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black students in Portland face are nicely captured in statistical form. For example, as far as graduation rates go, Portland Public Schools have the worst in the state for African-American students. Last year, Willamette Week reported that African-American students in Portland in 2012-13 faced disciplinary measures five times more often than their white counterparts, and most often the disciplinary measures were suspensions and expulsions that took students out of school. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights says black students are discplined at a rate three times those of white students.

Just recently the Oregon Department of Education ordered PPS to spend $1.5 million to correct its higher-than-normal rate of discipline of African-American special education students.

Other challenges are harder to quantify. At BPI's Parent Symposium earlier this fall, parents of black and multi-racial children gathered to share their stories and find common understanding. Many parents expressed seeing this as their first chance to connect with others who could sympathize.

Parents, mostly mothers, related on a number of concerns, from frustration with some teachers' lack of cultural understanding to other administrators' quickness to suggest medicating a child they see as disruptive.

"That's when the labeling begins," said one mother, as three others nodded in agreement. There is also the issue of role models, or the absence of those examples, in school environments. Though black students make up about 10 percent of PPS's total enrollment, they can easily go their entire academic careers without ever seeing a teacher of color at the front of their classroom, leading to a conception that the realm of education is essentially a white Anglo-Saxon Christian one. (Statewide, only 8.3 percent of teachers in Oregon are nonwhite, according to a 2013 report by the Oregon Education Investment Board.)

How it plays out is personal. Kimberly Porter, a staff member at BPI, shared her own story of false accusation. After her son went to school wearing new sneakers she had bought him for his birthday, he was accused by another student, who was white, of having stolen the shoes. That day Porter received a call from the school's office asking her to come in and produce a receipt. "I was outraged," she said. "They couldn't understand why I was mad."

Porter used her knowledge as an experienced social worker to challenge the school administrator's assumptions and exonerate herself and her son. And the experience made her want to help other parents navigate similar situations effectively. So she went to work for the Black Parent Initiative.

BPI was founded in 2006 by Johnell Bell and Charles McGee, who was only 19 at the time and fresh off a failed school board campaign. The two dreamed of giving parents of black children a network of resources to tap into during challenges like those experienced by the Porters.

"We all have the greatest aspirations for our children," says McGee, "but the questions becomes our ability to leverage resources, personal community resources, in the rearing and development of these kids."

Originally conceived as a vehicle for community organizing, BPI has evolved into a conversation with Portland's black families, moving away from the leadership development classes and tutoring they originally offered. To get a full picture of black Portland's needs, McGee and Bell hired Davis, Hibbitts and Midghall, Inc., an opinion research firm, to poll at local black churches.

"We went into these places and had honestly life-changing conversations with parents," says McGee. "We talked about hopes, dreams, aspirations, barriers."

Cynthia Traylor, a long-time supporter of BPI, told McGee, "This is all great, but I've got bills to pay. I've got craziness happening in my life. Who's helping me with that?" McGee describes that moment as a turning-point for BPI to move away from focusing on policy change to direct, in-home involvement.

"We found that before we start to go and do this activist and public policy reform stuff, we have to do deeper work within the community," said McGee. BPI's new direction was galvanized by its 2008 study (funded by the Chalkboard Project and conducted by ECONorthwest) that revealed that black students in Portland are twice as likely as white students to move and have to switch schools mid-year. Additionally they are more likely to attend schools with high teacher turnover rates.

Together We Can, BPI's intensive home-visit program, was conceived from this early grassroots research. Headed by Kimberly Porter, Together We Can primarily serves parents of very young black children and babies, these early years being most critical to a child's emotional, physical, and intellectual development. These parents are overwhelmingly young mothers disconnected from the educational system themselves.

"A lot of our families are coming in with a lot of intergenerational poverty," says Porter. "They're talking about trauma, domestic violence, limited access to resources, that could be food, that could be inadequate housing, whatever those kind of issues are." Upon receiving a referral from DHS, Porter or one of her team of three other home visitors immediately responds to the client, and sets them up with a temporary yet safe place to live. "We need those parents to be as stable, in terms of their housing," says Porter. "They need to have those basic needs met before they can really focus on reading to their child and early literacy."

Later, Together We Can reconnects the parents with the school system and eventually, the focus shifts to exploring community resources and building a support network of other parents, families, and educators. Those partnerships include organizations such as JOIN, the Breastfeeding Coalition of Oregon, and area alternative high schools, among others.

A second BPI program, Parent University, also grew from these early interviews. Run by BPI's Velynn Brown, Parent University offers classes to the general public focusing on teaching parents the skills to help their students succeed in school while strengthening cultural identity and pride at home.

"I'll never forget this mom saying, 'I grew up in a community where I had my grandmother who was there to teach me our family history and our culture and to talk to me about why things were the way they were,'" says McGee. "'And now I don't have that. So where do I go and get it?' And so truthfully when you look today at the work that we do through Parent University, it comes out of the story of how do we tell our own story in a different way, adding research and what we know works."

This fall Parent University is offering two six-week courses with sessions focusing on home life, looking at cultural identity and enhancing communication between the schools and homes.

Though Parent University and Together We Can cater to parents in different stages of stability, both operate with a focus on cultural specificity.

