go to online school. You know what I mean? Unless your child went to online school, our children didn't do that. They never seen that before. And it was a big adjustment for them. ... At the beginning, Sheila was fine, but when she went back because she went in school and then had to come back home, when that happens, she was not okay.

One TNA administrator echoed these sentiments, noting that among students, there was a "formal depression that came from the kids not having a social outlet ... spending more time by themselves than ever." The administrator hypothesized that part of the challenge came from unhealthy overexposure to idealized images projected in social media platforms: "They were looking at social media all day. There had never been more comparisons, comparing themselves to people they saw on social media."

For children of health care workers, their frontline status created another level of isolation and mental health challenges. As another parent described:

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, it was affecting his schoolwork, it was affecting him all around.

Parents and family caregivers were not immune to these mental health struggles themselves. Parents who worked from home in particular were struggling with balancing work and academic monitoring, to the point that one parent told 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 transferred that compassion to their children because they were sensitive to their own challenges.

Another major mental health stressor for students and families was the loss of life occurring around them, losses that have occurred at disproportionately high levels in African American communities due to factors related to systemic racism.³ Many PCAA families had members who became ill or

passed away during the pandemic, and this was stressful for kids and in some instances led to depression. The kids wanted to be heard and to talk about the challenges they were experiencing. A parent noted, "The pandemic was scary, right? It wasn't just scary for adults. It was scary for kids. They're panicking. They want to see people they loved. They're like, is this one going to die? That one's old. That one's sick. Mom, you're sick. What are we going to do?" An African American program administrator shared a personal narrative as well that tied together the immediate challenge grief presented with its systemic antecedents:

When our church went virtual and then we went back a little bit, we're still just a little bit every week, there's somebody, what, they die, too? That can be overwhelming. And we don't recognize grief, or expanded grief can be very debilitating. And I know that our communities have had more knowledge of personal grief. That stuff just doesn't roll off your back; it affects you in some way. And then when you're not economically the same as you were, of course that's going to help.



Table 3: 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 			

IV. Key Programmatic Supports for Black Family Academic Success

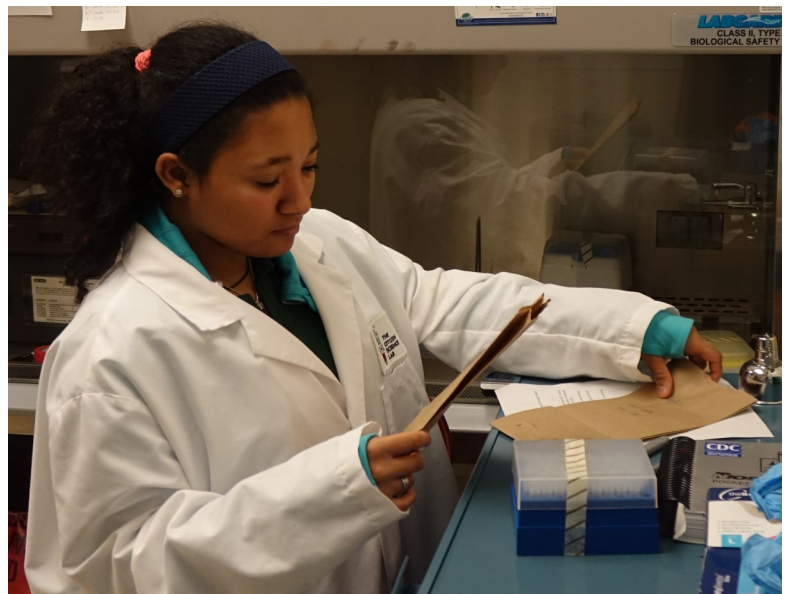
In seeking to support families in overcoming barriers to high-quality K-12 and post-secondary educational opportunities, PCAA programs provide an array of supports to the African American families in their care. As part of this inquiry, we engaged families to determine what they considered to be the most critical supports they were receiving from PCAA, both prior to and during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, results here tended to be categorized into financial supports, K-12 academic enrichment opportunities outside of school, and the provision of academic structure and culture. With the pandemic, however, these supports extended into making up for opportunities that were lost at the height of the crisis and assisting in meeting mental health needs of students and families.

