



DREAM BIG

Centering Black Parent Wisdom in Designing
Culturally Affirming and Liberatory Toolkits

vow

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Village of Wisdom's mission is to liberate and protect the intellectual curiosity and positive racial identity of Black learners (Black Genius®). We do this by amplifying the cultural strengths of Black families and creating the conditions for Black parents to co-design culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments in and outside the classroom.

DREAM BIG: CENTERING BLACK PARENT WISDOM IN DESIGNING CULTURALLY AFFIRMING AND LIBERATORY TOOLKITS

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Village of Wisdom may use terms in this report that some people may not relate to or find difficult to access. You may find these terms linked together or separately. To guide our readers, we share a few definitions of the terms we use in the report. We call this, **What do we mean when we say...**

Black Genius - A way to see the existence of Blackness and Black learners through the creation of new systems of equity and justice and or moments of liberation. It is also the ability to dismantle and resist systems of oppression and injustice.

Black Genius Framework - A group of six elements that Black parents identified as essential to the healthy development of Black learner's intellectual curiosity and racial identity. A framework that provides a conceptual grounding for what Village of Wisdom defines as a culturally affirming learning environment. Learn more in the [Black Genius Black paper](#).

Black Parent Designers - A cohort of Black Parent leaders who are equipped to engage in design justice principles and user-centered design to build and test tools that create culturally affirming and liberatory learning strategies, practice, and environments.

Black Parent Researchers - A cohort of Black Parent leaders who are equipped to use participatory methods such as focus groups and interviews to explore and validate frameworks, tools, and strategies needed to build culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments.

Culturally Affirming Learning Environment - A space or place that affirms the diverse cultural identities and realities of Black learners.

Dreams Assessment - A Village of Wisdom community-driven and context-adapted assessment model that identifies the dreams of Black parents, educators, and youth within the Black Genius Framework and outlines the steps used to translate dreams into culturally affirming and equity-based policies and practices. Learn more in the [Dreams Assessment report](#).

Keep Dreaming Toolkit - A resource tool with five broad strategies and more than 11 Black parent-designed and validated practices grounded in the Black Genius Framework and designed to promote culturally affirming learning in at-home and school learning environments. Download the Toolkit [here](#).

Liberatory Learning Environment - A space or place that liberates Black learners from systems of oppression and those that diminish their sense of self, their well-being, and full humanity.



KEEP DREAMING

DON'T STOP NOW, KEEP DREAMING

DON'T STOP NOW, KEEP DREAMING—ANDERSON PAAK, THE DREAMER

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the far too many COVID-19 related deaths of Black people and the deeply entrenched virus of racism, rocked the core of Village of Wisdom (VOW) and the Black families and communities VOW served. The effects of racism and COVID-19 on Black families in 2020 necessitated a community-driven approach that would inspire Black families and parents to dream. VOW would ask itself, what does it mean to respond to the dreams of Black families? What does it mean to center Black parent wisdom in designing the tools needed to see those dreams manifest in this world? At the end of 2020, VOW was ready to answer those questions. The organization had just concluded the first Dreams Assessment and was beginning to share findings with school leaders and educators. The Dreams Assessment concluded with the first cohort of VOW Black Parent Researchers sharing findings with a group of Black homeschoolers and traditional school parents. The Black homeschoolers and traditional school parents would later become members of a design team, Black Parent Designers in VOW.

The transition into the new year began the design process, and the Black Parent Designers began identifying, testing, and curating at-home instructional and parenting strategies into what would be toolkits. The goal of creating these strategies remained embedded in the idea that Black learners deserve the right to exist in culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments. The best people positioned to know how to build those environments would be Black parents. The toolkits would include the instructional and parenting strategies needed to manifest the dream "of Black [children] being able to realize and actualize their brilliance, unique gifts, and talents... and see their Blackness represented positively and in affirming ways" (p. 19, Barrie et al., 2021). By the summer of 2021, the coined term for the toolkits, the Keep Dreaming Toolkit, led to a prototype that would tap into the interests of Black children, and the strategies would allow others to see children as subject-matter experts. The strategies provided ways to connect Black children to Blackness. The uptake of strategies in the toolkits would allow others to build culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments at home and in school. No one could have predicted that the official release of the Keep Dreaming Toolkit for parents in the fall of 2021 and the release for educators at the height of the new year in 2022 would bring the toolkits into the hands of more than 14,000 people.

