

THE BLACK BOYS & MEN SYMPOSIUM

WORKING TOGETHER TO CHANGE CONDITIONS AND ELEVATE LIVES

INTRODUCTION

The inaugural Black Boys & Men Symposium was held on June 9 and June 10. We had 290 registered attendees, which exceeded our goal of 200. The two-day symposium provided space for guests to interrogate and dismantle systems that oppress Black boys and men and rebuild for their success. The decision to charge the police officer who shot and killed Patrick Lyoya during a traffic stop was issued on the afternoon of June 9. It seemed like fate was reminding conference attendees the grave reality that Black boys and men face daily, although many of the attendees know this all too well.



OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The symposium started with a powerful keynote address by Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, a professor, author, minister, and national speaker. He stressed the importance of education. He acknowledged that white culture pushes the idea that Black men can only be successful as athletes and entertainers. To combat this misconception, Dr. Dyson told the audience to ask other Black men about their careers and to be curious about their experiences.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

In the afternoon, there were multiple breakout sessions for attendees to choose from. Topics ranged from mentoring to mental health to retaining Black staff members to improving educational outcomes and so much more. In between sessions, attendees had the chance to visit local vendors who set up booths to showcase their goods and services.



SNEAKER BALL

The first day concluded with the Sneaker Ball, a “soleful” party with a purpose. Conference attendees and community members put on their formal attire and donned their best pair of sneakers to enjoy a night of Black talent, food, and dancing. Guests walked the red carpet, showing off their sneakers on the Sneaker Cam. The program included poetry, music, and meaningful monologues. Dr. Brandy Lovelady Mitchell, the inaugural director of diversity, equity & inclusion for the Michigan Education Association, shared her experience raising two Black sons and creating a healthy environment that allows them to thrive. Dr. Khalid Mumin, superintendent of Lower Merion School District, shared the importance of being a champion for students who often feel like failure is what is expected of them. The final meaningful monologue came from Jamon Alexander, president and CEO of West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology, who talked about the need for career training for adults so that they have access to careers that pay livable wages, allowing them to be financially independent.



PLENARY SESSION

Day two began with another breakout session followed by a panel discussion made up of educational leaders from K-12 to higher education. The speakers were Philomena V. Mantella, president of Grand Valley State University; Quentin Ross, president of Alabama State University; Bill Pink, president of Grand Rapids Community College; and Kevin Polston, superintendent of Kentwood Public Schools. Khalid Mumin moderated

the discussion. This plenary session was an opportunity for symposium attendees to hear how these educational leaders are tackling issues facing Black boys and men. Polston stressed the importance of representation, noting that Kentwood Public Schools is the most diverse in Michigan while teaching staff is more than 80 percent White. Mantella called for a shift in mindset from deficit thinking to abundance thinking. Ross called on educational leaders to be innovative and think toward the future, criticizing America’s educational system for remaining stagnant while companies like Apple lead in futuristic approaches to technology. Pink suggested that when one is overwhelmed by the totality of systems change, one needs to start small and focus on what’s within one’s control.



CLOSING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The afternoon concluded with the final breakout session and a closing keynote address from Dr. Juwanza Kunjufu, an author, educational consultant, and national speaker. Dr. Kunjufu asked the audience question after question, forcing attendees to think about real educational problems facing Black boys and men. One of the questions asked how we can get Black boys to read more. The answer was clearly stated by a Black boy in the audience who said, “Give us books we like.” Dr. Kunjufu’s questions shone a light on other problems within our educational system, including how having one Black male teacher significantly increases

the odds that a Black male student will graduate high school and even pursue higher education.

Dr. Kunjufu also shared numerous statistics, illustrating these educational inequalities, such as:

- 17% of students are Black, yet they make up 41% of special education students and only 6% of gifted and talented students
- 7% of teachers are Black and only 2% are Black men, yet 83% are white women
- 28% of students who are suspended are Black males
- 20% of teachers make 80% of the referrals for special education and suspension

CONCLUSION

Many attendees of the inaugural Black Boys & Men Symposium found the speakers and sessions to be incredibly valuable. One attendee said the symposium should be required for every teacher at her school. Grand Valley State University is already working on next year’s symposium, which is tentatively planned for June 15 and 16. We hope to reach an even wider group next year by increasing attendance from community members, government officials, criminal justice professionals, and more.