

'You can make a change'

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- Michael D'Onofrio Tribune Staff Writer



Students from 20 Philadelphia high schools gather for the Aspen Challenge at Drexel University on Wednesday.

— TRIBUNE PHOTOS MICHAEL D'ONOFRIO



Lance Goodwin, a teacher at Simon Gratz High School, a Mastery charter school.

Northeast High School teachers Amanda Fiegel, far left, and Scott Williams, third from right, stand alongside their students on Wednesday at the Aspen Challenge event.

Rayah Abdul-Malik, a junior at One Bright Ray High School.

Walter Pack, a sophomore at Northeast High School.

High school freshman Brianna Cooper does not shy away from challenges.

When given the chance to find solutions to the city's widespread poverty or other acute problems, the 15-year-old from Kensington High School said she would rather be part of the solution than sit on the sidelines.

“Instead of taking the easy route and just going along with everything that happens in the community, you can make a change,” she said.

Cooper was making her first strides toward that change Wednesday as one of scores of students taking part in the Aspen Challenge, an intensive eight-week program offering students to improve their communities.

Throughout the day, 200 students and teacher-coaches from 20 city high schools sat at round tables inside Drexel University’s Behrakis Grand Hall on Chestnut Street as part of the Aspen Challenge, which is run by the nonprofit Aspen Institute and funded by the Bezos Family Foundation.

As students jotted down notes in their journals, five local leaders gave them the following local challenges to choose from:

Josh Bernstein, founder and CEO of Explorer At-Large: Educate your community about the factors contributing to climate change, and increase community involvement to improve the health of the community.

Ezekiel Emanuel, chairman of the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of Medical Ethics and Health Policy: Convince members of your community to develop the habits of good nutrition, exercise, balanced emotional health and volunteerism.

Jane Golden, executive director of Mural Arts Philadelphia: Use art to raise awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline, and promote restorative justice and education over incarceration.

Randi Boyette, senior associate regional director of the Anti-Defamation League: Re-imagine digital tools that can be used for cyber-bullying and hate in order to create online spaces of support, respect and acceptance.

Jamila Harris-Morrison, executive director of ACHIEVEability: Design a program to disrupt factors contributing to the generational cycle of poverty, that also creates opportunities for education after high school, affordable housing and sustainable careers.

The challenges were intended to resonate with the students and their community “so they can go and inspire others to join their effort,” said Zachary Epps, program manager for the Aspen Challenge.

“It’s about thinking boldly,” added Epps, who was also a speaker at the event. “It’s really about, how do you give a platform to students to really be inspired and take action?”

The Aspen Challenge, started in 2013, partners with two city school districts every year. In addition to Philadelphia, the program is being conducted in Dallas in 2017.

The program runs for two consecutive years in the same city — although different students are chosen each year. This is the second year the challenge was hosted in Philadelphia, after which it’s up to the school district and city to fund and continue.

In addition to the keynote speakers, Philadelphia students heard from motivational speakers and were given their deadlines.

Within a week, the groups, made up of eight students from each high school, are tasked with choosing one of the challenges. After that, students will be tasked with designing a feasible and sustainable program to address those issues, conduct community outreach and surveys, and compile a written report.

The students will not be going about the challenge alone.

Two teachers at their school will serve as coaches for the students. The Aspen Challenge also provides students with a how-to guide to implement their solutions, and offers a \$500 grant to fund their projects.

In April, students will return to Drexel and present their solutions on stage. The team that comes up with the most creative and effective solutions will be chosen to travel to the Aspen Institute's Aspen Ideas Festival in Colorado to present their ideas.

After hearing the challenges, Rayah Abdul-Malik, a junior attending One Bright Ray High School, said she is eager to "really dig into these topics to figure out what my team wants to do."

"I came for the challenge," added Abdul-Malik, 17. "I came to see what other schools can bring and what I can learn from other schools, and what I can learn from my school and our team, and give the best that we got."

Elsewhere at the event, history teacher Lance Goodwin from Simon Gratz High School, a Mastery charter school, said the limited number of places for students made the selection process very competitive.

For a teacher participating in the event for the first time, Goodwin said students were "really taking the lead" on these issues.

"The room is filled with innovation and thought," he said. "Students are brainstorming, thinking of new ideas to tackle many of the social ills that plague Philadelphia and ... things that can be used in transforming communities outside of Philadelphia."

Among those teachers returning to the event for a second year with a new crop of students were Northeast High School educators Amanda Fiegel and Scott Williams.

Williams, a history teacher, said the program shows students they can take on issues bigger than themselves and "develops those kind of qualities of being a leader."

Fiegel and Williams said their team last year developed a plan to reduce food waste at the school by saving and donating food provided by the free- and reduced-price

breakfast and lunch programs. Students at the school continue to implement the plan, they said.

Fiegel, an English teacher, added that the program has an effect on teachers, too.

“I think when you set the bar high or set the standard high, and then you get the tools on how to do that, that’s allowed me to be a better teacher in the classroom,” she said.

Walter Pack, 16, a sophomore at Northeast High School, said the Aspen Challenge gave him a chance to not only hone his leadership skills, but “encourage a new way of thinking and a sense of creativity ... and pride in your community.”

And that will be important for Pack, who said he aims to pursue careers in engineering and politics.

“If you become a politician, you can better deal with those problems,” Pack said.

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