Truly the spirit of "don't stop now and keep dreaming" is a testament to centering Black parent wisdom and dream manifestation. This document narrates the development and validation of the Keep Dreaming Toolkit for parents and educators. Black Parent Designers translated cultural wisdom, instructional and parenting knowledge, and practices into culturally affirming and liberatory strategies. This document tells the story of centering Black parent wisdom and the continued need to #KeepDreaming in a world that tells Black learners otherwise.

DREAMING AMID NIGHTMARES

AIN'T THIS WHAT THEY'VE BEEN WAITIN' FOR?...

I USED TO PRAY FOR TIMES LIKE THIS—MEEK MILL, DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

The shift from in-person to online learning in 2020 may have offered temporary relief from the often hostile environment of schools Black families encounter in the U.S. (Allen-White-Smith, 2018; Bell, 2020; Marchand et al., 2019). When schools decided to move to online learning, some Black parents removed their children from school completely and resorted to homeschooling.

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It was estimated that in the spring of 2020, about 3.3% of Black families' households were homeschooling, and by the fall of 2020, that number increased to 16.1% (Reilley, 2022). Some Black parents felt a sense of relief; at home, their children would experience less harm from peer bullying and worry less about daily and often negative racial school interactions (Abramson, 2021; Barrie et al., 2021). Unfortunately, feeling a sense of relief and rest from racism is short-lived for Black families in this country.

2020 exacerbated racial stressors for many Black families. The devastating impact of COVID-19 and the compounding effects of racial trauma took their toll on the dream potential of Black families. 2020 was a year when the repetitive patterns of Black people dying from the pandemic, or from the hands of law enforcement and white vigilantism disrupted the fabric of this nation and the well-being of Black families (Horsford et al., 2021). And, yet again, Black children were being tasked to learn now online amid racial trauma. There is very little doubt that the U.S. education system was asking Black children to swallow symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress to attend and be present in online instruction (Anderson, Heard-Garris, & Delapp, 2022). Black parents who kept their children enrolled in U.S. schools were daily observers and evaluators of peer interactions and teacher instruction. The online environment allowed Black parents to witness first-hand racially disruptive and traumatic events (Horsford et al., 2021). Between 2020 and 2021, several incidents came forward in the media telling the story of Black children encountering negative racial rants, slurs, and other anti-Black messages online (Cornwall & Glass, 2020; Salcedo, 2021). Whether online or in person, Black families and children still dealt with hostile teachers and school personnel. 2020 necessitated Black families and children to dream amid a double pandemic. They were waiting for solutions that affirmed their Blackness and humanity.

Black parents are the first educators of Black children and they are experts in cultural knowledge (Henderson & Redding, 2011; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Tapping into this expertise, this knowledge becomes a vital exercise in tapping into the dream potential of Black parents and letting them drive the solutions needed to build environments that affirm them and their children. Thus, when Village of Wisdom convened Black homeschoolers and traditional school parents in sessions to dream and exercise their dream potential, VOW responded to Black families. These Black parents in VOW would become designers and identify, test, and curate the healing and affirming strategies needed to promote well-being among Black families and children. The inception and creation of Toolkits that would buffer racism and promote the full humanity of Black children is, quite possibly, what Black families were waiting for and even prayed for.

TOOL DREAMIN' AND VALIDATION

YOU MAKE ME SEE THE TRUTH IN THINGS.

I THINK THAT YOU ARE THE REMEDY FOR EVERYTHING—JHENE AIKO, BLUE DREAM

What happens when you begin asking Black parents, "Tell me about your dreams, aspirations, and hopes for Black children"? There may be a subtle pause, a cautious restraint, and then an outpour of Black parents ready and willing to articulate to anyone the dreams they envision for their children. When VOW conducted the Dreams Assessment in 2020 and asked teachers, Black youth, and parents what dreams they hold for Black learners, most, if not all, talked about Black children being in learning environments that affirm Blackness and their unique gifts. As one parent expressed in the report:

..I want my son to be successful...recognize that just because he is [Black], that he has the same opportunities as everybody else...But I want him to understand that you know you can do anything you wanna do..." (Barrie et al., 2021, pg. 19).

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The Dreams Assessment report overwhelmingly revealed the dream to have Black children learn in culturally affirming and liberatory environments. Culturally affirming learning environments are spaces where Black children see individuals representing their diverse hues, expressions, and geographic and linguistic identities. Culturally liberatory spaces nurture the curiosities and interests of Black children, they challenge them to embrace setbacks, trust adults and peers and discover cultures beyond white Anglo-Saxon norms (Scott & Purdum-Cassidy, 2016). Culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments affirm and value the diverse expressions, myriad identities, learning modalities, and differences of Black children (Majors & Jackson, 2021). It sometimes seems challenging for Black parents to dream of culturally affirming and liberatory learning environments for their children amid racism and a system that kills their dream potential.

