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Education Pioneer Tells Minnesotans to “Take a Stand”

Leader of Harlem Children’s Zone advises crowd at Minneapolis Foundation’s “Minnesota Meeting”

MINNEAPOLIS (May 27, 2009) – Minnesota must “take a stand” with its educational system in order to make it work for the state’s children, nationally renowned education expert Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone, told an audience of 1,000 at The Minneapolis Foundation’s Minnesota Meeting on May 27.

“We’ve all become apologists for the [educational] system,” Canada said. He encouraged Minnesota educators and community leaders to accept no excuses – to do whatever it takes to help children emerge from schools ready to achieve in college, work and life.

Canada said he’s learned that, “If you care about your children, you’re going to have to save them yourselves. No one is coming in to rescue Minnesota’s children. If you don’t do it, it will not get done.”

Since 1990, Canada has been the President and Chief Executive Officer for the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City. The project provides an interlocking network of social service, education and community-building programs to thousands of children and families in a 97-block area of Central Harlem.

He counted among the project’s successes that 100 percent of students in its Harlem Gems pre-K program are ready for kindergarten. “Not 90, not 80, but 100 percent.” Hundreds of Harlem Children Zone students are now receiving their college degrees. “If you want to transform a community, bring home college graduates,” he said.

Canada laid out basic principles for the Harlem Children’s Zone that he said apply to educational reform in Minnesota:

- Begin early. Only by beginning with early childhood education and intervention can we keep students from falling behind so far, so fast that they’ll never catch up. He said that nation has invested billions in a failed strategy: “Don’t educate them early; lock them up later. We can’t afford to do that anymore.”
- No one program idea is powerful enough to do the job. Create a continuity of best practices that help kids in school and in the community to help them to successfully achieve the next stage of progress, all the way through college. Canada pointed out a constant continuum of support is needed. His program believes that to tackle only one issue while everything else in a child’s universe is crumbling is a failed strategy.
- Parents have to be involved and engaged, especially for the most vulnerable children. Canada said he was unapologetic for programs in the Harlem Children’s Zone that provided economic incentives for parents to get involved in school activities, saying the focus needs to be on what the children need. He said, “We have to build a science of how to get parents from the most vulnerable families involved” in their children’s education.
- Schools must be redesigned for success. He said, “You’ve got to invest in a longer school day and a longer school year” to help children keep pace with competition elsewhere. He said we need to hold teachers accountable but also “pay teachers like they’re professionals.” He also said

the intensive repairs needed in the system can't be done "just as a job," but they require the dedication and extra effort of professional teachers.

- Communities need to support young people in an atmosphere with clean parks and playgrounds and an absence of violence. And if kids are hungry, they aren't going to learn, according to Canada.
- Evaluate and measure each and every step. He encouraged the crowd to get student testing data turned around fast enough to allow for meaningful intervention for struggling students.

Many of these principles are at the center of a local initiative being launched May 30th, the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis.

Canada's passionate concern for children to make their lives safer and more successful was woven into his remarks, which concluded with an original poem entitled "Take a Stand." Poetry was the hook that kept Geoffrey Canada engaged in education while growing up in a poor and sometimes violent Bronx neighborhood. He said, "We don't know what will save a child. For some it will be music, for others it will be drawing. Our job is to provide a variety of real opportunities for kids to allow them to find the things that save them."

Canada said the educational system is in a state of crisis, but that long-term fixes must be made while treating the emergency. Many people in Minnesota are doing great work for children in pockets of achievement, but that the state must get these efforts connected in order to give all its children the opportunity they deserve.

Commenting about the resistance to change in Minnesota education, he said, "In the end, you cannot accept any excuses because if it was *your* child, there would be no excuses."

The crowd of more than 1,000 at the Minneapolis Convention Center was the largest in the 25-year history of Minnesota Meeting. The theme of "Working Together: Organizing our Communities to Support Student Success" was the third of three 2009 public affairs discussion events sponsored by The Minneapolis Foundation, focusing on ways to ensure all the state's students achieve at high levels – regardless of gender, ethnicity, or household income.

Minneapolis Foundation President and CEO Sandra Vargas pointed out that to ensure the success of all students and to provide them with meaningful opportunity, Minnesota needs more than strong schools. She said it will require all sectors of the community working together to support student success. She said the Foundation is preparing to announce a new strategic direction that will focus resources and collaboration on transforming education in the state.

"Let's hold ourselves accountable. There are no excuses for not helping our kids reach their full potential and have a brighter future," Vargas said.

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Established in 1915, The Minneapolis Foundation is one of the nation's oldest and largest community foundations. It manages nearly \$500 million in assets, administers more than 1,000 charitable funds created by individuals, families, and businesses, and distributes more than \$35 million in grants each year. The Foundation also works with others to improve the quality of life in the region and serves as a catalyst for dialogue and action on critical issues, such as through the Minnesota Meeting public affairs program. For more information, visit www.MinneapolisFoundation.org.