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GCC's Listen. Act. Win. campaign seeks to find school-based responses to neighborhood violence

John F. Kennedy E³agle Academy junior Ty'Asia Brown wants to be a doctor. She's a second lieutenant in her school's JROTC program and looking forward to senior prom and graduation next year. But the past few months have been tough.

In February, Ty'Asia saw two of her friends get shot in a drive-by shooting. She was leaving school and headed toward her bus stop when she suddenly saw a gunman firing out of his car just feet away from her. Ty'Asia started running and looked back to tell her

friend to hurry up. But it was too late; he had been struck by a bullet. Another friend came limping toward her as she ran to flag down a police officer.

Ty'Asia told this story at a recent meeting organized by Greater Cleveland Congregations, a multi-faith coalition of religious congregations and a longtime partner to CMSD. The meeting kicked off the fourth year of GCC's Listen. Act. Win. campaign to find long-term solutions, identified by parents and students, to challenges in District schools.

This year's campaign is aimed at finding ways that schools can protect students from the violence that plagues their neighborhoods, help them cope with the emotional effects that trauma leaves behind and better support those students who find themselves in the juvenile justice system.

Ty'Asia's story is not uncommon for students at the John F. Kennedy Campus and other schools in Cleveland.

"Things like this can really hurt and make you feel totally lost," Ty'Asia said.

Since students have said that they feel safe at school but feel at risk of getting hurt or in trouble on the streets, Ty'Asia and GCC want to work with the District to bring more after-school programs to the JFK Campus through a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Cleveland. GCC also wants to bring similar activities to New Tech Collinwood, which had student and school representatives at the meeting.

The second student to speak that night was JFK E³agle junior Darryl Wright, a straight-A student with dreams of becoming a Judge Advocate General, the highest ranking uniformed lawyer in the Navy. Darryl told the audience about the emotional and psychological effects of living in the inner city.



John F. Kennedy E³agle junior Ty'Asia Brown spoke at the GCC meeting in her school's cafeteria about the shooting she witnessed and ways to keep teenagers safe.

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GCC campaign to focus on school-based responses to neighborhood violence

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“Every day, I try to fight the stereotype of black males, especially in Cleveland,” Darryl said. “People look at us as threatening, cruel and uneducated.”

He described the challenges of growing up around crime, guns and violence but having nobody to turn to when these things start to weigh on him.

GCC’s second request is for the District to place a trained “trauma team” in schools to provide support to students going through tough times. While the District has a rapid response team that responds to student suicide threats and attempts, grief response and student victimization, Darryl and GCC want something more consistent and permanent.

“We want long-term solutions and people who will work with us continuously to make sure we don’t keep all this bottled up inside of us,” Darryl said.

The final “ask” of the night came from Heather Hanstein, a teacher at the Downtown Education Center, a CMSD school in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Center. Hanstein said that while the graduation rate at the school has increased every year, there are still students whose academic needs aren’t met. A solution to this, she said, is summer school.

“Our students come to us well below grade level and lacking in fundamental skills that are needed to be successful in the classroom and, one day, in the workplace,” she said.

Holding up letters written by DEC students who say they want a summer school program, Hanstein asked that the District implement an extended school year for the 2017-18 school year.

Hard conversations

While each of these calls to action came from the mouths of students and teachers who described their individual experiences, the process of identifying these “asks” was more complex.

GCC organizer Khalilah Worley and her team spent the past few months talking to students at several schools to find out what’s troubling them most in their communities and schools. She visited groups at both JFK schools, East Tech and the Downtown Education Center for informal discussions.

Each time, Worley would sit with the students in a circle and say, “I want you to pretend, for a moment, that you’re the mayor of Cleveland. What’s the first thing you would do?”

While some students had unique answers, notable themes prevailed at each discussion: End the violence, get guns off the streets, remove drugs from neighborhoods, improve recreation centers and create more jobs for teens.

In one classroom, she went around the room asking each student how many people did they know who were shot or killed in the past year. Every student could think of at least one.

At times, the conversations became emotional and distressing.

“I feel trapped.”

“To be honest, it feels like nobody can help.”

“I feel like I always have to watch my back.”

Students shared these sentiments with Worley, who took notes to share with her GCC partners.

For GCC, these conversations are what fuel their work and make the Listen. Act. Win campaign so effective, Worley said.

