

THE ROOT

Imagine How Different Our Country Will Be When We Collectively Honor Black Excellence

Your Take: The White House Initiative on Education Excellence for African Americans honors achievement and possibility this month and all year long.

BY: DAVID J. JOHNS Posted: February 1, 2016



Generic image **THINKSTOCK**

Imagine how different our children would be if they were aware of the many contributions that black people have made to improve the world throughout history. Imagine, for a second, how different our country will be when we, collectively, honor black excellence, beyond the month of February, a time designed to reflect upon black history.

As executive director of [**the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans**](#), I lead the initiative in working with a national network of caring and concerned adults to accelerate the learning and development of African-American students of all ages. Throughout Black History Month, as is our practice throughout the calendar year, we will find ways to educate, empower and engage anyone who will listen, as well as those who don't yet know they need to listen to stories of unparalleled excellence. We hope that our efforts to draw meaningful connections between the past and the present will change hearts and minds in ways that provide all black children with the love and support needed to thrive.

As acting U.S. Secretary of Education John King [**said at the National Action Network's Martin Luther King Jr. Day Breakfast**](#), the nation's record high school graduation rate—82 percent—is possible because of historic reductions in the dropout rate, led by African-American, Latino and low-income students. The numbers of African-American and Latino college students are up by more than 1 million compared with 2008. And in 2014—the most recent year for which we have data—America had not just the largest class completing higher education in our history but also the most diverse.

Beginning Feb. 1, 2016, the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans will host a series of events in the Washington, D.C., area that celebrate African-American achievements, past and present, by honoring those who have supported the learning and development of African Americans throughout history, as well as affirming and supporting African-American students of all ages. As we celebrate icons of the past during Black History Month, it is critical that we look toward the future by ensuring that African-American students are equipped with the tools and skills necessary to succeed in college, careers and life.

Every weekday in February at 9 a.m. EST, the initiative, in partnership with the [**Because of Them We Can campaign**](#), will disseminate videos and images of African-American activists, past and present, to highlight black excellence—individuals who have supported the cognitive, social and emotional development of African Americans of all ages. The goal is to educate, empower and engage in innovative ways that allow

children to step into the shoes of cultural icons and truly understand that because of them, we can.

On Feb. 3, 2016, Jeremiah (who is 10) and Joshua (8 years of age) West, authors of *Champions of Change: Live to Give*, will join me at Browne Elementary School to read a book they wrote about the importance of spending, saving and sharing. The event will also engage parents and educators to emphasize the importance of early learning and highlight the **Every Student Succeeds Act**, which was signed by President Barack Obama last year and expands access to high-quality preschool.

On Feb. 4, 2016, from 1 to 3 p.m. EST, the initiative will host a College & Career Success event for ninth- and 10th-grade students at Anacostia High School to celebrate black excellence by ensuring that African-American students know that they can graduate from college and are supported in preparing for the college-admissions and financial-aid process. At the event, students will learn more about **the College Scorecard**, which provides the clearest, most accessible and most reliable national data on college cost, graduation and debt and postcollege earnings; and **Pell Abacus**, a free, mobile-friendly college-search tool designed to help low-income students understand their full range of financial-aid options.

From 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. EST on Feb. 8, the initiative, in partnership with First Book, will invite elementary-school-age male students of color in the D.C. area to the Department of Education for an interactive and engaging morning of reading, dancing and celebrating. The event will highlight prominent figures in black history who challenge and disrupt negative stereotypes about African-American youths, with a specific focus on boys and men of color, and provide a platform for youths to speak about their experiences in schools and receive affirmation for their lived experiences.

From 3 to 5 p.m. EST on Feb. 8, the initiative will screen the film **The Rule** as part of **the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans Film Screening and Discussion Series (#AfAmEdFilms)**. *The Rule* documents the achievements of St. Benedict's Prep, an all-boys college-preparatory school in Newark,

N.J., with a nearly 100 percent college-acceptance rate. After the screening, audience members will engage in a student-led discussion on ways to support boys and men of color so that they feel safe, supported and engaged at home, in school and within their communities.

On Feb. 10 at noon, the initiative will host a Supporting Educational Excellence for Boys & Men of Color **#AfAmEdChat** to discuss best practices on supporting male students of color.

On Feb. 17 at noon, the initiative will host a Supporting African American Students in STEM Programs and Careers **#AfAmEdChat** in partnership with Code Fever Miami to highlight **Black Tech Week**, an immersive weeklong series of events that bring together the most innovative young minds to address common challenges. The chat will virtually connect young minds to discuss barriers in science, technology, engineering and math fields, as well as President Obama's plan to expand access to computer science and highlight critical resources for caring and concerned adults, families and students.

We encourage you to find ways, throughout the year, to celebrate black excellence and to support the learning and development of black children, youths and young adults, too.

The Root aims to foster and advance conversations about issues relevant to the black Diaspora by presenting a variety of opinions from all perspectives, whether or not those opinions are shared by our editorial staff.

David J. Johns is executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, which President Barack Obama established in 2012 to strengthen the nation by improving educational outcomes for African Americans of all ages, and to help ensure that all African Americans receive an education that properly prepares them for college, productive careers and satisfying lives. Learn more about the initiative by visiting ed.gov/AfAmEducation.

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