

Proposal Brief

**“Mobilizing Black Religious Organizations to Elevate Black
America’s STEMAIR Educational Performance”**

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Abstract

Overview

If one can read, then one can learn almost anything. If one can perform mathematical computations, then one can figure out almost anything. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) reports that the average Black American is likely to have some difficulty on both fronts relative to their peers. According to the NCES, Black Americans exhibit fundamental educational underperformance: About 10 percent for reading and about 25 percent for mathematics when compared with top performing counterparts at the end of secondary school in 2015. Is this true? If it is true, then why is it true? More importantly, what can Black Americans do to improve our educational performance—especially in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, artificial intelligence, and robotization (STEMAIR) fields? It is logical that educational performance at the elementary and secondary school levels affect life’s later outcomes. Accordingly, the NCES (2018) reports that for those who were 25 years of age and older in the US in 2016, only 21 percent of Black Americans held a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 35 percent of White Americans, and 54 percent of Asian Americans held such degrees. What we know is that important institutional forces within the social environment affect learning (e.g., schools, households, and agents within areas of influence (communities)). In many cases, Black Americans have limited control over schools’ role in learning, and even less control over how our ability to learn and how our actual learning is perceived in schools. However, Black Americans constitute households, and we need to redouble our efforts to motivate households to ensure that students are prepared to learn, to assist students in the learning process, and to build favorable expectations and perceptions of our learning ability and actual learning. Fortunately, Black religious organizations are important agents in the social environment that can influence schools, households, and students so that learning can be enhanced. Also, Black religious organizations can help ensure that perceptions about our learning ability and actual learning are fact-based. Black religious organizations have always played important roles in Black America’s educational development. This proposal calls for these organizations to evolve more unified and strategic efforts to influence schools, households, students, and the broader social environment so that Black America’s educational performance is elevated to the highest standard and that we play more significant roles in STEMAIR fields.

Proposal

For 13 years, conduct a national summit of at least the top six (by membership) Black religious organizations. During the summits, the religious organizations should agree on a unified strategy that will be operationalized at the local level to elevate Black America’s learning, and expectations and perceptions about our ability to learn at the elementary and secondary school levels. Each year, the strategy should be updated to account for evolving conditions. At the end of this series of summits, Black religious organizations will assess the impact of their strategic efforts.

Financial assistance and operational and strategic support are sought from the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Education Association, and the National Urban League to conduct these summits, to help elevate Black America’s learning, and to eradicate stereotypes and false perceptions about our ability to learn particularly in STEMAIR fields.

Background Audio File

Before reading this proposal, please review the attached seven-minute audio file;
<https://www.blackeconomics.org/BEFuture/conradcf.mp3>.

I. Introduction

“...As a man thinketh, so is he...” Proverbs 23:7

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge....” Hosea 4:6

If Black Americans are to compete economically and play a significant role as America and the world go deeper into the 21st century and beyond, then it is imperative that our educational performance and attainment is elevated. It is difficult to achieve this objective when there are widespread sentiments that Black Americans are not, and cannot be, as proficient in learning as other ethnic groups—particularly in the STEMAIR fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, artificial intelligence, and robotization). This, despite the historical realities of STEMAIR personalities such as Granville T. Woods, George Washington Carver, Dr. Charles Drew, Mark Dean, and Neil deGrasse Tyson—just to name a very few. Schools’ inability to produce more Black Americans skilled in STEMAIR, indicates that the former suffers inadequacies or comprise part of the problem. Unfortunately, in many cases, Black Americans have limited control or influence over school operations.^{1,2} However, there are at least two other institutional factors in the social environment that influence educational outcomes and for which Black Americans have control: Households and certain agents in our areas of influence. Clearly, households should act to ensure that students are prepared to learn, should assist in the learning process, and should create the perception and belief that Black Americans can function at high levels in STEMAIR fields. It may be too tall an order, though, to develop and underwrite the cost of new programs or methods to address individual households’ role in the Black American educational outcomes. Fortunately, as agents in our areas of influence, Black religious organizations are already positioned to execute efforts that can influence many households, students themselves, and perceptions/beliefs about Black Americans’ ability to learn. Moreover, because of their wide reach across many aspects of social environments at the local level, Black religious organizations can influence school operations as well. In fact, Black religious organizations have always played a role in the education of Black Americans. Therefore, it is logical to call on Black religious organizations to develop a unified strategy that will assist in elevating Black STEMAIR learning and the perception/belief that Black Americans can excel in all fields.