“We know that as an organization, we’re not going to have the kind of impact on neighborhoods that we want to have if we don’t have these conversations,” she said.

Turning “Asks” to “Wins”

Anyone familiar with GCC knows the organization is nothing if not steadfast about its causes. So true to form, Pastor Richard Gibson took time at the public meeting to ask District CEO Eric Gordon to make a promise, in front of the students and faith leaders, to turn the “asks” into “wins.”

After Gordon pledged to explore solutions, he reflected on how important these issues are to him personally.

“When I hear something on the news about a shooting, the first thing I do is start worrying if it’s one of our kids,” he said. “Not enough people are talking about what’s going on in our streets.

He also said that many of GCC’s requests are aligned with the District’s existing priorities. Gordon said GCC’s request for a Boys & Girls Club at JFK lines up with goals that he and Boys & Girls Clubs of Cleveland President Ron Soeder have already established.

While GCC calls these items “asks,” the group does not expect the District to do all the work. GCC leaders said they will work with the District to make these changes happen, deploying its newly formed trauma committee to have a hand in fulfilling the campaign’s promises.

The committee is already working to launch a series of public forums on how gun violence and trauma affect students.

Clergy step up to protect students walking to school

On a chilly spring morning, Bishop Eugene Ward of Greater Love Missionary Baptist Church looked down the long stretch of Union Avenue and talked about the important role that churches can have in keeping students safe.

“There are 100 churches on this street alone,” he said. “So there is no reason why we shouldn’t be out here every morning and afternoon to make sure our kids are safe.”

After police found the body of 14-year-old Alianna Defreeze, who was kidnapped while she switched buses on her way to a charter school, in an abandoned house on the East Side, Ward and other faith leaders in the area vowed to make sure nothing like that would ever happen again.

Following the tragedy in late January, a small but dedicated group of ministers began patrolling the Union-Miles neighborhood every day, rain or shine. One pastor even rides the bus with a group of children each day from Union Avenue to their stop on Kinsman Road. The group calls their initiative Safe Streets.

Since then, the pastors’ efforts have snowballed into something much bigger, drawing in both municipal and community-based groups who have a common goal to protect children. They’ve formed school walking teams to patrol unsafe areas that put children at risk as they go to and from school.

While schools have crossing guards and security near campus, some students’ routes to school mean walking past vacant properties, high-crime areas and dozens of strangers. Ward and his colleagues think their presence can make a difference.

Rev. Tony Minor of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry is another minister with Safe Streets.

“We responded in a very organic way to a problem in our neighborhood, but



A team of ministers, District officials, city leaders and volunteers walked around a neighborhood to identify risks that could put students in danger walking to and from school.

we realized that we couldn’t do it by ourselves, and we realized we need to interface with the community,” he said.

The pastors connected with CMSD’s Safe Routes to School initiative, a partnership with the city and the Ohio Department of Transportation to provide safe routes for Cleveland students to walk or bike to school. They worked with Safe Routes Director Calley Mersmann to see how the two groups could combine their efforts to make the most impact.

They reached out to the Cleveland Police Department, the mayor’s office and several other city departments, including Building and Housing and City Planning. As the word spread, community development corporations and other groups joined in to help.

Minor and Ward are two of six clergy leaders who now head up the walking teams who will patrol the neighborhoods around Miles Park, Mound, Andrew J. Rickoff, Robert H. Jamison, Charles W. Eliot and E-Prep schools each morning and afternoon.

The committee has met several times to plan and organize the walking teams. Volunteers signed up to patrol certain neighborhoods and pinpointed problem areas that might need an extra pair of eyes. More than 70 volunteers showed up to a training in April to walk the streets and learn how to best support students and report red flags.

The volunteers gathered at their assigned schools on May 19 to introduce themselves to the school staff and students and let them know what the walking teams will be in the neighborhoods come fall.

The group’s presence in the community during training has already sparked conversations with residents about the mission and even resolved a few small problems, for example, by asking a business owner to move vehicles off a sidewalk so children wouldn’t have to walk in the street.

“It’s those little engagements that you can’t predict unless you’re out on the streets,” said Freddy Collier, Cleveland’s

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Clergy step up to protect students walking to school

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director of city planning. “You don’t know how you’re going to impact a situation by just being present.

