

Interviewer: All right, so just want to ask you, you're participating in this focus group, what did you hear? Anything surprising? Anything new? Anything inspiring? Uplifting? Spiriting? Anything?

Speaker 2: It's interesting that you use those words. I think the thing that I heard at the end, was that we're not addressing students in a spiritual way to empower them, to encourage them. That actually resonates with me, because it's something that I do outside of CPS. Outside of my teaching. My nine to five.

I have a nonprofit organization where I focus on black girls and black women. So, we create safe spaces for these black girls that come together to share together, and empower each other and uplift one another. And that's what students are lacking, and that's the piece that we need to include in the schools, so that we can address the holistic child.

Interviewer: Great. Anything else you hear? Anything else ...

Speaker 2: No, I just think we need to be more supportive, and increase our supports and resources for our children. And to listen to them, instead of just coming and labeling them, when they act outside of what we're used to. To actually give them a voice, and allow them to be their complete selves.

Interviewer: Thanks so much.

Speaker 2: No problem.

Interviewer: All right. Who's next?

Kila: I am.

Interviewer: Can you [inaudible 00:01:11]

Kila: This is my good side.

Interviewer: Yeah, some of it.

Kila: That's right. [crosstalk 00:01:35]

Interviewer: So, real quick, Kila, thanks so much for coming

Kila: Yes, okay.

Interviewer: Just tell what did you hear that surprised you, or interested you, inspired you, anything?

Kila: What interested me most that I heard was the cry for talent in front of the children that we service. Whether it is directly in the classroom, or it is leadership, but definitely connecting that talent with the student's experience. And then just breaking down those barriers that children and families bring to schools.

But it's still their best, in the understanding that we have to supersede whatever is happening outside of the school, to figure out what the trajectory is for our students, whatever decision that they choose to make. And so the talent piece really resonated with me, and how I can best serve the teachers I lead, for the children that they lead.

Interviewer: How about the fact that this is a conversation just for African-American educators? Is that unusual for you? Is there anything about the format that is appealing to you, or ...

Kila: The format, yes, because it was formal. But it is absolutely not a new conversation. My peers and I, we speak all the time about what keeps us up at night, how can we best serve the children, are we presenting our best selves, the pressures that sometimes weigh heavy on us, as we are trying to move not only just a generation, but a people.

So, yes, all of this resonated with me. Formally, in this great setting on a Saturday morning. Powerful, but a conversation is always happening at our dinner tables, through text message, emojis, long four-page letters. We are always in dialogue about being black educators and administrators.

Interviewer: Nice. Great. Got it?

Speaker 4: My whole face is a good side, yes. This mic right, here? Okay. Perfect.

Interviewer: Now just real quick, what did you hear that inspired you, or interested you?

Speaker 4: Well, one particular piece that really stood out to me, was the part about the committee also being broken. That education obviously has its issues, but our communities are suffering as well. And as I was looking around the room, and seeing all the people of color who are taking a part in the conversation, I realized that in educational policy, people who are beginning the four movements are not people of color.

My own network has a white male who is on the network. And the school is also white. And I'm thinking about different ways to include people of color in those conversations, to really be the lead change agents of education change for our students of color.

Interviewer: Anything about this particular conversation that things should happen more? Should there be more of these type of things?

Speaker 4: Definitely so. I think as, you know, in this room you're having a conversation. I think it's an important thing to have it. Also, I want to say that I was thinking more about educational policy, specifically. That when you go to school, educational pedagogy, and then policy are two different things. And so when you're trying to create reform via policy, language is different. And we have to find some way to merge those two, to put people who are in the classroom, impacting these kids' life on a daily basis, in the policy room as well.

Interviewer: Thanks very much. [inaudible 00:05:00] real quick. Really appreciate it.

Speaker 5: Of course.

Interviewer: Thanks so much for being here. So, any reflections on what you heard?

Speaker 5: Yes. I heard a lot about poverty and the effects that poverty is having on educating our children, particularly African-American students. And it reminds me of conversations that we've had ongoing since I've been through the teaching profession.

Interviewer: Is it not new?

Speaker 5: No, it's not new, but they're relevant.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you heard that gives you hope? That if we had more teachers of color, or if there was a better conversation, that maybe we could start moving the ball forward?