"Traditionally, social work and social services have come and worked with families from the viewpoint, ' We need to rehabilitate you. There's something wrong with you.' Which is always problem-focused," says Porter. "So we come from the perspective that we look for the strength, and where you come from in terms of being a person of color, and we go from that tradition. We meet you where you're at and teach you other skills."

In BPI's programs, cultural specificity may mean connecting a young black parent with an African-American therapist, instructing a white parent on caring for their biracial or black child's hair, or introducing parents to children's books with black protagonists. One series of classes covers teaching black children how to navigate instances of racism in school. BPI, for many, is the only place to access such resources.

"Honestly, I really believe that the world is at a really interesting place where people are tired of black issues," says McGee. "First of all, we're turning the page from Ferguson already. If you notice the news and everything else, we're on to the next drama. I think America does in very interesting ways sort of says to us, 'When are you gonna be OK now? You've got your black president, you got Oprah, what else do you want?'"

Most recently, BPI has increased its offerings to biracial children and black children adopted into white families as the number of biracial students enrolled in PPS has increased steadily since 2006, when the district began including "multiple specified" as a category in their enrollment demographic reporting.

In recent years, PPS has made visible efforts to improve the cultural sensitivity of its faculty and staff. Most notably has been the widely publicized Courageous Conversations. More recently, PPS implemented Restorative Justice, an approach that, according to the PPS website, emphasizes accountability rather than punitive measures that take students out of school.

But BPI fills a role not addressed in schools. "We know we have the skills to work with our people and that's what we're doing," says Porter. McGee agrees, saying, "As we began to do the work we truthfully started to respond to these parents who said, Look, here's what I need. Here's what I want to see. And we're doing it."

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Portland or even Oregon. Rather, he hails from nearly 7,000 miles away in Liberia the youngest of five children of Cecilia and Charles II, a high-ranking official in the Liberian government. To understand Charles is to understand the long complicated history of Liberia, a tiny West African nation founded in 1874 as a homeland for formerly enslaved African-Americans looking for a place where they could experience true equality.

"I am a direct descendent of those freed enslaved people who went back (to Liberia)," says McGee. "My grandmother's grandfather was one of the founding fathers of Liberia."

Instead of equality, however, Americo-Liberians, as the settlers were called, established supremacy. Over time, the hostile relationship between the Americo-Liberian elite and the native African majority finally broke out into civil war in 1989 when McGee was only a baby. As the conflict grew more and more bloody, the McGees knew it was time to leave.

They killed (my father's) boss." McGee says. "He was next in line. The war in Liberia essentially was about its indigenous people gaining power and so people like us had to leave."

McGee and his family came to the United States in 1993 with the aid of then-senator Mark O. Hatfield, and settled in Northeast Portland. Charles was only 5 years old.

As an Americo-Liberian in Africa, McGee was part of a minority, and in Portland his circumstances were no different. Except that, once in Portland, it was his skin color that marked him as one of few. But his parents never allowed an inferiority complex to take hold of him. "My parents raised us to be able to navigate life to know that you're black, to be proud of your blackness and your black skin and what it means, but to also understand that we live in a world where everyone's different and to embrace it," McGee says.

Coming from Liberia, McGee grew up personally knowing black role models in positions of power, including in his own family, and race was not a conversational taboo. "I'll never ever forget growing up in my parents' household and having conversations about blackness and about how great it is to be black and they didn't put limits on it."

For Charles, this room to explore and affirm his cultural identity translated into a career of activism and community organizing that started as soon as he entered high school. That penchant to verbalize pride in their identity heavily influences the organizational principles of the Black Parent Initiative, which operates on the principle that cultural specificity is a critical tool in empowering parents. "That story is a story and that complicated story is a story that every single day I think of," says McGee of his own cultural history. "And every single day inspires me to do the work that I do and to believe what I believe in, because it is both that complicated history that I believe that black people need to recognize and own as part of the fabric that makes us the beings that we are, but also inspires us to be greater."

McGee's passion and ambition runs in his family. His older sister Charlene was elected the president of the NAACP's Portland chapter in 2007 when she was only 24. She now travels back and forth between Portland and Liberia, raising funds and awareness for victims of the Ebola epidemic.

Though BPI and its founder are both quite young – McGee started the organization at age 19 – he came to the project with six years of community activism and organizing under his belt. By the time McGee graduated from Franklin High School in 2004, he had already built an impressive extracurricular resume that included spurring a system-wide conversation on race when, during his sophomore year, he presented to the school board a petition of more than 200 signatures calling for race sensitivity training for Portland Public School teachers. In 2005, McGee was still navigating his freshman year at Portland State University when he ran for the Zone 4 School Board seat on the platform of increased student involvement in district decision-making. Even though he didn't win, he channeled his drive to create change for Portland's underrepresented students into starting BPI with his friend and fellow activist Johnell Bell.

In many ways, BPI is McGee's way of imparting the gifts he had in youth with other black kids in Portland, giving them the cultural knowledge and pride that he believes, will be the vehicle for beginning to heal generations of trauma endured by Portland's black population and getting black Portlanders to engage differently and more fully in their home, school and work communities.

Now, married with two young children, McGee has the same passion and drive that first inspired him not that long ago. "Being a parent has made me a better person," says McGee. "It has made me more reflective. It's made me a bit more humble, I think. Parenting has made me walk slower."