The wide range of stakeholders has also allowed the committee to expand its mission beyond just the patrol. They are also putting an emphasis on reporting dangerous infrastructure issues like vacant homes and cracked sidewalks. Cleveland Police Commander Johnny Johnson, who heads up the community policing bureau, has been part of the planning. His role is to make sure Fourth District officers work with the walking teams and patrol neighborhoods more heavily during school travel times.

Mersmann, the Safe Routes director, said cooperating with the ministers and other



community groups has helped advance the work her department already does. She and the committee hope to replicate the walking teams in other neighborhoods in Cleveland if they prove to be successful.

Collier said he thinks that harnessing the power of the local government to boost what the pastor and District are already doing could help the mission.

“Kids who live in an urban environment

face some unique challenges that create stress and anxiety for them that can affect their academic performance and health,” he said. “A lot of the things that these kids face are things that can be addressed, and we have the human and financial resources at the city to help make that happen.”

The walking teams, who will be identified by wristbands or vests, will officially begin their patrols in the fall.

Council of Jewish Women volunteers revamp school libraries

The National Council of Jewish Women’s local chapter has always made literacy for Cleveland children a priority, but its efforts are hampered when libraries are out of date.

That’s why its members have restocked, organized, coded and even worked as volunteer librarians at three CMSD school libraries through an initiative called “Building Bridges with Books.”

Most recently, while Wade Park School students were on spring break, a half-dozen NCJW members worked to restock and rearrange their media center. They have completed similar projects at Warner Girls’ Leadership Academy and Adlai E. Stevenson School.

Debbie Joseph is vice president of community service for the organization. She has also helped organize book clubs and other reading programs at the schools.

“Our literacy efforts cannot be effective if kids don’t have access to books every day,” she said.

The NCJW is a grassroots organization of volunteers and social justice advocates, with 1,800 members in the Cleveland chapter — one of the largest memberships in the country.

The library project got its start two years ago, when NCJW decided to find a local



The National Council of Jewish Women debuted the revamped library at Warner Girls’ Leadership Academy after weeks of restocking, organizing and rearranging.

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Council of Jewish Women volunteers revamp school libraries *continued from previous page*

school whose library needed some improvements. They put together a committee and eventually chose Warner.

Once the volunteers arrived, they found that Warner actually had a decent supply of donated books, but the books had not been processed.

“That bothered us, because there were thousands of really fabulous books that kids couldn’t get their hands on because they weren’t processed,” Joseph said.

So the volunteers got to work doing the time-consuming, people-intensive process of coding, organizing and shelving about 4,000 books. With help from the school librarian, they also made the library more user friendly by adding rugs and creating an “easy readers” section.

The Council bought about \$15,000 worth of books and supplies for Warner and obtained about 4,000 donated books.

Their work didn’t end there. Because Warner only had a part-time librarian, Joseph and the volunteers were concerned that students didn’t have the access to books that they needed. They decided to take turns volunteering as librarians during the hours the part-time librarian was gone.

After being so deeply involved at Warner, NCJW volunteers felt they still had more to give. They launched three separate

literacy programs at the school: Reader’s Theater, a fourth-grade program that uses theater to improve reading skills; Reading Buddies, a monthly first-grade program in which volunteers read one-on-one with first-graders; and book clubs for fifth- through seventh-graders.

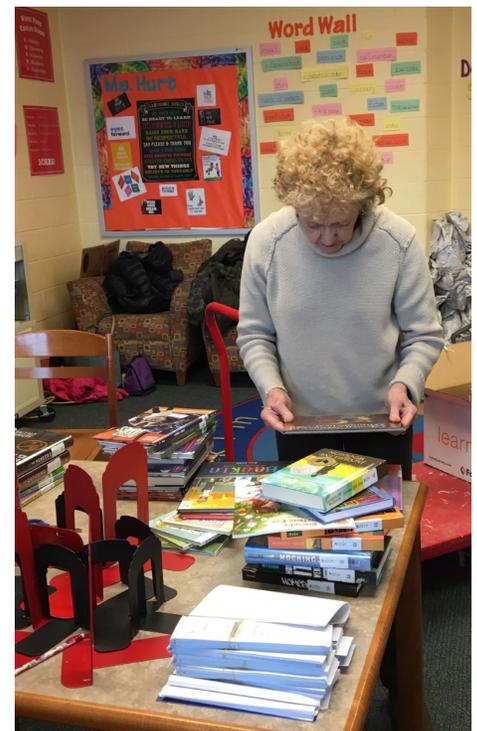
Warner Principal Audrey Staton-Thompson said having more books to choose from has increased her students’ love of reading. And the reading programs fill a void left in some students’ lives when parents don’t have time to read to them at home, she said.

