Dr. Pedro Noguera Addresses National Y-PLAN Summit

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When I learned about Y-PLAN, it made so much sense. Why not try to find ways to engage young people in addressing challenges by getting them to ask questions, to think about what is shaping their lives, and how they might be able to use their education to solve problems through planning. When you think about it, this is really what education should be about. If your education does not prepare you to have an impact on your community, if it doesn’t prepare you to make that community a better place to live, then what good is the education?

I would say right now that our policy makers have focused on the wrong aspects of education for a long time. They focus on how to get students to raise achievement, solely measured by test scores. Their strategy, fear. That is that if you don’t do it, you will fail. If you don’t do it, you won’t go to college. If you won’t do it, in New York City, we will shut down your school.

However, for people who have not experienced success, fear is not an effective motivator. Fear breeds a sense of resignation, a sense of pessimism, and a willingness to give up. Because people then believe, “Well, I don’t know what’s out there anyway, and if I haven’t experienced success before then maybe it’s not worth putting in the effort.” We see many examples across the country illustrating that these strategies haven’t worked. What we don’t recognize is that young people need to be inspired. They need to understand something really critical, and basic - knowledge is power.

Knowledge is power. What do I mean by that? I saw this clearly when I was working in Berkeley as the Chief of Staff to the Mayor of Berkeley. I used to go to all the meetings and I would learn about how decisions were made. I learned how they would decide where to put a waste dumpsite, where to put a clinic for people with heroin addictions, or where to put a homeless shelter. This is when I started to realize that when decisions were being made about how to deal with crime or where to put what was seen as an unwanted land-use project, it was always the communities with the least power that got stuck with the least service.

And why did that happen? Because they weren’t at the table when the decisions were being made, and so they became victims of plans that others made. In communities that were trying to keep clean and safe, they were always able to make sure that crime and unwanted sites didn’t get there. What that made me see is that if we’re not involved directly in the room where decisions are being made, then invariably what happens is we get stuck with the short
end of the stick. We’re the ones who become the victims of others’ decisions. Knowledge is power because if you have an understanding of how decisions are made, you start to insert yourself into the process of influencing that decision. So in many ways what you’re learning now is preparation for what you will continue to do throughout your lives. If you can learn as young people how to use your education to take control of your life and help your family and community, you can have an impact. Not just on yourself, but on many others.

Something that struck me about The Academy for Language and Technology in The Bronx is that the school serves recent immigrants from different parts of the world, mostly from Latin America, and many of these are young people who didn’t attend school regularly in their home countries. They speak Spanish, but in many cases they’re not strong in their literacy. One would say that this kind of student is seriously at risk of dropping out, because statistically that’s what the data shows. These kinds of students usually don’t graduate, but not at The Academy. This time they are in a school that doesn’t rely on fear to motivate. It relies on hope.

I asked the young people what makes this school special, and they said, “this school feels like a family,” “this school feels like a community.” I was inspired by watching the students and teachers at work, and how seriously they engage in what they’re doing. I saw brand new teachers meeting and planning lessons together, and then critiquing each other’s lessons.” What it left me knowing was that this school doesn’t leave it to chance, they take themselves very seriously because they understand what’s at stake.

And so when a school that might otherwise be a place where you would associate failure, instead what you see is the vast majority of students graduating, and going to college, because they have a lot there who are not documented going off into careers. They don’t leave it up to the government to figure out what to do about with the students; they make sure that these young people have a future.

They’re living proof that knowledge is power and that when you ask the right questions, you can change lives. What happens when we educate young people like this is that it not only benefits them individually, but has a rippling effect throughout their community. That’s why we do this. Because when young people see themselves as leaders, they’re in a position to have a much greater influence then if they merely see themselves as future workers, or future students. What they’re learning is how to be resourceful, and how to use their critical thinking skills to imagine new possibilities. And this may or may not lead to a job, but it does lead to their ability to engage their own future and not simply be a passive recipient waiting for someone to help you.
I’ve seen this work repeatedly, and not just through Y-PLAN, but in other contexts. There were a number of high schools in the Bay Area that were experiencing racial conflict and violence in schools. Violence got so bad the police were being sent in to try to maintain order. The police realized they couldn’t solve the problem this way because we couldn’t be here all the time. A few educators came to me and asked to help solve the problem. I thought, “why don’t we do something really radical, and talk to the kids find out what’s going on?”

I was asked to go to Richmond High School. There was a lot of racial violence in the school, and I met with kids who were leaders from different groups to talk about the school. They said, “A lot of what happens comes from things going on in the community. It also happens because kids are divided and don’t even know each other and are separated within the school. One of the kids said, “the bigger problem here is that this school sucks.” They said, “they lock the bathrooms during the day because they said if crimes are being committed in the bathroom, you can’t use the it. They had to get a custodian to let them in, which could take a very long time.

They agreed that this was a huge problem so they decided they needed to organize to gain access to the bathroom. They started circulating a petition amongst their peers and sent it to their parents. Everyone agreed that having an access to the bathroom is a human right. They mobilized and went to the school board to petition for the right to use the bathroom. It was very hard for the board to say no. Then they wanted to have a conversation then with young people about how to make sure that they had bathroom access while staying safe.