Speaker 5: I've heard a lot of intelligent people here today speak to those issues, and I heard a lot of people that really do care, and are solution driven, more than just harping on the problem. So, that's very encouraging.

Interviewer: Great. Thanks very much.

Speaker 5: Thank you.

Interviewer: Appreciate it, bye.

Speaker 5: All right.

Speaker 6: Thank you.

Marilyn: I don't know. I wish I could, too.

Speaker 8: All good here.

Interviewer: All good? Okay. So, Marilyn-

Marilyn: Yes?

Interviewer: We had an interesting conversation with those all-black educators in the region. What did you hear?

Marilyn: I heard a lot of passion. A lot of personal investment in changing the system, the narrative that is playing out currently, with African-American kids not performing well, being disproportionately disciplined, and on the path to prison, or some other form of poverty, incarceration. I heard a lot of memories about what it was like for them growing up in school. Some teachers were taught by African-American teachers predominantly, and others never really had African-American teachers. And the difference that that made, and how important image is, and having role models is to a child in a school environment. I think that's highly underestimated, because the dominant population takes for granted, the culture is very dominant. It's white culture we live in, predominantly. And so, the need for role models doesn't seem like it's as pronounced as it is for ethnic groups, and particularly, black groups.

And so, I don't know exactly how to fix that, per se, but using the people that we do have in education, empowering the black educators, is really important. And one teacher said "We are the ambassadors for the profession, so if we ever hope to come to a place where we're raising up students to want to be educators, then we have to take our jobs really seriously, because we're advertising whether they want to do this work or not."

And so, it's really important not just for today, that we provide the supports that children need, and that teachers need to thrive. But we need to do it with a long vision, a long-term vision. What education is going to look like, and how students are going to feel in 20 years, when their children are coming to school. Will it be a place where they'll have fond memories? Will they want to stay in school? Will school be a place where kids feel like it's relevant? And feel like it's a path to a better life, or will they just decide it's not for me, and decide to go their own way? It's really important work we're doing.

Interviewer: Just real quick, this conversation, all of African-American educators, why is it important that we create a space like this? I just want you to reflect on what we did today.

Marilyn: Our voices have been drowned out over the years. We know that teachers, black teachers, are disproportionately laid off when there's a layoff. We are not seen as the ideal candi- There have been studies. There was one recent study in Fairfax County, Virginia, about how discrimination is very present, in terms of hiring practices for school districts, particularly that school district. Where you can even be more qualified than a black candidate and still not get the, I'm sorry, than a white candidate, and still not get the job. I've seen that.

Me, I just resigned. The hardest part about resigning from my school was that I was the only African-American teacher in the building. And I had been for the past three years. So, that's not normal in a city like Chicago. And it's not okay. It's important for teachers to be able to say what is happening, and be honest about it. And this forum was perfect for that. For African-American teachers to say what they're going through, and know that we have traditionally been the gatekeepers for quality education for our community.

If we are not there, unfortunately, people who don't understand our community, don't understand our children, will make bad assumptions about what they need. They will perhaps not have the highest expectations for them, and sometimes sympathy actually comes in and it affects their ability to make proper decisions when its like, no, sometimes, you know, tough love is necessary. So, balancing those things, it's very nuanced. It's very cultural. And it's just important. Not to say that if you're not white, you can't do a great job with children, but diversity matters. I've never seen an all-white school, with all black teachers. But I've seen many, many, many all-black schools, with all-white teachers. So, there's a double standard there. And if it's not right to have it one way, then it's not right to have it the other way.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Marilyn: You're welcome. [inaudible 00:12:08]. Thank you.

Speaker 9: I probably have to leave at three. I don't know what time it is, now.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, quarter to three.

Speaker 9: Quarter to three? Yes, yes. Well, my flight is at 5:30, so ... I don't know how far I am, but ...

Interviewer: Okay, so real quick, just a couple of questions. So, let's reflect on-

Speaker 9: What's that? Over here, all right. Yeah.

Interviewer: ... each of these groups. You can start with the kids and then work back to this point. Just any reflections on what you heard: anything unusual, and inspiring, different.

