Transitions for Youth

William J. Clinton and Robert Keith Rae

The Honourable William J. Clinton, 42nd President of the United States and the Honourable Robert Keith Rae, Ontario's 21st Premier, were invited by Transitions for Youth (Halton) to speak to an audience of sponsors, guests, volunteers, students and the general public, as part of the ongoing Champions of Youth Speaker series, April 03, 2007, at Hamilton Place. This event is an integral part of an awareness campaign and fund raising effort to build an Endowment Fund to support agency programs, designed to assist families, children, and youth of the greater Halton Region who are in need, crisis, or marginalized in some way. Transitions assists youth experiencing depression, behaviour problems in school or the community, demonstrate inability to cope in society and who are debilitated, perhaps homeless or in trouble with the law due to stress and unsuccessful life experiences.

I covered this speaking engagement as a media representative because I believe strongly that what these two individuals had to say is important for readers of Teaching and Learning and serves to remind us that everyone regardless of profession, status, power or wealth can make a positive impact and difference to the life of a child at school. While boys and literacy was not the main focus of the talk, education, health and well being of children including literacy issues were included in the overall intent of the message.

Mr. Clinton began by describing Transitions for Youth as a member of an increasingly significant growing force of private sector corporations around the world called NGO's, Non Government Organizations that facilitate and provide intervention and support to vulnerable families, children and teens in need. President Clinton expressed great admiration for Transitions for Youth director, Ellis Kastof and to his staff for providing leadership and initiative in a time when great opportunities exist to change our world in positive outreach. He specifically praised volunteers who make Transitions

for Youth work possible.

Mr. Clinton said the key to the success of any outreach initiative is "consistent ongoing contribution". Like wise, former Premier Bob Rae echoed these remarks by saying that companies like Transitions for Youth fill in the Gaps that government initiatives simply cannot address. Mr. Clinton shared with his audience that "at no time in history have private citizens been able to affect the outcome of so many proactive initiatives throughout the world through individual donations of money and time". Volunteerism, he said, will be the new service catalyst as baby boomers move into a time he coined as "those with more yesterdays than tomorrows". "With more retirees there is more opportunity for volunteerism and time to give back".

During his talk, Mr. Clinton highlighted various on-going projects he is associated with or started in Africa and other third world nations. He explained that donations by individuals over the internet is the most successful fundraising mechanism ever known and has made a significant difference in the lives of the impoverished, the downtrodden, those faced with tragic loss due to natural and non natural disasters and particularly to those who are, simply stated, "left behind due to inequality and injustice". He specifically cited examples of assistance and positive outcomes to children's health issues, and education, world literacy, and to those with aids and other debilitating diseases. A startling revelation was that child and youth obesity and related Type 11 diabetes is the fastest growing disease in children of the modern world and that more

than twenty percent of the total medical health budget of the United States is devoted to this concern. Sadly it seems, affluence brings with it a price and that price is the increase in inequality among the poor of the rich nations. This he says results in more crime, in more pressure on health care and social services and increases in student dissatisfaction which leads to unsuccessful school experiences. But there is hope. Clinton suggested that if a million individuals of "modest means" in Canada gave one dollar to a charitable organization that would be one million dollars to work with imagine if a hundred million people world wide gave just one dollar what we would have at our disposal.

It's not just the big guys like Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and the Wal-Mart organization that make an impact it is everyone and anyone interested in helping someone else become better. "Small steps are cumulative", he said and this applies to at home projects as well as overseas. Private Citizens can and do make a difference in the lives of suffering children. Mr. Clinton shared with the audience that he has made a personal life commitment to do what he can to ensure that "no child's life is ever wasted" he invited the audience to travel that same road. Praising Clinton for his work Bob Rae made the point that while inspiration is good thing nothing is accomplished without filling in the gap between the "Thought and the Deed". "We need to get beyond talking and make inspiration our realities" he said. Inequality must be addressed not only in impoverished so called third world countries but here in Ontario, throughout Canada, and all of the Western World.

Rae spoke highly of the late Dan Orford, a Hamilton Psychiatrist, who once confided in him saying

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that we know why children are at risk; we know what happens to them when they are impoverished; we know what happens when they are downtrodden; and we know what happens when they suffer humiliation, poor parenting, bullying and a host of other debilitating pressures. We know why kids drop out of school and why they end up in jail. What we don't know is why people and governments don't do more to help change the course of events that ultimately in the long run end up costing society more than if early intervention had occurred. Rae said we must fix what is wrong and one way to do that is through private organizations like Transitions for Youth, education and health advocacy organizations, mentorship programs, and a broader network of publicly supported outreach programs. Both agree that "saying is one thing, doing is another". Interventions cannot be temporary do good acts they must be long term, consistent and meaningful, delivered with integrity. Their message was that "real connections happen one at a time, over time".

Too many children go to school hungry and cannot learn due to

Robert Keith Rae

health, social and home circumstances. More and more are lagging behind in literacy skills and therefore their potential for success in life is greatly diminished. The end result is more inequality, more ill health, more school and society drop outs, more crime, and a more disparate society said Rae. Clearly the message delivered by both speakers was that "no child", living anywhere in the world should be abandoned and relegated to a life destined to be shortened by inequalities, poverty, poor health care, lack of education and opportunity nor diminished in any way as to prevent their potential to emerge.

Reflection

Children, particularly boys, but all children need to be encouraged in whatever way possible to learn to read and write and become literate across the broad range of skills that will be required of them as adults living in a highly technological world. When children are at risk they cannot live or learn well and this is essentially what Transitions for Youth initiatives are all about. Clinton's message is that volunteerism is about helping, one by one, step by step in a consistent ongoing manner. Through citizen service we can ensure that no child is left behind and that the goal of

excellence for all is truly achievable. In a modern society ensuring that every child and every adult can read and write should be achievable. While literacy in itself is not a cure-all, it is the first step towards new understandings and enlightenment by opening doors to new opportunities and possibly new beginnings. Reading to a child and encouraging reading and writing is a start. Most important tell stories; for, this is how we learn about ourselves and our history, culture and society. Helping a child or adult learn to read is a gift that takes little money but lots of time and effort. And it's a gift that keeps on giving in terms of opening doors to a more successful life and opens a window to a world that is in some way better than it was before.

I see that in the future there are many possibilities for Teaching and Learning to continue to emerge as an effective educational tool in helping educators understand and "reach and teach" children the skills needed to survive in a very competitive and demanding world. Teaching and Learning, like Transitions for Youth, is but one of the many messengers trying to make the world a better place. But as Bill Clinton said it is "consistency over time that gets the job done".

Transitions for Youth may be contacted at www.tfyhalton.ca

Reported by Ray Chodzinski

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