

Education for Self-Determination and the Future Economy

SNCC 60th Anniversary Conference

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Speakers include:

Russlynn Ali-Chief Executive Officer, XQ Institute

Danny Glover-Speaker, Actor, Activist, Humanitarian

Maisha Moses-Executive Director at The Young People's Project

BJ Walker- President and Founder, In The Public Way

This discussion centers around education and its role in helping to advance the black community. The panel will discuss various strategies that can be taken to ensure that students, particularly Black students, are receiving a quality education, as well as the current efforts that are taking place to ensure this goal.

BJ Walker: To talk to some very smart folk and very active folks about education for self-determination and the future economy. This topic, in the 21st century, couldn't be more important, taking up a very serious question about what role education needs to play in supporting our people. So, they are thriving and not just surviving in the 21st century. It's about jobs and careers, but it's also about being fully prepared to participate in every aspect of the world that we are all living in today. Today, I have Maisha Moses and Russlyn Ali with me. I'm gonna ask them to tell you a bit about themselves and why this topic makes sense, and then we'll jump into some conversation with them and then eventually some Q&A with you. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. Maisha, Start off.

Maisha Moses: Hi, good afternoon. So, my name is Maisha Moses. I'm currently the executive director of [Young Peoples Project](#), a near-peer math literacy organization that frames its work as being at the nexus of math literacy and social justice or math literacy and social change. I got into this work because of my family story, my father in particular, and my mother. So, both of my parents were involved in the civil rights movement in the sixties and actually really turned their lives over to freedom work.

When I was in the eighth grade in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he thought I was ready to take algebra, but the school didn't offer it. So his freedom movement bug, I think, was triggered or reactivated. This was in the early eighties. So, it was about 20 years after his work in Mississippi. He started organizing with other parents. He ended up having to come into my classroom to be my algebra teacher because the school wasn't prepared to teach me algebra; the teacher wasn't prepared.

So what he discovered was that access to quality math, to the highest level of math that the school was offering, was basically broken down along race class lines. He was ENT in a say in a

sense again; that was the early eighties. He saw that math was becoming a new literacy, right in the same way that reading and writing were a literacy. Right.

So he started to organize with parents around this question, just in this school in Cambridge, around who's getting access to algebra that work turned into the Algebra Project¹. Later, after I graduated from college, actually during college, when I was in my late teens, I gravitated to the [Algebra Project](#) and started working with the Algebra Project. When I graduated from college, I continued working on the Algebra Project and, after some years, started working on the Young People's Project, which grew out of the Algebra Project. So, to answer BJ's question about why I think this work is important, I want to say that it's the only work I've done my whole professional life. So I think it's important, and I can talk more about it later.

BJ Walker: Algebra Project is a family business for the Moses family. So we're glad to have you today. I'd like to have Russlyn Ali introduce yourself. Let's settle back after you do what you do in this conversation. So Russlyn.

Russlynn Ali: BJ and Maisha, it's a real honor to be here with you both today. Maisha, your father, and your family business; as BJ put it, it taught me so much, the notion that rigor that algebra, this gatekeeper. Listen, algebra is still the highest failure rate course in the country has been when I came up, and I'm over 50, and it is still today. It is the obstacle and the gatekeeper ultimately beyond getting to college for getting into career pathways that have gainful employment and rigor. Your father, in your work of framing it as a truly civil right, changed my life.

I was a white collar criminal difference and securities fraud litigator, knowing that feeling like I needed to purge that film off my body every day, knowing that I was gonna be the one to take the firm up on it; you can 30% of your hours, a third of your hours, [Pro Bono](#), even in a top tier law firm. Very quickly realized that this idea of education and public education in America, all the way to and through college or any lifelong learning path, really was the most important civil rights issue of my generation. So, I've had experience in the think tank world, founding the Education Trust-West. I had the great privilege of being President Obama's assistant secretary for civil rights for the first term in the Department of Education.

Now, I help run the [Emerson Collective](#), where I sit as managing director of the education fund at the Emerson Collective, a social change organization funded by Lorraine Powell Jobs. In addition, she and I co-founded the [XQ Institute](#) in 2015 to help transform the nation's high schools, which have been stagnant. They've essentially remained the same for the last hundred years. They certainly haven't kept the pace of other industries.

