Florida: About Our Children & Families

Colloquia 2010 Series — Friday, October 30, 2009 — Florida A&M University

Strengthening Schools Through Collaboration

The purpose of this colloquium was to have a good conversation to explore how we can engage families to strengthen schools. This session focused on children and families in Florida. A panel of experts led us in “conversations” centered around:

- What do we know about Florida’s children and families?
- If we knew more about our children and families, would we proceed differently in the educational enterprise?
- Can we assume that all families are able to motivate and guide their child’s academic and social life that leads to success in school?

This newsletter brings you a sampling of the presentations by panelists, plus a glimpse of the discussion that started that night — a discussion that continued in a lively exchange of emails and promises to produce further conversations and perhaps another colloquium.

Panelists

**Dr. Genniver Bell**, Dean, COE, FAMU. Former school teacher and administrator. Ed. D. from Clark-Atlanta University. Dr. Bell has wide experience in educational administration, research and policy analysis.

**Joyce Hobson**, Director of Faith, Community, and Family Initiatives for the Bureau of Family and Community Outreach, Florida Department of Education. Works with local communities, school districts, schools, and faith-based organizations to promote parent involvement in schools.

**Jesse L. Jackson**, Superintendent of Schools, Lake Wales (Florida) Charter School District. His wide experience in schools includes teaching middle school and high school, principal of elementary, middle, and high schools, and superintendent of Florida State University schools.

**Carolyn Spooner**, Title I and Special Services Director, Leon County Schools, overseeing the county’s after school programs. Served as principal at Ruediger elementary and assistant principal in elementary and middle schools.

**Jessica Wallace** — Site Coordinator of 21st Century Community Learning Center at Oakridge Elementary School, and also Parent Liaison, Partners Coordinator, PTO/Faculty Liaison, Chairperson of the Parent Involvement Committee, News Advocate, School Advisory Council member, and member of the board of the Florida After School Alliance. She is working on a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Florida A&M University.

Moderator: **Susan Martelli**, Master Practitioner, Teacher Quality, at Teachers for a New Era, Florida A&M University. She has served as Principal of the Florida State University High School and has worked extensively with the supervision of new teachers in the field.
The Discussion

[To illustrate the kinds of real-world problems educators are faced with every day, Jesse Jackson told about a 17-year-old special education student whose father had just been arrested for molesting the child’s sister. There was no mother at home, so now the 17-year-old was living alone. The molested sister was in foster care. In this case, parental involvement was irrelevant, because there was no parent to involve.]

Jesse Jackson - This may seem strange and unusual to you, but it is not. Educators have to deal with the real world. Incest and sexual battery are far more common than you would think. If a child is sullen, sleepy, or disruptive, a teacher may not be able to imagine what circumstances in the family led to that child’s condition, and the child may not be willing to come forth with it.

Susan Martelli - How do we prepare teachers to deal with such societal problems?

Genniver Bell - I hope we would prepare every teacher to be concerned with every child. I will not accept the idea that there are some children we cannot teach simply because the parent is not engaged. While it is true that every parent is not necessarily in love with their children, an outstanding teacher can sometimes make a difference, even in the home.

There is no child we have to give up on. Educators who really care can take children from any environment and make a difference with them.

Teachers must have the disposition to advocate for every child. If every child did not meet the goal, it is still a failing school.

The discussion continues...

Dr. Ada Burnette

I see the picture as starting in the early 1980s as one designed to destroy public education when it became knowledge that the minority population was going to become the majority population in the 2000s. Good teachers have always done what is good for individual children. With the test, test, test movement, data are available to show some reasons and some misconceptions about what is, is not, and ought to be.

The wisdom I saw at the Colloquium really inspires me. I feel that we at FAMU can design a program that includes children and families to increase teacher effectiveness because of the preservice training. I spoke briefly about the Primary Education Program (PREP). The elements of that program certainly are as valid today as they were in the 1970s. We need to determine physical, emotional, intellectual, and other needs of children; design programs to meet them; educate and involve parents; teach future educators the kinds of strategies they need to reach hearts, minds, and souls of children and families. I agree with Malinda Jackson after visiting hundreds of classrooms that almost all teachers are dedicated and do far more than they signed on to do.

The system is not broken. Rather, we need to put the great pieces together here at FAMU to show people what we can and should do with education. FAMU DRS should be a laboratory for our students to see and learn this as they do research. We should have the journal -- the research committee is working on this -- and we should have the research conference on educating minority children with all elements in it.

