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INNOVATORS Q&A

# YouthBuild aims to open a school designed to build up young men of color



'We're disruptors and innovators,' CEO Anthony Hubbard says. 'We've decided to call ourselves a prep school because we want to take over this term.'

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 20, 2020, 6:00 a.m.

Anthony Hubbard, CEO of YouthBuild Preparatory Academy  
COURTESY OF ANTHONY HUBBARD

*The Boston Globe's weekly Ocean State Innovators column features a Q&A with Rhode Island innovators who are starting new businesses and nonprofits, conducting groundbreaking research, and reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to reporter Edward Fitzpatrick at [edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com](mailto:edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com).*

*This week's Ocean State Innovators conversation is with Anthony Hubbard, CEO of the YouthBuild Preparatory Academy, based in Providence.*

**Question: What is the YouthBuild Preparatory Academy and when was it formed?**

**Answer:** [YouthBuild Preparatory Academy](#) is an umbrella organization that is authorized to open a new public school in Rhode Island that would address barriers to achievement for urban youth, especially for young men of color in

cities such as Providence and Central Falls. The organization already runs the YouthBuild Providence program, which has 20-plus-year history of successfully creating hands-on learning experiences for youth through construction and building trades industry certification.

YBPA was created for two reasons: First, the neglect and lack of a quality education provided by public schooling. Second, the prevailing misconceptions relative to the difficulties in educating people of color, which has resulted in the lack of opportunities and access to education and workforce development for people of color — especially boys and young men.

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**Q: While YouthBuild has received legislative approval to open a new public high school, it has not opened yet. What steps are needed to open the school, and who would it serve?**

**A:** In 2016, the Rhode Island General Assembly authorized YouthBuild Preparatory Academy to operate the only high school that — while open to all — would focus on engaging young men of color in preparatory programs. But for YouthBuild Preparatory Academy to open its doors for students, we need a signed memorandum of agreement with the Providence School Department.

We have worked tirelessly for the last four years to reach that agreement, but we have yet to get parties to move forward. We are hopeful, given the [turnaround strategy that the district has released](#), that YouthBuild could play a critical role in improving the educational outcomes for our [“Opportunity Youth.”](#)

**Q: How would the academy address the problems identified in the [Johns Hopkins University report](#) on the Providence public school district?**

**A:** It is not YouthBuild Preparatory Academy's claim that we have all the answers to respond to the crisis Providence is now facing regarding the quality of its education. However, YouthBuild, as part of a national movement, has a history of engaging and offering youth opportunities through proven, evidence-based practices that have been researched and tested.

YBPA feels compelled to address the long-existing barriers to achievement for youth in Rhode Island's urban communities. Research shows that boys of color, who have risk factors predictive of dropping out of high school — such as low-test performance, poor grades and attendance, disciplinary infractions, or being overage and under-credited — often begin to show warning signs to be at risk when they are in middle school.

Our target populations have traditionally been unsuccessful in school because they don't find what they are learning, or how they are learning it, relevant to their lives. One size does not always fit all. Schools often do not have the resources to address the various needs that are barriers to student success. Students often lack strong relationships with teachers and other adults. And racial disparities exist for students (especially males) of color concerning out-of-school suspensions, court involvement, and academic achievement.

The YouthBuild Prep Academy model is centered around creating and building meaningful relationships, which lead to improved engagement and, as a result, high performance by the students. It is critical that students find the school's staff relatable and feel safe to be their authentic selves. YBPA seeks to close the existing gaps by providing youth with rigorous academics, supportive networks, and a positive culture.

**Q: The death of George Floyd has prompted a national reckoning with matters of racial prejudice and inequality. How has that informed the work of YouthBuild and the plans for a new high school?**

**A:** The national reckoning lags significantly behind the daily lived consciousness of the Black community, which is at the heart of and informs all the work we do.

The YouthBuild organization was started to address the needs of marginalized youth in Harlem in the 1970s — almost 50 years ago — and YouthBuild Preparatory Academy is an outgrowth of that movement. Sadly, the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, while gaining national attention, are not new in communities of color. The critical and

ongoing issue of the brutality that people of color, particularly Black males, routinely face at the hands of the police and from our society at large has been ongoing.

What has changed is the invention of cell phone cameras and their increased use in recording these countless incidents of injustice and prejudice within our nation. The spotlight on these tragic deaths has forced our broader society to recognize the need for change across multiple systems of oppression, of which education is one.

Our Rhode Island program has been addressing these concerns for the last 23 years, serving the state's most underserved population, and providing them with the tools they need to become economically and educationally prepared for life. Most importantly, what we do is help our young people understand that civic engagement can be a personal power shift. They think of themselves as leaders, and therefore they become leaders within their communities.

**Q: What would the academy do differently from existing public schools?**

**A:** YouthBuild Preparatory Academy would be the first high school in Rhode Island to be modeled as a community development corporation, and the first to center on the needs, experiences, and gifts of boys and young men of color.

In its design, governance, and operation, our school will elevate the voice of youth. The school's co-founders consisted of a group of young men who had experienced the failure of Rhode Island's public school system. They wanted a school they could call their own, one that would address their unique concerns and challenges.

These young men took charge of their own future and lobbied, advocated, and testified in front of the General Assembly to pass the bill that approved the formation of the YBPA. It was called the most powerful piece of legislation to come to the floor during session. Yet, we are still struggling, four years later, to open our doors.

Our design will dissolve the walls between the school and surrounding community by expanding where real learning happens. This means enlisting industry partners, community-based organizations, higher education partners, and local residents to ensure our students have real-world practitioners leading project-based learning experiences in the classroom. YBPA will incorporate research-based youth development principles shown to engage

young men of color and provide them with a liberating, personalized educational experience that prepares them to be confident, civically engaged leaders.

**Q: How is the YouthBuild Preparatory Academy similar to or different from the traditional concept of a prep school?**

**A:** We're often asked why students should choose us — and why we've chosen to adopt the “prep school” moniker. After all, we don't look or function like a traditional preparatory school. We're disruptors and innovators. We've decided to call ourselves a “prep school” because we want to take over this term.

We believe that our young people deserve an education that prepares them beyond secondary education. The world is continuously changing, and we owe it to our students to give them an education that won't just help them succeed in their college careers, but for the rest of their lives.

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