

2014 HEINZ SUMMIT REPORT

On October 28, 2014, The Heinz Endowments sponsored a one-day summit for educators entitled “Are Academics Enough?” The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and the Center on Race and Social Problems hosted the summit, which had close to one-hundred attendees. The summit consisted of a keynote speaker and a panel with guests from the research community, Pittsburgh Public Schools superintendents, and community leaders.

Presenters discussed the challenges faced by black youth in the educational system, and the types of non-academic skills that are necessary for them to learn so they can succeed in the classroom and in society at large. Large and small group discussions between the panel and summit attendees focused on three main areas: the topics that need to be addressed by educators and policy makers, strategies that have worked, and changes to be implemented.

Objectives

- To offer educators an opportunity to hear about and explore compelling research that offers pathways for developing non-academic skills among African American male students in our communities and schools.
- To bring educators and policy leaders together from the region to identify promising practices and strategies for developing non-academic skills and discuss how these can be the lever for creating greater access and opportunity for our most vulnerable populations.
- To encourage collaboration in the region that is cross-district in nature and helps communities move from a limited school-to-school reform approach to a broader transformational and sustainable ecosystem for learning.
- To identify a common agenda in the region for equity in education issues that can be supported in part through foundation funding.

Keynote Speaker

The Keynote speaker was Dr. Howard Fuller, Distinguished Professor of Education and Founder/Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. Dr. Fuller presented data on the realities of black student achievement in the public school system. He

stated that half of America's black youth fail to graduate from high school on time, while more and more jobs are requiring higher levels of education. He stressed the need for educators to focus on the strengths of black students, rather than their weaknesses. He stated that although academic success is important for the African American student, having other social and emotional skills is just as valuable as the academics learned in the classroom. He challenged the attendees to focus on teaching their students about persistence, self-control, confidence and strength in dealing with adversity.

Dr. Fuller presented findings from research on resiliency about the skills necessary for youth growing up in adverse situations to develop into successful members of society. He listed the following skills as important: responsiveness, cultural flexibility, communication skills, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Furthermore, Dr. Fuller emphasized the need for adults to put aside their discomfort with race and allow room for action that will benefit students of color.

Panel Presentations

A panel discussion followed Dr. Fuller's speech. Members of the panel were: Dr. Linda Lane (Superintendent, Pittsburgh Public Schools); Dr. Lori Delale-O'Connor (Associate Director for Research and Development, Center for Urban Education, University of Pittsburgh); Dr. James Huguley (Research Associate, Center on Race and Social Problems); Dr. Wayne Walters (Assistant Superintendent for High Schools, Pittsburgh Public Schools, and Principal, Obama International Baccalaureate High School)

The panelists spoke about what, in their experience, works in helping black students to succeed. They focused on the need for students of color to have positive role models who will guide them and show them the way. They emphasized the need for school districts to band together with parents, churches, organizations, service providers, and other school districts so as to improve the quality of supports available to their students. They discussed the need for teachers to build caring relationships with their students in order to build upon their strengths and form a collaborative unit. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of open discussions about race issues, and trainings about cultural diversity for teachers, staff and administrators.

Small Group and Post-presentation Discussions

Summit attendees were asked to discuss the following questions in their small groups:

1. How did the morning change you and how can you use the information to change Pittsburgh?
2. Do you see any barriers to implementing these strategies? (lack of funding and/or staff, lack of community support/interest, etc.)
3. What aspects of this issue were not addressed during the morning presentations and discussions?
4. What other topics or questions would you like for the speaker or panelists to address?

Finally, the discussion was open to the larger group, where attendees shared, asked questions and presented concerns. This discussion revealed the challenges faced by many schools, where the focus tends to be on test achievement and less on the personal development of the students. Some schools shared their successes and offered support to those that are still trying to define where they are. The participants were eager to build collaboration and further explore the issues presented.

Summary

This summit provided an open space for discussion, sharing of concerns, and building of collaboration among educators at all levels. The strengths of black students and the cultural sensitivity of school personnel will be further enhanced by the relationships started here and by the real sharing of strategies that are useful and productive. Educators left the summit equipped to encourage and engage change within their schools and districts, empower fellow educators to evaluate their role in supporting young black males, and build collaborative relationships that will ultimately benefit their black male students academically and in the larger society.