Speaker 9: I think with the students that it's very clear that they know the difference between a good class and a bad class. And they know the difference when adults care about them and when they don't. I think it's very clear to them, when they're not being challenged. When they know that they want to do more, they can do more, and they can't. Multiple students said the same thing about that one teacher that gets it right. And they really feel inspired and makes them want to do more. But then they talked about, that's like, one out of five, one out of six, one out of seven. And that was a problem. That was like a wake-up call to

me that number one, they know what a good education is and they're not getting it. And they know that they're not getting it.

Interviewer: Talk about the parents. You've been very, very clear about the importance of having real conversation with these folks, unlike some of the conversation that they're having around the country. Talk a little bit about that conversation, what you've learned there, and just, why it's important.

Speaker 9: So, I think with the parents, the thing that is really important for them, is that they just don't get great information. And they feel like they have to navigate a byzantine system just to get their kid to a school that fits and that matters. Especially in a city like Chicago, a big urban city like this. It seems like they have too many different directions to go to get information and to find out. Many of them have put their kids in several schools. Like the school that they're in today, may not be the school that they're in this same time, next year.

That's heartbreaking, because you know that these are some of the most engaged parents. These are the ones that really dig for the information to find it. And you have to know that there's a whole bunch of other parents that aren't able to get their kids into the school that they want. They just don't have the information.

Interviewer: Can you hold the ... Sorry, this is, [inaudible 00:14:22]. Okay, so real quick, let's talk about the first group is teachers. What did you learn there? You and I have spent a lot of time in the teaching profession and what did you learn from the teachers?

Speaker 9: Teachers are really dedicated beyond just the craft of teaching. They have a reason to be there. Many of them knew that it was their job to be present, and be a role model for kids that aren't going to see many black teachers. In their lifetime, they're not going to have many role models. I think it was clear that there was a heightened reason for them to be there. There was also a very strong sense that they weren't set up to do their best work. That the system didn't always support them the way that they need to be supported to do their best work. And I think for all of them, they could imagine a way to do it better. They could imagine a way in which this would all be better, but they're not being listened to, and they're not being heard.

Interviewer: And just, last question, just reflect on if this was a conversation with all African-Americans [inaudible 00:15:28] but generally conversation among people of color, among African-Americans, why was it important to have a conversation like that?

Speaker 9: Because there's a lot of people talking about education. The reasons really important to listen to groups of black students, black teachers, black parents, is because they're the most left out of the big conversation that we're having nationally. There are a lot of people talking about education, about us, without

us. There are a lot of people that are making rules, and changing the game, and changing where and how you go to school, and it's not us.

And when we have these really honest discussions with people of color, with black folks specifically, teachers, parents and students, you learn right away that there is a detachment from where we are, from where the institution is. There is a gap between what we know would be good for us, and would be optimal, and what the institution is doing for us. And the institution is not real good at listening. I think the motto right now, for the institution, is we know best. Let us just take care of you.

I don't think that's true. And it will never be true, if it is never informed by real people. No successful anything, does it without bringing its end user in mind. It just can't succeed that way. I think it's obvious to everybody, we're not succeeding. I think there's nobody who's going to disagree with that. When it comes down to black kids, we're not succeeding. We're probably out of ideas if we don't talk to black teachers, black parents, and black students.

Interviewer: Great, thanks a lot.

Speaker 9: Did you get all that?

Interviewer: You're from Seattle. You came to Chicago. You came, you saw, you heard. What did you hear? We can work backward from the students-

Speaker 10: Sure.

Interviewer: ... back to the parents, and then the teachers, if that's easier. What did you hear from the students?

Speaker 10: So, for me, I always think in education that we do an incredible amount of talking, but not so much listening. And I've always said that students know good teaching, better than anybody does. And the students, they were incredibly insightful about their experiences. Some of it was heartening, and some of it was disheartening. They're aware of the inequalities that exist system to system, and place to place, kind of to a point of just like, painful obviousness to them.

At the same time, they're also really aware of their own [inaudible 00:17:43] and advocacy. And so just seeing these students, and I hear a lot of them say, it's up to me, and I understand that I have to look out for myself and look out for my future. It was really, really insightful. I think my favorite question was, well actually my favorite answer was, when they were asked how did you decide what school you were going to? And where are your kids going to go to? The answer was really powerful. There was one young man who said basically, I hate the school that I'm at. I hate the way they treat me. I hate the systems. My kids are going there. And like, that says a lot.

