

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center’s Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems.

Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Dr. Morton: Often, Black fathers are viewed as irresponsible and uninvolved in the lives of their children. Turn to the mass media, and you will hear, see, and read the master narrative of the deadbeat dad who walked out on his family or the belief that Black fathers simply do not exist. These stereotypes around Black fatherhood have far-reaching impact. Fathers, mothers, children, and hence the entire Black community are affected.

The legacy of slavery has and continues to play a major role in the dismantling of the Black family. During slavery, laws and social norms broke the bonds between Black fathers and their children. Black men were not allowed to provide for and protect their children fully. But, these fathers continued to play a vital role in their families even though white masters constantly circumscribed their power.

In addition to slavery, other historical trends such as declined employment, lack of jobs with livable wages, welfare policies that favor single mothers, and mass incarceration have led to increased single Black parent households. This, however, does not mean that Black fathers are uninvolved, irresponsible or non-existing.

The purpose of this podcast is to counter the pervasive stereotypes about Black fathers, specifically as it relates to their lack of involvement in their childrens’ education. The goals of this podcast are to discuss (1) Black fathers’ relationship with schools, (2) how Black fathers engage in K-12 schools and (3) how schools create barriers for Black fathers. For the next few minutes, you will hear from three Black men: One non-custodial father, a single father, and a father who is married to the mother of his daughter. These Black fathers are in different spaces, but they are all engaged and invested in the lives of their children. They counter the prevalent Black father stereotypes.

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We will start with a discussion around the fathers' relationship and interactions with their child's educators and how they view their roles in their child's education.

Dr. Morton: First question, if you could talk about your relationships and interactions with your child's educators.

Dr. Kazembe: Yeah. Well, um, it's a...I'm a non-custodial parent. So, mine came in the way of, I think with her, going all the way back to her preschool years, up until now...she's in sixth grade now. I've been very adamant about being present at the parent-teacher conferences, being present at like, when her school would do the curriculum night, which they'll usually do like in the maybe either slightly before, or maybe two or three weeks into a new semester, they'll invite parents and stuff to come and meet the teachers and the teachers can discuss their teaching methodologies, and share curriculum and content and stuff.

I reached out to the principals because I, and I had emailed these principals personally, separately, and I emailed them to introduce myself to tell them that, that I'm who I am, the fact that I'm in a different state, and the fact that I'm very interested and a very active parent in my daughter's life, in her school life, schooling life.

So that's been good, because they email you back and all of the- each of them has said in their own way that they, that typically, does not happen, that a parent will reach out and do that, but, that's part of my being extra diligent.

Mr. Abdullah: So, as far as the educators, the only ones that I've interacted with would be her teacher and the school principal. Obviously, we have the parent-teacher conferences, maybe three or four in a year. Usually there's one in the beginning of the year, one beginning of the, I say semester, and then one at the end of the semester. [inaudible] In the wintertime, but the same, in the Spring. The principal, the conversation usually for me is just kind of catered around the education system in that school and what their goal is, what they're trying to do, how they do testing, and what are the outcomes of the testing, things like that. That's typically the conversation I have with the school and, as far as their education, I guess.

Dr. Morton: So, what do you view as your role in your child's education?

Mr. Abdullah: I feel like I'm ... What can I say? I'm ... I'm like 50% of it. I feel like she gets it as school, but, at the same time, she's coming home, and I have to push it. So, a lot of times, things like reading in the evening, reading before going to bed, making

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sure she does her math and things like that. So, I feel like I'm 50% of her education.

Mr. Abney:

Okay, I feel personally, a horrible relationship with my daughter's teacher of record. What I run into a lot with them is, a lot of times they'll say they're going to do something and then they won't. I feel that the teachers that I have been running into, they don't care, they really don't care, it's a paycheck. They really don't care. Kelly has been in a science class and she has gotten a F every single day. She's been getting F's the whole time. Do you know the teacher never once called me and said, "hey we got a situation here"? Even though I have sent them text messages asking them "how them how's my daughter doing? Is everything ok," they don't even respond.

Dr. Morton:

Our conversation will now move to the ways in which schools facilitate a relationship with fathers in order to support their child's education.

In what ways has the school facilitated a relationship between you in order to support your child's education? Have they done anything to facilitate the relationship?

Mr. Abdullah:

Well, again, I think the teacher-parent conferences are good. Another thing that they do is they have a lot of school-related events where they encourage you to come out and be a part of it. Some of it, fundraisers for the school. One thing they do that I really like, and I bet you [inaudible] that they do reading where you sign up, and you go to that. You work it out with the school, her teacher, and then you go to the school and you pick a day or whatever and you, any book, any child-friendly book, and you read it to the entire class. And, for me, I know that was something that she really liked, and, even though it was to the entire class, it's something that she really enjoyed, and I actually ended up enjoying it, as well.

Mr. Abney:

You know what the principal should do. The principal should ... I should first off, be taken seriously. I don't feel that I am. I don't feel that I am. I feel like they look at me and they're not ... I mean, they're not even listening. They're watching my mouth move.