The remainder of this proposal unfolds as follows. Section II describes the “problem.” Section III outlines a “Solution/Initiative.” Section IV delineates the “Proposal.” Section V presents a “Summary/Conclusion.” Section VI lists “References.” Section VII includes “Annexes.”

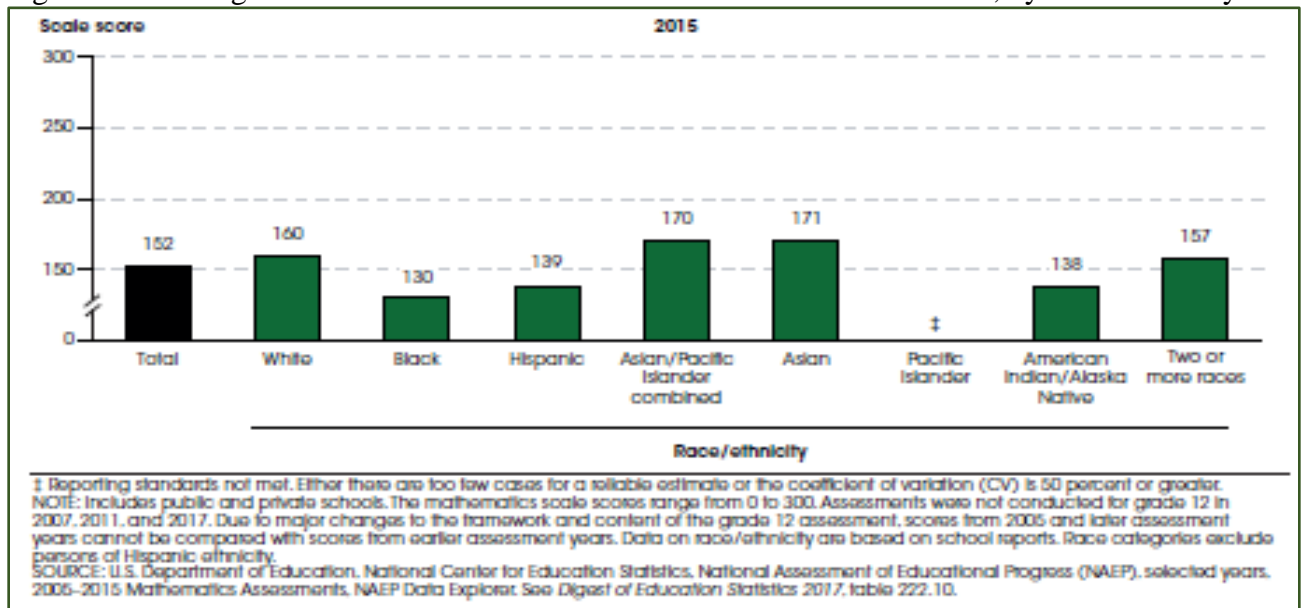
¹ The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2018, pages 10 and 12) reports that for the school year 2015-16, 80 percent of public school teachers were White; and that 70 percent of teachers in public schools located in cities were White.

² While statistics are not readily available, it is common knowledge that Black American representation on public school boards is generally small and insufficient to ensure that efforts are promulgated that address specifically Black America’s educational performance.

II. Problem

The “problem” is “known” widely. There is a sizeable gap between the educational performance of Black Americans and the nation’s top performers (Asian Americans) at the end of secondary school.³ For example, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale scores for mathematics reveal that Asian Americans scored 171 on average in 2015, while Black Americans’ average score was 130 (i.e., there was about a 25 percent gap) (Figure 1) (NCES 2018).

Figure 1.—Average NAEP Mathematics Scale Scores of 12th Grade Students, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: NCES, US Department of Education.

