

Call to Action

Chavous: Education Reform Long Overdue

By Candace Gwaltney

When it comes to the state of American schools, Kevin Chavous has a few questions: “Where is the outrage? Where is the shame? Where is the sense of urgency...?”

He points to a few reasons for his concern: More than 40% of all fourth graders in the United States are not reading at grade level, and students attending public high schools in urban areas (population more than 100,000) have only a 35%-65% chance of graduating.

The Indiana native and Wabash College graduate spoke at the Indiana Chamber’s fall board of directors meeting in November. Chavous is a school choice advocate and attorney in Washington, D.C., where he formerly served on the city council and ran for mayor in 1998. After the passing of a D.C. charter school bill, Chavous led efforts to aggressively support and fund the schools. While he served as chair of the council’s education committee, charter schools grew from zero to more than 40 with 17,000 students within six years.

“And I was shocked, dismayed and shamed by a recent statistic that will hit all of you close to home in this great city (of Indianapolis). Of all of the major cities in America, the Schott (Foundation) report released a statistic that should embarrass all of us: Only 19% of the African American men who enter public high school in Indianapolis graduate,” Chavous notes.

The Schott Foundation for Public Education report released last summer looked at 2005-2006 school year data. While the purpose of the study was to compare black male graduation rates, the report showed no racial gap in Indianapolis with only 19% of white males finishing school.

So where is the outrage? Chavous says most people are ill-informed on the reality of public education. He notes that “57% of Americans feel there is a problem with public education, but they don’t think it’s at their school.”

Root of the problem

The U.S. public education system hasn’t changed in more than 160 years, Chavous asserts. Curriculum approach and the hours of operation for most schools remain the same. Schools still operate 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and close for the summer – choices made more than a century ago so children could work in the fields before and after school and during the summer planting season.

“Everything else in our human endeavor from the sociological point of view and the practical day-to-day living point of view has changed and been updated except for our approach for public education.”

Curriculum is largely inflexible; Chavous cites that generations have learned algebra in ninth grade.

“The problem that we have is that our one-size-fits-all approach that still by and large is the dominating approach utilized in most school districts in America is untenable, unworkable and inflexible as it relates to today’s children.”

Funding models for public schools and the power of teacher unions cripple progress. Schools are self-protected bureaucracies, Chavous asserts. “The first priority of school bureaucracy is to retain power and control over structures and people. Innovation and creativity, often times if they fly in the face of that main priority, they will be given a back seat.”

Schools protect themselves by lowering standards of success. These so-called successful schools then have access to more money, he explains. The lower standards result in abbreviated textbooks, graduating inadequately educated students and more remedial courses at the university level.



“The dumbing down phenomenon means businesses have to increase training dollars, not to grow existing skills which was the original purpose, but to develop skills because they (students turned workers) didn’t come with those skills,” he adds.

Chavous warns the schools will not fix the problems internally.

“No bureaucracy has ever reformed itself from within. Never has, never will. The only way you can reform a bureaucracy is through external pressure. And when it comes to schools, from my vantage point and my experience, one of the best forms of external pressure to cure what ails an internal bureaucratic problem is parental choice.”

A united front

“I think the mood of the country is going to change in terms of this (parental choice). I travel around, and I just feel as if this thing is going to explode over the next few years.”

Chavous, who has served on president-elect Barack Obama’s education policy committee, says national reform can occur with bipartisan efforts locally and nationally. “That’s a challenge because the traditional Democratic, union-led education policy folks, some of which are on that policy committee as well, clearly are going to be resistant to some of the radical change that needs to happen in education.”

He notes Obama is a strong supporter of charter schools and in the last presidential debate “he didn’t pound the table on vouchers.” Chavous predicts Obama will “come to support all forms of parent choice,” which will cause a shift in the Democratic Party.

“The way forward in terms of parental choice is bipartisanship,” Chavous emphasizes. “And there are members of your (Indiana) legislature on the other side of the aisle who will be a part of this.”

Both parents and business leaders must press state leaders for school choice. He urges advocates not to rule anyone out. Legislators in other states who had not supported choice have been convinced once someone took the time to explain the issue and the need for reform,

Chavous explains.

“At the end of the day, the approach we need to take in education has to have a singular focus: the best interest of children.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Kevin P. Chavous at www.kevinpchavous.com

The Schott Foundation for Public Education at www.blackboysreport.org

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