



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS

A Call to Action for  
Educational Equity

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### UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS: A Call to Action for Educational Equity

Behind many of the most important battles for racial and gender equality in the United States—from school desegregation to sex discrimination—are African American girls. From the pioneers in school desegregation, such as Linda Brown and Barbara Johns,<sup>1</sup> to the advocates for legal protections against student-on-student sexual harassment, like LaShonda Davis,<sup>2</sup> African American girls have played significant roles in ensuring the availability of meaningful educational opportunities for everyone. Despite this proud history of leadership, the ongoing experiences of African American girls in our nation's schools are rarely considered or discussed. Yet African American girls face significant barriers to educational attainment, including lack of access to quality educational opportunities; pervasive racial and gender stereotypes that affect the decisionmaking of school leaders and educators; discriminatory discipline practices that disproportionately push them out of school; high rates of exposure to sexual harassment and

violence; juvenile justice system involvement; and lack of support for those who are pregnant or parenting while still in school. In almost all states, the high school graduation rate for African American girls is significantly below that of white girls and the national average for all girls, and African American girls are behind on a range of academic measures related to college readiness. These systemic educational barriers and challenges produce life-long economic obstacles, such as limited job opportunities, lower earnings, and disproportionate representation among those in poverty. As a result, African American girls are uniquely vulnerable to a “School-to-Poverty Pathway.”

With *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity*, the National Women's Law Center and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. shine a spotlight on the barriers that restrict and limit the educational opportunities of many African

American girls, the impact of those barriers on the lives of African American girls and women, and the available interventions that present opportunities to fundamentally improve life outcomes for young African American women. This report – the result of a multi-year study – urges educators, school leaders, community leaders and members, advocates, policymakers, and philanthropic organizations to take action to advance the success of African American girls, complementing the important ongoing work to improve educational outcomes for boys and men of color. Our entire nation has a stake in ensuring the academic and professional success of all children.

**Because of the Intersection of Racial and Gender Discrimination and Stereotypes, African American Girls Confront Significant Obstacles to Achievement in School.**

African American girls often encounter deeply embedded stereotypes that reinforce racial and gender biases in the classroom. Research confirms that stereotypes of African American girls are pervasive among educators who assume that African American girls require greater social correction than other girls.<sup>3</sup> As a result, African American girls frequently face harsher disciplinary sanctions for “non-conforming” behavior, such as expressing their opinions, and are more likely to be erroneously disciplined as aggressors, instead of properly identified as victims of sexual harassment and violence.<sup>4</sup> Despite facing these challenges, research shows that African American girls aspire to be leaders more than any other group of girls and rate themselves more highly on leadership skills than do white girls.<sup>5</sup>

African American students are disproportionately enrolled in schools that lack quality resources, including credentialed teachers, rigorous course offerings, and extracurricular activities.<sup>6</sup> As a result, African American girls are less likely to have access to curricula and instruction that lead to postsecondary education and high-

wage careers. Additionally, despite the well-documented benefits of after-school programs and extracurricular activities to students’ engagement in school, graduation rates, and overall academic achievement, African American girls have limited access to such programs. While girls’ participation in sports has skyrocketed since the passage of Title IX, studies show that African American girls face significant barriers to participation in sports and other after-school activities, such as cost, lack of transportation, financial obligations, and family responsibilities.

Overly punitive disciplinary practices, such as out-of-school suspensions for relatively minor and subjective offenses, disproportionately push African American girls out of school and increase their involvement with the juvenile justice system. Data from the most recent U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection demonstrate that African American girls are disproportionately disciplined. During the 2011-12 school year, twelve percent of all African American pre-K-12 female students were suspended. This suspension rate was six times the rate for white girls, and higher than any other group of girls and also higher than white, Asian and Latino boys.<sup>7</sup> And earlier data show that African American girls represented only 17 percent of all female students but constituted 31 percent of all girls



referred to law enforcement and about 43 percent of girls who experienced a school-related arrest.<sup>8</sup> The data are troubling as research also shows that although African American students are punished more frequently than their white peers, they are not engaged in more frequent or serious misbehavior.<sup>9</sup> In fact, African American students receive harsher disciplinary sanctions than their white peers for the same offenses.<sup>10</sup> Such practices severely restrict opportunities that African American girls have to attain a high quality education and fail to identify or address their possible underlying social and emotional needs.

