

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

CRISIS IN OUR NATION'S SCHOOLS

Hosted by the Jackson Hole Institute
Co-sponsored with
The Philanthropy Roundtable

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Over 100 philanthropists and education leaders participated in a conference on the "Crisis in Our Nation's Schools," sponsored by the Jackson Hole Institute and co-sponsored with The Philanthropy Roundtable. Highlights from the conference follow.

A Crisis in Our Nation

The conference opened with the question, *Is There a Crisis in Education?* **Cory Booker**, president of Newark Now, said that because educational excellence abounds in America, there is no crisis in education. Instead, we are confronting a crisis in our nation because so many are denied access to that educational excellence:

"I decided that the front line to the American dream is in our inner cities. I moved to one of the most challenged inner cities in America, one of poorest we had, and I was shocked to find so many heroic people – so many people who did so much for so little for so many. I moved across the street from some high-rise public housing projects and met women who were holding their communities together with toothpaste and bubble gum and string.

They reached into their own pockets because they knew that schools weren't educating their children.

They were holding tutoring classes and enrichment classes outside ... knowing that if they let their kids be raised by the streets they would be taken and swallowed up by them."

Booker emphasized that accountability and alternatives to the government monopoly on schools are needed to promote freedom and equal opportunity in education:

"The reason why systems like this are allowed to be preserved is because they have no accountability. Accountability is three things. First, accountability is having clear standards. The private sector has it. No matter what business you're in, you know what your standard is at the end of the day, what you must meet. The second thing is having measures, ways of measuring progress to those standards. The third and most important part of accountability is having consequences when there is failure. The public monopoly in my city and in so many other cities has none of that. They've got these minimal competency tests that are failed year after year, and what usually happens is a demand for more money and more resources. But the failure continues to happen.

"We talk about freedom all the time in America. Free market, free economy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of ideas. All of those freedoms are based on having an electorate, as Madison said, that is intellectually capable of supporting and sustaining our democracy. The one freedom that has been stripped from the people in my city and in urban areas around the country is educational freedom. There's a famous old saying that power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely. I don't buy that. I always say that power corrupts, but powerlessness corrupts more. When you strip a people of their power, that's when the corruption ensues."

Booker also made an impassioned plea to the audience to become active in educational reform efforts:

As I look before me now I see so many heroes who are already are doing so much for this cause. This cause must grow stronger.

More people must join us and realize that unless we unlock the potential in our urban community, our nation as a whole is destined to its own demise.... This struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, or it may be a moral and a physical one, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand, thus said Frederick Douglass."

A Grim Report Card

In giving *A Report Card on Our Nation's Schools*, Deputy Secretary of Education **Eugene Hickok** painted a grim statistical portrait of education in the United States. He said that education is the "essential work of a democracy," and our nation has "compiled a huge list of excuses and allowed a generation to slip by." He said that two essential ingredients to success in any educational endeavor are ownership and attitude – especially a refusal to accept mediocrity. He also emphasized the need to reinvent and revolutionize American education, and encouraged us to think differently about what education could look like:

"So as you debate whether or not to pursue ideas like school vouchers or school choice or charter schools or engineering or technology, be willing to really think about what the next generation of American education might look like. Why is it we have elementary, middle, and high schools? Why is it we have a process that tends to trump substance? Why is it so radical that all of a sudden we're talking about results and performance as though these were new ideas? Why is it we refuse in most places to try to link teaching rewards to results as opposed to length of duty?"

I would encourage you to really push – push your own imagination to think how things might look if we could start from scratch,

if we didn't have to start with all the old assumptions. Begin with what constitutes an educated man or an educated woman in the 21st century, and then work backwards: how could you create structures to get men and women there?"

"Revolution takes root in small places with large hearts and great minds. One of the reasons I was hoping to be with you today is to encourage you to think about a revolution taking root, perhaps here – an education revolution.... Let it be a revolution of rights and expectations for all of us. Let it be a revolution that recognizes, as John Walton said, that it's a good thing to have heroes, but it's a better thing to make sure that the work of those heroes lives long after they are gone. Let it be a revolution that recognizes that every child has within his or her heart, mind, and spirit, the heart and mind and spirit and promise of America. Let it be a revolution that recognizes that there can be no higher calling in a democracy for any of its citizens than to do whatever you can to make sure that promise is fulfilled.... Remember that our task is simply understood and timeless in its purpose.... Whatever we are, whatever we do, our job is to be good and faithful guides for our children. I hope that as you go forward you think about new and exciting and important ways to start an American education revolution and ensure that you are good and faithful guides for all of our children."

You Cannot Walk Away

John Walton of the Walton Family Foundation shared the lessons he had learned over years of funding education reform. He concluded that although individual programs do much good, they will not change the system. In order to make education work for all children, we have to change the incentives that are at work within the system. One way to do this is by empowering parents and children to choose schools that are right for them, creating incentives for excellence and consequences for failure. Walton described the tangible results of initiatives such as the Children's Scholarship Fund, which has provided nearly 62,000 low-income children with scholarships to attend private schools:

"In my work, I have seen entire families turn around and be re-energized and almost reborn as a result of having hope for their kids, which is something I really didn't expect. It is amazing the lack of hope that you find in these inner cities because they know –



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you don't have to tell them – that their school is dysfunctional. You don't have to tell them that the odds of their child graduating, if they are a minority kid attending an inner-city urban school, their odds of graduating are less than 50 percent. That's across the country. You don't have to tell them that. You don't have to tell them that if they do graduate there's a high risk of being functionally illiterate. These parents know all that.... It is the hope of every parent that your child is going to do better than you did. I hope my son doesn't make all the mistakes I made. When you see what happens to parents when they see their child beginning to blossom in the way that they had always hoped, it's what -- after all the discussion and all of the academic arguments and all of the theory -- it's what keeps me coming back to this issue and will not let me quit. I, you, just simply cannot walk away.

