

DECEMBER 3 SPEAKER SERIES

PRESENTATION: WARREN SIMMONS

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SCHOOL REFORM DOOMED WITHOUT DISTRICT, COMMUNITY SUPPORT

School turn-around efforts are destined for failure without a high-functioning school system and an organized neighborhood.

That was the message from Warren Simmons, president of Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform, who spoke at Generation All's first community forum on December 3rd at Kenwood Academy High School in Hyde Park.

"We are one of the few countries in the world that tries to get all students to reach high standards, but we act as though the sole responsibility for that lies with the school," he told an audience of 70, who included community residents, students, parents, and educators.

The evening event was the first in a series of community forums aimed at building participation for the Generation All initiative, which is creating a plan to ensure top-quality education in every neighborhood high school.

Communities are vital for building political will to demand change at the district level, Simmons explained, and also for providing the outside supports such as afterschool programs, mentoring, or jobs and internships for youth that are also essential for learning. And school improvements are more likely to be sustained over time, he added, if community members had a say in creating them and remain invested.

Too many reform efforts rely instead on a "heroic savior model" where a dynamic new principal sweeps in and leads a turn-around, he observed. "That will work about three years and that person will get worn out

and the school will revert to its previous practices because the larger system and the community are inert.”

Most school reformers he knows demand that the schools they work with have autonomy from the district, but “one of the worst things you can do is have a system that doesn’t support you, tries to control you, undermines you and you keep it in place and say, ‘I just want autonomy from you.’ You have to work too hard in a toxic system to be successful—the toxicity will eventually get to you.”

Simmons cautioned Generation All to learn from failed reform efforts of the past, including the \$1.1 billion Annenberg Challenge in the 1990s which focused on transforming schools in Chicago and elsewhere. It had little long-term impact on student achievement, he said, because it ignored district reform.

As another example of failed reform, he pointed to the Chicago Public School District’s Mid-South Initiative, which he helped lead. Launched in 2003 to improve neighborhood schools and outside learning opportunities on Chicago’s mid-South Side, “It somehow got diverted into closing down and phasing out schools,” presumably by more powerful political interests, he reported.

That’s why community organizing is so important, he said. “It takes organized communities to unmask the policies and structures with powerful constituencies that prevent us from reaching goals.”

Organized communities can stand up to top-down education reforms from the state and federal government, too, and even from foundations, he said. But to do that, residents need to create their own long-term visions and agendas. “Otherwise there will be another education reform agenda visited down upon you.”

Communities also play a role in educating youth by creating learning opportunities outside the school day through recreation programs, youth programs, businesses, and faith institutions. Where neighborhoods lack that social and cultural capital, cities need to invest in them, he insisted. Research has shown that

Chicago schools that succeed in raising the achievement of high concentrations of poor children have that kind of capital to draw on in their neighborhoods.

It was a neighborhood college counseling program that inspired him to go to college, said Simmons, who grew up in Harlem, New York. Coincidentally, he went to the same high school as Chicago Schools Chief Barbara Byrd Bennett, and both were told by a guidance counselor that they were “not college material.”

The counselor was herself African American, he recalls. But her attitude towards poor students of color was still shaped by achievement gaps between white students and black and Latino students that have persisted through every major reform effort, he says.

Closing those gaps will require focusing on systems, not just individual schools. He compared the education infrastructure in the United States to the sorry state of the electric grid and the rail system: “All of those systems aren’t going to be fixed in two or three years.”

Districts that have made lasting reforms have focused on incremental changes to achieve an equitable and organized system of supports, he said, rather than relying on short-term initiatives. He pointed to Long Beach Unified School District in California and other winners of The Broad Prize for Urban School Reform as good examples. Some promising strategies include sending teams of high-performing teachers to turn-around low performing schools, providing sufficient resources to support students with special needs, and making sure that challenging students are spread across the district rather than concentrated in certain schools.

The need to improve schools “in an aligned way with a transformed [school]system and community” has been ignored for long enough, he said. “That’s why this coalition is critical. You need to make it happen now, ladies and gentlemen. I’m here to give you the advice of a soldier who has struggled in this battle for a long time and would like to see a major victory for once.”