VOW aimed to activate the dream potential of Black families. Using findings from the Dreams Assessment and the call from teachers, parents, and Black youth, VOW convened Black homeschoolers and traditional school parents in user-centered design. The remedy and balm needed were evident in an invited group of Black parents who would later see themselves as Designers and who would identify, test, and curate instructional and parenting strategies. The Black Parent Designers challenged the “matrix of domination” by bringing in their parent wisdom and informing design decision challenges (Constanza-Shock, 2020). These Black Parent Designers would co-create toolkits that amplify and celebrate Black parent wisdom. Thus, when parents and educators use the strategies in the Keep Dreaming Toolkit, Black children would “know that they are valued and welcome no matter where they are but exactly as they are” (p. 20, Barrie et al., 2021).

WHO WERE THESE BLACK PARENT DESIGNERS?

In 2020, a call went forward to Black parents from VOW’s Family Learning Villages and networks to engage in a user-centered design experience. Four Black homeschoolers joined the Parent Design Team; these parents were three Black women-identified mothers and one Black man-identified father. Three additional traditional school parents joined the team; two were former VOW Black Parent Researchers and one parent had attended VOW programming for the past three years. The largely Black-identified women team represented diverse backgrounds and geographic origins. One parent was born in Haiti, one could speak three languages, and another had more than two decades of teaching homeschool.

WHAT DID THESE BLACK PARENT DESIGNERS DO?

The Black Parent Designers committed to more than 32 hours of design work across three months. The first session invited Parent Designers to retrieve self-memories of when they were affirmed, and valued by others. The Parent Designers were asked to connect these early memories to a vision for Black children today and into the future. Parent Designers were posed with a question, how might we define and design a holistic approach that affirms and protects Black Genius? The subsequent sessions allowed the Parent Designers to ideate around numerous instructional and parenting strategies they either use or believe would support Black learners at home and in school. The Parent Designers, with the support of facilitators, created a shared vision around the use of the Toolkit and populated strategies to bring that vision to life. As a result, the Parent Designers identified 24 unique strategies under five broad themes.

- Exploding Boundaries and Creative Expressions
- Making Space and Dialogic Interrogation
- Mindfulness and Gratitude
- Affirming Identity and Children as Experts
- Somatic Learning

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Black Parent Designers were involved in the design decision-making process. A prototype of the Toolkit included the 24 strategies. Parent Designers were tasked with testing the strategies and gathering evidence over 30 days. Parent Designers were informed to share their reflections, and observations and bring forward questions. Additionally, Parent Designers were invited to rank, on a scale of 1 = least effective to 5 = most effective, each strategy. Testing by the Parent Designers led to the further distillation of the strategies. Some of the Black Parent Designers sat in spaces early during the prototype phase with Black educators; these educators were convened to try and test out some of the strategies and offer feedback. Feedback gathered from Black Parent Designers and educators contributed to the further refinement of the strategies and aesthetics of the Toolkit. The feedback allowed the facilitators to distill the 24 strategies into 15. Village of Wisdom also engaged staff in a review of the themes and strategies. The renaming of the five broad themes included:

- Woosah, Chile (Mindfulness and Gratitude)
- Just Move or Break Free (Somatic Learning)
- Talk to Me or Let's Talk (Making Space and Dialogic Interrogation)
- Our Story (Exploding Boundaries and Creative Expressions)
- You Matter (Affirming Identity and Children as Experts)

TOOLKIT TESTING AND VALIDATION

The strategies in the Toolkit went through a testing and validation stage. Black parents and caregivers across Durham, Wake, and New Hanover counties in North Carolina participated in a 5-week sprint. The sprint, designed to move participants through an intense, quick, and deep dive experience, convened eleven Black parents and caregivers to test the Toolkit strategies in their homes and to offer feedback about aesthetics and structure. The familial structure of the Parent Users ranged from single-parent, two-parent, and caregiver (e.g., grandparent) households and their children ranged in age from 2 to 15 years of age. The sprint occurred from June to August 2021. A baseline survey was administered to the Parent Users to assess where they go to get resources, and practices to affirm the racial identity of their children, stress reduction, and emotional regulation. All Parent Users completed a mid-sprint and post-sprint survey to determine any knowledge gained from the Toolkit and insights during the 5-week sprint experience. Five Black parents who had served as Researchers and Designers were the primary facilitators of the focus groups across the 5-week sprint.

