

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

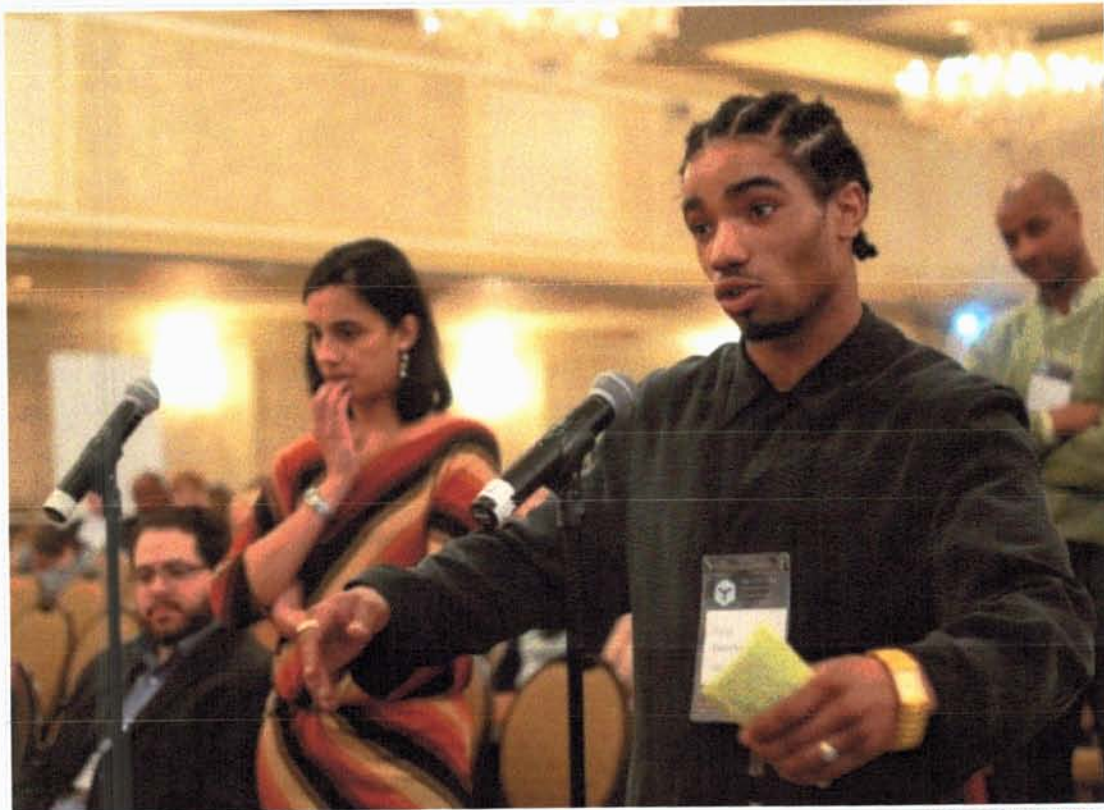
IT'S YOUR TOWN. READ ALL ABOUT IT.

Tyler: Let The Kids Teach

BY **Melissa Bailey** | APR 4, 2014 11:20 AM

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MELISSA BAILEY PHOTO

Blatche speaks up at confab's opening night at the Omni.

A Hillhouse High student challenged a national conference of adults to change the way students learn.

We're on it, one of the adults replied.

The exchange took place Thursday at the Omni Hotel on the opening night of the Yale School of Management Education Leadership Conference. The annual conference kicked off with "stories from the field" from Connecticut educators, including New Haven schools Superintendent Garth Harries, state early childhood point-person Myra Jones-Taylor, Achievement First CEO Dacia Toll, Maria Zambrano of Excel Bridgeport, and Karen Lott, the former New Haven principal who's [now leading a turnaround charter school in Hartford](#).

The panel focused on various efforts at school reform.

In a question and answer period, James Hillhouse High School senior Tyler Blatche hustled to the microphone to ask the first question.

"Will having peer teachers help students more, rather than having adults teach students?" he asked.

Toll, who leads a network of charter schools based in New Haven, replied that she's working on that.

Achievement First (AF) recently [hired a high-powered design firm called IDEO](#), which invented Apple's computer mouse, to help the charter network invent a new model for K-8 education. IDEO has been working with AF for the past four weeks to rethink common assumptions about how learning happens, and to begin to design a new school model. Toll said she just met with IDEO and brainstormed a few ideas.

"One of our apparently not-so-breakthrough ideas," Toll said, was to do just what Tyler had suggested.



Toll said AF is considering having students take a more formal role in helping each other learn.

"We learn by doing and getting feedback," doing and getting feedback, doing and getting feedback, Toll said. The feedback is a crucial part of learning.

"Right now, we're relying on a teacher to do that for 25 kids" in a class, she noted.

Toll said AF is tossing around the idea of having students serve as "running partners" to each other. Each student could be assigned one or more "running partners," who would give each other feedback on their academic progress.

Toll later elaborated on the nascent idea. She said technology is one tool that can offer students individualized feedback in real-time. "But so can peers."

"We are not rigorously training kids to give feedback," she noted.

She said the idea felt like somewhat of a breakthrough in the brainstorming process. But "apparently he's already thought of it," she said of her Hillhouse questioner.



Tyler was one of nine students who attended the conference through a program called Pathways to College at Hillhouse High. They were among the only public-school students in the audience, which included board members of charter schools, representatives from the ed tech industry, and few on-the-ground educators.

Tyler said that students will listen to each other more than they will to adults. He recounted how he learned that through his own life.