“Some of the girls don’t get a chance to read with anyone who’s not their teacher, so having another adult in their life to read with them is really important,” Staton-Thompson said. “They get so excited when their reading buddies come to the school, because there’s a special bond there.”

Joseph said that because of the high-level of poverty that many Cleveland children face, it’s important for NCJW to fill in gaps.

“Many children who live in poverty don’t have enough books at home,” Joseph said. “If they don’t have books at home, they need to have books available to borrow at school.”

The volunteers have also helped rejuvenate the library at Adlai E. Stevenson, another East Side school in



a neighborhood with high poverty. Last summer, NCJW bought \$13,000 worth of books and donated an additional 1,000.

Joseph said about 60 NCJW volunteers have participated in these projects.

While the library updates are an important part of their work, Joseph said it’s the interaction with students that makes the biggest difference.

“The more time we spend with children, the more impact we can have,” she said.

Pastor launches ‘Safe Haven Saturdays’ at John Adams

Last spring, teenagers in the Union-Miles neighborhood found a place to spend their Saturday afternoons to escape the violence that often plagues the streets. That place was John Adams High School.

From 1-4 p.m. on Saturdays, teens were invited to “Safe Haven Saturdays” at the high school, where they played basketball, ate a meal, played chess and participated in life skills training and career workshops.

Pastor Dwayne Simmons of the New Life Community Worship Center, who launched the program, says teenagers have told him that the only place they feel safe is their school. Simmons grew up near John Adams High School and said when he heard that students had been shot during the last school year, he felt a call to action.

“Students have told me that when the bell

rings and they’re dismissed, they don’t feel safe,” Simmons said. “And I’ve had too many young people who tell me that after they eat lunch on Friday, they may not eat again until Monday at school.”

In collaboration with John Adams Co-Director Terrance Menefee and the Cleveland police, Simmons is seeking to ease these and other challenges that Cleveland children and teens face when

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Pastor launches ‘Safe Haven Saturdays’ at John Adams

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they aren’t in school. Simmons said he pitched the idea to Cleveland Police Chief Calvin Williams, who has been a vocal advocate for both community policing and reducing gun violence, and the chief agreed to help.

At the launch of the program on April 29, four Cleveland police officers showed up to play basketball and chess and make connections with teens whom they might not otherwise meet.

“For some of our young people, the only interactions they have with police officers are negative,” Simmons said. “This is a chance for them to build positive relationships with officers.”

Menefee said he supports the initiative and even agreed to use money from the school’s budget to pay for security.

Menefee also grew up in the neighborhood and said when he was a teenager, he and his friends would hang out at the nearby Randall Park Mall or the neighborhood YMCA, both of which have since closed. And while the Boys & Girls Club offers programming at the school, those activities are limited to weeknights.



Cleveland police officers are part of Pastor Dwayne Simmons’ new weekend programming designed to keep children and teens safe during the times they’re away from school.

“Teenagers need a coming-of-age place that’s non-judgmental and safe where they can go on weekends,” Menefee said.

To make the program attractive to teens, Menefee and Simmons surveyed John Adams students to find out what activities and resources they would like. As the initiative grows, they’re hoping to implement activities like a flag football team and self-defense classes. Both men said their goal is for the

community to see John Adams as a safe zone. Menefee said he sent fliers to neighborhood K-8 schools in hopes that students at those schools will take advantage of the program.

Simmons also hopes that other District high schools whose students are experiencing similar problems with violence will follow suit.

Q&A: CEO Gordon sits down with United Pastors in Mission

United Pastors in Mission is a coalition of about 120 religious congregations in Greater Cleveland that work to connect their members with issues they care about. One of these issues is education for Cleveland’s children. That’s why their leaders meet quarterly with CEO Eric Gordon to hear updates about the District’s progress and to have a candid conversation about the issues affecting students.

“We know we’re in critical times, and the CEO can’t do this job by himself,” said Dr. Larry L. Macon Sr., president of United Pastors in Mission and pastor at Mt. Zion Oakwood Village.

