

Edelman: American education system in crisis

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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It was cold (the thermometer showed -9) and it was early (doors opened at 7 a.m.) but for the 2,000-plus in attendance at the 23rd annual MLK Breakfast, the early morning cold was no obstacle. Many said the celebration of the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – on a historic day when the country celebrated the second inauguration of President Barack Obama – was necessary because there is still work to be done to insure opportunities for all. And if there was any ambiguity of the dire situation this nation finds itself in when it comes to the plight children of color face, keynote speaker Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, clearly spelled things out.

"We need to wake up," said Edelman. "And we need to recognize that we have to invest now, and invest with urgency and with persistence so that we can give every child a chance to be able to function, work and contribute in this very complex, changing world and economy."

To prove her point, Edelman offered a few sobering statistics.

"In this nation, every eight seconds a child drops out of school," said Edelman. "Every 29 seconds a baby is born into poverty. Every 85 seconds a child is born to a teenage mother. One in three black males and one in six Latino men have been incarcerated."

Edelman, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the highest honor awarded to a civilian – and who was the first African-American woman admitted to the Mississippi state bar, took time in her remarks to call for an end to gun violence in the nation and in the African-American community and called for education reform in what she termed a cradle-to-prison pipeline.

"Every three hours and 15 minutes a child is lost to gunfire. Every three hours we have a Newtown," said Edelman referring to the December school massacre that killed 20 children and six adults. The former counsel for the Poor People's Campaign that King, Jr. began organizing before his death, Edelman said since the assassination of King, Jr. more than 1.3 million people have died due to gun violence.

"That's two times the number of all those killed in all the wars in American history," said Edelman.

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A maven in human, civil, and child rights, Edelman said America's education system is in crisis.

"Eighty percent of black and Latino students cannot read, write or compute at grade level," said Edelman. "Folks, this is a disaster. (These individuals) are being sentenced to economic death. These children are going to become a majority of our population."

The underperforming of students of color is not fault of their own doing according to Edelman. "I'm tired of us holding children accountable for things we have not equipped them to do," said Edelman, who said just throwing money at the problem is not the answer. "We don't have a money problem; we have a values and morals problem."

One of the solutions Edelman offered was to attract more qualified instructors to the least performing schools and having teachers who are more culturally competent and vested in children's success. She also called for better funding of pre-kindergarten learning. According to Edelman, affluent children enter kindergarten with a three million word head start on their poorer counterparts.

Breakfast attendee, Derrick Owusu, said education cannot be left to just the educators. He called on more citizens to take on a mentoring role with at-risk students.

"We (adults) need to learn to give back," said Owusu, who is originally from Ghana. "You can't put all the pressure just on the students. But also, the student cannot give up. Keep pushing."

MLK Breakfast chair, Martin Abrams called on the capacity audience to commit to service.

"Let's do more than feel the spirit of this celebration; let's commit to action," said Abrams. "Let's talk less and do more."

The breakfast, in its 23rd year, has become known as one of the nation's premier King, Jr. holiday celebrations. Past keynote speakers have included Martin Luther King III, Gen. Colin Powell, Newark Mayor Cory Booker and Vernon Jordan. The event was sponsored by the United Negro College Fund and supported by the General Mills Foundation.