

Educators overcome challenges with access, participation and engagement

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By Pete DeLaunay

Two distinguished educators came to the Rotary podium with essentially the same message: providing access for students of all ethnicities and situations results in participation and engagement in programs aimed to help students succeed! Dwane Chappelle, former principal at Rainier Beach High School and current director of the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, joined Dr. Nancy Coogan, Superintendent of the Tukwila School District, as they separately offered their perspectives on inspiring students to succeed.

Chair of our Rotary Education Committee, **Jon Bridge**, introduced both of the day's speakers with an overview of the work of his committee and the importance of equity in the educational system. "Equity means not just money spent," he said, "but equal opportunities for all as we depend on the next generation to carry us forward."

Dwane Chappelle's leadership at Rainier Beach High School was transformational. With 76% of the students coming from low income families, 95% of color and 40% speaking other than English at home; he offered access for Rainier Beach high school students to opportunities they had never dreamed.



"We joined the 'International Baccalaureate' program to coordinate college curriculum across various subjects to encourage academic independence and critical thinking," he said. "We provided high levels of support for students who struggle telling them exam scores are not the only measure of their success." When Mr. Chappelle started at RBHS, the graduation rate was 53% and grew to more than 80% when he left to take over the Seattle Department of Education.

His innovations included starting a 'community café' for students, parents and teachers to foster and improve relationships, raised grant monies to send students to international conferences and gave hopeless students a pathway to succeed. "It is not about me or you," he said, "it is about the kids."

Jon Bridge then introduced Dr. Nancy Coogan, Superintendent of the Tukwila School District, the most diverse school district in the U.S. who led a 'mindful turnaround' of the school district by allowing students 'to find themselves' to create 21st century leaders and contributors to society. "Our priority was to 'raise equity' among our students with special programs from industry certifications companies such as Boeing and Amazon while others go on to college," she said. "We met our goal of having every student reading by 3rd grade to break the cycle of 'remediation' by transforming it into acceleration."

She described a district of 3,000 students in five schools where nine languages other than English are spoken at home. A district that includes 11% homeless with one elementary school where 22% of the students come from homeless situations. “Our district is a national model for academic distinction and for feeding our students breakfast, lunch and dinner,” she said. “We inspire our teachers and students to improve their grades in math, science, and language.” Graduation rates in the district have spiked from 55% to 75%, with graduation rates for homeless students reaching an average 79%.



Both educators spoke of quality of teachers who have created an atmosphere of success. Teacher leaders are ‘boots on the ground’ with students to help them succeed by going out into the community vs. waiting for the community to come to the school. “We want these families to feel a welcoming climate at school,” she said, “and that’s what customer service is all about.”

They concluded by reflecting on the ‘sense of urgency’ around their work, by making students the forefront of the relationship between the student and the teacher. In the halls of their schools ‘there are no strangers’.

President Cathy opened the meeting with several announcements followed by the invocation that touched on student life from **David Levine**; and the anthem, ‘On Blueberry Hill’ led by **Skip Rowland**, accompanied by **Marli Iverson** on the piano. Fellow Rotarian, **Rob LoBosco**, introduced new member **Amy Ridley**, classification financial services. The day’s program ended with our club’s most senior member and past-president **Don Kraft** who offered a touching reflection on his 60+ years as a Rotarian; encouraging our newest Rotarian, Amy Ridley, to celebrate the many values of Seattle Rotary from fellowship to the four-way test, inspiration programs and just plain fun!