Each week, Parent Users received an introduction to the strategy and were invited to try 2-3 practices underneath each strategy. For example, Woosah Chile is a mindfulness strategy designed to build self-awareness and support young people with stress-reduction and mind-focused practices. Two practices under the Woosah Chile, the use of LoFi sounds during study time and the creation of an individualized music playlist incorporate music as a source of stress reduction and mood regulation. The Woosah Chile strategy was mostly aligned with tapping into the **Black Genius element of Interest Awareness**. Parent Users were also invited to share any new learnings or practices they modified or used. One particular new learning that emerged from the 5-week sprint was the use of mindfulness eating. One parent talked about how they used dinner time in their house to invite their children to talk about the smells and tastes in the food. Surveys administered to Parent Users suggest all Parent Users increased their awareness of the strategies in the Toolkit; however, Parent Users demonstrated the highest increase in "I have an awareness of what my child(ren) rely on to relieve stress". Parent Users valued the presence of the Black Parent Researchers and Designers as reflective partners. Survey findings also reveal that most Parent Users indicated strategies in the Toolkit allowed them to focus on socioemotional development and improve the parent-child relationship.

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ONE QUOTE GATHERED FROM A PARENT USER:

..the relationship building was the most powerful outcome of using this Toolkit for me. I felt like a lot of the strategies, when applied with intention, really led to me understanding my children and building that deep relationship with them. And just a little add-on, my husband and I have been using some of the strategies in our date nights...I know it's for the kids, but we've been cheating a little bit and using it for ourselves, which has been really great for our entire family.--Parent User, self-identified Woman, August, 2021

The strategies in the parent [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) were also shared with a North Carolina Teaching Fellow; the fellow provided additional feedback on the strategies and how the strategies could translate into classroom instruction. Synthesis of learnings from the five-week sprint and a further review with the Black Parent Designers and Researchers led to an online and published version of the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#). VOW partnered with the [Center for Racial Equity in Education \(CREED\)](#) to work with about four educators to review the strategies in the Toolkit and to translate the strategies into [lesson plans](#). The [Toolkit for educators](#) was then released online in January 2022. VOW worked with an intern from Duke University to review each strategy in the Toolkit and conduct a literature review. The literature review aimed to identify research studies that demonstrate and support the positive effects of the strategies in the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) on learners and, specifically, Black children. For example, several studies have found that using meditation, movement therapy, and other mindfulness-based stress reduction practices positively impacts health and socioemotional development (Barnes et al., 2008; Grasser et al., 2019; Kerrigan et al., 2011). By the time the 2022 Black History Month season rolled in, Black parent wisdom had led to and informed the creation of two Toolkits.

THE TEACHING FELLOW OFFERED THE FOLLOWING INSIGHT:

This toolkit is inspirational. It is the type of lesson that can easily integrate into a STEM/STEAM classroom. The components strengthen student-peer partnerships and the classroom community...I find that all the strategies should be incorporated throughout each quarter to solidify the identity of students. The first three strategies are super impactful as students are learning to integrate back into the physical classroom space.--Educator, self-identified as Woman, August, 2021

DREAM MANIFESTATION

AND I WONDER IF YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO FIND YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE—LABI SIFFRE, MY SONG

A finding from the [Dreams Assessment](#) was the dream to see Black children learn in environments that were culturally affirming. The release of the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) for parents in October of 2021 and a later release of a [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) for educators in partnership with [CREED](#) meant this dream could come true. Between 2021 and 2022, there have been more than 800 downloads by folks that include educators, parents, researchers, and nonprofit leaders. The reach of the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) spans across North Carolina, and into geographic places like California, Washington, and the Northeast region. About 25% of the 800-plus people who downloaded the Toolkit identified themselves as educators. Like the broader demographics, most of these educators were from regions across North Carolina, with the remainder spanning the U.S. to include the states of Washington, Texas, Missouri, and the Washington, DC area. One can conclude that these more than 175 educators work with about 20-80 learners across K-12 institutions. Black parent wisdom can inform the instructional decisions of these educators and impact an estimated 3,500 to 14,000 Black learners.

