

As Trump surrogate, Paladino stirs controversy at urban educators' forum



Carl Paladino speaks during the Trump rally at First Niagara Center in Buffalo, April 18, 2016. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

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Carl P. Paladino never shies away from voicing his opinion.

Even to an audience not likely to agree with his views, language or delivery.

On Friday, Paladino took to a national stage presenting his opinions on education to a conference of urban school leaders in Miami. It was part of a debate between surrogates of the two major party presidential candidates that was hosted by the Council of Great City Schools, which represents the country's largest, urban school systems.

Paladino, representing Donald Trump, debated Mildred Otero, a former education adviser for Clinton.

Western New Yorkers have become used to Paladino's brash style and often off-color language – he employed it here before a Trump candidacy was ever on the horizon.

But as his involvement in the campaign has thrust him on a national stage, his comments have garnered greater scrutiny and criticism.

Friday was no different, with the added element he was speaking to a group of people he has been apt to criticize – urban school leaders.

In his opening comments, Paladino referred to the “corrupted, incompetent urban school systems we have in this country” and suggested they exist exclusively to fuel a liberal voting base for the Democratic Party.

“There was so much there, I don't know where to start,” Otero began during her time to comment.

The debate continued with Paladino slamming teachers unions and referring to academics on college campuses as former “pot-smoking hippies back during the Vietnam era.”

Such comments elicited boos from a befuddled audience and prompted moderator Dan Rather to urge them to save their reactions for later. He was unsuccessful.

“Way to not know your audience,” one audience member tweeted with #slursarenotpolicy.

Paladino's remarks also drew quizzical looks and criticism from a panel of well-regarded urban school superintendents.

“I guess I'm glad I don't live in Buffalo,” said Cincinnati Public Schools board vice president Melanie Bates.

“A lot has concerned me, but we only have 90 minutes,” said Miami Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho.

In answering a question about the role of the federal government in ensuring equity in schools, Paladino accused the Office of Civil Rights of “perpetuating absolute nonsense.” He dismissed the ongoing issue pertaining to diversity at City Honors High School.

He went on to reference students from “dysfunctional homes” and saying “our minorities need to be brought along,” a comment that garnered the sharpest criticism from his debate opponent and the audience.

“Language matters,” Otero said. “I don't want to get in a back and forth with you but ‘minority students need to be brought along’ is not the place to start that conversation.”

Still, Paladino appeared unruffled throughout the 90-minute session and refrained from getting into a back and forth with any of his critics – something he’s prone to do when arguing with his opponents on the Buffalo school board.

Paladino was not immediately reachable for his reaction to the debate, but seemed aware his comments were not going over well with the audience.

When asked who Trump might select as his secretary of education, Paladino laughed before answering.

“I don’t think it’s going to be me,” he said smiling. “So ...”