A recent study shows that some states have lowered standards to help them get closer to all students making the achievement level they should. At any rate, I think that those of us internally need to look at the big picture and all the details and offer the nation the best as they struggle with how to educate all children. My own personal feelings are that if schools do not make a difference, then why have them? However, I feel that schools do make a difference and that many children have achieved in school and life because of good school leadership and great classroom teachers making a difference.

Ada Burnette

Dr. Burnette is Chair of the Educational Leadership and Human Services Department in the College of Education at Florida A&M University.
Too many times we operate from deficit models, in which life is about issues we need to overcome. Even in the high performing schools, we will often find pupils who are not performing.

I think about the leadership of the school a lot. We develop strong leaders and strong teachers who will produce outstanding results in spite of every challenge.

**Jesse Jackson** - We know that there are often students in every school who are not making it. And those are often black students. **In scores, black students are usually behind. We have to be honest about this and recognize it as a problem of the black community. It is something we have to embrace and deal with.**

**Edward Clark** [Graduate student in the Department of Social Work and graduate of the Department of Education] - Those in social work are very familiar with the kinds of family problems Jackson talked about. I am especially concerned about the black boys.

**Ada Burnette** - One of the most important things is to have passion for what you do.

**Parent education** - There are some parents who care, but who don’t know what to do.

Parents need to know things they can do when they come on campus, so they will not feel out of place.

Some children were never allowed to go out and play in the park. Part of the current afterschool program not only provides support for homework, but also dance, music, band, and a chance to play outside in a safe setting.

The program on parents building better readers trains parents in just what to do at home to support the school.

**Discussion, cont’d**

We use the Joyce Epstein model of parent involvement.

**Gwendolyn Trotter**

They need parent education.

**Parent involvement** – Some parents need to be motivated to get engaged with their schools and even with their children.

While it is true that boys are displaying the most visible problems now, we can’t ignore the girls. While we are putting emphasis on the boys, we may be losing the girls. Some of our girls have already lost it.

The discussion continues...
Joyce Hobson and DLOPI

Hobson told about the many ways parents can become involved in their children’s education. The program on Different Levels of Parent Involvement (DLOPI) provides parents not only with encouragement, but with actual training on how they can help their children with school.

![Joyce Hobson](image)

**All parents want their children to succeed in school, even those who did not graduate themselves.**

Florida has two parent resource centers that offer free programs and workshops to promote parent involvement. Dundein, other at USF. Work with low SE parents and students at risk. Families Building Better Readers – programs for ele, mid, and HS, specifically for parents to work with students at home.

Grandparents are very much involved in children’s education.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different Levels of Parent Involvement (DLOPI)</th>
<th>Level 4 – Volunteer &amp; Mentoring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – Responsibilities and Attendance</td>
<td>• Visit my child’s classroom</td>
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<td>• See that my child attends school regularly</td>
<td>• Maintain regular contact with</td>
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<td>and on time</td>
<td>the teacher</td>
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<td>• Equip my child with necessary school</td>
<td>• Volunteer in a needed area at</td>
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<td>supplies</td>
<td>school</td>
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<td>• Provide the school with current demographic</td>
<td>• Volunteer to assist on field</td>
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<td>information</td>
<td>trips</td>
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<td>• Provide a home environment that encourages</td>
<td>• Send materials or supply items</td>
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<td>learning</td>
<td>to assist in classroom activities</td>
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<td>• Encourage positive school feelings</td>
<td>• Attend at least three PTSO</td>
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<td>meetings a year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 2 – Communication and Support</td>
<td>• Become involved in planning</td>
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<td>• Meet my child’s teacher</td>
<td>school activities and fund</td>
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<td>• Communicate regularly with my child’s teachers</td>
<td>raisers</td>
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<td>• Talk with my child about school activities</td>
<td>• Attend all parent-teacher</td>
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<td>every day</td>
<td>conferences</td>
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<td>• Encourage my child’s efforts and be available</td>
<td>• Insist that all homework</td>
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<td>for questions</td>
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<td>• Insist that all homework assignments be</td>
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<td>completed</td>
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<td>• Provide a quiet, well-lighted place to study</td>
<td>• Support the school in</td>
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<td>• Support the school in developing self-discipline in my child</td>
<td>developing self-discipline in my child</td>
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| Level 3 – Literacy & Tutorial Assistance       | Level 5 – Leadership & Partnership |
| • Encourage my child to read at home and      | • Become an officer of the PTSO/|
| monitor TV viewing                             |  PTA and school advisory council|
| • Read with and let my child see me read      | • Participate in the decision-|
| • Acquire a library card for my child         |  making process                |
| • Provide tutorial assistance for my child if | • Attend trainings and workshops|
| needed                                        | • Train other parents and share |
| • Stay aware of what my child is learning     |  information                   |
| • Sign and return all papers to school        | • Become knowledgeable of cur-|
|                                               |  rent educational laws         |
|                                               | • Maintain contact with lawmakers|
|                                               |  to help ensure the best educa-|
|                                               |  tional support for all children|
|                                               | • Form a parent-teacher support|
|                                               |  group                         |
|                                               | • Maintain an open line of com-|
|                                               |  munication between the school  |
|                                               |  and the community             |