¹ Algebra Project- A non profit organization founded by SNCC veteran Bob Moses that focuses on working with teachers and communities to help ensure that students who have not had access to college preparation math courses such as algebra.

We believe that data backs it up that high schools really all are the fulcrum for change across the entire K12 system. So, again, let me just say I'm so honored to be here with you, Maisha. I am so sorry for your loss. The country lost a national treasure this summer when your father passed; we are so grateful that you and your brother have taken the reins. Especially as we mark the 60th anniversary of SNCC, an organization that we know was critical to the success of the civil rights movement of the sixties. And I believe your work, standing on his shoulders, is going to be critical of the civil rights movement that we live in today.

BJ Walker: Russlynn, thank you so much. Excuse me. My name is BJ Walker. I've had a long career that is too long to give you a number for being involved in human services. On the side, I met [Bob Moses](#) in the early nineties and became a strong advocate around algebra and mathematics literacy. I've spent my life working in education and human services.

I am really, very committed to thinking about ways in which we help our public leaders; our public sector leaders do everything they can to have our public institutions and our rights protected inside of them. But also that they have a mission to make sure that all of us are being all that we can be. As we grow from children to adulthood to seniorhood, which I happen to be in right now, but, having done those introductions, let's start off with Maisha and Russlynn; I think we really ought to start with the whole topic for this conversation today.

What do we believe necessary to actually, I mean, that we have to keep talking about what is it going to, to be what was, what is it we're going to have to do to actually educate and ensure a strong economic presence for the black community in the 21st century? I can tell you this as a human services person: We cannot continue to just rely on a public sector safety net because it's not safe. So what we need to do is to make sure everybody can stand on their feet. So what's it, what's it going to take, what's gonna be necessary? Do you believe in really getting a strong economic presence for the black community in the 21st century?

Russlynn Ali: Hi, Maisha. You wanna start there?

Maisha Moses: Yeah, sure. I can go. So, I guess my way of thinking about the problem is just so deeply influenced by our work on the Algebra Project and the young people's project. Of course, my dad's thought leadership around all of this work. Thank you, Russlynn, so much for your words. Thank you. But so I think that one of the things that we've been thinking about is to address the problem, you have to understand the problem and understand it in [Ella Baker](#)'s sense of understanding.

Sort of getting down to the root cause and how much do we actually have to do to get down to the root cause of the problem. So what we've talked about over the years is the idea that citizenship and economic access for black people and really for all people, but particularly for black people and poor people, are now linked to an issue of math and science literacy in the 21st century. So, while in an industrial society, schools educated an elite to run the society, and most

people were prepared for factory work or other kinds of work that required like repetitive tasks that mimic factories. But the 21st century has ushered in this huge technological shift in the global economy that we all experience and that we're deep enough into it to really understand and appreciate it.

But this shift places the need for math literacy front and center. So, one way my dad talked about it that I really loved and appreciated was that he would say the Industrial Revolution built machines that automated physical labor. However, the information age builds machines that augment, organize, and automate mental labor. So, it's completely reorganizing the skills that are needed and what's valued in the labor market, and this is happening everywhere.

So, actually, I came across an article or an article that was shared with me this morning about one way this happens in the criminal justice system. So, many of us know about these automated programs that are used to assess the likelihood of recidivism². Police departments use it, and judges use it to guide their decision-making. Right. So, for instance, with this program of those who were labeled higher risk but did not re-offend, 23% of white people who were labeled higher risk did not re-offend, but then 44% of black people who were labeled higher risk did not re-offend. So, the system is skewed.

The coding is skewed for white people to be labeled as lower risk. For instance, of those who were labeled lower risk but did re-offend, 47% of white people who were labeled lower risk did re-offend, but only 28% of black people who were labeled lower risk did re-offend. But so this is happening. These kinds of systems are being put in place all over our society. So it gives rise to the question of what do we, as citizens, as black people, need to understand about the math and science behind these programs.

