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Newark Education Leaders Discuss Reform

By Guest Writer Jonathan Jaffe

Leaders in the education reform movement in Newark agree that now is a transformational and historic moment in the history of public education in the city, where a \$100 million donation from Facebook, new school district leadership and national attention on urban school reform is forcing unprecedented change.

Newark Regional Business Partnership convened a panel of leading experts on education reform in Newark on June 1 to brief members about the people, projects and ideas that are contributing to what many hope will be lasting change in the city's education system.

The event, "Education Reform in Newark: Opportunities and Challenges," is part of the Newark Insiders Forum series sponsored by **Gibbons PC**. The breakfast was sponsored by **Essex County College**, **Seton Hall University School of Law** and **The Star-Ledger**.

The panel was moderated by **Ross Danis** (pictured below) of the **Newark Education Trust**, the city's Local Education Fund and the only permanent, non-partisan entity committed to the



long-term improvement of the Newark Public Schools (NPS). He opened the 90-minute forum by offering a grim statistic: Only 22 percent of the students entering

ninth grade in the Newark Public Schools graduate with a diploma four years later.

"To put it in context, imagine if an airline had a statistic that showed only 22 percent of its planes take off and land," said Mr. Danis, noting that upwards of 90 percent of NPS graduates require remedial courses before being able to take college-level courses. "This is a crisis of epic proportions. It's time to focus less on the problem and more about what we plan to do about it."

Dan Gohl, executive officer for innovation and change at NPS, said this is a pivotal moment as the traditional school day is being re-examined for the fall and contracts are expiring with all the labor unions serving the schools. In addition, he said, there are new school models being introduced for the 2011-12 school year, such as Bard High School Early College, which provides 60 free college credits, as well as the "co-location" of traditional public schools and charter schools in the same buildings. All this will be under the direction of Cami Anderson, who took over as schools superintendent in June.

Mashea Ashton (pictured left), CEO of the Newark Charter School Fund, said now is the time for NPS to begin collaborating with the city's charter schools, noting projections show that 40 percent of city



students will be enrolled in charter schools within five years. Ms. Ashton said the focus needs to be on ensuring charter schools are quality schools that provide strong alternatives to NPS. Ms. Ashton told of how she recently attended a national conference and many were surprised to learn that Newark is way of the Facebook donation. "People are concerned with what is attached to that money," she said. "They are worried about 'outsiders' having influence in Newark. My response is that this is a global economy; a world of Facebook and Twitter. There are no longer 'outsiders' and 'insiders.' We need to rethink local public education." Ms. Ashton said she is "optimistic" about the tension that the Facebook donation creates, as it forces change at a time when it is needed the most.

The panel also included **Edythe Abdullah** (pictured left), president of **Essex County College** in Newark, who said reform needs to take place in three critical areas. There needs to be stronger collaboration between NPS and area



colleges to ensure the curriculum is aligned. There also need to be better ways to use technology, such as the smart phone, as learning tools. Finally, she said, teachers need to be equipped with better

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tools to thrive in the classroom.



Shavar Jeffries (pictured left), a professor at **Seton Hall Law School** and the former chair (current board member) of the Newark Public Schools Advisory Board, agreed the most important ingredient in a successful school system is the people. “We need to make sure great people are in front of our kids,” he said. “We need to attract, retain and promote the very best people. We need to be relentless in identifying what is working and what is not working.” Mr. Jeffries said friendly competition between NPS and the city’s charter schools is beneficial to students, as it causes overall quality to improve.

Jarrad Toussant, an education liaison for Mayor Cory Booker, said 28,000 of the 40,000 students in the NPS are now in failing schools. However, there are some bright spots, such as Robert Treat Academy Charter School, Science Park High School and Ann Street Elementary School. Mr. Toussant said the stars are now aligned for an urban transformation in the Newark schools, noting there is a shared focus between President Barack Obama, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Gov. Chris Christie and Mayor Booker. “We can’t afford to fail,” he said. “In the most aggressive way possible, we must create a model of urban transformation and reform in Newark.”

Audience comments were included in the dialogue. Paul Tractenberg, founder of the Education Law Center at **Rutgers Newark**, told the panel that the NPS has been under state control for 16 years, so current failures should be considered state failures. In addition, he noted, the state Department of Education has less capacity now than it did 16 years ago. “Teachers are crucial,” Mr. Tractenberg said. “You can’t improve education by bad mouthing teachers.”

The audience also included Jennifer Robinson, executive director of the Center for Pedagogy at **Montclair State University**. She has 35 Montclair students who are undertaking teacher residency programs in the NPS. The students are focused in math, science and special education. “We are preparing these students to become the next generation of teachers in Newark,” Robinson said. “While this program is new, we are already seeing test scores in Newark improve in classes where we have our teacher residency program.”

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