African American girls experience pervasive harassment, violence, and trauma that undermine positive educational experiences. African American girls report higher rates of sexual harassment and assault<sup>11</sup> and dating violence<sup>12</sup> than their white counterparts. Among female students, African American girls also face the highest rates of threatened violence or injury with a weapon on school property, and are disproportionately vulnerable to child sex trafficking victimization and to prosecution for their involvement in that underground economy.<sup>13</sup> These experiences exacerbate poor outcomes for those girls who do not receive counseling assistance.<sup>14</sup> And those girls who do seek help often encounter inappropriate and unsupportive responses from teachers and administrators.<sup>15</sup>

African American girls who are pregnant or parenting are likely to encounter a range of barriers to pursuing and completing their education. Pregnant and parenting students often encounter negative stereotypes about being teen mothers, lack of support from and/or discrimination by schools, financial hardship, and inability to find or pay for childcare, all challenging obstacles to the completion of a program or the finishing of a degree.<sup>16</sup>

African American girls have limited opportunities to enroll in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) courses and are discouraged from participating in STEM activities. Schools that disproportionately serve students of color, including high numbers of African American students, are considerably less likely to teach higher-level math and science courses<sup>17</sup> and more likely to hire teachers without significant teaching experience in those subjects.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, African American girls report being discouraged by teachers from pursuing STEM classes; for example, some education professionals steer African American girls to classes that promote dialogue, instead of encouraging them to achieve in the sciences.<sup>19</sup>

### **These Barriers Hinder Educational Outcomes for African American Girls**

Due to systemic barriers, African American girls suffer from compromised educational outcomes. High school graduation rates for African American girls are lower than for all other girls except Native American girls.<sup>20</sup> In addition, on a range of academic measures, African American girls are experiencing poor outcomes in high school that leave them unprepared for higher education. For instance, in 2013, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of female African American seniors scored “below Basic” in math and nearly four in ten (39 percent) scored “below Basic” in reading.<sup>21</sup> Also, African American girls were “held back” a grade or “retained” at a rate of 21 percent, which is more than twice as high as the 10 percent rate for girls overall.<sup>22</sup> Although African American women are enrolling in higher education programs and institutions at higher rates than all other groups of students, their completion rates are lower than those of other female students who enroll.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, African American women are less likely than other female students to enroll in four-year colleges.<sup>24</sup>



**African American Girls' Educational Disparities Have Significant Economic Consequences, Not Only for African American Women, But Also for their Families and Communities, and Our Nation as a Whole.**

Graduating from high school or college without being career-ready can have negative short- and long-term ramifications for the economic well-being of African American girls and women. In 2013, more than 40 percent of African American women 25 years or older without a high school diploma were living in poverty, compared to 29 percent of those who had a high school diploma, and 8.7 percent of those who had a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the average African American female college graduate with a bachelor's degree can expect an increase of about \$657,000 in lifetime earnings over the average African American female high school graduate.<sup>26</sup> The much higher rates of poverty for African American women without a high school degree underscore the importance of addressing and eliminating the barriers they face in attaining a high quality education. Without intervention, they and their families, many of whom depend on women as primary breadwinners, can experience poverty and other consequences of limited educational attainment.

**A Call to Action**

*Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity* calls for the development and implementation of policies and programs to improve educational and career outcomes, not only for African American girls, but for all students. This Call to Action complements the laudable recent efforts to address the critical challenges facing boys of color and offers a supportive context in which to understand the needs of all youth of color. The full report contains a detailed list of recommendations for policymakers; schools and districts; parents, caregivers, and community

advocates; and philanthropic organizations. Key recommendations are listed below in summary form.

- **Give students a strong start by investing in early childhood education.** Expand access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education through increased investments in child care; universal, full-day pre-kindergarten; Head Start/Early Head Start; and other early learning initiatives.
- **Provide support for the most vulnerable students.** Develop problem-solving and evaluation models for schools to ensure that all children are screened early for disabilities and to ensure that children's academic and emotional needs are addressed by early and intensive evidence-based interventions, instruction, and support services.
- **Ensure equitable distribution of school resources.** Reduce intra- and inter-district disparities in school resources, so that all students have access to curricula, instruction, materials, support personnel, subject-matter qualified teachers, and technology that encourage and facilitate college- and career-ready curricula and skills.
- **Eliminate overly punitive and exclusionary discipline practices.** Increase transparency and accuracy in schools' annually reported discipline data, audit schools' discipline policies, promote implementation of community-responsive discipline practices and alternatives to exclusionary practices, such as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Implement data systems that encourage the tracking, identification, and timely reporting of racial and gender disparities in discipline.
- **Reduce race- and gender-based harassment and violence.** Require schools to adopt and publicize strong anti-harassment policies. Ensure that educators and students receive race- and gender-responsive, trauma-sensitive,

culturally-competent training to properly identify symptoms of trauma and appropriately respond to victims of sexual harassment and violence without mislabeling African American girls as perpetrators, when they are actually victims, based on stereotypes. Ensure that schools prevent and address harassment and violence.