How do we organize around the politics and the math and science related to these issues? Then, of course, the question of economic access is critical. So, in this economy, that's increasingly organized around knowledge work, which is powered by technology, which is powered by math and logic and what people call computational thinking. There's an opportunity to organize around equity and math education. Otherwise, we really run the risk of further cementing the current inequities in the education system and the inequities in our society as a whole and how that gets manifested in the education system. So I think partly where we start is just really framing and understanding the problem, which then points to a direction of what to do. I can pause there.

Russlynn Ali: Well, thank you, Maisha. That was really, I mean, so much of what you said resonates and, in particular, that link between the needs of today's economy and what happens in our schools; we are a knowledge-based economy for the first time in a hundred years. Yet, our

² Recidivism- A term that references the relapse back into criminal behavior.

system was built on a principle that prepared young people for factories, right? The unprecedented opportunity that we have now is to rescue money from COVID.

We have more money coming into our public schools than ever before, even when LBJ[President Lyndon B Johnson] launched the war on poverty and created the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ³, which, for the first time in history, devoted millions of dollars targeted to Title One schools. Schools we defined as those serving mostly low-income students with the recognition of the change of federal policy, knowing that the impact and effects of poverty made both the job and the duties of schools stronger.

We were gonna provide resources to supplement schools that were educating students. We know that the pervasive achievement gap, that sort of lack of, quite frankly, great teaching, teaching our kids what we need to know and be able to do in order to succeed in this new economy, is not happening at the scale that we need it to. But back to what, and we could go on and on and on about these data, and I know Maisha, you like to bury yourself in data, what to do around these data when it comes to not just the rate of achievement throughout our schools, but the opportunity gaps that give rise to those achievement gaps. Because it's not this, it's not that I grew up more in PG[Prince George] county. It's none of those things, right? They contribute to the achievement gap, and in the end, those are correlations.

They are not causative. What causes it is that our kids who are most dependent on schools for their learning actually get the least of everything. Research says that we know it makes a difference. So it is not BJ that we don't have the know-how on what it takes to transform schools and prepare everyone for the economy that Maisha so eloquently laid out; it's that we don't have the civic will. And for far too long, there has been a zero-sum game. This is why the hope of COVID relief monies, right?

We're looking at \$190 billion taken together, 170 billion just from the Care Act ⁴ alone, \$190 billion put into K12. It has a three-year cliff. They have to spend it in three years. One of the other significant policy changes in this stimulus act monies is what's called maintenance of equity. It's the first time ever the federal policy has said, no matter what, these dollars, the maintenance of equity provision, we can go on and on about the won about this effectively, it means that everything we give to, to schools plagued by the achievement gap, plagued by the opportunity gap goes to solve them.

We aren't gonna take money that had here too far been earmarked for low-income schools and take them to cure the funding and other gaps caused by COVID. We're gonna make sure these monies go on top of those equity-based dollars that have been historical in the Obama administration and dating back. But as I often say, I know like you, Maisha and so many of those

³ Elementary and Secondary Act- An act signed by President Lyndon B Johnson on April 11th 1965 that required federal funding for K-12 schools in the United States.

⁴ Cares Act- The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and economic security act passed during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic to provide economic assistance to the american people.

watching today are students of history. When I thought about looking at these monies, I realized that they were unprecedented and that we had never had resources like this before in K12; the only time really was when LBJ launched the war on poverty. And at that time, he said in the speech that created [Title One](#). Basically, he said that we needed a fifth freedom building on the four freedoms of Roosevelt's [New Deal](#), a fifth freedom.

It was gonna be the freedom from ignorance, the freedom, so that he said, quote, every young person everywhere can be free to develop their talents to their full potential unhampered by arbitrary barriers of race or birth or income. 60 years ago, that very much was about access. Today, we are standing on the shoulders of giants who made that access plausible and real, made a country hungry for it, and laid bare the injustice that was happening in our schools. We wouldn't have known if it weren't for SNCC. Now, the movement is ahead, especially when we have a kind of empathy for civil rights that we certainly have had.