DLOPI is a collaborative outreach effort by the Florida Department of Education’s Bureau of Family and Community Outreach, and Audrey Lewis-Potter, Parent Services Coordinator from Gadsden County, Florida.
**Discussion, cont’d**

We need to look at the educational situation comprehensively. Rural and urban settings are where we are having the greatest problems, and these two settings are very different from one another. In a rural area for example, everybody knows everybody, and that changes the way a teacher goes about cultivating parent involvement.

Things like incest don’t happen only to poor children.

*We who know better have got to take control of our community. If we don’t, we will just have children repeating the crimes of their parents.*

For example, we must find ways of providing counseling for students who have been abused.

**China Evans** – [Retired from Calhoun County school system in Blountstown after teaching for 40 years and six months in public schools.] I just don’t believe there is a child you can’t teach and who can’t learn. As a teacher, you have to study your children, just as the children have to study their lesson. You have to find out how that child learns, then you have to be the teacher of that child.

You can’t do it sitting down. You can’t do it standing behind a desk. You have to do it one on one, because every student learns a different way.

Students who get into trouble need to have something to do. You have to keep them busy reading, writing, studying, focusing attention on what you want them to learn.

**You have to keep them involved.**

**You have to challenge them.**

**A student can’t get into trouble if he is busy doing his work.**

**Susan Martelli** – Preservice teachers have a lot of concerns about how to manage students in the classroom. Part of managing them is getting to know what is going on in their lives.

**Gwendolyn Trotter** – I always found that if I knew the parents, I could work with that child much better.

Should we be afraid to go for home visits?

**Susan Martelli** - as a special ed teacher 40 years ago, I was required to go to every home.

**Jessica Wallace** - You don’t want to be afraid to go to students’ homes. If necessary, take someone with you so you will be safer. She would usually keep the child with her and they would go home together. Many of your kids come from the same area, so some of the people you see will be familiar.

Since you can’t come to me, I’ll come to you. It’s very much the norm that I’m at your house, so when I invite you to come to mine (the school), you’ll feel it is the norm.

**Jesse Jackson** – A particular disruptive child had special needs and was far behind, with addicted parents, and responsibility for a younger brother. That boy had a lot of energy in class and no productive way to apply it.

*The discussion continues...*
**Kathleen Rogers** – Children don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Children have the power of discernment. They can pick up whether you care for them or not — and parents will pick up from the kids what the teacher’s attitude is.

It’s not the children’s fault how they come to school. That’s how the parents send them. Educators have to learn to be flexible. You have got to learn to change, to implement strategies in the classroom based on the needs of the students who are there.

No matter what title is behind my name, I am an educator. Now I am Director of Intervention Services, working with district-wide discipline and attendance matters.

**We need to be thinking how to be proactive, to reduce the need for intervention services.**

Not everybody is cut out to teach. It’s about whether you fit. We have to think about placement of individual teachers, about administrators taking care of teachers, about teachers talking to parents. We need to look at all of this.

**Joyce Hobson** - Work with parents, schools, volunteers, and community members to help them help kids to be more successful students.

**Jackson** – If you sit and wait for something to happen – guess what? – it will!

We decided not to wait to get graduation rates. We asked: What if we proactively work to improve graduation rates?

What if we target the kids who are likely to have trouble graduating? We got a list from the 8th grade schools of the students most likely to get into academic trouble.

