

Supporting Young Men and Boys of Color: Targeting as a Case for Health Equity

MAISHA SIMMONS

Senior Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

In philanthropy we have the privilege to experiment and take risks in the ways that we support investments in the community. Often our theories of change are guided by the promise of innovation and the hope for meaningful impact. Our partners gracefully indulge these shifts to ensure that everyone in their community has a better opportunity to live long and healthy lives.

One theory of change that I fully embrace is “targeted universalism” as described by John A. Powell, who challenges the effectiveness of both universal approaches and programs targeted to specific populations. The former are “very likely to exacerbate inequality rather than reduce it,” he says, while the latter “may be viewed as favoring some constituent group rather than the public good.”

Instead, Powell favors “targeted universalism,” which involves “identifying a problem, particularly one suffered by marginalized people, proposing a solution, and then broadening its scope to cover as many people as possible” (http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?item_id=11577&newsletter_id=104&kc=1).

It is through this lens that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) created Forward Promise in 2012, with the aim of addressing the needs of boys and men of color of middle- and high-school age. The program grew out of the knowledge that despite years of significant investments by us and others, people of color—but in particular males—continue to experience poor health outcomes in comparison to their white peers (Courtenay, 2000).

All young people need a safe place to grow up, supportive school environments, access to economic opportunities, and a loving and supportive family environment. As you chip away at these factors and replace them with high amounts of trauma and toxic stress from social and environmental factors, you create biological factors that affect adolescent brain development. If systems of care aren’t prepared to foster healing in these circumstances—or even to understand normal adolescent behavior—young men who have suffered this trauma and stress receive stricter and harsher punishments that jeopardize their future health and success.

Forward Promise aims to change that trajectory. In just three years, it has evolved into a \$15 million initiative with more than 20 grantees, scores of subgrantees, and a host of

philanthropic partners. We have learned several key lessons on this journey.

FORWARD PROMISE AND THE CULTURE OF HEALTH FRAMEWORK

RWJF has long recognized that conditions such as poverty and violence negatively affect health. Conversely, factors such as good education and economic opportunity, safe streets, and supportive social networks lead to better health outcomes. Forward Promise is about making those positive health factors a reality for every young man by targeting those who are least likely to experience the conditions to realize those factors.

Our Culture of Health framework recognizes that every person deserves the chance to pursue a healthier life, no matter who they are or where they live. The goal is not just to erase disparities, but to achieve health equity. Ensuring that boys and young men of color are included in this vision is especially important today, when over half of the children being born in the U.S. are children of color.

Achieving health equity requires transforming how communities, institutions, and systems engage and support boys and men of color (Bryant et al. 2013). The health, education, and employment outcomes of these young men are not only a matter of social justice but also an economic imperative for the U.S.

Through Forward Promise, RWJF seeks specific, measurable outcomes in the work toward a Culture of Health: increases in school attendance, school performance, self-esteem, graduation rates, acquisition of skills at grade level, credits earned, decision-making skills, student and parent engagement, resilience, and career readiness.

Three core considerations drove how we approached our work:

- Improving life outcomes for boys and men of color from cradle to career requires multidisciplinary action.
- Long-term academic success is strongly correlated with how students fare in middle school and high school (Balfanz 2008).
- Attention to culture and community supports is a critical factor in improving outcomes.

With these realities in mind, we employed specific strategies that have been essential to the success of Forward Promise:

- **New places, new partners, and new people:** Creating a continuum of services across health, employment, justice, and social welfare meant thinking broadly. We realized that we needed to expand the geographic focus of our grant-making to include places that are home to some of the biggest concentrations of boys of color and that have the fewest resources: the South, the Southwest, and in particular, rural areas of these regions. We engaged new partners to include a diverse perspective of racial and ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Forward Promise grantees include the Alaska Native Heritage Center and the East Bay Asian Youth Center. We make it a priority to elevate local, on-the-ground perspectives and engage local philanthropies as partners, given their knowledge of the landscape, networks, and deep institutional presence.
- **Investments in policy and system change:** We have encouraged grantees to approach the systemic issues facing boys and men of color in their communities in ways that make the most sense locally. In California, for example, Community Coalition—working as part of the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color—contributes to a new state policy that prohibits any student in grades K–3 from being suspended or expelled for “willful defiance,” which refers to behavior such as refusing to take a hat off, ignoring teacher requests to stop texting, or leaving a classroom without permission. Black students today are three times more likely to be suspended even when they misbehave at the same rate and in the same way as white students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014). Kids who are suspended or expelled from school are more likely to drop out, which is linked to shorter, sicker lives.
- **Community and organizational capacity building and infrastructure:** We believe strongly in elevating the capacity and credibility of grassroots organizations to change systems in their own communities. We focus on capacity building and leadership training to empower community institutions to reach out to key systems leaders—many for the first time. Grantees have succeeded in embedding their programs, values, and practices more firmly. For example, La Plazita Institute in Albuquerque conducted tours of its facilities for parole officers, familiarizing officers with the program’s principles, retention rates, and results and educating them about culturally appropriate services.

WE CAN ALL PLAY A ROLE IN SCALING THIS WORK

In accordance with Powell’s challenge, RWJF identified a problem that particularly affects marginalized people and proposed solutions. The next step in “targeted universalism” is broadening its scope to cover as many people as possible.

Philanthropies of all sizes have a role to play in improving the lives of boys and young men of color and in achieving health equity through convening, communications, research, and providing grant resources. The launch of Forward Promise coincided with an increasing national focus on boys and men of color. Today we are seeing many more successful programs with targeted approaches to supporting young men in their schools, in their neighborhoods, and in preparing for college and their careers.

Today’s boys and men of color will help shape the nation’s vitality, prosperity, and resilience throughout the 21st century. Forward Promise sets out to make certain they will be ready for the challenge by advancing an agenda of equity and opportunity for all. Rooted in RWJF’s Culture of Health philosophy, Forward Promise recognizes health as the essential platform upon which to build individual preparedness, thriving communities, and a strong, competitive nation.

SOURCES

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