



CITY OF KNOXVILLE  
MADELINE ROGERO, MAYOR

Problems and Their Solutions  
Generated by the Sons Summit



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

SOCIAL WORK OFFICE OF  
RESEARCH & PUBLIC SERVICE

# ***Problems and Their Solutions Generated by the Sons Summit***

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## The University of Tennessee, Knoxville College of Social Work Office of Research and Public Service

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## Introduction

On June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 150 boys and young men of color (B&YMOC) came together for some frank conversations about the realities of their lives. They talked about barriers at school, dangers in their communities, problems at home, and frustrations with the news. But rather than just complain, the B&YMOC also talked about what they need to overcome these barriers. They brainstormed solutions and gave their perspective on just what it will take to help them succeed. The conversations were the second summit held in conjunction with Knoxville's Save Our Sons initiative, spearheaded by Mayor Madeline Rogero. The initiative builds on the work of the Cities United and My Brother's Keeper programs, seeking to overcome barriers to education and employment, and reduce the violence plaguing B&YMOC in Knoxville.

The Sons Summit was organized by several Knoxville youth who themselves face the very same issues as Summit participants. They were responsible for planning, marketing and facilitating the Summit, and its success is a credit to their hard work and skills.

The Sons Summit brought together B&YMOC age 10-18 from across Knoxville. The B&YMOC participated in small focus groups facilitated by young men from their communities. The conversations began by having the B&YMOC identify what is making them mad or frustrating them in their schools, in their communities, in other communities or the media, and finally in their homes. Each table shared their top three issues with the large group. The small groups then reconvened to discuss solutions to the issues, which they also shared with the large group. After the Summit, the facilitators debriefed their experiences, clarifying and expanding on some of the points raised by the Summit participants.

Several of the participants' parents chose to wait for their sons while they participated in the Summit. Organizers took this opportunity to conduct a focus group with these parents to discuss the same topics: what barriers they saw to success in the school, community, media, and home, and what solutions they believed could address them. The parents' contributions appear at the end of each section (Problems and Solutions) of the report.

## PROBLEMS

When discussing their frustrations, the participants of the Sons Summit felt disrespected, stereotyped, and trapped. Throughout the conversations, regardless of the life domain discussed, these themes appeared again and again when the young men discussed their experiences.

### School

When the young men discussed what made them mad at school, they described a lack of understanding and respect from the teachers and administrators. Several conversations touched on the teachers' lack of cultural competence and unwillingness to get to know their students. Many brought up the fact that most of their teachers are older white women to whom the young men did not feel they could relate. They stated that the teachers did not make an effort to get to know the students, their families or their family circumstances. They do not try to connect with their students.

The young men also discussed experiences with teachers making racial remarks, bullying students, and creating a power struggle between the students and teachers. Some young men felt teachers assumed they were ignorant and accused them of cheating when they got a correct answer. Some reported

taking concerns to administrators at their schools but being ignored. They felt that either the principals were on the teacher's side, or the principals' hands were tied because there was nothing they could do about a disrespectful teacher.

The lack of respect was also felt between the students. The young men discussed the poor treatment girls and women received at their schools. They saw girls and women being called names and being touched inappropriately. They saw students making fun of others because of their appearance or because they did not have the newest clothes. While one participant said, "I don't care what I have on as long as I get my education," he believed few of his classmates felt the same. Summit participants also saw students making fun of those with disabilities. They saw the "labeling for life" that happens when adults return from prison mirrored in the schools when students returned from juvenile detention.

## Community

When students left school, they felt unsafe walking home. Some reported issues with drug addicts or homeless individuals hassling them or asking them for money every day as they walked to and from school. Participants also expressed distrust of the police in their communities. Some participants reported that when they were in a racially mixed group of students, police and other authority figures singled out the African Americans as responsible for any disturbances or infractions.

The young men felt that there was a lack of community cohesion in their neighborhoods. There are no community centers or community events to bring everyone together. Additionally, their neighborhoods have a lot of abandoned or empty buildings that are in disrepair. As the facilitators elaborated, the B&YMOC see other neighborhoods that are maintained and well cared for, and they see the difference between those neighborhoods and their own.

The Summit participants said they felt isolated and trapped in their neighborhoods. They said they were pushed into living in their communities and now that they are there, they cannot escape. There are few jobs in their communities and virtually none for 14-15 year olds. When they do find an employer willing to hire a high school student, the position requires experience. There are no restaurants in their communities, only fast food establishments, and few stores. Knoxville Center Mall was once a viable employer, but stores are leaving that location. The only jobs the young men know of are in West Knoxville. Unfortunately, they don't have a way to get to them – the buses don't run very far into the county.

## Home

The lack of viable employment opportunities left the young men feeling like there were few options available to them. Several reported getting mixed messages from those who were supposed to be role models in their lives. They were told to go to school and get good grades, get an honest job and work hard by people, including family members, who were selling drugs or involved in other illegal activities. The young men reported seeing the drugs and money frequently, even being brought on drug runs, sometimes without their knowledge. They felt it was all but impossible to resist the lure of that lifestyle when it surrounds them. The young men reported that the expectation of their families is that at 14 and 15 years of age they would work to help support the family. As one participant noted "Mom wants me to be a super hero."