We began to study those kids. We sent out letters to those kids and their parents the summer before high school, inviting them to a cook out. Congratulations! The letter said. You have been selected to be part of our Project Graduation!

It was a positive letter inviting the parents and kids. Many of them came, and many of the kids were proud, because they had never had a rapport with a school before, and here was a school showing interest.

Behind the scenes, we were meeting community members to set up mentors for those kids for the next four years. This meant a long and serious commitment, but it really does take that kind of effort.

And as superintendent, I will drop in on the classes where these potential trouble students are enrolled and give them recognition. The mere fact that we drop in on their classes and have a positive engagement with the students can improve the relationship between the kids and teachers.

Sometimes the principals hold activities at community centers that are close to where the students live. Teachers sometimes have to go across the street to the projects and invite the students and families to come to the activity, where they have food.

**Genniver Bell**

We have to find the good in every child and not dwell so much on the deficiencies. Every child, every parent, has a talent.

In California, school counselors are required to take a course in school law and leadership. In the normal program, we teach counselors and school leaders in separate programs, then we expect them to go to a school and work together. So I put them together in the same section, so these individuals could begin working together while they were still graduate students.

FAMU COE has a new initiative to engage student teachers as early as we can. We will start early nurturing potential education majors as early as freshman year, helping them understand what the program is like, what teaching is like, what commitments and attitudes they will need to have, and, for example, to understand that every child is different.

We have a Research, Writing, and Reading Initiative starting in fall. Some things are very different that when the college teachers started. And the world will keep changing while our graduates teach.
We actually cannot prepare students in detail to face the things they will face 10 to 20 years from now. So we have to cultivate critical and creative thinkers who, no matter what situation they face, they have the skills to develop an appropriate response.

We also have a special concern for girls. In the summer of 2010, a model program in the College of Education working with female children from 8-15 years of age will parallel the black male college program.

The school district of Miami-Dade County has a parent academy that goes beyond helping kids in school to helping their parents, too. The parent academy offers classes ranging from literacy, to how they can help children in school, to developing life skills, to how to obtain further education. This is the kind of comprehensive involvement schools need to have with the families of our students.

Malinda Jackson

We target low-performing students, but others also need a safe place and the enrichment, and they are welcome too.

Current administration is considering a longer school day and year. If we have quality schools and quality instruction, that is a good thing. But what about students who have been placed with teachers who are not providing that quality instruction?

“Class” is becoming the divisive issue, more than race. Middle class black teachers are finding that they have few shared experiences with lower class students. We cannot assume that being of the same race automatically creates a connection between teacher and student.

The discussion continues...
Our society can’t afford for ANY group to be behind.

Teachers must understand how to interact with parents without judgment.

Home visits are discouraged as not safe.

Teachers often don’t live where the students at the school live so the traditional means of informal parental involvement is less available.

Parents, grandparents, foster parents, the custodial aunt, an 18-year old sibling – teachers must be ready to deal, without judgment, with whoever acts in the role of parent.

“No one else cares. Why should I?” This is an attitude everybody has to be on guard against and address.

We are constantly trying to engage parents beyond the ways we usually do. It’s important not to assume you already understand the parents. Go ask. We surveyed parents to identify the barriers to their engagement, and this identified some things we had not thought of before.

**Jesse Jackson**

Moved to be superintendent at of Charter Schools at Lake Wales 2 years ago, after 20 years in Tallahassee, where he spent the last 12 years working with the FSU lab school, which did not have as many low-socioeconomic (SE) students as the system he works in now.

The Lake Wales system has 65 to 85 percent of students in low SE status.

They are poor and have behavior problems, but they belong. When you have situations like this, you have to be creative and come up with something to get every child engaged in your school.

“Many people go into education thinking they will move mountains, Jackson said. “But mountains get moved one grain at a time, one shovel load at a time. Nothing is going to happen unless you and I do it.”

“We don’t have to have new programs or money, what we need is willingness. Behind every successful program is a person with a willing spirit — willing to pick up some sand every day in order to move a mountain.”

**Gerald Grow**

I avoid the conclusion that education is "broken." Education seems to work rather well for most pupils in most schools. This is not a bad system over-all, and, besides, there don’t seem to be any persuasive proposals to replace it with something new and different.

We need to maintain a focused approach to identifying problems and proposing solutions.

