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Success barriers targeted

Ann Arbor student groups to seek answers to achievement gap

BY DAVID JESSE
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When administrators talk about the achievement gap between white and black students in Ann Arbor, Mateso Mbala-Nkanga sees more than the raw data.

She sees her classmates, with a lot at risk. "It's not only about low test scores," said Mbala-Nkanga, a junior at Huron High School. "You can't be speaking about the lives of people and find the answers in test scores."

Mbala-Nkanga and a group of her peers, most of whom belong to the Ann Arbor Youth Senate and the Youth Empowerment Project, have formed Youth-Powered Solutions to the Achievement Gap. The new

group hopes to use focus groups and surveys to get beyond data to find out what barriers to success exist in the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

By the end of the school year, the group hopes to present some recommendations for removing those barriers.

The achievement gap is commonly talked about in terms of a gap between black and white students. In Ann Arbor, the gap shows up in disparities in test scores, failure rates, graduation rates, suspension rates and participation in both remedial and advanced classes.

Christina Tzortzinis, a junior at Huron High School, said many students are hindered by a lack of opportunity. "We've realized how important it is to give everybody equal opportunities," she

'We've realized how important it is to give everybody equal opportunities. There's so many that have some sort of barrier to success.'

Christina Tzortzinis, Huron High School junior

said. "There's so many that have some sort of barrier to success." Group members will involve their high school classmates in seeking solutions.

Recruiting is under way for students to participate in a series of half-day focus groups that will discuss the achievement gap.

Organizers are looking for 400 teens to participate in the focus groups this fall. They're espe-

cially looking for students who normally don't get involved in projects at school, said Austin Green, a senior at Pioneer High School.

The results of those focus groups will be used to write survey questions. The survey will be sent out this winter to 2,500 students and posted online for students to take.

From there, the student group, along with students and

professors from the University of Michigan, will analyze the focus group and survey results to come up with recommendations.

They'll look at barriers on the personal level, the school level and the community level.

Last spring, the group ran some pilot focus groups to refine training and test the process.

The students said some common themes about obstacles began to crop up already. The group didn't want to identify those themes until this year's focus groups had been conducted.

The high school students said it's important to have students involved in finding a solution to the achievement gap.

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"It's hard to find total success for youth without having youth involved," Green said.

The school board has approved financial support for the project. Burditts are also helping with some of the costs, which haven't been determined. The students said they're de-

termined to make the project a success. "We're making this a long-term thing and not just dabbling in it and letting it go," said Eileen Myers, a sophomore at Community High School.

Mbala-Nkanga agreed. "What we want out of this project is results, results that will be good for the community. We're doing this because we believe in it. Our project is about finding results."

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