Why is it in the mainstream in my lifetime? Now, it's to get to quality. To make sure that everything our young people are learning accelerates the closure of the achievement gap, especially now the learning loss as a result of COVID is devastating. We have to catch kids before they slip. We have to ensure they get the strongest and best teachers. We have to make sure that once we have all of this, we take these stimulus monies and close the funding gap. Still today, poor schools get over a thousand dollars less per student by and large countrywide on average than students in our wealthiest district.

That kind of funding gap per student at scale is devastating. So it's time we take these resources and do the hard work of following what the research says. And we spend them in a way that we know our kids need the most. And it's about high time. That again, building on the shoulders of so many who made this work possible, including, and perhaps especially, your father, that we make this a movement. Once more, a change of the magnitude we seek requires a cultural shift.

Yet these issues we're not talking about; we're talking about vaccines in schools. That's what dominates civic and political conversation right now about schools. I'm not at all gonna trivialize that and say that it's not important, but at the end of the day, the reason our country is what it is as a first-generation American, I will tell you, is because we are the only place in the world that requires all the way through universal high school. We were the first place for sure, universal high school education as a right. We were in first place, and still, we are one of few. And so treating this Maisha, the last time I saw you was at the calling education as a civil right pre-pandemic in October of 2019, really honoring the elders of this movement and supporting leaders like you that are hustling and at it every day, because we do need to treat education as a civil right in this country. And we have not for far too long,

BJ Walker: This conversation is really laying a platform to talk about just that topic, Russlynn; most folks really don't have an understanding of the significant gap that exists between what our

young people need in the 21st century and the gap between that and what happens in schools. So, they don't have a full understanding of what a marketplace is. I mean, most people participate in education these days, most families. It's a marketplace for those who can get their kids in the best schools, and people buy them to get them in. It's an application process. There's just a lot going on out there, and it's not about access and equity and a floor that everyone is expected to be able to stand on. Most people don't know that fundamentally, we have no constitutional right to union. Most of us would believe it. I bet you walk down the street with a microphone.

You said, do you believe that the constitution says that you should have a right to education? Everybody's gonna raise their hand and go? Yeah, of course. I think about the need that we have as a nation going forward to generate the kind of enthusiasm and energy around this topic. That's so fundamental, not just to people, but it's fundamental to all generations. How, what do we need to do? I mean, in the sixties, the people with the problem in Mississippi became the drivers of the solution, but how do we get the people mobilized and energized? What does that look like in the 21st century from your perspective?

Russlyn Ali: Well, BJ, what it would've looked like pre-COVID, but what it looks like now is very different. I don't know a parent who hasn't witnessed firsthand the lack of quality and the lack of rigor, and I'm just wondering how poorly our schools are educating our young people for the future. Now, certain things we've made great progress on for the very first time. I couldn't talk about the digital divide ⁵, right? It was like pushing, pushing a Boulder up a hill. Finally, we've made progress on that because you couldn't teach at all unless young people had devices in the bandwidth to be able to reach their teachers in any kind of hybrid setting. Now, we are going to the place where, at a minimum, high schools are gonna need to be a kind of hybrid. And, actually, that's what the research says. It's good that this notion of synchronous and asynchronous learning is so that young people can pace themselves, right?

As opposed to sticking with this time-based system upon which the whole thing was built, the whole thing. Yes, many people don't understand that we don't have a federal right to an education in the same way that many people don't understand that every state constitution actually does have a right to an education. It makes the legal remedies more complicated, but it doesn't make the right obsolete. But more than that, it's not just about access. It's about actually seriously, seriously rigorous teaching and learning so that we're prepared for life after high school. Again, I think, and anecdotally, we're seeing this everywhere that the innovation that has been lacking in the K12 system is starting to take foot that people are realizing not only must we, but because COVID upended everything, we absolutely have no choice at this time because it's all in nothing.

You might have seen the LA USD[Los Angeles United State Department], the LA Times article about LA, and it was LA County. I don't think it was just the district where the full 20% of the young people in high schools just couldn't be found. They never logged on. They never logged

⁵ Digital Divide- the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not have access.

on. Those who did log on were half present and half not. So we are at a crisis point, the likes of which in schools, we quite frankly, haven't been since we were barred from access, since the fifties and the sixties, when, if you looked like us, you couldn't go to some schools. We are at that crisis point again. It's not just, but it is especially suffered in our communities, but not just so this idea of taking what we know works, putting old bargains, old fights, aside, meeting young people where they are with now, for the first time, since the war on poverty, we have the resources to do it.