But they're not even listening. You know what I mean? I feel like I have no rights with them. I feel I don't have a say so. And I believe that a lot of this plays into the single mother thing. The mamas is always up to the school. The mothers is always coming up to the school and I believe they think the fathers are ignorant, dumb dumb people.

I think a lot of us are wrote off. I don't think they're listening. I don't think they're listening at all to me. If you were listening to me, things would have changed

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now. For a fact, I believe that the teachers in science and social studies, any teacher that can have a student go all, the whole year, getting all Fs, don't send home a note, don't send home a note, don't call, don't email, or nothing about this student, continuously failing? They don't need to be a teacher. They don't need to be a teacher. They really don't care. They really don't care. That's what I feel, they don't care.

I went to a meeting, to the IEP meeting, and those guys don't even show up. I done went to all Kelly's IEP meetings this year and those two teachers never showed up. So, I believe, personally, they don't take Kelly serious. They don't take me serious. I mean, you know I can't tell you about the rest of the students. You know? But I know they're not taking me serious. They're not listening. They're not listening to me at all, and I believe a lot of that is, "Oh he's a Black, he's a Black dude."

Dr. Morton:

Now let's hear what fathers have to say about the ways in which schools might better support building authentic relationships with fathers, and the community, for the good of childrens' education.

So would you say, for you to have...would maybe step one in building a relationship, a better relationship with you as a father, is to actually listen? Like really listen and hear what you're saying and to take...and to value what you're saying and to act on it? Would that be-

Mr. Abney:

Right, right, because ... you know what, Crystal, they...I never got a response from none of the teachers. One of the teachers, I looked at him and I said, I find...I told one of the teachers, I said, "You a very strange guy." Now this is me catching him in the hallway. I said, "You a very strange guy." He said, "Why?" I said, "'Cause when my daughter was talking too much in your class, you called me immediately." I said, "But when she been getting Fs, all year long in your class, you never said one thing to me about that." And he had nothing to say, Crystal. He...I think they think they think I'm dangerous. I think they feel that there's gonna be some kind of confrontation. But that's not it. I just need an answer. Give me an answer. If you cannot help my daughter...if you can't, let me know, and I will get her the help that she needs.

They don't uphold they part of the bargain. I don't think they take me serious. I don't think they take me serious. I think they think that "oh, well he just talking." I don't believe that the principal had a sit down conversation with those teachers. I don't believe...I don't think nothing I said to 'em, they acted on it. I don't believe the teacher of record said anything. They don't. I mean, I think that if you wanna have a better relationship with me, at least we could've done...me and the teachers could all have sat down. These gentlemen won't even come into the

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room and sit down with me, you know? I don't know why. They would...even though I requested it. Sent my phone number and asked them to call me. They won't call me or nothin'.

Dr. Morton: And do you think that's-

Mr. Abney: And the principal. The principal wants me to CC him into the messages. No man, I'm not ... that's not what I'm going to do. I want you, me, and these teachers to have a sit down in the office, a sit down meeting. And he won't do it.

Dr. Morton: And so what do you think is behind him not wanting to set up your right to have a meeting with your child's teachers?

Mr. Abney: I think it's a paycheck, Crystal. I think they're just there for the job. They're just there to work. They don't care.

Dr. Morton: In what ways has the school facilitated relationship between you in order to help support your child's education? So, have they done anything to facilitate the relationship?

Mr. Abdullah: I think having community activities. I mean a lot of times I feel like at kind of a disconnect between the school and the community. A lot of time, I feel like the community feel like the school really doesn't know what they going through on a day-to-day basis, as far as work and all of that. So, a lot of times, when you're given us out homework, some parents, they don't like that because they feel like I come home and I got to work on this homework, and I got to cook, and I got to do, I got to do that, but I think, if you have that communication with the community, they would see that "hey, these teachers, this principal, they're human beings just like me." And, overall, our goal is the same, and that's educating these children. I feel like that, that's especially. For me, I mean, going to community events where I got to see not just her teacher, but other teachers and some of them grades up. So, I'm like these may be her teachers in the future. And just seeing how their attitude is, and what their role is as far as what they're trying to gain out of the student, and seeing that they're not just those teachers that are saying, "Hey. I just want your child to pass this test at the end of the year, so I can get a bonus" or something. You know, that relationship, I think, is really important. And it...so.

Dr. Morton: Lastly, we will hear from fathers as they talk about experiences with Black father stereotypes, and how it has impacted them.

So I have two last questions. The first one that...as you know, you often hear and read that Black fathers don't care about education. So when you hear those types

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of statements, or when you read things where people kind of lean towards that way of thinking, how do you feel about that?

Dr. Kazembe: Um...I understand it. I mean, I understand why people are saying that kind of stuff, because, um, it- you know, you look in society, you look at the messages that we get about our people. Whether it's...whether that message is teen pregnancy, or substance abuse, incarcerated folk, or people just, you know, on the-the dregs of society, if you will, right on down to inattentive parenting. You know, we get these stereotypical messages, kind of bombarding the psyche, 25 hours a day, eight days a week.

