

Undersecretary Martha Kanter touts Twin Cities as model for reform in education

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Undersecretary of Education, Martha Kanter (far right) discusses ways to better the quality of education in the Twin Cities. Also pictured are (from left to right) the Rev. Brenda Girton-Mitchell, Maxfield Elementary principal, Nancy Stachel, educator, Maren Gelle, Dr. Donald Easton-Brooks, assoc. dean at Hamline Univ. and Greater Twin Cities United Way CEO, Sarah Caruso.

Though the area has one of the worst achievement gaps in education for students of color, U.S. Undersecretary of Education Martha Kanter believes schools here are headed in the right direction. The undersecretary was recently in town for a series of meetings on education, including a town hall forum held at North Community High School. The town hall – “Together for Tomorrow”, attended by nearly 100 citizens, was presented by the United Way, the U.S. Dept. of education and the Corp. for National & Community Service.

Though Kanter acknowledged some positive initiatives in education, she was quick to point out how much work needs to be done to better educate students throughout the nation.

“President Obama has made education a priority and said he wants our nation to be the best educated, most competitive work force on the globe,” said Kanter. “The question is how can we take every child in 100,000 schools and help the child perform at grade level?”

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Kanter said, alarmingly, one-third of our nation's children begin their scholastic careers unprepared to perform at standard levels and 25 percent do not achieve a high school diploma. The undersecretary said half the students seeking undergraduate degrees are unable to complete their studies within six years.

Kanter said the U.S. decline in education could have dire consequences.

"All you have to do is look around the world for countries in serious conflict and you will see they are severely undereducated," said Kanter. "Caring for each and every student; that's what this is about."

Nancy Stachel, principal of Maxfield Elementary School in St. Paul is on the front line in the fight to better educate today's children. In many ways Maxfield highlights some of the numerous problems facing today's youth. Stachel is the eighth principal in 10 years at Maxfield, which has 99 percent its students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, 97 percent are students of color with 85 percent being African-American.

"When you have schools that are failing, that failure is across the board," said Stachel.

According to Stachel, a key to better educating students is parent involvement. The principal said within her two years at Maxfield, because of increased parent involvement, academic achievement and attendance are up while disciplinary problems have declined.

"Parents are the first educators in a child's life," said Stachel.

The Rev. Brenda Girton-Mitchell said often times when this issue of education reform is discussed many involved in the discussion seem to be the same type individuals.

"You here the term, 'preaching to the choir,'" said Girton-Mitchell. "Well that's important because the choir needs to stay motivated and on message."

Bill English, co-chair of the Coalition of Black Churches was not in concert with the speakers' message.

"You will not solve the achievement gap without involving the people and leaders of the (affected) community," said English.

Undersecretary Kanter agreed cultural concerns need to be addressed when trying to better educate students of color.

"We have a need to hire culturally competent teachers in the classroom," said Kanter. "We want to hire teachers who speak a second language. We want to hire teachers who reflect the ethnic makeup of the student body."

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According to the Greater Twin Cities United Way, the town hall was presented to celebrate and foster school/community partnerships that are helping to turn around the area's lowest-performing schools.