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### From 'just a teacher' to justice in teaching

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Education in America - the kind that is equitable, fulfilling and meaningful - is in short supply in the nation. The reasons are legion; the results well-documented; the real ravages largely ignored. Despite this, the imperative remains: America's children - all of them - deserve powerful classrooms, swirling with powerful ideas, orchestrated by powerful teachers and supported by dynamic community stakeholders. The National Urban Alliance is here in Bridgeport to support the leadership of Supt. John Ramos, the school board, educators and community stakeholders. Our mission is to substantiate in the public schools of urban America an irrefutable belief in the capacity of all children and youth to reach the highest levels of learning and thinking demanded by our ever-changing global community. Our partnership with Bridgeport is framed on a belief that when educators come to their schools armed with strategies for improving learning and teaching, all students do succeed. The work involves improving classroom instruction and schooling through professional development, and engaging the community in conversations that enable common ground to be found among parents, stakeholders and leaders, so that the future of the Bridgeport is built on hope, not despair. In the partnership established by Dr. Ramos, we have met many Bridgeport educators who embrace the opportunity to be advocates for schoolchildren and youth, and recognize that the responsibility for improving the life trajectory of their students is shared among schoolchildren, parents, teachers and the community. As they work to motivate their students, they are banding together as agents for justice in teaching by presenting at board meetings and community forums the success they are leading in their classrooms. Teachers possess the numbers, the access and the high moral purpose to help turn a failed system into one that secures a world-class education for all children, an education that we have called the "new civil and human right" and that Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University calls a child's "right to learn."

But the responsibility for enabling students to write themselves a better future cannot be done alone. In Bridgeport - despite lack of adequate funding, which create pockets of cynicism; blaming the victims of poverty for their problems, rather than searching relentlessly for answers to social and educational challenges - a critical mass of like-minded community members, dedicated administrators and forward-thinking faculty are forging ahead with a new vision for the children of Bridgeport - a vision fueled by a strong belief in the potential of every child and a relentless will to uncover ways to tap that potential.

The leadership of the superintendent, board of education, educators and an engaged community leaves no room in this new vision for whining or blaming sessions, dead-end discussions that dead-end the lives of children. Instead, in Bridgeport, professional development sessions now dominate. Sessions in which teachers and administrators laugh and learn, tackle deep issues in a trusting environment, ponder and practice content and renewed pedagogy and watch - wide-eyed and excited - as their students engage in animated discussions, write extensive essays, improve their grades, reveal their thinking, demonstrate their comprehension and otherwise display their learning and creativity with confidence and competence.

This focus on high-quality professional development is consistent with the message that has dominated the Bridgeport schools for the past three years: All students must achieve at high levels of proficiency and all students must graduate college ready. Together with the community, this message has been translated into a forward-thinking, aggressive strategic plan focused on the common mission to graduate all students "college ready" and prepared to succeed in life. This plan has been unanimously adopted by the Board of Education and is focused on the most fundamental part of the educational enterprise; that is, learning and teaching.

The programs and professional development provided by the NUA and the Total Learning Institute are just two examples of work under way, and together we hope to provide a seamless connection between early childhood interventions and those engaged to improve K-12 instruction. The NUA works to improve literacy and subject-matter learning at the elementary and secondary level, and TLI begins at birth and 3 followed by two years of Head Start through 3rd grade with a good deal of parent involvement and training. Change is under way. Despite an uneven rollout of NUA due to lack of adequate funding, successes are being documented in classroom observations, and includes a significant spike in grade 4 reading scores in Bridgeport while scores across the state generally declined.

Yet we recognize that much more improvement is required, especially for the students who lack sufficient support in their homes for learning and enrichment activities (e.g., guided reading provided by the parents, trips to museums, zoos), and for those students requiring special education. To this end, we are poised to introduce an internationally respected program from Israel on Jan. 9 at 9:30 a.m. in the Aquaculture School, 60 St. Stephens Road, to the Bridgeport community. Under the leadership of Dr. Ramos and the NUA, Rabbi Rafi Feuerstein of Israel will demonstrate an assessment and teaching device that properly evaluates children's learning capabilities, while enabling students to improve their achievement so that learning gaps can be eliminated. The purpose is also to reduce the misdiagnosis of special needs students, such as those with communication or emotional disorders, the brain-injured and culturally different and deprived student populations. Success stories are growing, but are scattered among our schools, classrooms and community programs. As students, teachers and the community labor tirelessly in attempts to help students write better life stories for themselves, nothing less than long-term and total commitment to the promise of America is required. We want the students lives filled with hope, not despair. Students in Bridgeport and throughout the region, the state and the nation, for that matter, deserve nothing less.

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