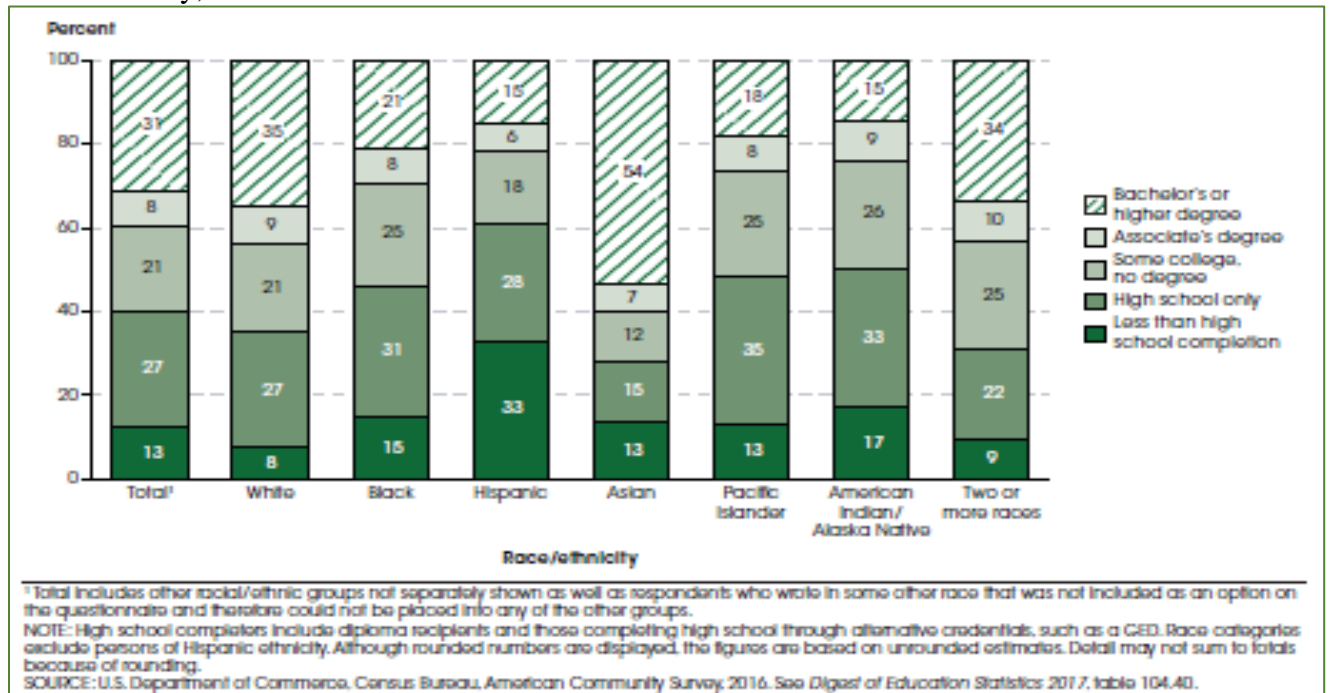
Actually, there is a problem with this picture. First, the results reveal that none of the ethnic groups were successful in achieving an average scale score that is 60 percent of the top possible score. In most academic settings, a score below 60 percent represents near failure. Second, there is no indication of the statistically significant difference in the scores. For example, while White students’ average score represents 53.3 percent of the total, Black students’ average score represents 43.3 percent of the total. What are the 90 or 95 percent confidence intervals around these mean scores so that we can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between them? The point being that these statistics help to paint a picture, a perception, and, ultimately, a belief that Black Americans are underperforming other ethnic groups by a sizeable margin, but the evidence may be countervailing. What is clear from the evidence is that none of the ethnic groups, on average, are performing at what would be considered an acceptable level in most academic settings. Keep in mind that this is the information that is being broadcast by the NCES, which operates under the auspices of the US Department of Education—the shaper and promulgator of the nation’s educational policies.

³ The Black Americans’ educational “underperformance” at the 12th grade level also exists at the 8th and 4th grade levels—points at which NAEP are administered.

This portrayal of mathematical knowledge is very pernicious for Black Americans. Why? Mainly because of the “stereotype threat,” (Steele, 1997), its impact on subsequent measures of mathematical knowledge, and its impact on later life decisions—e.g., to not pursue a STEMAIR career. Shih *et al* (1999) clearly shows that, possibly inadvertently, the social environment (especially schools) can be flooded with negative identity primers that establish conditions for anxiety over the ability to exhibit mathematical knowledge and can lead ultimately to underperformance on tests that measure such knowledge. The pervasive idea that Black Americans are “not good at mathematics and the sciences” perpetually reinforces the idea and help to create “a” reality. Therefore, it is critical that efforts be made to reverse this thinking throughout the social environment. Of course, the perception will not be overturned by challenging perceptions alone. Rather, it must also be the case that actual STEMAIR knowledge is gained and is exhibited when measured.

