



The Chicago International Film Festival

Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival
Education Outreach Program Screening: *The Boys of Baraka*
Director: Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady
84 minutes

Please use this guide to lead your students in preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the film, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays must be sent to Cinema/Chicago in order to be invited to subsequent film screenings.*

Synopsis

The Boys of Baraka is a documentary film that follows a group of middle school students as they journey miles away from their families and homes in the pursuit of a better education. The Baraka School For Boys relocates the students to rural Kenya for an entire year, separating them from friends, family, and the dangerous streets of Baltimore.

As the film follows their journey, they undergo many changes; some gradual and some rapid. The students transition into their new home environment smoothly, but the school environment is more challenging. All of the boys make it through their first year at the Baraka School, and many receive better grades than they did at their public schools. But their biggest challenge comes when the Baraka school closes down, and they are forced to return to public school education. The film ends highlighting the varied futures of the subjects, focusing on the many hardships they must overcome in order to succeed in school and beyond. With 76% of Baltimore young men failing to graduate high school, and 50% of them ending up in jail, the film questions how young men can succeed or even thrive when the odds and statistics are stacked against them and explores how the boys were affected by their experiences at the Baraka school and their return to Baltimore.

The School Environment

The Baraka School For Boys is one of many programs that offers alternate educational opportunities for students living in dangerous or low-income neighborhoods. In addition to being able to provide better educational opportunities, boarding schools can be a positive alternative for students living in areas with gang violence, high poverty, and high crime rates. For these students, boarding schools are successful in removing students from the dangers of their neighborhoods and preventing them from dropping out of school and becoming involved in gangs.

The school environment plays a very important role in fostering the development of young students and providing them the means to excel later in life. Because of the many challenges that often come with living in a city like Baltimore (or even Chicago), the boys featured in the film had scarce educational opportunities. Boarding schools and other away-from-home programs can be beneficial alternatives for

students dealing with many negative influences. Many programs specialize in educating students while aiding them with other challenges, such as learning disabilities, eating disorders, depression, and drug addiction. Other programs exist to help teens and adolescents cope with their challenges. Wilderness programs, similar to the Baraka School program, take place in remote locations with a small group of adolescents and an adult counselor. Wilderness programs can specialize in adolescent/teen counseling for anger management issues, mental illnesses, poor social skills, and much more. In the film, the boys must move to Africa in order to attend the Baraka School. This forces the boys to move away from Baltimore and separate themselves from its negative influences; it allows them to just be boys without having to deal with the other stresses in their lives.

One of the key factors in the success of boarding schools has been their unique ability to remove disadvantaged students from their areas and provide them with the resources they need to succeed in a nurturing environment. The element of removal is important for the success of underprivileged students because it removes the negative pressures and stresses of their environment and allows them to just focus on school. In a survey, 95% of boarding school students reported that drugs and alcohol are not a central part of their social lives, compared to the 82% of non-boarding school students surveyed who reported that drugs and alcohol are. Additionally, as high as 94% of students who attend boarding school also attend college. Most of the boys we see in the film receive better grades at the Baraka school than they did in their school in Baltimore. They also learn how to work together and communicate with others more effectively. The Baraka School allows them to separate themselves from the problems back home and focus on developing as individuals.

Know Your Neighborhood

Many neighborhoods in Chicago struggle to help adolescents stay focused and succeed in school. It can be difficult for students to stay in school because of the many negative pressures they often encounter from their family members, peers, and neighborhoods. Statistics show that students living in areas with high poverty rates are at more of a disadvantage. The higher the percentage of residents living in poverty is, the higher the rates of violent crimes and homicides are as well. Gang activity and drug use is also more prevalent in neighborhoods with high poverty rates. All of these factors can negatively influence students living in these areas. In fact, performance rates for low-income students in Chicago are 4% lower than the city average. All of these factors affect students' ability to succeed in school, and therefore stay in school. Chicago has approximately 60,000 school drop outs every year. From the time a student drops out of school until the time they turn 21, the odds of them ever completing a high school degree steadily decreases. Without a high school degree, job prospects also decline. Although the 60,000 dropouts in Chicago is much lower than the 76% of boys in Baltimore that do not graduate, it still puts many Chicago youths at risk of not being able to find jobs and not being able to improve their lives.

Study Ideas/Questions

1. Which student do you find most interesting in the film: Devon, Romesh, Richard, or Montrey? Which student, if any, do you most identify with?
2. Devon's mother was once addicted to drugs, and gets arrested during Devon's first year at the Baraka School. How might his home life influence his experience at the school? How does being separated from their home lives impact all the boys' experiences at the school?

- 3.** The Baraka School closes down halfway through the program. What challenges did you see the boys overcome at the Baraka School? What challenges do you imagine they will face with their return to public middle school education in Baltimore?
- 4.** How valuable do you think a high school education is? Do you think graduating high school will provide you with opportunities you wouldn't have otherwise?
- 5.** Do you think the boys who attended the Baraka school are more likely to graduate than some of their peers? Why or why not?
- 6.** How are the boys different after their first year at the Baraka School? How do you imagine the experience of returning home from a year in Africa, to the harsh streets of Baltimore was for them?
- 7.** Richard and Romesh's mother says that if only one of her sons was able to attend the Baraka School, and the other stayed in Baltimore, it would "make one a king and the other a killer." What do you think she means?
- 8.** Once the boys arrive in Africa, Devon states that he is happy to be around people just like him, "black and poor." How do you think the boys' environment at the Baraka school is different from their environment in Baltimore?
- 9.** How would you feel about being sent to another country for school? If it meant improving your education and would affect the rest of your life for the better, would you choose to do it, even if it meant leaving your family and friends for an extended period?
- 10.** Think about if this film was a "narrative" film, meaning the story was told with a script and actors, instead of a documentary. How do you think it would have been different? Would it have told a "real" story?
- 11.** Do you think your life would be different growing up in a different area or country? Why do you think a poor area of Kenya was so much different than a poor area in Baltimore?
- 12.** What kind of future do you think the boys have now? Do you think only one year made a difference in their mindset, determination, and goals?
- 13.** What do you think drives the anger and hostility within the troubled boys sent off to Baraka? How do you think their families could help them? Do you have a person that can drive away anger for you?
- 14.** What scene from the film affected you the most? Does it make you want try harder in school or support those who struggle?
- 15.** Do you think that the education system of Baltimore might improve the lives of their students by putting more money towards the schools or towards more programs focused on the few, like Baraka?

Useful Links and Resources

[WBEZ gang map with community areas](#)

[The Association of Board Schools report on boarding school statistics](#)

[Leadership opportunities for students](#)

[Big Brothers, Big Sisters](#)

[Cure Violence](#)

[Mercy Home Mentor Program](#)

[Chicago Youth Centers](#)

Interested in Film?

Adobe Youth Voices helps students/teachers get a film club started at their school to encourage students to foster their creativity, practice their storytelling techniques, and even influence change through experimenting with society's most powerful medium. Find out more: youthvoices.adobe.com

*Schools who do not send in essay requirement will not be allowed to attend future Education Outreach Screenings.