"My mother died of breast cancer when I was 2," he said. His father raised him and his siblings.

Tyler said he didn't use to pay much attention to the adults in school. He got into trouble and spent some time in an alternative high school in Maryland before moving to New Haven and joining Hillhouse his sophomore year.

He noted that he is an example of a statistic Superintendent Harries mentioned that night: [5 percent of New Haven's public school students, or about 1,000 kids](#), join the district as mid-year transfers, after Oct. 1, each year. Tyler attended three different schools in the first two years of high school. He always switched schools mid-year.

Tyler said he didn't feel invested in learning until he got a scare one day: "I was supposed to be the father of a baby."

That news jolted him. He said he determined to become a role model for the next generation.

"That made me see the light," he said. He became an insatiable learner: "I want to know everything there is to know."

An aspiring entrepreneur, he is hoping to go to Hampshire College next year.

"Knowledge is power," he said. "You have to want success as much as you want to breathe."

Tyler said he recently said something to that effect to some friends he was hanging out with. That message, he said, is more powerful coming from a fellow student than from an adult.

"[John] Dewey, the father of education, said the purpose of school isn't to teach—it's to make students socialize with each other," to work together for common goals, Tyler said.

He suggested that schools become more student-centered, beyond just letting peers teach each other.

"Schools should conform to the students—not the students conform to the curriculum," he said.

He was asked what he thought of Toll's reply to his question.

"They thought it was a whole breakthrough?" he responded. "All you have to do is ask kids."

"Children are the future," he said, quoting Whitney Houston. "Let them lead the way."

"Let kids tell you how to teach them."

Tags: [hillhouse high](#), [achievement first](#), [IDEO](#), [john dewey](#), [Tyler Blatche](#)

Comments

posted by: connecticutcontrarian on April 4, 2014 11:34am

After reading the sobering report of another young person being shot and killed in New Haven this story was a much needed reminder that there are young people determined to succeed. There are literally hundreds of community organizations in this town. I hope that some of them will step up to support this impressive young man in pursuing his educational and professional goals.

Young people aren't just our future, they must our right now. We need more visionary young people like Tyler to speak out and keep us old folks accountable.

posted by: Threefifths on April 4, 2014 12:05pm

Toll, who leads a network of charter schools based in New Haven, replied that she's working on that. Achievement First (AF) recently hired a high-powered design firm called IDEO, which invented Apple's computer mouse, to help the charter network invent a new model for K-8 education. IDEO has been working with AF for the past four weeks to rethink common assumptions about how learning happens, and to begin to design a new school model. Toll said she just met with IDEO and brainstormed a few ideas.

How come she will not tell him about how her schools do this.

Charter Suspension Rate Prompts Call To Action.

http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/alarming_charter_suspensions_prompt_call_to_ac

posted by: Brutus2011 on April 4, 2014 6:17pm

Tyler is obviously a bright kid—many of which attend our schools.

I believe that teachers who reflect daily on what is working or going on in their classes and schools already are engaged in the "feedback" thing. I was doing that almost 10 years ago.

Another thing effective teachers should do is to construct and maintain a website for their classes. Again, I was doing that years ago.

And it worked. But the icing on the cake is for a teacher to earnestly be interested in his or her student's learning and development. This is where and when student motivation can be most positively influenced which of course is the name of the game. Tyler told us what changed his motivation from negative to positive in his testimony.

That is the game-changer.

And we don't need highly paid administrators and managers and consultants and the like to tell us how to do this—in fact, they do not have a clue. What they are good at is convincing us that they have on shiny new clothes.

One more thing. There are many of us in the community who could be a positive influence on our kids but no one wants us. We don't look the part and don't fit in how things are done. I for one am educated, experienced and not many are smarter. Why leave me, and those like me, on the sidelines because you don't like the way I look? Or I somehow threaten your salaries and pensions?

I invite Mayor Harp to reach out and I would be glad to give her my take on how to help our youth and end the killing in our streets.

posted by: nhpscienceteacher on April 5, 2014 3:34pm

Dear brutus, there are mechanisms by which people can get involved. you mentioned looks... I don't know what to say here, but I know that we need reliable substitute teachers and science fair mentors just to name a couple of ways to get involved. As for supporting broader community, it is my understanding that church groups are another means to support students; however, I believe that support must go beyond the students themselves. Other adults in the community must also be supported, so that they can set good examples and also support the younger generation in kind. As a teacher, I find that the students whom I have the most difficulty with in terms of addressing their learning needs are the same students whose parents are not engaged. Support everyone you can in the best way that you are able.

posted by: RichTherrn on April 5, 2014 7:31pm

As well as students teaching each other, it is important to remember that one of the best ways for students to learn is to have them constantly talking WITH each other as part of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the classroom... a LOT...

We have had great success with upper grade students teaching younger ones in programs such as after school and science fair, and should do more of that....

and anyone is welcome to help students by doing mentoring, (such as in science fair....) or even science fair judging.. it is all about using the power of discussion to help kids learn! (<http://www.nhsciencefair.org>)

-Richard Therrien, NHPS Science Supervisor

posted by: Seth P on April 9, 2014 10:23am

IT is the most logical approach to teaching our young people. If we want to see them engaged and benefitting from the work we put in to improve their understanding of the world that is awaiting their participation, then we should include their perspective in the planning process. The old adage, "the customer is always right," applies here more than anywhere else. Props to Tyler Blatche and the Pathways Program. Let's get these young people engaged.