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Q&A: Michael Johnson has an 'audacious' plan to help low-income youths

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Boys & Girls Club of Dane County CEO Michael Johnson. Enlarge Photo

Pat Schneider

Pat Schneider joined The Capital Times in 1989 and has written on a wide variety of topics including neighborhoods, minority communities and the nonprofit sector.

Michael Johnson knows from mean streets. He came up in public housing projects in Chicago, where he saw many friends fall to gangs and drugs, and he's quick to say he probably wouldn't be alive today if it were not for the influence of church, the local Boys & Girls Club and a mentor who exposed him to life outside his high-poverty, high-crime neighborhood.

And Johnson knows the value of a strong academic foundation. A product of social promotion in the Chicago Public Schools, Johnson found himself on an athletic scholarship at the University of Minnesota, despite being hardly able to read and write. It took a 4.5 year stint at a junior college back in Chicago to build those fundamentals so that he could go on to achieve bachelor's and master's degrees in business to prepare for a career with the Boys & Girls Clubs.

Now the CEO of the Dane County club, Johnson is leading a \$15 million fundraising drive to finance a six-year holistic program that aims to ensure that the kids who are club members now go on to college. The AVID/TOPS program, a partnership between the Boys & Girls Club and the Madison School District that puts paid tutors in the schools, is already spurring kids on to better grades and attendance, a new

study shows. Johnson wants to see the number of youths served quadruple from 2,500 to 10,000.

"I've never been a principal or a school superintendent, but I am a champion for kids and a champion for teachers," says Johnson, 37, who lives in Fitchburg with his wife, Toya, and their children ages 2 and 8.

The Capital Times: What possessed you to take on a \$15 million fundraising campaign?

Michael Johnson: I've been here three years now, and I worked in large urban markets like Chicago and Philadelphia, and Madison is not either one of those cities. So I spent a lot of time sitting in people's living rooms, particularly in the Allied community and in south Madison, talking with them so I could understand what the issues were. I consulted with my board on developing a multi-year strategic plan to help our members achieve. Then we spent a year meeting with the United Way, the Urban League, philanthropists, our donors, our members and their kids, and decided we had to do something big. We spent 16 full days crafting an 80-page, six-year plan, and we looked at what the cost would be to make it a reality.

We figured it would cost us \$15 million to ensure that 90 percent of Boys & Girls Club kids not only graduated from high school, but graduate from college. We found if they don't graduate they can become unproductive citizens. If a person is in a correctional facility, you as a taxpayer are going to spend \$38,000 a year to incarcerate that child, but if that person graduates, they potentially earn \$630,000 more over a lifetime than non-graduates.

CT: What did you hear from people in Allied Drive and south Madison?

MJ: What parent doesn't want their kids to do well? Parents want to be involved in their kids' education, but a lot of parents don't know how to get involved. And you may have a parent who is working two or three jobs to try to make ends meet, so they are dependent on organizations like the Boys & Girls Club and the school district and local mentors to provide surrogate support for their kids.

CT: What does your plan entail?

MJ: Academic enrichment, sports and recreation, character and leadership development, and health and wellness — it's like a stool, you need each of the legs. We've been successful with our AVID/Tops and College Club programs; we have been in public schools working side-by-side with teachers. We have over 60 paid tutors in classrooms every day. We bought buses to bring kids from school to after-school activities, and we serve a healthy meal every day. We take kids on college field trips every month.



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CT: You just formally kicked off this fundraising campaign, correct?

MJ: We decided we have to invest in these kids' lives, right now. We can't wait another day. So we had a big event about two weeks ago and close to 800 people attended, our national president came out, we received a \$2 million grant from the Burke Foundation. We also announced a national partnership with Oscar Mayer that will now have the Boys & Girls Club logo on all of their Lunchables products, which will support our plan.

CT: How are you going to raise the rest of the \$15 million?

MJ: I'm a good fundraiser. It's going to be a diversification of sources: corporate contributions, foundation grants, support from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, retail campaigns, and individual contributions. People underestimate the power of individual contributions; in some ways I'd rather have a lot of \$50 checks than fewer big ones. Those \$100,000 checks are nice, but it becomes a huge liability because you have to retain those gifts over the years. So we've built up our individual donor base and demonstrated to our stakeholders that we are delivering results.

CT: There are a lot of programs to help low-income kids out there now, aren't there?

MJ: What I see is there are a lot of community-based organizations doing great work, but we're not aligned. There's no comprehensive vision on how the city, the county, the school district, local nonprofits and the philanthropic community can come together to support kids.

CT: You were the kind of young man — poor, black, from a single-parent family in a rough neighborhood, with an iffy education — that a lot of well-meaning people in Madison can't seem to figure out how to connect with. What was it that made the difference in your life?

MJ: Love is love, no matter where you come from. Pete Gochis was a Greek-American who had never been around a lot African-American families before opening a grocery store in our neighborhood. There were gangs that tried to lure me, but I knew Pete cared about me and my future. No one in my family talked to me about college. My mom worked in the school cafeteria — that's the work I knew. It was Pete who told me I could go to college and took me to area colleges. He opened up that door for me.

There are so many working professionals in Madison who could do that for kids here. I told the Rotary Club (Madison West) the other day, we need enough boots on the ground to open up these doors so they can become productive adults.

CT: Who are you looking at to volunteer?

MJ: We all have to own this achievement gap issue. I've found a lot of people who want to improve life for our kids, but there are also a lot of people who are labeling low-income students of color. It's become divisive, and as a result our kids are suffering. Let's get to know each other as a community and come up with a comprehensive plan on how we can support kids in the classroom and after school. I'm not going to bash teachers because the reality is the school district over the past 10 years had lost tens of millions of dollars as well. So instead of us going to the public and saying we want tax dollars for our initiative, we decided we're going to go out and raise it, and use our resources and work side-by-side with the teachers so we can have some skin in the game.

CT: What does this effort need from people in the community who might not now be active with or even familiar with the Boys & Girls Club?

MJ: We need time, talent and treasure. Some people can give all three; but most people can give one. Look at what you might be interested in. We'll be asking people over the next 5-6 years to help make this a reality. Our big, hairy, audacious goal is that 90 percent of our kids will graduate from high school and go on to a post-secondary education.

Tags Pat Schneider, Boys Girls Club, Michael Johnson, Madison School District, Chicago Public Schools, Burke Foundation, Oscar Mayer

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