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Series of meetings highlights plight of black boys

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Until recently, when people asked Carlos Thompson whether he was going to college after this school year ended, his answer was always "No."

DeWarren Langley prompted the teen with the same question, then decided to help him change the answer.

Langley, a recent college grad, met Carlos on a recent visit to Southern High School. The two started talking and Langley pondered whether he could help the 17-year-old aim higher.

Thompson had always planned to go straight into the work force with a high-school diploma. He wasn't sure he could manage or afford a higher education -- no one in his family has.

But through an informal mentorship with Langley, Carlos has polished his resume, gotten a cashier job at a grocery store, met local politicians and started applying to college.

"He's helped me with math, he's helped my writing skills," Carlos said. "He's helped the way I look at things."

The two shared their story at a community meeting last week of the Durham Public Schools, a conversation about supporting African-American males.

In Durham, and so many other communities, black boys score lower on state tests than their white peers. They are more frequently suspended and drop out of school at higher rates than their peers in other ethnic groups.

A study released last week by the Durham County Health Department also found that of more than 900 middle- and high-schoolers, black students reported fewer visits to doctors and dentists, poorer eating and exercise habits, higher incidents of fighting, being depressed and smoking marijuana than peers in other ethnic groups.

Among the ideas shared by the more than 100 educators, community leaders, parents and students who attended the meeting, mentoring was an idea many latched onto. As in other community meetings the schools have held, the ideas were documented and will be presented in a report to school administrators, who will use concerns and feedback as guidelines for decisions on programs and other interventions.

"As we talk about the decisions we have to make, these are things that are on our minds," said school board member Steve Martin.

Students need to be exposed to new opportunities and have higher expectations for themselves, participants also said.

Langley, now a mentor, said the mentorship he received when younger helped him seek bigger accomplishments than others may have expected of him.



Southern High senior Carlos Thompson, 17, runs the cash register at the Lowe's Foods in East Durham as Janelle Harrison looks on.

Staff Photo by John Rottet

He grew up in the West End neighborhood, he said, surrounded by dysfunction, drugs and kids who skipped school. Like Carlos, he had a single mom who spent much of her time working.

He left Durham to pursue an undergraduate degree and has returned to attend law school at N.C. Central University this fall.

"I truly believe that everyone is born with a hope and aspiration for greatness," Langley said. "Yet the key to keep that individual on the path is to make sure that person has the tools to reach that goal."

Langley, 23, said he has explained to Carlos that he can point the teen in the right direction, but can't do the work for him.

"That sense of responsibility is what's important," Langley said. "Letting that person know they're ultimately responsible for the outcomes of their life."

Langley hopes that while the schools discussion focused on the large, daunting idea of helping all African-American males reach great heights, individuals will be propelled to just help one child.

"I think the schools had the right mindset, but it's got to be more than just the responsibility of the schools," Langley said. "If you see a piece of paper on the ground, don't hold a community meeting to discuss the paper being on the ground. Pick the paper up. Maybe someone will see you and it will inspire them to do the same thing."

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