"Remember the 50 percent graduation rate I talked about in urban public schools?"

The truth is, if you stop to think about it, school choice is alive and well and being practiced by every one of those kids who dropped out.

They basically made a choice – the fact that they chose to leave the public schools shows that for them, there's more value in the street than there is in school...You can't stop school choice. Every kid has that option. The question is: What kind of choices do they have? What kind of choices do we offer? We came to the conclusion that there is no reason why every kid shouldn't have the same options that wealthier children have. Fortunately, we don't have to rely anymore on theory because the results are coming in...What I love now is that we're not arguing about why the kids are failing, we're arguing about why they're succeeding."

No Excuses

Michael Feinberg of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and **Christopher Barbic** of YES College Preparatory School shared their high-poverty, high-impact school models and their commitment to "no excuses" in education reform. At YES, a charter high school in Houston, college is not only a goal, but a graduation requirement.

At the beginning of each school year, teachers, faculty, parents, and students all sign a "Commitment to Excellence" contract that demonstrates their willingness to do "Whatever It Takes" to achieve the YES mission. This commitment is most clearly realized in the YES daily schedule, which requires students to spend 65% more time in school than public school students around the nation:

"One argument that we're trying to prove is that if you give our kids the same opportunities and resources that kids receive at great private and suburban public schools, our kids will knock it out of the park just like those guys. But if you look at a lot of inner city schools, they lack the opportunities, the resources, and most importantly they just lack the political will to get it done. If you don't leave with anything else today, leave with that idea. This isn't rocket science. It's having the will, it's finding great people and making them feel important, working hard, and then finding the resources. If you put those things together, it's not that hard."

Barbic also shared his long-term vision for high-performing schools like KIPP and YES:

"What we really want to do is have a bigger impact ... where we can then put some pressure on the larger system. We feel like right now we're kind of a gnat on the elephant's behind because we're serving such a small group. Our goal is not only to impact the kids in our school and make sure they get a great education, but indirectly push the system to show, 'Hey, look, these are the kids you've been making excuses for, explaining why they can't succeed – but so many of them are succeeding.' ... I hope that between our direct impact and that indirect impact, we will benefit thousands of kids in the Houston area and be an example to others around the state and the country."

A Challenge for the 21st Century

David Brennan, founder and chairman of White Hat Management, challenged the residents of Jackson to work to give every child in Wyoming a voucher:

"We've lived now for over 150 years of government domination of education. In every other part of our children's lives, we direct them. Until they get old enough and start to disregard us, we direct their lives – except in one place: education. We turn them over to the

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government and say, 'You do the job.' And then we don't like the job the government does. If we don't like it, we should take our kids back"

Brennan emphasized the importance of making tax money follow children and considering a variety of educational alternatives to meet the needs of a diverse student body. He called on participants to harness the American innovative spirit and maximize the potential of technology, finding solutions that will make educating each child less costly:

"The 21st century is different. Our technology is moving so fast it's scary. Our biggest problem right now is disciplining people not to change our schools too often. It's coming that fast. Software is being developed to supplement educational activities, which is exciting... We want to create an environment, a market to make sure we maximize those technology opportunities... And I feel deeply that until and unless we have a fairly large market place, we're never going to find out how really great the American innovative spirit is for solving this problem. But I'm completely convinced that when we do, the solutions will be unending, ongoing, and extraordinary."

Brennan also encouraged us to become more engaged in politics in order to achieve change, and he said that term limits have been especially helpful in his groundbreaking education work in Ohio:

"If this continues in the 21st century, our nation is not at risk, our nation is doomed... As a whole, we as citizens have not adequately taken up the charge of making sure that our government works right... We have to take charge. We have to let our politicians know what we think good government should be."



William H. "Chip" Mellor of the Institute for Justice gave an update on school choice in America and explored the myths and realities of vouchers. He also emphasized the need for school reformers to persevere despite the obstacles:

"Any fight to improve educational opportunities for all children must have one important ingredient: dogged tenacity and persistence. It ain't going to be quick,

it ain't going to be easy, and it's never going to be done because as soon as you win, you're going to be under attack from a new direction. But even so, the fight is still a glorious endeavor.... How can we not try to fulfill America's sacred promise of equal educational opportunity that is the birthright of every child in this country? How can we not try? And if we try, how can we fail?"

Participants also enjoyed presentations by education experts **Frederick Hess** of the American Enterprise Institute, who provided an overview of the history, institutions, and politics of education; **Jeanne Allen** of the Center for Education Reform, who explored solutions to the crisis in education; **Vivian Wilson**, administrator for the Union Baptist Excel Institute, who shared a golden example of a school that is empowering parents and providing underserved children with an excellent academic and moral education; and **Bryan Hassel** of Public Impact, who provided a primer on charter schools and the needs of the charter school movement.



Jackson Hole Institute

The Jackson Hole Institute seeks to improve American K-12 public education by increasing awareness of the challenges and by highlighting steps for positive change.

The PHILANTHROPY ROUNDTABLE

The Philanthropy Roundtable seeks to foster excellence in philanthropy, to help donors achieve their philanthropic intent, and to help donors advance freedom, opportunity, and personal responsibility.

For more details about this conference or the Jackson Hole Institute (JHI), please contact JHI president Steve Friess at steve@jacksonholeinstitute.org. For more information about The Philanthropy Roundtable's education programs, please contact Stephanie Saroki at ssaroki@PhilanthropyRoundtable.org.