

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?

Sharif El-Mekki: 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?

Sharif El-Mekki: 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?

Sharif El-Mekki: 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?

Sharif El-Mekki: 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.

Sharif El-Mekki: My pleasure. My pleasure. It was a very inspiring experience.

Interviewer: All right.

Sharif El-Mekki: All right. Thanks.