The perniciousness of conveying incomplete and misleading information about Black Americans’ STEMAIR knowledge and the ability to obtain such knowledge is also apparent in later life choices. A Black American child with sound academic ability (as measured by an intelligence quotient (IQ) score), who is made to believe that Black Americans “cannot do math,” will develop anxiety about math and is likely perform below his/her math ability throughout their educational careers. Not because they are not capable of “doing math,” but for the following reasons: (i) The stereotype becomes self-fulfilling; (ii) the absence of sufficient Black American role models who can “do math,” (“if you can’t see it, you can’t achieve it”); and (iii) his/her perceived effort budget constraint precludes the development of incentives to work to overcome the myriad hurdles to fulfill an aspiration to, in fact, be proficient at or excel in mathematics. Therefore, dreams are destroyed, life callings are missed, higher salaries go unearned, and life itself is unfulfilling.

Figure 2.—Percentage Distribution of Educational Attainment of Adults Age 25 and Older by Race/Ethnicity, 2016



Source: NCES, US Department of Education.

Figure 2 shows that for those 25 years or older in 2016, only 21 percent of Black Americans held bachelor's degrees or higher, while 35 percent of Whites and 54 percent of Asians held such degrees. Hence, it is logical to ask: To what extent did stereotypes and false perceptions/beliefs on the part of Black and non-Black Americans contribute to the just discussed outcome?

Therefore, unless Black Americans halt the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes that rest on the notion that Black Americans underperform in STEMAIR fields, and eradicate false perceptions and beliefs about our learning and ability to learn, we will find our roles to be diminished in an increasingly knowledge-based and technological world of tomorrow—in the US and abroad.

III. Solution/Initiative

Problems are best solved by identifying and addressing root causes. Clearly, schools are an important factor in learning because they provide: In-class learning environments; paid and volunteer instructors who create attitudes and expectations about learning and who can participate in that learning; instructional materials; peer student groups through which learning can occur; and parent-teacher organizations that shape learning activities. The quality of each of these factors can contribute positively to learning. When the factors are not functioning properly (i.e., they are affected by “implicit bias” (Kang, 2005)), they can contribute to Black America’s educational underperformance. Educational performance is heavily influenced by households’ roles in preparing students to learn by providing educational enrichment experiences, generating expectations about learning, and in assisting students with learning. When households perform these roles effectively, substantial learning can occur. When households do not perform their roles effectively, they contribute to educational underperformance. In many cases, Black Americans have limited power to affect school operations. In addition, it would be a costly undertaking to build a new program and/or devise new methods for affecting positively households’ performance of their roles as preparers and assisters of students in the learning process. Besides, it would be a redundant undertaking. Key agents, namely Black religious organizations, already exist in Black Americans’ areas of influence that can play definitive roles in motivating households to perform their roles as critical supporters of the educational processes.⁴ At the same time, Black religious organizations can influence positively schools’ provision of educational factors that lead to beneficial learning. Also, Black religious organizations can affect the uptake of education by students in direct ways. Most importantly, the long reach of Black religious organizations enables them to shape thinking broadly about educational possibilities—that is, what can be achieved educationally.

Why Black religious organizations?

It is no secret that Black Americans are the most religious ethnic group in America.⁵ Black Americans attend church and participate in church-related activities at a high rate. Therefore, the Black church has immediate and nearly continuous access to members of Black American households and should be able to influence households’ and students’ thinking and behaviors. If desired, that influence could, *inter alia*, extend to enabling Black American households and

⁴ Other important agents in Black American areas of influence that are designed to affect learning directly include: Scientific institutes, museums, theaters, natural parks and reserves, etc.

⁵ See Masci’s (2018) third fact.

students to recognize the value of education, to widen the education horizon to include STEMAIR fields as a fundamental expectation, and to intensify Black American households’ efforts to prepare students for learning and to assist students with the learning process.

History already records Black religious organizations’ commitments to Black American education that span “parochial schools,” “Sunday School,” “Bible School,” after school activities that include educational tutoring, and colleges and universities that are known today as Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It is also important to remember that Black religious organizations play a significant role in Black America’s success at the tertiary education level as a result of the scholarships that are extended to Black students. Consequently, it is logical to conclude that there may be no agent operating in Black America’s social environment that is better positioned to help elevate Black America’s educational performance than Black religious organizations—other than schools themselves.

