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Askwith Education Forum: Our Responsibility as Educators

by
Elizabeth Gehrman

In a speech that moved the crowd to its feet, 2005 National Teacher of the Year



Jason Kamras, Ed.M.'00

Jason Kamras, Ed.M.'00, called for an end to the socioeconomic inequities of public school education in America. "We live in a nation of great promise," he began. "One that aspires valiantly to fulfill its promise of justice and equality, of liberty and freedom. But I believe we have fallen short of that promise. Many Americans realized this suddenly last summer after Hurricane Katrina. But I didn't need a hurricane to convince me. As an educator, I have been dealing with inequity every single day for almost a decade."

At an Askwith Education Forum, the Washington, D.C., math teacher said that more than 90 percent of his students live in poverty--"in the capital of the richest and most powerful nation in all of human history."

He called the correlation between poverty and race "powerful and disturbing," noting that 17 million American children live below the poverty line of \$19,157 for a family of four: that's one in 10 Caucasian children, one in five Hispanic children, and one in four African American children. But the greatest injustice, he said, is that so many low-income children have been denied access to "the greatest equalizer:" an excellent education. Denial comes not only from the lack of access to quality



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schools and effective teaching, "but most tragically, from the lack of expectation that those children can in fact succeed and achieve at the same level as any other children in America."

The average fourth-grader who is not eligible for a free or reduced lunch has a 50 percent chance of scoring proficient or above on the mathematics portion of standardized achievement tests. The fourth-grader who is eligible, by contrast, has a 20 percent chance. "There are still Americans," Kamras said, "who believe this disparity exists because some children cannot learn as well as others, namely children of color or low-income or minority children....That could not be more false."

Given children's capacity to learn, he added, and the "undeniable" role that education plays in determining opportunities in life, "this is the very definition of injustice." The issue, however, is not an education issue. "It is a civil rights issue," Kamras maintained. "It is a human rights issue." It is also, he pointed out, an issue that "jeopardizes the future of our nation."

Students in his school, the John Philip Sousa Middle School, have made significant gains on standardized test scores in recent years, he said, partly through changes to the curriculum and schedule, but mostly because of their unwavering commitment to high expectations, and taking "a profound sense of personal responsibility for our students' achievements." When his classroom leaked sewage for three weeks, he didn't send the kids home, but moved the class to the library. When students' parents cannot pay the phone bill or afford a cell phone, the teachers make home visits. When textbook materials are irrelevant to the context of students' lives, instructors create similar materials to which they can relate. "We refuse to get bogged down in the challenges," he said.

But to attack the problem across the country, he said, "we must address the broader social issues." He conceded that lack of affordable healthcare and housing have a real impact on learning and achievement, and proposed a national comprehensive effort to recruit and retain the best educators and school leaders. To that end, he suggested rethinking the way teachers are certified-- "Sometimes we create too many barriers for people to get into education, and as a result we're unnecessarily keeping many extraordinary people out of the profession." One of those barriers, of course, is financial. Kamras suggested offering a federal tax credit to educators who serve in low-

income areas and have demonstrated an ability to raise achievement at their schools, and increasing the federal loan-forgiveness program, which currently offers \$17,500 to math and science teachers who spend five years at a Title I school. "That's good," he said. "But if you come out of Harvard with \$200,000 in debt, \$17,500 isn't going to cut it."

Finally, he issued a challenge to national leaders from all sectors--politics, business, religion, and entertainment--to use their influence to serve our nation's children. "Every single leader from every sector should be waking up in a panic in the middle of the night about this issue," he said. "They should be outraged by the injustice and the potential consequences for our democracy."

After sharing humorous and poignant stories of four of his students--each of whom "represents a different piece of the beauty I find in my children each and every year"--Kamras concluded by saying, "These kids...inspire me deeply, and I believe it's our responsibility as educators to fight for them; to believe in their capacity for greatness without question; to help them pursue the dreams that even they themselves have not yet imagined; to insure that all children in this nation...have access to that most basic human right--the opportunity to pursue their dream."

About the Article

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