Financial Support

Prior to and during the pandemic, PCAA programs were well known for being a gateway to financial supports for families' educational needs. Four of the five original programs actually provide financial assistance as core components of their programming. Crossroads and FAME respectively connect families with scholarship opportunities at private Catholic and independent secondary schools in our area. One Crossroads alum noted, "If it wasn't for Crossroads, I would have never been able to go to [Catholic high school]. I would have never had a lot of the opportunities that I received from [the school] and Crossroads. Probably would have never went to the college that I went to now. Probably wouldn't have had a lot of the opportunities that I have now." Similarly, scholarships associated with FAME were of great value to families. One parent described how FAME made his son's high-quality education possible:

I had applied for my son to go to [independent high school]. 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.

NEED families expressed similar sentiments in terms of their instrumental efforts to attain higher education supports. Also, as a private school itself school, TNA is unique among independent (private) school peers in that it specifically targets and procures funding for economically disadvantaged African American families, which comprise the vast majority of its constituents. Being that economic oppression and barriers are so primal to achievement disparities in the United States, it is no surprise that these programs target economic opportunities and that families see such great value in these outcomes.





Pandemic Aid Shifting Financial Supports. As discussed earlier, during the pandemic these financial supports at times shifted in accordance with the experiences shared above, including supports for utilities, learning supplies, technology, and even basic needs like cooked meals delivered home. These provisions were essential to PCAA family well-being and survival, as captured by this exchange between a TNA administrator and a student:

I remember a young man saying ... I said, "The food situation is really helping you?" And he said, "Yes." And he said, "Because before the food was delivered, Mr. Jordan, before we signed up for being on the food distribution list, food was unpredictable." And I remember looking at this young man, I said, "Explain that." He said, "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," and he said, "I didn't have a 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.

These basic need provisions were not without consequences for programs themselves, however. PCAA administrators reported that programs have been stretched thin during the pandemic, as these providers fought to simultaneously maintain prior levels and targets for educational assistance while also

helping to meet the basic needs of their families that, as discussed, by necessity superseded academic actualization. One program administrator noted how during the pandemic, even as families' needs increased, in some cases their funding decreased. As such, a major barrier to providing these supports was noted to be:

The [level of] support from funding resources about the need to support people who are delivering the service. Now, there was a lot of talk about helping the students, but where does that help come from? You can't have the same level of support or less level of support for those who are actually going to work. There needed to be more robust support and understanding for the people who are doing this stuff every day.

Ultimately, both the families and the service providers supporting them have struggled through the pandemic and the deep economic challenges it has presented, particularly in African American communities.

K-12 Academic Enrichment Opportunities

Many PCAA families especially appreciated the academic enrichment opportunities that were at the core of all the PCAA programs. One Crossroads alum described how enrichment offerings, although requiring sacrifices at the time, were impactful for her current college experience:

Crossroads definitely has had a great and positive impact on my education. Even starting in the summer of ninth grade, they made us come in and do summer classes. And while I was not in favor of that at the time, I'm really thankful for that now. They provided SAT help and constant tutoring, so that's definitely helped my education and my grades. Also touching on what [another respondent] said, the opportunities. Making us do certain things each summer, the programs that we had to participate in helped build my resume and helped colleges see what I've done. These experiences help with what I'm doing now.

Families also described how Crossroads created the opportunity for culturally congruent, socio-academic peer cultures that focused on academic activities in ways that otherwise may not have happened as robustly in either their under-resourced home schools and neighborhoods or in socially isolating private schools.

Parents expressed similar sentiments regarding FAME experiences, noting that the enrichment and tutoring opportunities were highly beneficial. As one student described, "I feel like FAME, there were a lot of opportunities that I wouldn't have had. ... It's important to broaden your horizons before you choose a career. I feel like that was important. We had leadership seminars every couple of Saturdays where we went to a thing and we'd see what these people do. There were a lot of things that I would have never considered." Parents at TNA also mentioned that the kinds of educational and enrichment

experiences at TNA were unique compared to their own experiences as students:

Every time I notice something they are doing, like their senior trip, Greece, Italy, you know we went to Cedar Point [laughter], I think, so, you know, it's just totally night and day with everything. And I point that out to her to, you know, just tell her to take advantage of most of it, you know, 'cause there's a lot of stuff going on in high school for her that I definitely didn't have the opportunity... to have at all. So, that's a big difference.

Higher Achievement families also lauded the enrichment opportunities provided by the program. Chief among them was early exposure to college environments and options. One alumni student described it this way:

I was always convinced that there was only like three colleges: Carlow, Pitt, CMU. When I went on my first college trip with Higher Achievement, I was like "Woah." I actually got to spend the night in the dorm and take a college class and walk on campus and play on the football field. Like, "Wow, I'm doing this at such a young age."

