

February 19, 2011

Education summit pushes African American pursuit of college degrees

By Dan Klepal
dklepal@courier-journal.com

Engaging parents, businesses and community organizations in education so more kids graduate from college and find successful careers was the focus of Saturday's Education Summit at Central High School.

The 12th annual event, sponsored by the Louisville Urban League, is a chance to brainstorm ways to improve education in Jefferson County. But this year's event was the first since the 55,000 Degrees program — which aims to have 55,000 college degrees earned by Jefferson County residents by 2020 — was launched in October.

Ben Richmond, Urban League president, said he wants at least 15,000 of those degrees to be earned by African Americans. Much of the summit focused on how to improve educational attainment in the black community.

Mayor Greg Fischer opened the conference by commending African American community leaders for staking out a portion of those degrees.

"You were the first to say we own 15,000 of those degrees," Fischer said. "That's a strong move right there."

Richmond said it was important to have a goal that is specific for African Americans.

"The gap is so wide, you can't have a lofty community goal and just hope," Richmond said. "This is about raising awareness and mobilizing people. A sign of mobilization is engagement."

Kentucky Sen. Gerald Neal, an African American Democrat, said the issues facing the black community are not "intractable" but won't be an easy fix. He said Senate Bill 3, which would guarantee children the right to attend their neighborhood school and allow local districts to create charter schools, isn't the answer. Jefferson County officials have said the legislation would dismantle their desegregation efforts and the district's student-assignment plan.

Neal said there needs to be an expectation created in the black community that kids will go to college, and that parents or grandparents will be involved in their kids' educations.

"We're working against a culture," Neal said. "It's not just that a kid didn't get access to a teacher. It's bigger than that."

Richmond agreed, saying "we all need to make a personal pledge to this goal." He told about 150 in attendance that he was going to give a \$10,000 donation to the 55,000 degrees program.

A youth summit was held separately, but in conjunction with, the education summit. Videos and speakers

at the youth event encouraged kids to stay in school and taught them about the perils of dropping out.

A couple of statistics given to the kids are that 50 percent of black students drop out of high school and one in three of the dropouts end up in jail. It's a message that stuck with William Simpson, a 17-year-old junior at Central.

"It opened my eyes," Simpson said. "I had no idea it was that bad."

The Rev. Kevin Cosby, president of Simmons College of Kentucky, gave the keynote address at the education summit and said adults giving kids the right message is critical in them succeeding. His address, which was more sermon than speech, repeated the phrase: "The me I see is the me I'll be."

"If I don't see me graduating from high school, I won't graduate from high school," Cosby said. "How we feel about ourselves is a self-fulfilling prophecy. That gets to the root of why there is so much underachievement in education when it comes to the African American community — a negative self-perception."

Cosby and Richmond signed a memorandum of understanding at the event that outlines a partnership between the two organizations which they believe will help achieve increased educational attainment for African Americans. The memorandum says the Urban League will help identify potential Simmons students; they will collaborate on public relations to promote education; jointly track and report educational results; and share data.

"We want to be a site that, when you come through our doors, you connect with Simmons at the same time," Richmond said. "The goal is to empower people."

Reporter Dan Klepal can be reached at (502) 582-4475.
