

Meeks' protest last year inspires forum on educational funding

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Last year's protest by State Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago) and inner-city students to change the state's educational system still has a group of North Shore residents talking.

Nearly nine months ago, Meeks led 1,000 Chicago students to skip classes, board buses, and head to the North Shore, where they unsuccessfully attempted to enroll in schools here.

On May 14, New Trier High School's Northfield Campus again was the venue for United We Learn's policy forum titled "The Future of Illinois Education and What We Can Do About It!"

Co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Glencoe, Glenview, Wilmette, and Winnetka-Kenilworth-Northfield, the event featured four speakers on education reform.

"A lot of people called me and asked what Interfaith (Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs) was going to do about this, since it is the only civil rights group in the area," said Gail Schechter, executive director of Interfaith. "We had a meeting and United We Learn was born during that meeting."

United We Learn is a grassroots organization that supports the aims of both Chicago public school and suburban public school communities to secure a higher quality public school education, Schechter said. Members consist of New Trier High School parents, North Shore community residents and organizations, and religious leaders affiliated with North Shore congregations.

The event featured four speakers: Matt McCambridge, a senior at New Trier High School and founder of the Illinois Council of Students; Dea Meyer, executive vice president of the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago; Julie Smith, deputy chief of staff for Gov. Pat Quinn; and Glenn (Max) McGee, former state superintendent of Illinois and Wilmette District 39, as well as current president of the Illinois Math and Science Academy.

"We learned a great deal about education, education funding, and what is right and wrong with it in Illinois," said United We Learn member Lali Watt.

Despite calls to change the system, "Illinois is leading the nation in size of achievement gaps," said McGee.

According to the former state superintendent, the low-income rate in Illinois is 40 percent, meaning that of 2.2 million students, 880,000 are low-income.

And because the lion's share of school funding in Illinois comes through local property taxes, a student in Libertyville can expect more than \$145,000 to be spent on his or her education from kindergarten through senior year. Meanwhile, a student in lower-income Auburn has have half that spent on his or her education, McGee said.

So by the time a student in Libertyville reaches the sixth grade, the money spent to educate him or her is equal to the amount spent for an Auburn student's entire schooling.

Still, experts have said, money isn't the only answer in closing the achievement gap.

McGee spoke of a study done by IMSA students on high poverty, high performing schools, what he dubbed "Golden Spike Schools."

Even though the amount of money spent on students' schooling is low, their education experience does not suffer.

"Funding matters," McGee said. "You need resources, but you need to spend them in the right place."

McCambridge presented three proposals at the forum regarding early childhood education, professional development for teachers and financial decisions.

"Success in Illinois schools exists," McCambridge said. "The challenge is uncovering and cultivating it."

Meyer, who remarked that the handling by Interfaith of last year's protest was "fabulous", spoke about the differences between charter and public schools.

A comparison Meyer described of charter schools and their neighboring public schools showed charter schools performing at a much higher level with state test scores.

A follow-up event, "Putting Action to Words," is scheduled for 7 p.m. May 21 at the New Trier Northfield Campus, 7 Happ Road, Building C, Room 234.

Schechter said information presented at the forum will be discussed, as well as what people can do to help reform the educational system.



Panelists Matt McCambridge, a senior at New Trier High School; Dea Meyer; Jill Smith and former state Superintendent Max McGee discuss education reform during the United We Learn policy forum, held May 14 at New Trier's Northfield Campus.

(Katie Okon/Staff Writer)

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