Parents noted the opportunities that the programs provide, the emphasis on necessary academic habits, and the positive outlook the Higher Achievement staff had for participating youth. In particular, parents noted that staff sought to have personal relationships with the students and maintained close contact with parents—experiences that fit well with the aforementioned attributes of desired educational environments. One Higher Achievement parent mentioned, "I got four phone calls since my baby's been in this program," to which another parent responded, "They got our kids' best interest at heart, and I like that."

Academic Structure and Culture

PCAA parents often appreciated the nuances of the academic structures and cultures of PCAA programs. Parents of students at The Neighborhood Academy valued multiple aspects of the school experience, including the extended-day structure, the attention to character education, smaller class sizes, the familial and relational culture of the school, and the Black males in leadership, which provided an all too rare but known benefit to the education of Black children.²² One parent noted that when choosing a school for his son:

Once I was told that there were Black men in leadership, for my son to see that. That is very difficult to come upon. We didn't have it at the charter school, nor did we have it at the Catholic school, and so, for my Black son to see Black males running the middle school, being a cofounder of this school, it was important, that was important to me.

One current TNA student commented on the *quality of student-teacher relationships* in this way:

I ever really need something from a teacher, I can, like, always ask somebody to help me, like, for instance, my own teacher lives near me, and then I have one time I lost my bus pass, so she, uh, I always met her at a spot in the morning so she can help me get to school without paying for it, until I got another bus pass, and it was very helpful, between me, my mom, and her, and if she, at our school, it's really easy to contact the teachers 'cause we're so close to them.

Similarly, an alum of NEED noted that the program personnel were actually responsible for him going to college in the first place. In his words, "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." He noted that not only was there the scholarship element to the program, but the personal connection with program staff made the difference for his attendance, graduation, and life trajectory. A parent noted similarly, "I honestly don't know what else they could do for the parents, too, because they put their heart into it."

Making up for Pandemic Losses

PCAA program leaders and parents described PCAA attempts to *make up for missed student opportunities* in order to help students overcome pandemic obstacles, in particular to remain strong candidates for college success during a time when their growth and experiential opportunities had been compromised. A NEED program administrator noted how virtual learning impacted students' preparedness outside the classroom:

Learning isn't all blackboard, you know what I mean? Learning is being in the band, being in the choir, being in the debate team, negotiating with your peers, interacting. I can't imagine. So, I guess it would be, I guess, students this year or maybe students from last year who are just entering college on campus but went for two years virtually in high school ... that's a learning curve. ... If you haven't had any experience with being in different student organizations, that can be problematic. ... That's a lot to deal with. And then they're probably not adequately prepared.

To compensate for these kinds of opportunities, PCAA program leaders organized virtual social events during the pandemic both for community building and socio-emotional support, but the desire for in-person opportunities was still great. Finally, in-person events began to reappear, and the NEED program administrator described the response to its first in-person trip in three years to historically Black colleges and universities in this way:

So, we announced that we were going to do the tour, and we had a parent orientation meeting. We anticipated, based upon RSVP response, about 50 parents. We had to put out, as people were coming in, 150-something chairs. These families came out in droves, and we were like, "Wow." I think the understanding of the need, "I've got to position my child so that they can go on to college" was demonstrated in their attendance. Like, parents knew what this experience meant in the long term.

Mental Health Supports during the Pandemic

PCAA programs have aimed to help address the aforementioned mental health challenges faced by African Americans during the pandemic in innovative ways. First, program staff were able to recognize and address changes in students' overall dispositions because of the prior relationships they had built with scholars and families. Some of the programs also directly provided counseling. At The Neighborhood Academy:

We set up counseling sessions for kids one hour a day, where we had two group counselors that were available, and you can meet with them in 15-minute increments. That was huge. And meeting with your academic advisor every day, and sometimes those conversations went off the subject, off of school-related issues and just talking about family matters.

PCAA program staff also noticed that there were more mental health resources in communities during the pandemic and referred families where they could. Still, challenges persisted with meeting the broader communities' needs, particularly because, as one program administrator noted, many community-based services have traditionally not been tailored to the African American experience:

We don't have enough culturally based or culturally specific behavioral health services. That's not changed in decades. I was reluctant to refer students to programs where I knew that they wouldn't understand the special circumstance. As a helping system, we have to look at diversity more than we have.

They went on to suggest the need for formalized crisis-intervention plans within their programs, particularly for programs already contextualized to the African American student and family experience.