Moreover, Black religious organizations present themselves as the leading candidates for engaging in service to elevate Black America’s educational performance because they are so prolific. Consider Table 1, which identifies the top six Black religious organizations and statistics on their memberships and number of churches:

Table 1.—Top Black Religious Organizations’ Membership

No.	Black Religious Organizations	Memberships (Millions)*	Number of Churches*
1	Church of God in Christ	5.5	15,300
2	National Baptist Convention USA	5.2	10,358
3	National Baptist Convention of America	3.5	2,500
4	African Methodist Episcopal Church	2.5	4,100
5	African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	1.4	3,393
6	Progressive National Baptist Association	1.0	1,500
Total		19.1	37,151

Source: Association of Religion Data Archive

*--Some of these data points are from the 1990s—the latest available information.

Table 1 shows that by just engaging the top six Black religious organizations, it is possible to touch through 37,151 churches nearly 20 million Black Americans, which represents over 40 percent of the total Black American population. Therefore, if these religious organizations alone adopt a unified strategy for addressing Black America’s educational performance with emphasis on STEMAIR fields, it should be possible to have a strong and positive impact on Black students directly, through immediate family members, or via a near or distant relative. Understanding the competitive nature of Black religious organization and their “follow-the-leader” operational approach, mobilization of the top six Black religious organizations is likely to entice many more Black religious organizations to join the ranks of those addressing Black America’s educational performance—particularly in STEMAIR fields.

What can Black religious organizations do?

Scholars who will be consulted in connection with this proposal may have a more comprehensive view of the various strategies that Black religious organization may employ to assist Black Americans to elevate educational performance. However, as a starting point, it is anticipated that Black religious organizations can take the following actions—at a minimum:

- Elevate the recognition of scholarship and learning in spiritual growth.
- Elevate the role of education in the hearts, minds, and lives of membership.
- Create an atmosphere of the “possible” with expectations about success in all educational fields, but especially STEMAIR fields.
- Motivate membership to focus more intently on ensuring that students are prepared to learn.
- Motivate membership to assist students with the learning process.
- Motivate membership to become elementary and secondary school teachers.⁶
- Conduct extracurricular activities that involve education; including hosting educational enrichment programs for the very young and after school tutorial sessions for older youth.⁷
- Reward excellence in educational performance by extending more scholarships.
- Leverage relationships with other institutional agents that function in Black areas of influence (e.g., the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the Democratic and/or Republican Parties, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL), Black sororities and fraternities, and recreation centers and clubs) to apply pressure to, and garner support for, schools through municipal councils and school boards so that schools address Black students’ needs more aggressively and effectively.
- Form stronger relationships with public and private schools that serve Black American students to ensure that schools identify and respond more effectively to Black American students’ needs. This includes helping to eliminate stereotypes, perceptions, and beliefs concerning Black American educational underperformance, especially with respect to STEMAIR.

Why the Group of Four?

To operationalize this proposal, financial and strategic support are required from four institutional agents that operate in Black America’s social environment: The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the NAACP, the National Education Association (NEA), and the NUL. The mission statements of each of these agents indicate that they seek to ensure that high-quality education results from their operations/efforts. Hence, they have a vested interest in realizing the elevation of Black America’s educational performance.

For the AFT and NEA membership, their job is to deliver high-quality education to students. Consequently, they should have no aversion to supporting efforts to engage influential agents in

⁶ Research shows that for Black American students, having a Black American teacher in elementary and secondary school can make a significant difference in academic achievement (Meckler and Rabinowitz, 2019).

⁷ Nobel Laurette James Heckman (1995) argues that early stage educational enrichment pays high dividends.

Black areas of influence, such as Black religious organizations, which can assist with improving Black American educational performance. Similarly, the NAACP and NUL are organizations that have as a core function Black America's rise through the attainment of civil rights, education, and economic progress. Therefore, the NAACP and NUL should not be averse to assisting in this effort to elevate Black America's educational performance.

What can the Group of Four do?

Because of their direct relationship with the educational process (i.e., teachers, schools, and the political infrastructure that undergird them), the AFT and NEA can motivate their memberships to renew their commitment to provide a high-quality education to all of America's students. Beyond commitment, the AFT and NEA can press their memberships to develop and implement educational strategies that help elevate Black America's educational performance. Those strategies should certainly include ensuring that stereotypes and false perceptions and belief play no role in shaping the educational process for Black Americans, especially with respect to STEMAIR fields. Also, the AFT and NEA can facilitate the hiring and retention of more Black American teachers (Meckler and Rabinowitz, 2019). Like Black religious organizations, the NAACP and NUL should leverage their multifaceted social, economic, and political relationships to help elevate Black America's educational performance and to broaden the scope of educational possibilities specifically for STEMAIR fields. Importantly, the group of four has the wherewithal to raise financial resources that can be used to raise Black America's educational performance.