Which pupils are having problems? What schools do they attend? What do we know about those pupils and those schools? What programs have been shown to help these specific pupils in these specific locations? Or to help those failing pupils wherever they are? What is the cost-benefit of successful programs? Are they sustainable? Can they be scaled up to a regional or national level?

What teacher preparation programs are already successful, and in which schools are their graduates successful as teachers? Do we need specialized schools of teacher preparation to address specialized needs of crisis pupils in crisis schools? Do any such programs exist now? If so, how do they find and select, prepare and apprentice the teachers they train?
Some people seem to expect teachers today to raise other people's children at the expense of neglecting their own -- by spending so much extra time, attention, and energy on their school jobs that they can't possibly sustain their own family life. Is anybody studying the stresses on teachers and their families, brought about by the increasing demands on teachers as their jobs expand to make them the providers of more social services, to make teachers responsible for more and more of the lives of their pupils?

Teachers are not only expected to adapt to an increasing number of student needs, they are further expected to teach EACH student differently.

From what I know of classroom teaching, it is a physical impossibility to teach 30 students as individuals -- so this must be a symbolic way of talking about something else, perhaps a lack of parenting or a breakdown of community cohesion that schools are now being told to fix.

Has anyone studied just how teachers try to carry out the ideal of teaching each child separately? How did teachers get assigned this task, anyway? **When did every learner become so different from every other learner?** Is there any evidence to support the view that every child learns differently and has different needs? How many meaningfully different ways of learning are there, really? -- A dozen? A hundred? Four? Three? One of the things that makes college teaching more difficult is the number of students who think they are automatically entitled to special treatment, but who don't actually do their work. Is the special treatment of kids in public schools contributing to this problem? We must teach kids to be responsible learners.

Teachers are in danger of guaranteed burnout. Unless teachers can do an excellent job within a 40-hour week, the educational system will either be unsustainable or it will have to be run by monk-like devotees with no other life but teaching. And anyone with no other life but teaching will not be a very interesting person to have as a teacher.

Education can succeed only when ordinary teachers can produce satisfactory results. No matter how good our intentions, we have to be careful not to be drawn into a heroic, religious, healing, redemptive model of teaching.

**Teachers are real, ordinary, limited 21st century human beings with lives of their own; they are not gods, healers, or saviors.** The current trend expects teachers to put in executive hours on a worker's pay. That is not a sustainable situation. It's not fair to the teachers or to their students.

What might make it possible for ordinary teachers to keep producing satisfactory, even excellent results?

What if we shift emphasis from what teachers do to what pupils do? If every pupil was determined to learn the subject, it would matter less what teacher they had.

What might make pupils more determined to get an education? More engaged, constructive, cooperative, less focused on the disruption and antagonism of current youth culture?

Colleges of education place emphasis on the dispositions that underlie the attitudes, values, and actions of teachers. But how can we cultivate the dispositions of pupils as well as the dispositions of teachers?

That is the million dollar question. If we can improve how pupils approach learning, this could improve schools as much as any changes made by teachers or in the training of teachers.

Perhaps the system isn’t broken. Perhaps, instead, certain pupils have not yet attained the dispositions that motivate them to pursue the skills they need in order to function effectively inside a functioning educational system.

How can teachers, schools, parents, churches, communities, businesses, government, technology, sports figures, and popular culture idols, all help develop each pupil’s disposition to master the process of schooling -- and the learning that comes from it?

Teachers can't do it all. They may not even be able to sustain what they are being asked to do now.

**Dr. Gerald Grow taught Journalism at Florida A&M University for 25 years and is an adjunct with Teachers for a New Era.**

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**Credits** — Special thanks goes to the team effort that made this colloquium possible. It was wonderful to watch as I was away for a week and preparations continued from Ella-Mae Daniel and Josh Kennedy with the program, Valarie Joiner with materials preparation, Susan Martelli with setting up the panel, Malinda Jackson working overtime to get school personnel there, and Serena Roberts providing table decorations to create such a warm environment. Thomas Mingo escorted some of our guests back to their cars. -- Gwendolyn Trotter, Director, Teachers for a New Era.
The Teachers for a New Era (TNE) Initiative aims to achieve radical re-design of teacher education and the improvement of teaching and learning across the entire campus of Florida A&M University.

Teachers for a New Era is sponsored by a grant the Carnegie Foundation of New York, with additional support from the Annenberg and Ford Foundations.

Gwendolyn Trotter, Director (Teachers for a New Era)

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