We have the science to do it. Finally, technology has caught up with policy. So, for all those reasons, I'm more hopeful. There is a roadmap that we can follow if we have the civic will to follow. My belief is that because we now know COVID showed everyone, even if we didn't know the data, even if you weren't wonky like us following this research, we see it. And we feel that if we can do this as the next great civil rights movement in our country, we will all be better off. And so many of the isms that we are suffering through, from tolerance to just the rise of ignorance that breeds the divide that exists in our country, I believe will start to win.

BJ Walker: It's a great point about meeting young people where they are. And I know that's at the heart of the work you're doing. Talk to us a bit about what that looks like and feels like in a post-COVID world, or about to be a post-COVID world, also in a mid-20th, first-century world, because in a minute, we're gonna be there. And how the work you're doing speaks to that.

Maisha Moses: Okay. Yeah. So this is really the heart of the work of the Young People's Project. And so when you think about, um, who is most directly affected by this problem? Well, it's this: it's the students, and they have a window when they're still students, and then they age out of that status. And the question is, well, what can they do? So, one of their main problems is that they don't have the math teachers that they need. They don't have elementary school teachers, by and large. The country doesn't have elementary and middle school teachers, and it needs to ensure that all children learn mathematics. And so one of the main thing that the young people's project has done is to organize resources and create spaces where young people can learn and teach bits and pieces of mathematics to each other.

We call them math literacy workers, and we consider it to be really important entry-level knowledge work. When you think about the opportunities for work that young people have, what kinds of work they can do as teenagers are giving them a taste of work that the emerging knowledge works, right? That work is proliferating across the economy. And so in that context, what we've been able to do over the years is to create, I guess, small beachheads in local communities working with after-school organizations, working with schools, working with school districts, training and developing students from the community who may or may not be comfortable in math or gifted and talented in math. But our point is that this is a serious problem that not only are you, your community and your generation dealing with, but it's really a national problem.

This is a very important problem for the country, and the country actually needs you if it's gonna be able to work its way out of this problem. And so, engaging in hiring young people through that consciousness. So they have a consciousness that as they're working, it's not just about doing math in a fun or creative way, um, or meaningful way. But it really is about math for citizenship. The other part of it is that, you know, if you think about it in an industrial setting, the math that we learn and teach is still an artifact of the 20th century.

We really are still figuring out what needs to be taught and how it needs to be taught for math to be meaningful as a literacy in the 21st century. So young people are also pushing the boundaries on that question because of course, they have more degrees of freedom working in the out-of-school time space. Teachers are very much constrained by various state standards and district standards and testing in terms of what kinds of innovation they might try to develop in the classroom and begin to systemize for students in terms of what works for teachers.

I've had teachers tell me this, you know, they spend way too much time doing things that they know do not work, but they don't. They haven't wanted themselves the freedom to buck the system, to do what they, to try, what they think might work, might actually work. And so students who earn the right, who give themselves the right and earn the right over time by demonstrating that they can actually figure out what works. They are very important to our strategy and approach to the problem.

BJ Walker: Russlynn, that raises for me. I know you guys are out and looking at models of high schools, trying to understand how we rethink this high school model and this whole issue of young people as assets. One of the things I've found about doing community work is that our young people are not ever seen as assets in their own communities. So are there some things you guys are seeing, doing, or hearing about that give us energy around what Maisha is talking about in terms of engaging the young people right at heart about this issue of literacy and their education?

Russlyn Ali: Yeah. BJ, you nailed it. That's it, right? The best schools, the best high schools in particular, are those that have flipped conventional school design on its head and started mission and culture with young people, what their needs are, what their voices are, what they want, how they want to consume curriculum, what they feel like they need to know now. And that's not to say that we don't need adults and experts in total partnership. Of course. Right, having said that, so for example, down to one of the things that we realized as we, I mean, no surprise, given everything we've learned from Maisha's legacy and algebra as a civil right, is the notion that, if we don't crack this, not of teaching algebra, if we're trying to say that we know a mastery-based competency-based system is how to do it.