IV. Proposal

All of the foregoing points to this proposal to align key Black American religious organizations to address Black America's educational performance. To facilitate and effect this alignment, the leadership of these organizations should meet jointly in annual one-day summits to build and renew year-after-year, for at least 13 years, an evolving strategy for elevating educational performance especially in STEMAIR fields. The first summit should be conducted before the end of 2020. A draft proposed program and budget for the first summit appear as Annexes 1 and 2.

This is a request that the AFT, the NAACP, the NEA, and the NUL consider and approve this proposal. Organizational approval, in turn, should guarantee the shared provision of funding to underwrite the cost of the annual summits.

In return for this organizational support, the AFT and NEA will receive immediate compensation in the form of improved educational performance on the part of the Black student population, which bolsters and buttresses these organizations' power and bargaining positions. On the other hand, Black religious organizations, the NAACP, and the NUL will receive a delayed reward in the form of a better educated Black American population whose self-knowledge, earning power, and wealth are enhanced. It stands to reason that Black Americans who have benefitted greatly from assistance from these organizations will be better positioned to, and will find ways to, reflect their gratitude. But another important benefit for Black religious organizations, the NAACP, and the NUL is that this shared strategy adds to their *raison d'être* and helps solidify their roles as very relevant institutions in Black areas of influence.

V. Summary/Conclusion

Problems exist all around us. It is incumbent upon recognizers of problems to resolve them—using every available resource. The long-standing concern about Black America’s educational underperformance particularly in STEMAIR fields can be resolved; not by initiating a new organization or developing a new program, but by simply utilizing the agents already existing in the social environment. Hence this proposal for shared financial support by the AFT, NAACP, NEA, and NUL to facilitate mobilization of Black religious organizations to help elevate Black America’s educational performance. Keep in mind that the proposal is not a “one shot deal,” but calls for a sustained, 13-year effort to resolve the problem. Stereotypes, false perceptions, and unfounded beliefs about Black America’s underperformance in STEMAIR fields will be difficult to dispel. However, in the grand scheme of things, the time and effort that will be dedicated to this objective is a small price to pay to ensure that Black Americans can make steady progress in elevating our educational performance and ensure that we remain a vibrant part of America’s and the world’s knowledge-based and technological economy for the 21st century and beyond.

VI. References

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VII. Annexes

Annex 1.—Proposed Summit Program Outline

8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.	Welcome
9:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.	Introductions and Scene Setter
9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	Exploration of the Problem by Noted Education, Economic, and Religious Scholars
10:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.	Refreshment and Health Break
11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.	Exploration of Solutions by Noted Education, Economic, and Religious Scholars
12:30 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.	Lunch
1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	Impressions, Questions*, Visions, and Strategic Commitments from three Religious Organizations
3:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.	Refreshment and Health Break
3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Impressions, Questions*, Visions, and Strategic Commitments from three Religious Organizations
5:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.	Summary and Approval of Strategic Commitments by Consensus

*--Presenting scholars are expected to respond to questions in writing on a post summit basis.

Annex 2.—Draft Proposed Budget

Receipts Total	\$53,000
Cash Contributions	\$33,000
AFT	\$ 8,250
NAACP	\$ 8,250
NEA	\$ 8,250
NUL	\$ 8,250
In-Kind Contributions	\$20,000
Summit Venue	\$ 2,000
Event Recording (Video/Audio)	\$ 3,000
Administrative*	\$15,000
Expenses Total	\$53,000
Administrative (Event Coordination)	\$20,000
Air Travel	\$15,000
Ground Transportation	\$ 4,000
Hotel Accommodation	\$ 4,500
Summit Venue	\$ 2,000
Event Recording (Video/Audio)	\$ 3,000
Food Amenities	\$ 3,000
Per Diems	\$ 1,500

*--BlackEconomics.org offers to provide in-kind administrative (event coordination) support for the first year of this initiative if it is agreed that the first summit can be organized for the second half of 2020.

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