

AFT, White House host discussion on boys and men of color

June 17, 2014



The auditorium of Challengers Boys & Girls Club, a vibrant community hub serving some of the toughest neighborhoods in Central Los Angeles, was packed on June 12 when the AFT co-presented a roundtable discussion on ways to build the pathway to graduation, college and career for boys and men of color. The event was the latest in a series of roundtable discussions presented around the nation by the union and White House initiatives on Educational Excellence for African Americans and Educational Excellence for Hispanics, as well as initiatives on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Native American and Alaska Natives.

AFT President Randi Weingarten participated in a panel discussion that explored proven practices to help ensure educational excellence for boys and men of color. She was joined by AFT vice presidents David Gray and Joshua Pechthalt in a daylong exploration of issues tied to concerns about access, equity and opportunity for key student subgroups—from the damaging, disproportionate effects of rigid "zero tolerance" policies on students, particularly boys of color, to the need for public-private partnerships and the community power they bring to bear on schools' biggest challenges.

Weingarten made it clear that the AFT and its affiliates stand ready to do their part when it comes to building "a ladder of economic opportunity and educational opportunities so our children can climb up and reach their dreams."



Discussions like the one at Challengers Boys & Girls Club offer the promise of "a very different beginning in union-community relations," the AFT president added. It's a relationship that is based around "a consensus about what works for students in life, school, college and career." This new direction has a momentum that can't be extinguished by the powerful few who are bent on fomenting dissent and splintering these essential alliances through the courts or the legislatures.

"We reaffirm our commitment to improving educational outcomes for all the men and boys of our country," said Gray, president of the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees. The AFT, he added, is steadfast in its "unshakeable belief" that all children deserve access to early childhood programs, small class sizes, wraparound services and outstanding schools staffed by highly qualified and well-trained professionals—some of the vital components of building opportunity for boys of color. "When we stand together, we are unbreakable in this fight to reclaim the promise of public schools."

Pechthalt, who leads the California Federation of Teachers, also urged the crowd to see the power of partnerships, stressing that these coalitions had unquestionably proven their mettle. In California, "for the first time in years, we aren't cutting programs and laying off teachers, but so much more needs to be done," he reminded the crowd. "As a teachers union, we only have so much power; but if we build alliances with our community, we are so much stronger."

Early, effective intervention was a major theme at the event. Damon Williams, vice president of program, training and youth development services for the Boys & Girls Club of America, spoke of the frustrations he felt coming from a background in higher education and seeing so many children unprepared for both the emotional and academic challenges of higher education. "I felt I was too late," the former administrator at the University of Wisconsin-Madison remembered. Now, Williams stressed, his current organization, the Boys & Girls Club, plays a vital role in the younger years, through outreach that fights summer learning loss and through programs like Diplomas to Degrees, which instills a sense of purpose in young people when they need

it most. Other supports and interventions highlighted at the panel included incentive-building dual-enrollment programs and school master schedules designed to expose all students to challenging opportunities early in their schooling.



The roundtable also explored institutional obstacles facing boys and men of color, including problems tied to disparities in law enforcement and special education placement. A growing body of evidence shows that young men of color receive unequal treatment in both settings, UCLA professors Gary Orfield and Phillip Atiba Goff warned. Young black men are 400 to 500 percent more likely to be placed in special education than their peers, said Orfield, director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. For far too many, this ushers in years of "dead-end and isolated" schooling. One of the most important ways to correct the situation, several panelists said, is to ensure cultural sensitivity through diversity on school panels charged with making placement decisions.

One ingredient still needed, they said, is political will—policymakers committed to putting essential resources in place to support effective interventions. Immense human potential is being lost, and the task deserves immediate attention, said Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana, former assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education at the U.S. Department of Education and currently a senior administrator for the Los Angeles Unified School District, a district with 100,000 youths and young adults who are either out of school or unemployed. Marc Philpart, associate director of the nonprofit public policy group PolicyLink, said his organization is focused heavily on goals like safe, supportive and welcoming schools, and approaches to student retention and suspension that do not target men and boys of color. "We know what works, but we somehow lack the will to make it happen."

It's also critical, several speakers said, to view issues not exclusively as school problems but as problems in the context of the community. "At the end of the day, it's not just about the school functioning at a high level, it's about the community functioning at a high level," one panelist remarked.

The event emphasized how strong parental engagement and meaningful one-to-one relationships had power in the fight to keep vulnerable students in school. Torey Broughton, a student at Hawthorne Math and Science

Academy, offered a moving account of how, after a brush with the law, he found the help he needed to change his path by working with adult mentors who supported him in the school. These men went as far as appearing at a court hearing to attest to his character and potential—and it left an indelible impression on the young man. "If they care enough to stand up for me like that, the least I can do is meet them halfway," he told the crowd.

[Mike Rose/photos by Armando Arorizo]