- **Support pregnant and parenting students.** Identify educational barriers for pregnant and parenting students, evaluate promising school-based programs to support their educational success, and give school districts resources and tools to establish such programs. Support medically-accurate and comprehensive sex education that is LGBTQ inclusive and does not stigmatize young parents.
- **Increase access to athletics and other after-school programs.** Support efforts to increase transparency in high school athletics participation and distribution of resources, reduce financial obstacles to participation, and promote outreach to and recruitment of girls of color.
- **Support leadership development among African American girls.** Expose African American girls to African American women in leadership positions and help African American girls develop skills that will enhance their leadership potential. Amplify the voices of African American girls and ensure that their needs are addressed in policies and programs.

- **Increase access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs and other rigorous course offerings.** Ensure that schools take the steps necessary to provide African American girls and women with equal access to STEM classes; ensure that schools train teachers and administrators to identify and address implicit bias and stereotypes, isolation, and other issues impacting the involvement and success of African American girls and women in STEM.
- **Encourage transparency and accountability for the performance of all students.** Promote policies that identify low-performing schools, and require that reported data be cross-tabulated to take into account the ways in which the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender affect the educational outcomes of girls and boys of color.
- **Strengthen enforcement of Titles VI and IX** to eradicate race- and gender-based discrimination in schools.
- **Invest in the future of African American girls.** Target philanthropic funding domestically to address the needs of women and girls of color in the United States; funding should be aimed toward providing social services, support systems, and programs that will help address the needs of all African American girls, especially the most vulnerable — those who are low-income, in the child welfare system, victims of child sex trafficking, struggling to complete school, or in the juvenile justice system.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Linda Brown was the seven year-old daughter of Oliver Brown, the plaintiff in *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was Mr. Brown's concern for Linda, who was compelled to endure a perilous walk and then bus ride to a segregated school, which encouraged him to challenge the School Board of Topeka, Kansas. Barbara Johns was a high school student activist in Virginia who led a student walkout to challenge conditions in the segregated school she attended. Ms. John's courageous challenge was a critical spark that set off intensified school desegregation efforts throughout Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> *Davis v. Monroe County Bd. of Educ.*, 526 U.S. 629 (1999). *Davis* established that schools have a duty to respond to and address complaints of student-on-student sexual harassment.

<sup>3</sup> Jamilia J. Blake, Bettie Ray Butler & Charlotte Danielle Smith, *Challenging Middle Class Notions of Femininity: The Cause for Black Females' Disproportionate Suspension Rates*, in *CLOSING THE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE GAP: RESEARCH TO PRACTICE* (Daniel Losen ed., forthcoming) (manuscript at 4, on file with authors) (citing Regina Rahimi & Delores D. Liston, *What Does she Expect when She Dresses Like That? Teacher Interpretation of Emerging Adolescent Female Sexuality*, 45 *EDUC. STUD.* 512 (2009)).

<sup>4</sup> Sonja C. Tonnesen, Commentary, "Hit It and Quit It": Responses to Black Girls' Victimization in School, 28 *BERKELEY J. GENDER L. & JUST.* 1, 10 (2013), available at <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1312&context=bgj>.

<sup>5</sup> GIRL SCOUT RESEARCH INST., *THE STATE OF GIRLS: UNFINISHED BUSINESS – GIRLS' LEADERSHIP* 15 (2013), available at [https://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/sog\\_ch7\\_leadership.pdf](https://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/sog_ch7_leadership.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., GARY ORFIELD ET AL., *THE CIVIL RIGHTS PROJECT/PROYECTO DERECHOS CIVILES, E PLURIBUS... SEPARATION: DEEPENING DOUBLE SEGREGATION FOR MORE STUDENTS* (2012), available at [http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/orfield\\_epluribus\\_revised\\_omplete\\_2012.pdf](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/orfield_epluribus_revised_omplete_2012.pdf); CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC. OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, *ISSUE BRIEF No. 3, DATA SNAPSHOT: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS 1* (2014), available at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-College-and-Career-Readiness-Snapshot.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Civil Rights Data Collection, *Data Snapshot: School Discipline*, Issue Brief No. 1, 3 (Mar. 2014), available at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009-10 National and State Estimations, available at [http://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Projections\\_2009\\_10](http://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Projections_2009_10). Data are for students without disabilities.

<sup>9</sup> See generally RUSSELL J. SKIBA & NATASHA T. WILLIAMS, *THE EQUITY PROJECT AT IND. UNIV., SUPPLEMENTARY PAPER No. 1, ARE BLACK KIDS WORSE? MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN BEHAVIOR: A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE* (2014), available at [http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior\\_031214.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior_031214.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Russell J. Skiba et al., *The Color of Discipline*, 34 *Urb. Rev.* 317, 333-35.

