

For Ahkeem Discussion Guide



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Film Synopsis

For Ahkeem is the coming-of-age story of Daje Shelton, an African American seventeen-year-old girl in an impoverished community in north St. Louis, Missouri.¹ Daje fights for her future, as she navigates the trauma of neighborhood violence and the complexities of entering adulthood, all while trying to pursue her dream of graduating from high school.

For Ahkeem touches on a variety of important issues, such as how trauma impacts young people; the influence that adults and other role models can have on teens; the school-to-prison pipeline; and how high school graduation impacts the individual, the community, and the nation. To help the audience better understand these issues, the sections below provide guiding questions and further explanations that connect the experiences of Daje, her classmate Antonio, and other young people featured in the film with the realities that historically underserved students face in communities and high schools across the country.

Trauma

1. **How do violent situations and traumatic experiences impact children and adolescents?**

Trauma results when a child or adolescent experiences a hurtful or disturbing event, such as witnessing violence. This causes the brain to initiate a stress response—a response originally developed for survival needs that triggers changes in behaviors.² Exposure to and fear of violence, such as gun violence, domestic violence, or physical bullying, can traumatize individuals and impact the social and emotional behavior of students at home and in school. A student who has experienced trauma may display “fight or flight” behaviors, such as bullying other students or rushing out of class when confronted by a teacher,

or detachment behaviors, such as isolating him- or herself from adults and peers or being disengaged during class.³

2. **What systems of support are evident in *For Ahkeem* to help students who have experienced trauma? What was lacking?**

During the movie, Daje and her peers recount the multiple traumatic events they have experienced. Many have lost friends to past gun violence events and Daje herself is a victim of gun violence, meaning the trauma that results from this type of violence is a reality for Daje and her peers. In addition, Daje and her classmates witness the riots that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 after Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old African American man, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a white Ferguson police officer. Without support from teachers and adults in Daje’s life, no outlet would have existed to process these traumatic experiences. Throughout the documentary, teachers discuss with their students the realities of gun violence and the criminal justice system in their communities. These conversations not only provide a platform for students to process trauma, but they also show students the support systems in place for them.

To ensure that students who experience or witness traumatic events receive appropriate academic support and counseling, parents/guardians, caregivers, and school personnel must understand how to recognize the effects of trauma in adolescent students and collaborate to assist students in their healing.⁴ Parents/guardians and teachers should provide opportunities for students to speak openly about their opinions and feelings regarding a traumatic event without fear or negative consequences. Once parents/guardians and schools establish this mutual trust, parents/guardians, students, teachers, counselors, and administrators should be able to discuss the student’s academic goals, home and community events that may affect student behavior, and the social and/or emotional

needs of the student.⁵ Teachers also should be able to discuss the student's academic progress; social-emotional development; classroom behavior; and any school-based events, like bullying, that may have impacted the teen.

3. How does exposure to violence and trauma affect academic achievement?

Students of color and those from low-income families are more likely to encounter violence; report greater feelings of fear of being victimized; and often do not have access to support structures, such as counseling, to cope with trauma. Students who experience trauma often are hindered from achieving their full academic potential because of trauma's adverse effects on their classroom behavior and engagement, as mentioned above.

Influence of Adult Role Models

1. What role(s) do parents/guardians, teachers, community leaders, and other adults play in ensuring that traditionally underserved students remain on track toward high school graduation?

The influence of successful adult role models has an important and positive effect on students' socioemotional development and success. For example, effective teaching reflects a diversity of strategies designed to engage students and support high achievement. These include setting high expectations; increasing academic, attitudinal, and social outcomes; using diverse resources to plan and structure learning opportunities; and collaborating with peers to ensure student success.⁶ In addition, parents/guardians need ongoing involvement in their children's schools. Parents/guardians should ask their school, district, and state education leaders how they will ensure that parents/guardians receive multiple opportunities to engage with their children's school, including during nonwork hours.⁷

School-to-Prison Pipeline

1. What school-based practices or procedures contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline?

The phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline occurs when children—disproportionately students of color—are pushed out of school settings and toward the criminal justice system.⁸ Schools suspend and expel students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners at higher rates than their white peers, according to civil rights data from the U.S. Department of Education.⁹ Additionally, students of color also are more likely to be arrested or ticketed for minor school offenses than white students.¹⁰ This criminalization of student misbehavior contributes directly to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Such suspensions drastically increase the likelihood that students will drop out of school and face future incarceration. Studies find that school dropouts are eight times more likely to be sent to prison.¹¹

2. What policies and practices did you see in For Ahkeem that helped prevent underserved students from entering the school-to-prison pipeline? What else could have been done?