V. Recommendations for Educational Practice with Black Families

African American parents, students, and alumni shared tremendous insights around how they have been able to parent effectively and leverage resources at their disposal in navigating what are often oppressive school and community contexts in pursuit of educational success. During the pandemic, additional practices emerged from families and support programs that perhaps became *essential educational work* in ensuring Black family resilience in a global health crisis. Based on the experiences, several recommendations hold implications for educational practice with African American families both in and outside school settings, and both before and during the pandemic.

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 the 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 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, and efforts to close such gaps are critical to Black family support efforts and educational equity aims more broadly. Programs like those in PCAA and elsewhere, which are standing in gaps created by intergenerational oppressive factors in our region, also merit additional support if we hope to address educational inequalities and 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, where 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 leverage established local resources to redouble efforts toward ensuring the safe, edifying, and academically optimal experiences of students and families of color in their communities.²³

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-interventions supports.** One suggestion was for formalized crisis-intervention mechanisms in programs, which could be activated during pandemic conditions. This is an innovative suggestion whereby programs could, as we saw above, mobilize themselves to begin supporting more basic needs which are specific to vulnerable constituents' contexts and which, in the case of PCAA programs, supersede academic activities or other missional priorities as such needs arise. It should be noted, however, that, as seen here and elsewhere in non-profit communities, this

type of response mechanism likely requires additional philanthropic and policy support. Programmers specifically described having to cut academic and financial aid offerings to meet clients' basic needs, and a challenge for the funding community is to provide such supports so that programs can then use them to 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. Indeed, as discussed below, there is evidence that Black families in particular have interest in parent programs and supports of this sort.²⁴
- **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 for mental health needs specifically, but also in terms of proactive academic guidance activities as well. Such approaches may have unique value and potential for working-class communities, which are less connected to the cultural and social capital that often are gateways to mental health and academic opportunity systems.
- **Greater voice to the Black pandemic experience.** The voices expressed in this report spoke courageously about their experiences with the challenges of the pandemic experience, but they admittedly only scratch the surface. A much deeper exploration of Black experiences during the pandemic is needed if we genuinely want to understand and address the disproportionate harm that has been caused by the events of the pandemic 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

Enhance 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. 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 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 Pitt's Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education program (PRIDE), Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, 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 that can be leveraged and shared across the region.
- **Remove structural barriers to parent involvement where they exist.** Parents and students suggested ways to remove structural barriers to parent 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 of making 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 points 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 those connections 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.



VI. Conclusion

The findings from this study have important implications for parents, students, families, schools, and educational programs regarding African American educational journeys before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families we spoke with provided a vast array of ways in which they were involved in their children's educational experiences, whether in schools, at homes, or in out-of-school programs. They also recognized how that involvement shifted and even increased in many ways out of necessity during the height of the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, these parents and students recognize the structural barriers that hold many of their peers back from quality educational experiences and outcomes that pre-exist pandemic concerns, and they offered some suggestions as to how programs and schools can limit the impact of these barriers.

PCAA families described in depth both the strengths and challenges of their school experiences in public and private contexts. Of primary note was the *triple quandary* that Black families face in educational involvement, where they have to often choose between (1) the rigor of mostly White and socially isolating private school experiences and (2) more representative but often under-resourced traditional and charter public options in their communities, all while navigating (3) intergenerational economic and social subordination experiences that have created distressed community contexts. These challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic, particularly in terms of juggling work and childcare activities when schools were closed to in-person learning and balancing basic physiological and social needs with academic priorities during the pandemic crisis. The pandemic also brought its own unique challenges related to navigating difficult virtual learning experiences and the mental health impacts of social isolation.

Across these trials, parents showed tremendous strength, resilience, and ingenuity in finding solutions and accessing resources. PCAA programs and others like them have also served in key roles in ensuring the educational success of these families, even as priorities shifted during the public

health crisis. They continued to help families navigate these educational choices, providing financial supports for both academic and basic needs faced across contexts, as well as positive relational and mental health assets for youth. At the same time, however, parents expressed a greater need to promote PCAA-type programs more effectively to the larger community, so as not to have social capital and "who you know" be barriers to participation.

There were also several programmatic suggestions for how to improve reach and services during both traditional times and during crises periods, such as those faced by families in the past three years. As such, efforts to improve the scope and influence of academic programs like these should perhaps focus on collective action across programs and schools in ways that have the capacity to not only increase academic skills and financial aid awards for the few involved but also promote the necessary enhancements of funding resources and policy changes needed to develop more adequate and just academic infrastructures, influential family support networks, and contextually tailored crisis-response strategies. This integration of supports and strengths can magnify the impact of individual programs and schools in ways that best honor and uplift the extraordinary efforts we have seen for Black caregivers and students over the past three years and beyond.