Role models preaching "do as I say, not as I do" were just one in a long line of people failing to support the young men in the Summit. The B&YMOC at several tables stated they needed role models and

mentors to give them guidance during difficult decision points in their lives. Several participants reported that, even though their family members try to encourage and support them, they are not present in their lives because they have to work. The young men were left alone, sometimes to act as the parent for their younger siblings. When the children tried to bring up concerns with their parents, they did not feel that anyone knew how to deal with the conflict in a healthy manner. One group of 10 and 12 year olds discussed living in a single parent family and having too many responsibilities placed on them. Their parent did not know what constituted an appropriate level of responsibility for a child, and the sons did not know how to cope with the role in which they were placed.

### Media

When the conversations turned to things happening in other communities or on the news, some participants brought up specific events that made national headlines, but many more touched on the media's portrayal of people of color in general. The young men said when African Americans were portrayed in the media, they were depicted negatively. They were shown lacking healthy conflict resolution skills. In general they felt that the news focused on the negatives and rarely shared positive stories of people coming together or good things happening in their communities. This was felt at both the national and local levels. One facilitator noted that if someone from Austin East High School was shot, the reporter always said where he went to school. That was not the case if the student was from Farragut High School or Bearden High School, schools which a Summit participant felt actually have more drug issues than Austin East. Both the Summit participants and the facilitators felt that, even though staff and students at Austin East have worked hard to turn the school around, the media continues to perpetuate the image of a rough school with gang violence and drug problems.

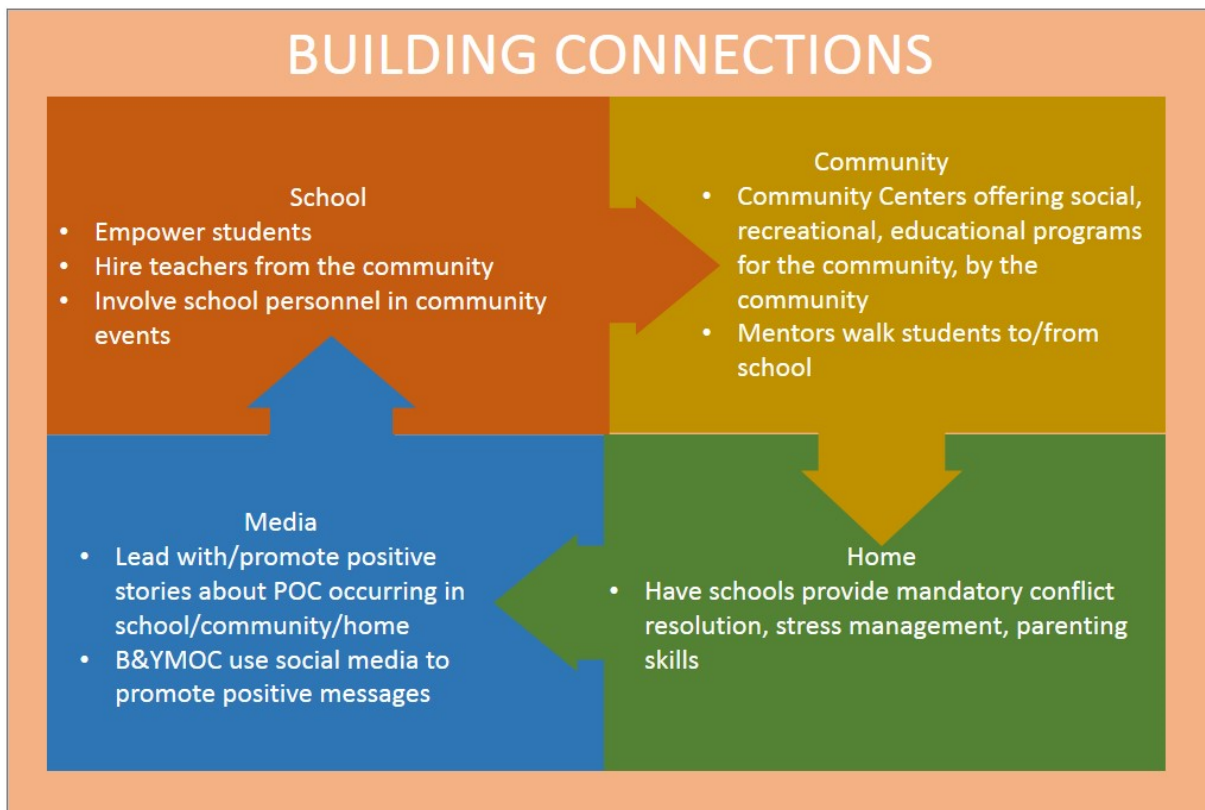
### Parents' Concerns

During the impromptu Parents' Discussion that occurred while the Son's Summit was taking place, several of the same themes were identified. The conversation centered on issues at school and in the community. Parents noted a lack of connection between teachers and students. Several felt that changes in zoning regulations had resulted in the closing of neighborhood schools and had forced children to attend "the wrong schools." Additionally, parents felt that the teachers at their schools did not want to be there. Several reported the belief that the administration "punishes teachers by putting them at Austin East."

