Preface

A friend and colleague asked me the following question: "If I brought a 70-year-old illiterate man to you, could you teach him to read?" My answer was "yes," for I had taught reading to beginning readers. He asked me the same question referring to a 40-year-old man, and my response was "yes," again. He asked me the same question a third time pertaining to a teenager, and I said, "Yes, of course." My colleague's final question was, "Then why can't our African American males read in our public schools?" I did not have a response, but I did a lot of thinking about that question, and I continue to do so. As we introduce this edited volume dedicated to African American males, we encourage the readers to ask themselves the same question. Why are African American males not succeeding academically in schools?

The crisis of African American male lack of educational achievement has become such an important topic that in the year 2000, the U.S. Department of Education had cause to sponsor a conference specifically dedicated to this topic. As a researcher, one cannot help but wonder, If this topic is such a crisis for adults, are young African American males themselves aware of the odds against their succeeding academically in our schools today? More specifically, what is going on in the minds of African American male students who are not succeeding in school? At what point in their young academic lives do they realize that because of sociological, psychological, educational, and environmental factors that count against them, they are really not supposed to be successful in the classroom?

Does this begin in September when the summer ends, the weather begins to change, and around Labor Day, the theme for school-aged children is "back to school?" For families of all school-aged children, there is much anticipation about the upcoming new school year. During the back-to-school period, television, newspaper, magazine, and radio commercials flood the public with pictures of smiling school-aged

students clad in new uniforms, carrying new books, and eager and ready to learn. But then, as many of us know, television commercials often have a way of not reaching an entire audience.

If one attempted to paint a realistic picture of the back-to-school period, one would realize that not all school-aged children are always excited about returning to school. Some students are returning to school after having been retained in grade. Some are returning to school after having numerous suspensions during the previous school year, and they wonder what, if anything, will change during the upcoming school year to make school a more enjoyable experience. Others are returning to school ill-equipped to succeed behaviorally, academically, economically, culturally, or socially, and therefore it is only a matter of time before these students join the nation's population of dropouts.

This makes one wonder, What is taking place in the minds of students who are not succeeding in school? How many of them are actually dreading attending school in the fall? When do students begin to associate school with negative feelings, and can some of these negative experiences and feelings be erased or improved?

One might also ask, Do these feelings begin to accumulate in the spring time? During the spring season, we once again see signs of hope in the natural environment. The trees begin to grow leaves, the grass begins to turn green, April showers begin to produce May flowers, the days grow longer and the nights are shorter, and the days are also warmer. The advent of the spring also signifies the beginning of testing season in many schools, and this can also be a traumatic time for students facing academic achievement challenges. This is the case not only for standardized tests but also for school-based tests that eventually determine whether or not students will be promoted to the next grade. One cannot help but wonder what takes place in the minds of young African American male students who are struggling to find answers to questions that they might not even understand. This reflects not only questions in the classroom but also questions about life, role models, presence of positive males, the relationship between academic achievement and masculinity or race, constructive outlets for displaying frustration, joy, sorrow, misunderstanding, and pain. The authors of the various chapters in this volume attempt to address many of these issues individually and uniquely.

The chapters in this edited volume are rich and informative scholarly insights into many of the obstacles that adjust the expectations, standards, and goals of academic achievement for African

American males. They attempt to provide insight about cultural, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive struggles faced by the academic community at large. The work, however, does not end here. In fact, the work has just begun. One of the next steps for people in higher education is to begin to create infrastructures in the educational community that will continue the important work in this area and to stay in constant communication with practitioners, fellow researchers, legislators, and policy makers.

The chapters in this volume approach this serious issue from various perspectives, suggesting improvements in different aspects of the educational process. Edmund W. Gordon's foreword makes the case that the existing literature about African American males must be added to, including areas that pertain to education and schooling. Rather than show African American males as a lost cause, he asks that we begin to investigate different ways that we as a community of educators and researchers can come together and explore better ways to improve the educational achievement, attainment, and experiences of African American males.

Robert Cooper and Will Jordan address this issue by discussing sociological aspects of the classroom, such as the racial and gender interactions between students and teachers, the shortage of African American male teachers in public schools, and appreciation of the talents of African American males.

Fashola's chapter presents alternative ways of intervening in the lives of young African American males by providing them with opportunities for mentorship, positive enrichment experiences, academic enrichment and achievement, and positive peer interaction during the nonschool hours. She presents four programs that have successfully addressed the academic needs of African American male students during nonschool hours and also addresses community-based programs that have either had success with or show future promise working with African American males during the hours when they are not in school and not under the direct supervision of their parents or families.

Pedro Noguera's chapter addresses the issue by discussing the socioemotional, family/community support services, and the needs of the students.

Ronald Ferguson approaches this topic by specifically exploring teachers' interactions with students and paying close attention to their perceptions, expectations, and interactions with students. He addresses how these influence students' beliefs, behaviors, work habits, and ultimately, academic achievement.

James Davis addresses this issue by examining forces sometimes beyond the classroom. He specifically addresses the developmental and socioemotional aspects of gender definition—how these factors may contribute to the development of African American males and how they manifest themselves in educational settings.

Melissa Roderick presents an intricate study of four young African American males who aspired to succeed and tells their stories using case studies and interviews. She presents students with aspirations of success in the beginning of the school year who slowly but surely, as a result of loopholes in the school system, their communities, and sometimes society at large, are faced with the tough task of deferring their dreams of academic success.

Dena Swanson, Michael Cunningham, and Margaret Spencer also present societal and familial impacts on the education of African American males. They show how some males struggle to define themselves as young scholars, sometimes having to juggle academic achievement with masculinity and sometimes having to select one of the two in order to be successful. They also discuss the challenges that males are faced with when they choose to be scholars in terms of having strong survival mechanisms in and out of the classroom.

Jomills Braddock's chapter addresses the benefits and challenges of African American males participating in athletic events in school, and the extent to which this seems to enhance some students' academic performance, but not others.

Altogether, the various chapters in this edited volume are the proceedings from the conference on African American males presented at Howard University. The conference was cosponsored by Howard University and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The conference took place under the guidance of Dr. Kent McGuire and Ms. Sandra Steed, who also served as the main conference coordinator. As readers will note, the answers to many questions posed about the educational achievement of African American males are diverse. All the chapters in this volume are unique in their approaches, yet they all send a similar message: quality instruction, high expectations, and advocacy for the students. This is the first, and hopefully not the last, edited volume dedicated to the education of African American males.