<sup>11</sup> Amer. Assoc. Univ. Women, *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School* 24-25 (2001), available at <http://www.aauw.org/files/2013/02/hostile-hallways-bullying-teasing-and-sexual-harassment-in-school.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ctrs. for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2011* 66, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6104.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Nat'l Ctr. Educ. Statistics, *Higher Education: Gaps in Access and Persistence Study* 62 (Aug. 2012), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012046.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Scyatta A. Wallace & Riki Wilchins, True Child & Heinz Endowments, *Gender Norms: A Key to Improving Health & Wellness Among Black Women & Girls* 4 (Jan. 2013), available at <http://www.truechild.org/Images/Interior/findtools/heinz%20report.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Often school systems discipline African American girls who display "defiant" or "bad" attitudes without consideration of their victimization histories. See MONIQUE W. MORRIS, *AFRICAN AM. POLICY FORUM, RACE, GENDER AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE: EXPANDING OUR DISCUSSION TO INCLUDE BLACK GIRLS* 5 (2012), available at <http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resources/Morris-Race-Gender-and-the-School-to-Prison-Pipeline.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., *A PREGNANCY TEST FOR SCHOOLS: THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION LAWS ON PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS* 1 (2012), available at [http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/final\\_nwlc\\_pregnantparenting\\_report.pdf](http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/final_nwlc_pregnantparenting_report.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC. OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, *ISSUE BRIEF No. 3, DATA SNAPSHOT: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS* 1, 8 (2014), available at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-College-and-Career-Readiness-Snapshot.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in the academic year 2007-08, 22 percent of mathematics teachers and 21 percent of science teachers were novices in high-minority schools, compared with 13 percent and 18 percent in low-minority schools. National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, *Science and Engineering Indicators 2012*, Appendix Table 1-18. Years of teaching experience of public middle and high school mathematics and science teachers, by minority enrollment and school poverty level: Academic years 2003-04 and 2007-08, <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind12/append/c1/at01-18.pdf>. "High-minority schools" are defined here as those with minority enrollments greater than 45 percent of the student population, and "low-minority schools" are those with 0-5 percent minority enrollment.

<sup>19</sup> Rose M. Pringle, et al., *Factors Influencing Elementary Teachers' Positioning of African American Girls as Science and Mathematics Learners*, 112 *Sch. Science & Math.* 217, 221 (2012).

<sup>20</sup> Editorial Projects in Education, Education Counts database using Editorial Projects in Education, Research Center, Custom Table Builder, <http://www.edcounts.org/createtable/step1.php>. 2010 graduation rates by race and gender are: female African American students (66 percent); female white students (82 percent); female Hispanic students (71 percent); female Asian students (83 percent); and female American Indian students (51 percent). Figures are National Women's Law Center calculations. Graduation rates are reported by Editorial Projects in Education under the Cumulative Promotion Index.

<sup>21</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading and Mathematics Assessments using U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>. Figures are National Women's Law Center calculations.

<sup>22</sup> TERRIS ROSS ET AL., NAT'L CTR. FOR EDUC. STATISTICS, U.S. DEPT. OF EDUC., HIGHER EDUCATION: GAPS IN ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE STUDY 58 tbl.11-1 (2012), *available at* <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012046.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2013, Table 326.10.

<sup>24</sup> Graduation rates of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, and control of institution: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2006, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_326.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_326.10.asp).

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), School Enrollment, CPS October 2012 – Detailed Tables, Table 7. Enrollment Status of High School Graduates 15 to 24 Years Old, by Type of School, Attendance Status, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 2012, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/2012/tables.html>. Figures are National Women's Law Center calculations.

<sup>26</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading and Mathematics Assessments using U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>. Figures based on National Women's Law Center calculations.

<sup>27</sup> TERRIS ROSS ET AL., NAT'L CTR. FOR EDUC. STATISTICS, U.S. DEPT. OF EDUC., HIGHER EDUCATION: GAPS IN ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE STUDY 58 tbl.11-1 (2012), *available at* <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012046.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2014 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, POV29: Years of School Completed by Poverty Status, Sex, Age, Nativity and Citizenship: [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032014/pov/pov29\\_100.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032014/pov/pov29_100.htm) (last visited Sept. 17, 2014). Figures are for adults 25 and older who are of a single race.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2014 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, PINC-03: Educational Attainment—People 25 Years Old and Over, by Total Money Earnings in 2013, Work Experience in 2013, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032013/perinc/pinc03\\_000.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032013/perinc/pinc03_000.htm) (last visited Sept. 17, 2014). Figures are for full-time, year-round workers 25 and older and assume a 40-year career. Figures are not adjusted for inflation. Figures based on National Women's Law Center calculations.