And so, it's sad, but that's the way media works. Um, we're at war in this society, and so, anything that we do is obsessively analyzed. And so, it become very easy when you keep getting hit with these pejorative, backward, negative messages, it becomes very easy to believe it. And it's just kind of lazy, in some ways, but it becomes very easy, so I understand why people arrive at that.

But then, see, when I go to these spaces, whether it's a cookout that the school is doing, an end of year cookout, or a talent night where the students are doing you know...Ella, I mean, she has a ballet recital coming up.

Dr. Morton: Okay.

Dr. Kazembe: In May, the spring recital. When got to these things, I look around to see who's there, and I see a lot of Black fathers there. And I've interacted with many of them over the years and stuff, so, I see both sides of it. I see there are a lot of brothers who are just not, for whatever reasons, just not on...not on the ball, as they should be. There are a lot of, you know, sisters who are not. But also, like seeing...and I do see Black men who are actively involved, in fact, one of my friends back in Chicago, he's an engineer. Um, brother Torio, Toriano, and he is I mean, he just is just seriously (laughs) involved in the lives of both of his daughters. I have another good friend in Chicago who has twin daughters, I mean, I've known them since they were negative one. And they're now in college, and for 18 years of their lives, up until this present moment, my friend Bill and his wife...they have been like...I've watched them, and they have been consistent. So, to the left and right of me, as I look around and think about the Black men with children that I know, all of them are deeply involved, in varying degrees, but they're all involved in the lives of their children. And some of the men that I know are custodial, and some of the men I know are actually in the household.

Dr. Morton: Well, my last, well, last couple of question is have you experienced any stereotypes about Black fathers?

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Mr. Abdullah: Yeah. That we're absent. We're not involved in the child's life. We're not there. I'm never around. That we're, I mean, uneducated ourselves, so we can't really educate them. So, I've seen it. I've sometimes been talking to teachers or parents. They seem surprised when we show up for things, and like, again, back to the book reading, they told me, "Oh. You're the only Black father that signed up for this." You know? [inaudible]. I'm here, so.

Dr. Morton: Does it impact you in any way?

Mr. Abdullah: It pushes me to want to continue to be that impact in her life. So, as far as from an education standpoint, it really makes me push because, to me, I'm have a feeling that Black kids in general have to work twice as hard anyway. So, I'm always kind of wanting to push and, like I said, when I see those stereotypes, it just encourages me to try that much harder.

Dr. Morton: My last question for you though, and you already talked to this, but I just wanna see if there's other ones. Have you experienced stereotypes about Black fathers in general and also about Black fathers' involvements in their child's education?

Mr. Abney: Okay. Let me tell you how they do a Black father. My daughter got in trouble at school for something. I call the school...this is the kind of dude I am: when I find out something happened, I'm on my way up there.

Dr. Morton: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Mr. Abney: So, I go to the school. I got my daughter in tow. We're getting ready to get to this, we're getting ready to find out about this. I get to the door, the lady look at me and tell me on speaker, "we can't let no parents in. We can't let no parents in." See the lady already know what's going on, 'cause I done called. Now, I'm not agitated, I'm not loud or nothing. I'm on the phone with her, "hey, hold on, I'm coming up there right now. What's this situation with my daughter and this little boy calling my..." I think that's what it was, the little boy called my daughter a bitch. And her and the little boy had words, but this is the whole subject at hand.

Both of them in trouble, but only one person approached the other person. You know, he approached my daughter and called her out of her name. So I'm up at the school. I ain't mad. I ain't mad. I ain't mad and I ain't talking loud or nothing. I wanna get to the bottom of it. How my daughter in trouble for defending herself. So, I go to the door, ring the bell, the lady tell me, "you can't come in the school. You can't come in the school, the teachers are all in a meeting. And you can't come into school.

So I walk back to my car, got on the phone, call the superintendent office. I said, "hey ma'am, I just went up to this door, knocked on this door, rung the bell, they wouldn't let me into the school. She said, "what school is it?" I told her what

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school it was. She said, “them doors are supposed to be open.” So as I'm sitting there talking to the school superintendent, I tell her what's going on, guess who walks up to the door. A Black lady. A Black parent. What do you think they did to her, Crystal?

Dr. Morton: Let her in.

Mr. Abney: Let her in.

But for some reason she didn't let me in. She wouldn't let me in, but she let the mother in. Everybody that came after me got in that door. So, you know, what else can I say? I don't know. The school superintendent agreed with me. She said that sound real fishy. And they fired that lady. That lady wasn't there at that door no more. They fired that lady. So, she don't even work at the school no more.

I don't know Crystal, I think we got a little bad reputation maybe. Maybe a fear of us.

Dr. Morton: The brief narratives you heard from fathers during this podcast push back against the myth of the deadbeat or non-existent Black father. The voices of these fathers are in no way speaking on behalf of every Black father in the world. They represent a sample from a larger population of Black fathers who are actively involved in the lives of their children, despite systemic and institutional barriers that seek to hinder and erase their involvement—and even their very existence.

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Collateral Consequences: Hindering the Engagement of Black Fathers in K-12 Educational Settings



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