

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES BASED ON ETHNICITY CAN BE CHANGED

One year ago, a challenge was sent to the membership of the SOEECC of the AAP suggesting that each member organize a summit in his community to create public awareness of the data of James Heckman, Nobel laureate, who has related the low average high school graduation rate in the US, to failure to adequately prepare children under the age of 4-5 years old for entrance into public schools.

In 2005, I heard David Lawrence address a special AAP meeting in Orlando about the need for considering that the education of a child begins at birth, not merely upon entrance into kindergarten. He suggested that the public needs to consider this fact as a third movement, akin to the movements: Women Suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement.

Conversing with a large number of individuals and groups in Savannah, I tried to gather representatives together from the school district, the health department as well as child care site owners and groups like Family and Children's Services and child abuse prevention groups. Because there would be a need for financial support to secure a nationally known speaker for a public forum, I was pleased to find a group, Youth Futures Authority, that had 501c3 status, a secretarial staff and a willing Board of Directors to work toward such an educational summit in Savannah.

When I spoke with Mayor Otis Johnson, we agreed that the man for the job was his old friend Geoffrey Canada, whose project; the Harlem Children's Zone had recently been documented in a book by Paul Tough, "Whatever It Takes".

The resulting Early Childhood Development Symposium was actually held on April 30th, 2009, and was well-attended. Admission was free and it attracted agency members, members of the Savannah Chatham School Board, the

Chairman of the County Board of Legislators, the local Health department Director, interested individuals and parents of young children.

Mr. Canada showed graphs of language development of the various ethnic groups of “haves” and ‘have nots” which were identical up until 16 months of age, though markedly different once 5 years old was reached. However, with the intervention from the Zone, there was no difference in the performance of all of the children. Previously, the cynical practice of trying to assess the number of jail cells one would need in a community 15-20 years hence, had been made by noting how many of the 3rd grade children were failing and would probably not graduate from high school. The plan of the total “pipeline enhancement” of educational opportunities was working.

While the critique of our Symposium is still to take place, there is general feeling that Savannah would try to apply to be chosen to receive federal funding as one of the 20 cities in the US for duplicating the Harlem Children’s Zone. It has been an exciting experience to explore what could be done to raise the high school graduation rate from Savannah’s of 64% (Nationally, it is 70%). It will not be an easy task to pull this off, but the alternative of continuing the present way is expensive and unworthy of a caring society.

An OP-ED by David Brooks in the NY Times on May 8, 2009, was entitled “The Harlem Miracle”, and in effect says that the plan has produced enormous gains and is worthy of being replicated.

My take, as a former practicing pediatrician, is that in view of the AAP’s goal to bring about optimal physical, mental and social health in all children that a drastic change in education – especially early childhood education – should be a top priority of the AAP, equal to working toward a “health home” for each child.

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