During the course of this movement to get the bathroom access, all of the violence went away. Instead of focusing on the petty conflicts, they were focusing on something that mattered. It wasn’t just the bathroom, what they were really doing was claiming their right to be heard as students, especially in matters that affect their education. When young people are able to insert themselves into the process this way, democracy becomes real. Democracy is not simply about being able to vote. We know that even after voting, decisions that affect our lives are being made. If you’re not involved in making those decisions, sometimes people will make decisions that will be against your interest, like whether or not you your voice is heard is so essential to shaping what kind of lives you’re going to live.

I saw another example in Oakland. I was called on by the superintendent of Oakland Public Schools to help a school in West Oakland, a school that had a reputation for nothing but trouble. I met the teachers and all they wanted to tell me is how bad the kids are. I finally stopped them and said, “suppose you’re going to teach in a foreign country, what would you want to know about that country before you taught there?” I asked, “What would you need to know about its history? What would you need to know about their economy, and politics and
I asked: “Well how much do you know about the community in where you live right now?” Although some teachers had taught there for over 20 years, they couldn’t tell me anything about the history of the community. They couldn’t tell me if there was a supermarket, or if there was a library or a park because they perceived this to be a bad neighborhood. And so when the bell rang they were out of the school as fast as the kids, into their cars, onto the freeway, and out of town. So they reluctantly agreed to go on a field trip. They went out and learned a little about the history, and saw the parks where the kids played. They even saw some kids who waved at their teachers.

When we got back to the school, almost every teacher told me the same thing. They said, “I felt uncomfortable, people were staring at us while we were on the bus. I felt like a tourist,” Then one new teacher said, “I noticed that a lot of homes have gardens in the backyard. Because this community is surrounded by industry, and there’s probably a lot of lead in the soil. I teach environmental science, and I think I can do a whole entire unit around the ways in which lead gets into the soil, and what happens to the children.”

I decided to sit in the class as this unit unfolded. She taught the children on how these toxins get into the atmosphere and into the soil and how it gets into plants and what happens when you eat those vegetables from the garden, particularly how it affects the development of the brain in small children. Then she went a step further by getting soil testing kits, allowing the students to go out into the community and start testing where the soil’s most toxic. They started finding certain patterns, and made maps of their community, identifying in red the areas where the soil is most toxic. Like epidemiologists, they start to look at patterns and notice something: the soil was most toxic near refineries and gas stations. They started to understand land use patterns, and produced a map with all of these red zones showing areas where there’s toxic waste and contaminated soil.

The middle school students did a report and show what they’ve done. Throughout the exercise there’s never a disruption, because the kids are so engaged in their work. The teacher is thrilled, then she says, “Well okay, this is great, but we have to move on to the next unit.” One of the kids raises his hands and says, we can’t move on now, because now we have to tell the people.”

The teacher and I go to see the county health commissioner and she brings the students’ work. He’s shocked because the only thing he’s ever heard about that school was how bad the kids were. The students present their work to him. They present their research and show their
maps and explain the findings from their research. Everybody’s impressed and he decides he’s going to send a letter to every house in this community, warning them about the effects of lead in the soil and invite any family to get free topsoil. Afterward I started talking to the kids about what they learned. What struck me was not only did they learn about the effects of lead in the environment, they learned something else. They learned that science was important because they understood how it affected their lives, and how it affected their community, and the children that lived there.

That’s what you’re learning through the Y-PLAN process. Maybe it’s not the soil, maybe its transportation, or the Internet. Whatever it is, you have to continue asking: why? Because as you start to peel back the layers, you start to realize that this is about power, and about the way decisions are being made to certain people that result in them having a lower quality of life. Because some people are profiting off the disadvantages of others and the more we know about how things work, the more we can do to change that reality.

I want to encourage you to use this work as an entry-point for making sure that you are a part of the decision-making process in your communities. Everything you’re learning is important because of that. One of the things that our policy makers don’t ask when they tell you to raise your achievement, is why? Why is learning so important? Going to college and getting a job is important because it gives you the ability to not merely be an observer or someone who’s affected by the decisions made by someone else. It gives you the ability to become a decision-maker. It gives you the ability to have some influence in the decision-making process.

Education is always about two things. On one hand, you learn and master the skills and knowledge of previous generations to go to college and get jobs. So doing the math and learning to write well is very important, but not sufficient. The other purpose of education is to give you the skills to solve the problems of the previous generation. And we’re leaving a whole lot of problems. But I’m not afraid because I believe the next generation is going to have imagination and the critical thinking skills that will allow you to be better problem solvers than the previous generation. That’s my hope, that’s my faith, and because of that I’m not afraid about the future.

So I want to encourage you to use this as an opportunity to unleash your imaginations. Don’t be afraid of asking questions about why things are the way they are. Who made that decision and why? Who’s at the table and who’s not? Use this as an opportunity to empower yourselves to become decision-makers in your own neighborhoods because as that happens, things will change. As you become leaders, others who are presently not at the table will be represented and have a voice through you. We do this because our future is not going to be
determined by those with power unless we let them. And you have the chance to ensure that the people that you know and care about, your grandmothers, and grandfathers, your parents who worked hard, the people in your neighborhoods who didn’t get to go to college but are working hard everyday. You can use your education to help make their lives better. And because of that, the work you do can be transformative. So aim high and keep on doing the work to use education to empower yourselves and empower your communities.