Behavioral approaches that focus on the reintegration of erring students into the school community through problem solving and the facilitation of dialogue between conflicting students, rather than punitive measures, benefit all students.¹² These practices provide more equitable and supportive systems of school discipline, particularly for traditionally underserved students.¹³ For example, in the film, adults at Daje's school have open conversations with her and her classmates about police brutality, the harsh realities of racial violence, and productive coping strategies during the aftermath of the violence in nearby Ferguson.

High School Graduation

1. What consequences do young people face if they drop out of school? How can increasing high school graduation rates benefit the community?

Although the national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high of 83.2 percent, graduation rates for students of color, English language learners, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities fall short of the national average.¹⁴ Students who leave school without a diploma face a higher likelihood of unemployment and lower wages, earning more than \$330,000 less in a lifetime than a high school graduate.¹⁵ By contrast, young people who earn at least a high school diploma are more likely to be employed and have better health, and are less likely to live in poverty.¹⁶ Furthermore, the increased earning potential of high school graduates over high school dropouts benefits the community by generating more local, state, and federal tax revenues, spending, and investments. For instance, if the national high school graduation rate for the Class of 2015 had reached 90 percent, the nation likely would have seen the following benefits on various economic and social indicators:

- 250,000 additional high school graduates that year
- \$3.1 billion in additional annual income earnings
- 14,210 new jobs created
- \$159 million in additional tax revenue collected by the federal government annually¹⁷

2. What can schools and communities do to help students stay in school and graduate?

Strategies for ensuring an effective transition for students between high school and postsecondary education include integrating rigorous academics, career and technical education, and work-based learning; mentorship; family engagement

programs; career counseling; and coordination with institutions of higher education and employers.¹⁸ Such efforts increase students' likelihood of finishing high school and graduating better prepared for college or a career.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Synopsis," *For Ahkeem*, <http://forahkeemfilm.com/thefilm/> (accessed August 14, 2017).
- ² R. Harper, "Understanding How Violence and Trauma Impact Teens," *High School Soup* (blog), Alliance for Excellent Education, October 24, 2016, <https://all4ed.org/understanding-how-community-violence-and-trauma-impact-teens/>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ J. Bishop, J. Cardichon, and M. Roc, *Climate Change: Improving School Climate by Supporting Great Teaching* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014).
- ⁷ Alliance for Excellent Education, "Every Student Succeeds Act Primer: Parent and Community Engagement" (Washington, DC: Author, 2016).
- ⁸ "Issue: School to Prison Pipeline," *For Ahkeem*, <http://forahkeemfilm.com/issue-> (accessed August 14, 2017).
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Education, "2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look," (Washington, DC: Author, 2016), <https://ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ K. Loschert, "Part One: Five Things Parents Need to Know About School Safety," *High School Soup* (blog), Alliance for Excellent Education, September 26, 2016, <https://all4ed.org/part-one-five-things-parents-need-to-know-about-school-safety/>.
- ¹¹ "Issue: School to Prison Pipeline," *For Ahkeem*.
- ¹² J. Simons, "Defending Restorative Discipline," *RJ Library* (blog), Centre for Justice & Reconciliation, April 9, 2014, <http://restorativejustice.org/rj-library/defending-restorative-discipline/11434/#sthash.tLBz7U4e.dpbs>.
- ¹³ Bishop, Cardichon, and Roc, *Climate Change*.
- ¹⁴ J. Amos, "U.S. High School Graduation Rate Hits All-Time High: A Time for Celebration and Rededication," *High School Soup* (blog), Alliance for Excellent Education, October 25, 2016, <https://all4ed.org/u-s-high-school-graduation-rate-hits-all-time-high-a-time-for-celebration-and-rededication/>.
- ¹⁵ K. Loschert, "The Suspension Effect: Exclusionary Discipline Practices Increase High School Dropout Rates and Cost the Nation Billions in Lost Tax Revenue, According to the Center for Civil Rights Remedies," *Straight A's* (newsletter), Alliance for Excellent Education, June 28, 2016, <https://all4ed.org/articles/the-suspension-effect-exclusionary-discipline-practices-increase-high-school-dropout-rates-and-cost-the-nation-billions-in-lost-tax-revenue-according-to-the-center-for-civil-rights-remedies/>.
- ¹⁶ America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises, and Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, "GradNation Community Guidebook Updated Edition," <http://guidebook.americaspromise.org/> (accessed August 15, 2017).
- ¹⁷ The projections cited in this document were generated by the Alliance for Excellent Education using an economic model developed by Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc. and updated by Tripp Umbach, all through generous support from State Farm®.
- ¹⁸ Alliance for Excellent Education, "Every Student Succeeds Act Primer: High School Dropout Prevention and Reengagement of Out-of-School Youth" (Washington, DC: Author, 2016).

Film still from *For Ahkeem* courtesy of Nicholas Weissman/Last Resort Doc

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