

Fresh Voices Are Heard at Cambridge College Education Forum

*By Kimberly Dunbar
Communications Specialist
Cambridge College*

It is very rare to find a group of nearly 100 educators, students and community leaders who all agree on something. On Monday night, March 26th, this was the case as Cambridge College presented “Fresh Voices in Education: The New Massachusetts Leadership” at the Boston Cambridge Marriott. The consensus of the group was that there is a need for change in Massachusetts education, and that change must begin with each of us.

“Fresh voices and a passion for education is something we all share,” said Cornelia Kelley, Headmaster of Boston Latin School and moderator for the panel discussion.

The evening featured a keynote presentation by Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, Special Adviser for Education under Governor Deval Patrick and President of Bridgewater State College, and a subsequent panel discussion where four educational leaders responded to audience questions. The panel included Cambridge College President Mahesh C. Sharma, Superintendent of Cambridge Public Schools Dr. Thomas Fowler-Finn, Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools Dr. Joseph P. Burke, and Superintendent of Lawrence Schools Dr. Wilfredo T. Laboy.

“Education is the backbone of the future of this country,” said Dr. Mohler-Faria, who focused on the need for Massachusetts education to move forward. “I hope we are headed toward engaging in what I like to call the ‘next wave of reform.’ This reform needs to include not only Pre-K- 12 but also early education and higher education. We finally have legislation and a governor focused on education. This is the first time that has happened that I can remember. We are definitely in a position to move forward,” he added.

Dr. Mohler-Faria commented that people all across the Commonwealth are waiting for change in education. “We have the leadership to do it and people are ready,” he emphasized. “The challenges educational leaders face are enormous and they cannot be faced alone. It will require focus, collaboration and leadership with vision and objectives.”

Dr. Mohler-Faria stated that while the United States is the wealthiest country on Earth, in 15 years we will no longer be able to compete in the global economy. “In order to move forward and keep people engaged and competing globally, we need to step up and provide bold leadership and make some bold moves in education,” said Dr. Mohler-Faria.

One of these bold moves would be to stop short-changing educational resources. Dr. Mohler-Faria shared a story about how Yogi Berra was asked one night if he would like his pizza cut into six or eight slices. He requested it be divided into eight slices because

he was hungrier that night. “We cannot slice the resources any more,” said Dr. Mohler-Faria. “Education is our future and we need to find more resources to help.”

The panelists echoed Dr. Mohler-Faria’s call for bold leadership and change. Dr. Burke, Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools, pointed out that students graduating with B averages are still not capable of doing college level work. “Education is not as effective as it used to be,” said Dr. Burke, who added that our schools could be accused of “education malpractice” because of the out-of-date materials being taught in schools. “My belief is that the approaches and textbooks that we use are based on a set of educational programs that were developed so long ago that they may no longer be correct.”

Dr. Burke urged the audience to think about what we are educating students for in terms of knowledge and jobs. He said today’s economy is not the same as it was in the 1950s, or even the 1990s, and that education needs to change with the times. “We need to do this now. Every day we have kids in urban systems who are not being taught the way they should.”

Dr. Laboy agreed. “Schools need a curriculum that is current,” said Dr. Laboy, Superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools. He advised that schools should personalize and humanize the education experience in order to provoke real engagement with students. Dr. Laboy said the City of Lawrence is extremely excited about the new high school that is currently under construction on a 25 acre campus setting. The new school will include six separate themed buildings enabling students to specialize in their areas of interest and get a high quality education. He also suggested that the schools create real communities that are relevant for young people and their experiences. “We need systems that are congruent and consistent so we can change our schools and communities.”

Cambridge College President Sharma called for changes in the way teaching is approached in the classroom. He expressed three concerns: 1) making sure that teaching standards are raised and being practiced in the classroom; 2) using a more hands-on approach for teacher education; and 3) making sure that teacher training is relevant to the school’s needs. “We need to restructure in order to solve the problems in education,” he said.

“Good teaching creates good learning and we need to keep our eyes on the prize,” said Dr. Fowler-Finn, Superintendent of Cambridge Public Schools. He commented that schools don’t just need money, they need help. Dr. Fowler-Finn expressed the importance of colleges and universities reaching out to provide resources and assistance to the public school systems in their communities. These institutions of higher learning need to start cultivating relationships with public schools. “There are plenty of schools that need help, and they need help now,” he added.

President Sharma ended the evening with an innovative proposition. He suggested Dr. Burke initiate a partnership between Springfield Public Schools and the Cambridge College Springfield Regional Center in which high school students would get special

training that would start them on the track toward becoming public school teachers. President Sharma's gesture was the right step towards initiating change in education. "With leadership and fresh voices, only then will we move forward," said Dr. Mohler-Faria.