VII. Appendices

Appendix A: Methods

Participants. This study utilized a qualitative focus group and individual interview approaches to elucidate parent, student, and program staff perspectives on the contexts and processes associated with how parents' involvement in schools, with PCAA initiatives, and with other activities support their children's academic achievement. Researchers recruited participants directly through efforts of PCAA staff after agreeing upon a quota sample strategy for determining potential participants.²⁵ Whenever possible, parent and student focus groups were stratified across the following key constituent background factors:

- Parent levels of engagement with programs
- Gender of parents
- Gender of youth participants
- Economic background
- Parents with longer and shorter histories of involvement
- Geographic diversity

We conducted eight focus groups for the study. Seven were conducted prior to the pandemic in 2019: five focus groups with parents/primary caregivers for each of the core PCAA programs; one group with current students from across the programs; and another focus group with PCAA program alumni. Then in 2022, after pandemic conditions improved enough to allow for in-person learning, an additional parent focus group was conducted in May 2022 to ascertain family experiences with educational involvement and programmatic supports in the COVID-19 era. To further capture the contrast between the business-as-usual and pandemic experiences, additional individual interviews were conducted with a staff member from each of the four active PCAA programs. In all, nearly 50 participants contributed to the study, and the group was nearly completely African American, although diverse in terms of economic background and types of educational experiences among parents and students. Across parent and student participants, approximately 24% of participants were male and 76% female. Among agency representatives, two were African American

women, one was an African American man, and one was a White woman. Both the focus groups and individual interviews used a semi-structured interview format to promote consistency across interview sessions and were recorded and then transcribed by the research team.

Data Analysis. All focus group transcripts were analyzed for themes with a modified-grounded theory regarding parent involvement in education; successful program/parent collaborations; and race, class, and educational achievement. Post-pandemic interview questions asked how these factors changed during the pandemic and what academic, economic, health, and mental health challenges the pandemic presented to families and programs. The team used existing theory on parent involvement as a guide for developing interview questions. As unanticipated but salient content and themes surfaced in data collection and analysis, we allowed new theory and processes to emerge directly from the data. The researchers met regularly throughout the process to discuss data collection and build consensus on common themes. The lead researcher analyzed all the pre-pandemic transcripts, while individual team members led reviews for specific themes in the post-pandemic analysis. Team members then met again regularly to achieve consensus on the coding and final analyses included in the synthesis below.

Limitations. There are several limitations to this study that should be considered when people are interpreting its findings. First, the sample size of this study is too small to reach general conclusions about the experiences of all Black families in Greater Pittsburgh. This work is exploratory, and future studies using randomized, large-scale data-collection methods should explore these educational experience issues more broadly for representation and variation across local settings. Further, the families participating here were already PCAA families who were willing and able to take part in this study. Given that most PCAA programs target working-class families, and that three of the five contributing PCAA cohorts come from programs that have direct purposes related to private school accessibility and success, the sample of participants here have a much more in-depth experience and perhaps a greater orientation to private school opportunities than Black families in the region may have more generally. There is also less attention to public school experiences than would be given in a general cross-section of African American families in Greater Pittsburgh, including very little attention to Black families' experiences in Greater Pittsburgh's mostly White public suburban school districts. Such explorations are, however, more common in the broader literature, and as such, the findings here provide unique insight into the comparative challenges of multiple educational contexts and the aforementioned triple quandary faced by African American families. Moreover, the population's diverse experiences and the qualitative methodology used here also provide distinct depth regarding how Black families who have navigated multiple educational contexts perceive the strengths, barriers, and compromises they must engage in to ensure their children's long-term academic success.

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Finally, the Pittsburgh College Access Alliance Leadership Team consists of:

Esther Stief, Executive Director, Crossroads Foundation

Dr. Anthony Williams, Headmaster, The Neighborhood Academy

Darryl Wiley, Chief Executive Officer, FAME

Dr. Marcia Sturdivant, President and Chief Executive Officer, NEED

Appendix C: End Notes

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²³Local capacity-building efforts around culturally relevant practices in schools and organizations include the PittED Justice Collective (<https://www.education.pitt.edu/about/equity-and-justice/pitted-justice-collective>) and the University of Pittsburgh's Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/REC>).

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