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A call to action on public education in Springfield

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Members of the Coalition of Experienced Black Educators invited Springfield Superintendent of Schools-designate Sonia Dinnall to speak at its Family Forum on education in the black and brown community. From left to right are Emurriel Holloway, Willette Johnson, Bobbie Rennix, Sonia Dinnall, Gloria Williams and Mary B. Worthy. (Dave Canton / The Republican) Dave Canton



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By [Dave Canton](#) | dcanton@repub.com

SPRINGFIELD — Between 175 and 200 people packed the Bay Area Neighborhood Center on Bay Street Saturday morning to talk with area education leaders about how families in Springfield can help their children improve their educations and excel in school.

The forum, spearheaded by the Coalition of Experienced Black Educators, brought educational leaders in the Springfield School System, including Superintendent-designate Sonia Dinnall, to discuss parental roles in advancing education.

Dinnall told the crowd that learning is not just for school time when kids are in the classroom. Learning is a constant activity and parents and family have a stake in that.

“I want to remind you of your power,” she told parents in the room. “Eighty-seven percent of the time that child spends is outside the classroom. That means 87 percent of the time they are with you, in your home, they are at the Boys and Girls Club, they are in church. Learning does not start and stop in the classroom. It is in the home as well,” she said. “Numerous studies show that with just 20 minutes a day at home with parents reading to their kids, their scores increase by 50 percent compared to those parents who do not engage.”

Coalition Executive Director Gloria Williams said Saturday’s forum is a specific call to action for the Black and Brown community.

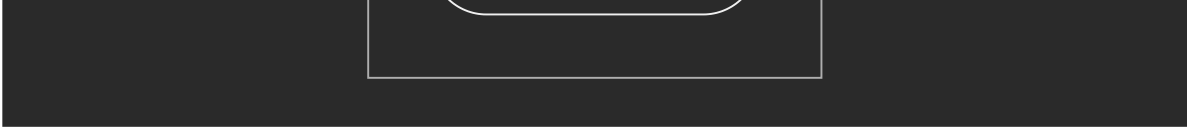
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“It is for the community to better understand and get involved in the education of our children,” she said. “We are trying to save our children.”

Williams said the five members of the coalition represent over 100 years of educational experience, mostly within the Springfield school system. Parental engagement is an especially important part of every student’s success, she said.

“There is a need for families, parents in the community to get involved and work collaboratively to help us help the children to a great education,” she said. “We want to support our new superintendent and help her with the resolve that we gather from the parents here.”

Kisha Morgan runs student support and services for the Springfield Empowerment Zone. She said engagement and empowerment are two related but different functions.

“Engagement is like the first level of bringing families in and you have spaghetti suppers, and you have meet and greets with the principal and teachers. That’s engagement,” she said. “It is important, for sure, but we are talking about elevating parents to become decision-makers and partnering with our schools for the best interests of our students. No one knows the students better than their families, a parent or grandparent, and bringing that information to the schools to start making decisions in partnership with families. We are working to elevate family voices for true partnerships.”

Morgan said that the relationship with Black and Brown families in Springfield schools has been broken.

“Firstly, we want them (families) to feel comfortable and welcome in our schools. We want them to be heard, we want their voices to be elevated, and be part of the decision-making process we are making for student outcomes.”

State Representative Bud Williams, D-Springfield, said that racial inequities in Massachusetts extend beyond the educational system.

“We know the system is broken. COVID-19 revealed all the inequities that exist in education. And it’s not just education. If you look into the community, it’s housing, it’s food deserts, it’s the medical situation for Black and Brown people,” he said. “Education is one of the pillars of our system, but our kids are falling behind — the achievement gap. Some are graduating from high school, and they can’t read. Some

have to take remedial classes to go to a community college. Too many kids are flunking and turned off in school.”

The Coalition of Experience Black Educators is a five-member group of teachers and administrators who, after years of service, are applying their experience and skills to try to improve educational outcomes for the Black and Brown-skinned communities.



Invited speakers at the COEBE Family Forum on Education were Kisha Morgan, chief of student support and family engagement, Francena Brown, executive director of Families Against Violence, and Sonia Dinnall, Springfield School superintendent-designate. (Dave Canton / The Republican) Dave Canton

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