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“Congressional Black Caucus Forum Highlights Achievement Gap Strategies”

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Summary: How does your garden (of students) grow? At the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 2011 Annual Legislative Conference in September 2011, a forum addressed the merits of two types of teacher preparation programs, and other education issues.

Traditional teacher preparation programs at HBCUs (which make up only four percent of U.S. colleges and universities but provide a credentialing pipeline for more than half of the country’s African-American teachers) should be better supported financially to help narrow the Black-White student achievement gap, argues Dr. Leslie Fenwick, dean of the Howard University School of Education. The HBCUs’ four-year programs provide valuable knowledge and experience, supporters contend, and thus require increased financial investment because the programs eclipse short-term programs such as Teach for America (TFA). Dr. Fenwick faulted TFA for, “subjecting minority students to non-credentialed teachers who are only asked to commit two years [to teaching.]”

On the other hand, supporters for Teach for America contend that although it may not equal a four-year education degree, there are other factors that go into quality teaching and TFA “is a good way to get youth advocates and leaders the kind of practical experience they need to more effectively bring about change in other venues.”

Seeking to focus on common ground in the dialogue, Chante Chambers, the Managing Director of HBCU Recruitment at Teach for America, suggested that the goal of stakeholders is the same, “to improve the state of education in low-income communities for students of color...”

Forum speakers also addressed: 1) the (over?) emphasis on standardized testing, and 2) parental involvement in their children’s education, and 3) charter schools.

Congressional Representative Bobby Scott (D-Va.), the Links, Inc. (an organization of professional women of color), and the Kettering Foundation hosted the forum.