

Atlanta Black Star

Obama Adds Nation's Largest School Districts to My Brother's Keeper Initiative

July 21, 2014 | Posted by [Nick Chiles](#)



While the initiative has drawn fire from some segments of the Black community, particularly among prominent women such as author Alice Walker and legal scholar Anita Hill, the White House has been steadily moving forward, pulling in corporations, foundations and experts to figure out the best way to improve the life chances of this troubled population.

Having 60 of the largest school districts on board, representing 40 percent of all African-American and Hispanic boys living below the poverty line, will be a major boon to the initiative.

The development was announced in a story in the *New York Times*. The *Times* reported that the My Brother's Keeper initiative will also be broadened to address the needs of Asian-American and Native American boys.

The school expansion will be coordinated by the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large urban school districts. By joining My Brother's Keeper, the school districts have committed to expand quality preschool access; track data on Black and Hispanic boys so educators can intervene as soon as signs of struggle emerge; increase the number of boys of color who take gifted, honors or Advanced Placement courses and exams; work to reduce the number of minority boys who are suspended or expelled; and increase graduation rates among African-American and Hispanic boys.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the organization, told the *Times* that while a few districts had made some progress in helping Black and Latino boys improve their academic performance, "We need to move these numbers and improve these futures as a collective if the nation as a

whole is to make any progress on this front. It's not enough for us to do well in a small number of cities."

"The 50-year anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act reminded us that those great battles of the past were not fought over access to mediocrity," Casserly said. "They were fought over access to excellence."

Shortly after the president announced the five-year, \$200 million initiative in February, some African Americans asked why he was ignoring the needs of females.

[White House Senior Adviser Valerie Jarrett](#) told MSNBC that the critics of MBK were operating on flawed logic.

"I think the flaw in the logic is not understanding that this is not either/or, this is both/and," said Jarrett, chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls, who recently co-hosted a White House summit on working families. "The president's approach is to create a society where nobody gets left behind, and right now our young boys of color are falling further and further behind than everybody."

"Many of our initiatives have been designed to make sure that that cohort doesn't fall behind," she said, referring to women of color. "So for them, we'll add encouraging girls of color to go into STEM fields. It's a big priority of ours, and that means that that begins with science and math courses, so what can we do to provide mentors to those young girls so they go into those fields."

Jarrett said the president and first lady Michelle Obama will keep working on behalf of Black boys after they leave the White House.

One of the districts that will be participating in the expansion is the Los Angeles Unified School District, where Superintendent John E. Deasy told the *Times* he was eager to share some of the tactics his district has found to be successful with other school systems.

He said his district reduced its annual suspensions from 50,000 in the 2009-2010 school year to 8,000 this past school year, with much of the credit going to a new policy eliminating "willful defiance" as a reason for suspension. Deasy said the efforts to improve academic and social outcomes for young Black and Latino men was "a deep moral commitment issue."

Other outside groups will hop on the program, including the NBA, AT&T and the Emerson Collective — founded by Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of Apple's founder Steve Jobs — to make grants and investments in education initiatives, according to the *Times*.

To increase the number of Black and Hispanic boys in Advanced Placement courses, the College Board will partner with the Council of the Great City Schools to push those students who show promise on preliminary SAT exams into AP courses.