

## Is "equity" in education just about money? Educators debate strategies

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CLEVELAND, Ohio - Everyone agrees that black students, Hispanic students and poor students deserve good educations, Denver school board member Allegra Haynes told educators from across the country gathered in downtown Cleveland Friday.

But they start backing away when discussions about equity in education involve money or having to change behavior or biases.

"People equate the idea of taking away from one group and giving to another as a lose-lose," Haynes said.

How to change that attitude was a major focus of a panel - "What is equity?" - at the annual conference of the Council of the Great City Schools, the national organization for the nation's big-city school districts.

Haynes was joined by Cleveland schools CEO Eric Gordon, superintendents from Dallas and Milwaukee, a Cleveland parent and two Cleveland students in a 90-minute discussion of how learning gaps between different racial and economic groups can be closed.

Led by CNN commentator and author Van Jones, panelists spent little time spelling out the test score differences between the groups or the significantly-higher poverty and incarceration rates for minority groups in the nation. Those are all just part of the daily life of city schools.

They instead talked about ways to attack the issues - like involving students more, creating a friendly atmosphere at an early age, helping kids address emotional issues, and forcing curriculum and teaching changes to best help students.

Gordon said that he wants to let his students "dream without limits," to be able to have the education and ability to chase their dreams, despite the racial and class issues of the city, multi-generational poverty and anger over police shootings.

"Those of us in this room have an awesome responsibility because we are most positioned...to create that space for dreaming."

Milwaukee Superintendent Darienne Driver said she hopes to change the longstanding belief that black students can't learn as well as white students and are doomed to troubled lives. That can only happen by tackling the school and personal needs of all students.

"Public school can work for all kids, but it has to be a commitment," she said. "It has to be a choice."

That raised the issue of money - adding more money, likely by taking it away from others.

"I was all for taxing rich people when I was broke," Jones said, drawing laughter.

"But I got a raise recently and I'm starting to get a little bit wobbly"

"Why," he asked, "is it good for me to give up my money for somebody who has less?"

Haynes said that people can agree to spend money when it brings results. She told of how more money brought changes to some Denver schools - extra social supports for kids, improved social and emotional learning in classrooms, and changes with teachers and curriculum - that led to "miraculous" improvements.

That has helped make the case for continuing to aid those schools, Haynes said.

"They did the things to make a difference," she said, cautioning, "You can't just throw money at the problem and that's the end."

Dallas Superintendent Michael Hinojosa said education is the only way for the poor to advance, so he appeals to people's altruistic values. If that doesn't work, he said, he talks about house values.

"You've got values somewhere," he said, drawing loud laughter.

Driver and others said that changing the atmosphere of schools - being more welcoming, and avoiding suspensions through "restorative justice" methods where students reflect on behavior and how to make amends - is a good first step.

While Driver said she questions students and families on where the district falls short, Hinojosa said his district hired consultants to do an "equity audit" on his district to find things he and his staff would overlook,

Cleveland parent Jessica Nelson, who has two children in the district and one who graduated, said parents also need to be advocates for their children. If they don't know how, they need help finding people who can.

She also reinforced a belief by many in the audience that students with disabilities are often not treated equitably and pushed aside. But she praised the district for including a daughter with disabilities in regular classes, where she can thrive.



Cleveland students Shauntia Adams and Jonathan Chikuru discuss education equity at a Council of the Great City Schools panel.

Student Shauntia Adams, a senior at New Tech East High School, also appreciated district efforts - particularly Gordon's regular meetings with students from every high school to discuss issues in their schools.

Sophomore Jonathan Chikuru, who attends the Lincoln-West School of Global Studies, drew the largest reaction from the crowd and from Jones. A refugee from the Congo, he talked about coming here 15 months ago, while his parents in the audience looked on.

"Here they can help you to achieve your goals," he said. "Not like in Africa."