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Study Highlights Successful Strategies for African-American Girls in School

April 25, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - A new study of urban African-American adolescent girls concludes that the most resilient and successful students seek and receive support simultaneously from their families, their schools, and their communities.

In her new book, *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classrooms*, Venus E. Evans-Winters, assistant professor of Educational Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University, reported on the results of her three-year ethnographic study in which she followed a group of African-American students in a Midwestern city from middle school through their junior years in high school.

Of all the issues that arose in her study, Evans-Winters says that the most significant finding underscores the need for more educational research and policies that take the “whole” child approach to school reform.

“We have policies at the local level and the national level that target students, that target parents, that hold teachers accountable, or that hold schools accountable,” said Evans-Winters. “Based on my research with these students, none of these areas should be given greater importance than another, and we need to find ways to erase the boundaries between the home environment, community organizations, and school systems. All three need appropriate funding and support.”

Evans-Winters interacted with the students in a variety of settings, interviewing relatives, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders to determine how students were able to overcome adverse conditions.

“Research of this sort has tended to focus on African-American males,” Evans-Winters said. “However, we are seeing African-American female students who are staying in school despite family responsibilities and stressors at school that are related to their race, class, and gender.”

In addition, Evans-Winters chose to focus on girls because of her personal experience growing up as an African American girl attending public urban and suburban schools.

“Throughout my study, I was able to relate on a very personal level to what I was hearing from these girls as they discussed their lives,” she said.

Evans-Winters said that while many of the subjects of her study were able to find occasional support in these areas, only those who accessed the resources simultaneously were successful.

These resilient students, she explained, not only had an adult caregiver showing interest in their schoolwork but also had discovered a mentor in the school while becoming active in some sort of after-school program in the community.

“We know from history that nothing works single-handedly when it comes to solving problems with our educational system,” said Evans-Winters. “What I found underscores the need to address all of these areas in a coordinated effort.”

To discuss her study with Evans-Winters, contact either Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.



Venus Evans-Winters