Interviewer: What about the parents? What did you hear from them?

Speaker 10: So, I have always said an education is a three-part stool. There's parent-involvement, student-involvement, and teachers. The parents who were here, were current [inaudible 00:18:27] champions for education. There are a couple young ladies actually, sitting all right here, who were just all at the same school. The city of Chicago is blessed to have the caliber of parent.

You don't come across people who are so passionate about education, and learning to fight and navigate systems as much as they have to. And honestly, it's really sad that you almost need a college class, as a parent, to know the systems that your kids are going through. Like, parents have to navigate, am I going to send my kid to a public school, to a charter school, to a private school, to a Saxon-Roman school? If I send them to that school, will their needs be met? And just, the amount of ...

So, to me, all that expertise a parent needs to develop, is demonstrative of the inequity of the system. Every kid and every parent deserves an effective, meaningful educational experience. Although, that's not what we have. And so these parents have to shop, and be very choosy consumers.

Interviewer: Do you feel that they really know about the inequity? They sense it?

Speaker 10: Particularly from the parents. I think they are very aware of the inequity. A lot of parents talked about how often they go into the schools. One mother said that she's in the school three times a week. And I think if you're in a school three times a week, that says a lot about your commitment to the education of your kids, and also the work you're willing to do.

There was one parent that talked about how their child has gone through eight different schools. And to me, that says a lot about how dedicated she is. She's looking for the right fit for her child, and what's best for them. And even some of the schools that are really high regarded, they weren't a good fit. And that's what really matters, right? More important than school reputation, and image, is the fit. You can have a kid who doesn't fit in at this well-regarded school, and it took an excited parent to know that.

Interviewer: Are you a teacher? You had a whole room of African-American teachers. Did you hear anything from these Chicago teachers that you hadn't heard in Seattle?

Speaker 10: It's interesting. A lot of teachers are saying the same things nationwide. There's an incredible amount of resource inequity. And the work that we're being asked to do is very difficult, and it's complicated by outside circumstances. I think sometimes we get fatalistic, and lose our hopefulness in education. I actually left this conversation very hopeful, because these teachers care. These teachers are dedicated to the work and they're dedicated to the communities they work in. And the systems they work in aren't always serving the parents needs, and

the teachers needs, but the teachers we heard from today are incredibly passionate, and are advocates.

I loved how Mr. Grisby, I think his name was, he was talking about the work that he does, and then two hours later, two kids who didn't know he was here, were talking about how impactful he was, and changed their lives. And that's what the work is all about. Every teacher wants five years from now, ten years from now, their students walking around and saying Bowling did this, and Bowling shaped me this, and Bowling taught me this.

Interviewer: Now, when you put people, all African-Americans, in a room, is the conversation going to be a little different? Is it important to have a conversation like that?

Speaker 10: So, for me, as someone from the West Coast, and in the Northwest, I sat with more black teachers today, than I have worked with in my entire career. And the conversation that happened was very frank, and very honest. But in times like this, we need frank, honest conversations. And nobody knows the inequity that exists in the system like the people who work in the system and experience it. And so, who better to have conversations with about what needs to be done, than this group?

Interviewer: Okay. Thanks, [inaudible 00:21:44].

Speaker 10: No, thank you. My pleasure.

Interviewer: [inaudible 00:21:48]

Speaker 8: And we are rolling.

Interviewer: So, I just want you to reflect a little bit on the three groups. You can start with the students and then work back to the teachers and parents in between. Just tell a bit from the students. You're from Philadelphia, you came to Chicago, so what did you hear from these kids? Anything interesting?

Speaker 11: Yes. I mean, everything was very interesting. It was inspiring to hear how students are thinking about themselves, about their role in society. We didn't get a chance to ask this very specific question, like how one are your classrooms political? Not that they're talking about the politics other, but talking about societal issues. And that naturally bubbled up from several of the students answers, as far as how their teachers engage with them, and what they're thinking about.

The other thing that really came across to me, was how much students expect the adults to create a community and structure, things that are coherent, and make sense in their schools and classrooms, so that they can achieve at the highest levels. And that even carried into whether they were thinking about teaching. Rather than talk about whether their experiences of being in

classrooms and schools that were not structured, or not managed well, or not a sense of community. And that thread was informative around what students are expecting.