Participants in the Parents' Discussion were also concerned about the lack of options within the schools, namely that there are not enough art or music classes. One parent believed that only 10-12% of kids have had an art class. They felt this left their children with no opportunities for expression. They also said schools have cut gym class because "it is frowned upon for a young black man to just run around."

Parents felt that there is "no more sense of community" and "no sense of pride." Parents found it hard to take pride in their neighborhood when it does not take pride in itself. Parents felt that no one in the community had a sense of responsibility for the community, pointing out that very few people attended community meetings.

## SOLUTIONS



After identifying the main issues they were facing, the B&YMOC participating in the Sons Summit were able to express exactly how they wanted to help address the problems they identified. At table after table, across the conversations and topics, the young men talked about creating connections. They want to build bridges within and across the groups identified in the conversations: bring the school staff into the community, involve parents in the school, develop the sense of community in the neighborhoods, and get the media and the young men themselves talking about all the positive things happening.

### Schools

The first thing the B&YMOC wanted was a sense of empowerment within their schools. Connections cannot be forged if one side perpetually felt like they lack a voice. They suggested a method of reporting disrespectful or bullying teachers to an authority outside of the school, possibly to someone within the Central Office or School Board. Additionally, they wanted a say in teacher evaluations; they proposed something akin to the end of course evaluations colleges and universities use, but with more weight behind it. Then, to develop the sense of community within the schools, the young men stressed the importance of hiring new teachers who looked like them – young men of color who have a better understanding of the lives of their students and can act as role models and mentors. For those teachers already working in the schools, the young men felt cultural competence training was vital. However, they wanted it to go beyond just providing information or hoping for connections because of a shared

history. Several conversations mentioned inviting school personnel to community events. The B&YMOC stressed the importance of having social events, rather than educational events. They wanted to provide an opportunity for teachers, students, and their families to get to know each other in a different context.

### Community

Within their neighborhoods, the B&YMOC wanted to see more community centers; they called for places where they could have social events, attend afterschool programs and classes, learn skills and develop healthy outlets. Playgrounds and athletic fields were seen as necessary to prevent B&YMOC from getting involved in drugs and gangs: "Having an outlet such as basketball prevents me from doing drugs." "This is good and needed. This is keeping me from doing something wrong." Block parties and events held during the daytime were other opportunities for developing connections the young men identified.

Beyond athletic outlets, the B&YMOC felt community centers could offer educational programs for students and community members, led by community members. They talked generally about afterschool programming, but specifically wanted job training and employment skills, identifying music production as a desirable topic. However, beyond that they wanted to develop employment skills such as networking and an understanding of workforce expectations. Teaching the B&YMOC the skills necessary to start a business could have a ripple effect of encouraging economic development in and by the community.

Educational and networking opportunities for young fathers was a specific need the Summit participants identified that the Community Center could meet for community members. Offering programs for community members and having programs led by community members was identified as crucial to building community investment. Additionally, the participants felt the community centers could play a role in assisting those with felony records reintegrate into their communities.

To address the safety concerns the students had about walking to and from school, one group suggested that mentors could escort students on these commutes. The facilitators went further in the debrief and suggested that the mentors could discuss issues the students were facing, while modeling ways for the student to handle the drug addicts they encounter. Perhaps the presence of the mentor alone would be sufficient to shield the student from some of the unwanted attention.

### Home

The desire for healthy conflict resolution skills was discussed by participants. Additionally, stress management and parenting skills were identified as needs. The 10 and 12 year olds coming from single parent families mentioned that they thought having mandatory family counseling through the schools could address these issues. The counselors could work with the family on identifying needs and providing skills. Making the counseling mandatory for all families would help remove the stigma and would be a step toward ensuring everyone who needs the services receives them. Additionally, having the counseling at the school creates another connection between the school and the family.

### Media

The sons noted that all of the solutions they were discussing should appear on the local news. These were events that should be promoted and celebrated. News programs should lead with these positive



stories rather than with the negative stories that lead off currently. Additionally, the B&YMOC took some personal responsibility for promoting positive stories. They realized they could use social media to share positive messages among their peers. They took it upon themselves to change the tone of their posts.

### Parents' Solutions

Several of the ideas generated during the Parents' Discussion were the same as those shared by Summit participants. To overcome the issues identified in the schools, parents stressed the importance of cultural competency training for teachers. They also felt that having teachers live in the communities they serve could break down barriers.

While parents felt that schools should encourage academics, they also felt that the schools could support students by offering job training, citing the traditional trade school model. This notion of job training was not just limited to the schools, but was also something parents felt the communities should invest in. When communities identify their own resources, they can invest in them.

### Conclusion

The participants of the Sons Summit are keenly aware of the obstacles they face. They also have a clear picture of what needs to happen to help them overcome those obstacles. They yearn for connections within their own circles, but also across groups that have not been coming together recently, despite common goals. They want opportunities for disparate groups to learn about each other and discover commonalities. They want to break down barriers and create relationships. They just need the adults to support them.