Macon and other members of the coalition have partnerships with CMSD schools and some of its leaders even sit on committees with the CEO and other District officials. Macon said it’s important for United Pastors in Mission to keep up with CMSD’s challenges and successes for several reasons.

“We know the CEO is doing a wonderful job, and we want to make sure we’re consistently communicating with him about how the church can help the schools,” Macon said. “It’s important for us to have these meetings because we have supported all of the levies, and at

some point we have an accountability to our congregations.”

During the question-and-answer session with more than 50 church leaders in April, Gordon answered questions raised by individual pastors. Here’s a summary of the Q&A, edited for length and clarity:

United Pastors in Mission: What is the current enrollment of CMSD?

Gordon: Over 39,000 kids, which is good news. We’re up 1,100 kids in two years, and we’re growing again this year, so we’ll probably be up to about 39,500 next year.

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Q&A with United Pastors in Mission

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UPM: How much more money do you need to educate our kids so that they can all be successful?

Gordon: I don't know that it's money that we need, but it's about the community resources that remove some of the barriers that our kids come to school with. It's about making sure kids have access to high-quality mental health services for the trauma they've experienced, or about the food that many of you provide in your churches so they don't struggle with food scarcity. I would argue it's not about the District needing more money, but it's about how we align the community resources.

UPM: Some of us are concerned about recent statistics that came out showing that 1 in 5 students have attempted suicide. What is the District doing to help?

Gordon: We participated in that survey through the Centers for Disease Control intentionally to check on our kids' well-being because we live in a high-risk community. The good news is that CMSD is further along than most districts in doing something about this. We have a program called Humanware that started in 2007 after a student carried out a shooting at SuccessTech Academy. I vowed that day that we would never stop talking about it. I believe if we stopped talking about it we would set the stage for it to happen again, and that if we keep talking about it we will work toward not letting it happen again. Over the last 10 years we've invested in social and emotional learning practices for kids in preschool through high school. It's based on the idea that if you know how you're feeling, you can manage your emotions. We've got a long way to go, but it's really important work about getting to the root of who a child is and helping them manage their personal life as well as their academic life.

UPM: But what does the District do when something does happen with one of the students?

Gordon: We have a rapid response team and a set of protocols in place for suicide risk and student death. That team is deployed at the school to support school faculty and students. In many cases, we partner with mental health agencies. We also immediately find out if the student has siblings at another school and send a team there.

UPM: What is the District doing to employ more diverse teachers, administrators and mentors so that students have role models who look like them?

Gordon: We are continuing to work to find a diverse workforce so that kids see teachers and leaders that look like them. We're hiring hundreds of people this coming year. We have very clearly articulated goals for our hiring to make sure that we hire more men and more African-American and Hispanic teachers, because our profession tends to be white and female.

UPM: How can churches take on a more active role in students' lives, academically and socially?

Gordon: I think it's a lot easier than we might think. It's really about partnering with a school and offering what you have. I don't think schools tend to remember that, for instance, the sanctuary has an auditorium, and they can do a performance there, or that the mentoring and tutoring that schools need can come from a church. So it's really about going to a school in your community and saying, "Hey, I'm from the church down the street. We would love to host things for you, or have your family event in our church and have you use the church kitchen." There's laws about separation of church and state, but that doesn't mean we can't like each other and work together and share with each other.

UPM: How many schools do you visit throughout the school year?



Gordon: I try to be in schools at least one or two times a week, every week. I move meetings to schools so that I can visit the schools before or after my meeting. The best way to know where I am is to follow me on Twitter, because I don't leave a school site without posting something. I do that for two reasons: One is so that you can hold me accountable and know that I'm actually visiting the schools, and two is because I want my internal school staff to know that I saw something positive.

UPM: Some of us are True2U mentors and that program is growing rapidly. We're going to have up to 2,400 students next year. We're hoping this program is making improvements, but do you have any numbers to support that?

Gordon: We'll start to see the numbers as we follow the eighth-graders from last year and see how their numbers progress over the four years. I'm a numbers guy, but I will tell you I don't need numbers to tell you that's exactly the right thing to be doing and I need you to keep doing that. One of the places that churches can help is by mentoring, because we need more mentors. We did a third of the schools last year, two-thirds this year and we're doing the whole District next year, so we need to ramp up.