HBCU Student Government Association Symposium for Children Overview

In February 2008, through the efforts of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 55 student leaders from 44 Historically Black Colleges and Universities came together to discuss the needs of our nation's children and develop a plan of action that will transform the lives of children and youth in their communities. These student leaders, each representing Student Government Associations (SGA) from the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) connected with one another, re-visited the history of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and pledged to work for the future of today's children.

Over the course of a weekend, these SGA presidents connected both formally and informally to learn about the unique challenges each faces as a leader and in the community. They shared stories of children and families in their communities, the realities on their campuses since Katrina and its aftermath, and the interests and concerns of their student bodies. They spoke with Civil Rights leader and former field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Charles Cobb, learned about the role of youth in this historic movement, shared creative expressions, and worked with CDF staff to develop action plans for improving the lives of children in their communities.

Through intensive planning, these leaders developed programming designed to improve campus mentoring of children in surrounding neighborhoods and, particularly, in struggling schools; improve collaboration between campuses and launch a broad strategy to impact children; and initiate advocacy programs designed to improve awareness of children's needs and ensure that students' voices and skills are applied to systemic change. Students in Tennessee resolved to promote awareness and advocacy programming related to obesity and HIV/AIDS as significant factors impacting today's youth. Others along the eastern seaboard have structured a program entitled Adopt, Educate and March, which includes a multi-phased effort to connect with area schools for mentoring and to promote advocacy both online and through organized events. Students across the south identified various ways to implement mentoring programs as tools to help alleviate poverty. Through programs in elementary, middle and high schools, students have committed to empower youth to succeed through their examples.

Equipped with facts about the needs of children and youth, empowered by an awareness of potential interventions, and emboldened by the network they have established, these student leaders will be able to act with urgency and persistence in addressing the needs of children. The 1960s movement made it evident that college students are not citizens in waiting but leaders today. Each campus has already begun promoting awareness and planning a Day of Mentoring through which they will connect with area youth. Together, these campuses represent over 100,000 young adults who are connecting with the movement to leave no child behind.