Black parent wisdom has been amplified and celebrated through the hands of the more than 800 people who downloaded the Toolkits. A survey administered in the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022 suggests that of the respondents, the Toolkits have been shared with more than a cumulative 14,000 other individuals. One comment shared by a survey respondent:

I've shared the Toolkit with colleagues who are better-positioned to get these resources into the hands of our BIPOC teachers, particularly those friends who are looking for concrete tools they can use with young people in the classroom and other contexts. Again, the immediate practicality of the Toolkit seems to encourage uptake while pushing at a broader message.--Researcher, self-identified Woman, October, 2021

The Toolkit has been shared with psychology professionals and researchers across 3 Divisions in the American Psychological Association (Division 27, Society for Community Research and Action, Division 45, Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, and Division 37, Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice). Organizations and institutions like the NC Early Childhood Education Foundation, the Color of Education, the Center for Race, Ethnicity, & Diversity Education at Elon University, and Christensen Institute referenced Village of Wisdom's Dreams Assessment and Toolkit. Feedback gathered through surveys, email testimonials, and social media posts indicate that most individuals find value in the strategies. Village of Wisdom has found that most individuals gain more practical and easier use of Woosah, Chile (Mindfulness), You Matter (Affirming Identity and Children as Experts) and Talk to Me/Let's Talk (Making Space and Dialogic Interrogation).

A social media campaign translated the strategies in the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) into infographics and digital assets. The campaign included mapping the strategies in the Toolkit with video clips gathered from TikTok and Instagram, bulleted tips, and simple "How to..." posts. Analytics gathered suggest the digital assets reached more than 21,000 contacts and more than 1,000 unique engagements (e.g., shares, likes, and saves). Digital assets that focused on "You Matter" (strategies that affirm the racial identity of Black children and see them as subject-matter experts) and "Let's Talk" (strategies that promote curiosity, dialogue, and questioning by Black children) received the highest engagement yields. One particular post on Twitter, a You Matter strategy on "How to Raise a Black Child with Love and Intentions?" received more than 1,000+ engagements.

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A subgroup of Black Parent Designers and Users facilitated three virtual gatherings for parents and educators to learn about the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) and its strategies. More than 200 educators and parents registered for the gatherings. The gatherings allowed Black Parent Designers and Users to share strategies in the Toolkit and to invite dialogue among attendees on how to use the strategies at home and in school. Attendees were majority from Durham, Orange, and Wake County, North Carolina, yet some attended from places beyond North Carolina and including Texas and New Jersey. The virtual gatherings invited parents and educators to manifest the dream potential of Black families and children by gaining more knowledge on how to use the strategies in the Toolkit. One attendee who attended the parent gatherings wrote:

I'm encouraged to help my children and grandchildren express their Black Genius--August 2022,
Parent-Grandparent

In the gatherings hosted for educators, the majority of attendees indicated relying on Black parent wisdom to inform their thoughts in the session. Attendees also indicated after the session they increased their knowledge of how to help Black children express themselves openly and how to take time and listen to Black children. One educator commented:

I valued the conversation and its content as a whole. I think this [session] was and continues to be a very important topic that we should all learn more about, especially as educators.--November 2022,
Educator

The [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) and its strategies created by Black Parent Designers and further validated by Black Parent Users extends and spreads well beyond North Carolina, and, as provided above, is beginning to inform the instructional decisions of parents, educators, and researchers. The uptake of the strategies in the [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) can, ultimately, drive the dreams of Black families to come true and create learning environments that allow Black learners to thrive.

DREAMIN' INTO THE FUTURE--CENTERING BLACK PARENT WISDOM

THEY ARE STILL DREAMING

THEY ARE STILL DREAMING--NAS, STILL DREAMING

When a Black mother, one of VOW's Parent Designers said, #KeepDreaming, in a Zoom call to coin a hashtag and social media slogan in early spring of 2021, this hashtag would later turn into the Toolkit title. She was a Black parent who had spent the last 12 months completing training in participatory research, user-centered design, and facilitation. She was a Black mother who had participated in Family Learning Villages, and other offerings VOW convened in Durham, North Carolina. She had the vision and innate wisdom to foreshadow the magnitude of what was to come. A series of Toolkits for parents and educators that included culturally affirming and liberatory learning strategies. This work facilitated by VOW offers a pathway forward and narrates the value of centering Black parent wisdom and how Black parents dream big.

The [Keep Dreaming Toolkit](#) centers Black parent wisdom. The release of the Toolkits allows VOW to bring Black parent wisdom into the households of other parents, into the classrooms of educators, and across neighborhoods and communities. When a U.S. education system restricts its capacity to recognize and integrate the wisdom of Black parents and does little to respond to or affirm Black children, that system robs their dream potential. When Black children continue to be pushed out of educational opportunities like academically gifted, college prep, and advanced courses disproportionately and overwhelmingly disciplined and punished for their expression, verve, and diverse learning modalities, Black families must maximize their power to address inequities. The need for Black children, their parents, and families to "dream big" of an existence that values their humanity and ability to thrive connects #KeepDreaming to a collective strategy toward liberation. And, guess what, we will still **DREAM BIG** into the future!

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