Interviewer: And going to the teachers, real quick, we'll just jump to them, then we'll get to the parents. Go to the teachers, so the kids have these expectations of teachers. How do you think the teachers live up to those expectations, or what do you hear from the teachers?

Speaker 11: Yes, I heard varying things from teachers. I heard some teachers who the weight of responsibility seemed to be more on kids and families. And while I agree there is a partnership, also believe that we are in the classroom ... We choose in our classrooms and schools to lead and serve. And to be a part of that means that we have to make sure that we're providing whatever it is that a family needs. Some of the teachers raise the issue of, we don't know if that family is working in the evening, or a double job, they were ... When we got to the parents, there were several grandparents who were, hey I have custody of my child and I may not be able to do xyz, but I'm still ... I trust that you're going to do best by my kid, that you're going to help them achieve at the highest levels, and you're going to hold them accountable, but you're also going to hold yourself accountable.

So, I would really just challenge us as educators to really step up. And not that we're not doing it, but to constantly be reflective and be humble about the work that we chose to do, and making sure that we are holding ourselves accountable at the highest level. I tell people all the time ... And I heard this a little bit. It's not our job as educators, to hold parents accountable. That's not our job. But sometimes you hear adults say that about other adults. What we want to do is create an atmosphere that is welcoming. That we heard this from families. We want to walk into a school that's welcoming, that's transparent, that's clear, that's organized, coherent, so that they can be the best partners that they can be, and that we can be the best servant-leaders that we can be.

Interviewer: And then, let's go to the parents. What did you hear from the parents here in Chicago? Did you hear a sense that they feel welcome, or did you hear something else?

Speaker 11: I heard a varying degrees. I heard a lot of different levels of transparency. One of the themes that stuck out the most, was how nimble they had to be, how much knowledge they had to have about a system, a very, what seemed to be complicated system of finding the right fit for their child. How impressed they were for schools that were providing structure. Then also there was conversations around how much is too much? If you're providing a structure, and you have rules and expectations, how much is too much? And I think what it sounded like, was a desire for schools to approach it with love, and outcomes. Not being dismissive of love for children in pursuit of outcomes, but also to not ignore the need families are having for outcomes, academic and other outcomes for their children.

So I think, a big theme I heard from parents was the expectation that the school that I'm trusting my child in, and the system that I'm trusting my child in, has to have love and outcomes. And then, there was also a lot of conversation about how much they have to advocate, and to get their child into the best possible and optimal-level situations.

Interviewer: All right, and just last question: You've been very active in trying to recruit more black male teachers. This conversation was all people of color, all African-American, all [inaudible 00:27:01], in any case, just what it's like to sort of on racial dynamics, and again the conversation that you had, briefly, if you could, you know, what's going on in public education?

Speaker 11: Yes. I mean, so most of the participants, especially from the parents and students, most of them ... And I would say, let me start with the parents. A lot of parents were saying, you know what? I am looking for students to have an experience where they also have black or Latino teachers. And that came up a couple of times. And one particular man came up, from several of his students, and they talked about the experience of having this black man ... One of the students used a word like, it was powerful to have Mr. Grisby as a teacher. And how he approaches us, and how he dives into issues, and how his classroom is a political classroom, where we're talking about societal issues.

Other students talked about teachers being able to relate to the experiences that they've had, and tie that into the content, which speaks to relevancy and what students are ... What teachers are bringing to that. And then, another student felt like, you know what, it doesn't matter, but as long as that relevance piece is there. As long as they are conscious and aware, and respect of me, what I'm bringing to the table. So, it was a very interesting dynamic.

But several of the parents brought up the idea that hey, I'm looking for kind of this, what we talk about windows and mirror. Not only do I want our students to have this window, where they're seeing outside into the world, to the larger world, I want them to know outside the mirror, where they seeing themselves, and the image of themselves. And students talk about how that can be very motivating to themselves, and as well as their peers. And parents felt the same way.

Interviewer: Great. Thanks for coming.

Speaker 11: My pleasure. My pleasure. It was a very inspiring experience.

Interviewer: All right.

Speaker 11: All right. Thanks.