In other words, what are the stackable sets of credentials that equal algebra? What are the stackable sets of badges that, if you will, equal algebra? Why is it that if I struggle with polynomials, I'm likely gonna have to repeat the whole course? If somehow linear equations get stuck for me, I'm gonna have to repeat the whole course because that's how we teach it today. So at XQ, we actually worked with young people and innovative teachers and are developing a project-based algebra curriculum, building on everything we know about the science, not just of what kids need to know and be able to do for deductive reasoning, which is in effect what algebra's all about. Right? But also, how to teach so much have we learned from the algebra project and great ⁶pedagogy everywhere, and through them, it's actually how you tune an instrument.

It's how you make and tune an instrument. It was also what our folks needed to do to be creative in a world where this is teaching and learning because we can't see young people, but we can find ingredients in our homes that actually we can make and in. So doing and just figuring out how to play and how to tune turns out with the best psychometrics and to ensure psychometric validity with the best teachers, with the most rigorous scientists behind us scientists that are teachers, because it turns out it is rocket science to teach rigorous courses, especially for the most disaffected learners. We have made and will open source, open source, all of it, a curriculum that young people not only have driven but have defined equaling in nine units.

The most rigorous algebra curriculum, and fun in entertaining algebra curriculum that so many of our experts have ever seen. We have also seen in places like Crosstown, a school that many of you that know Memphis would've known, the old seals, Sears robot distribution center, a dilapidated building for a long time. Now, if you go there, it's not only the center of the Cross Down High, but it has a medical clinic that, last I looked, serves 70,000. I'm sure that's grown since then. It has everything from a theater to local businesses to housing. It's magnificent.

It is the center of the community. Its school was derived before the development was even really, I don't wanna say they broke ground. They might have broken ground, but it certainly didn't look like it was now full of a museum at all. It was designed. They call it diversity by design to heal the wounds. That was the segregation happening in Memphis, across Shelby County across it. One of the most remarkable schools I've ever seen in my life. Its team was not only the most its design team was not only among the most diverse that I've ever seen, but it was completely and utterly student driven.

And it still is recently, I had not recently because time feels elastic in the pandemic. It was probably more like a couple of years ago, but the leader there in the most graceful way and in the most rigorous teaching and learning moment. I'd seen what other leaders would've called chaos when his students walked out and revolted during the protests and around issues of equity and the way that these teachers took that as a learning moment and a healing moment, not only for the school but the entire community. They do this idea of project-based learning, bringing arts and science and, again, meeting kids where they are in really innovative ways. There is

⁶ Pedagogy- The method and practice of teaching especially as an academic as an academic subject.

one-size-fits-all its-all. That's what we've learned. That's what we've learned. But if you have questions, I'm sorry. Yeah.

BJ Walker: The questions coming in and, this one, I think, picks up rustling from where you were a little bit ago; one of the questions is what should states and districts really spend their COVID release funds on, and what are some of the smartest investments they should be making in those three years? So I'd love to get both a take from you and Myesha about some ways in which school districts, you know, have plenty of things to spend their money on. So the question is, how could we give them some guidance about how these funds could really support a different experience for children and young people in schools? So, what's the smartest investment? Give me one or two things, a piece that would be a smart investment of the COVID-19 dollars.

Maisha Moses: Do you want me to go first?

Russlyn Ali: I've been talking too much.

Maisha Moses: So I'll answer that question, but I wanna preface it with a little story about my hometown, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Cambridge is the innovation, one of the innovation capitals of the country, if not the world. When I went to the high school so many years ago, I was the only black student in all of my math and science honors classes for all four years for my grade level, more or less, the same thing is happening. Cambridge spends an inordinate amount of money, more than any other school district in the state, on its students. At the same time. Cambridge, as a matter of policy, sets different targets for different demographic groups, such as for what percentage of students will meet or exceed expectations. This policy is based on state practices or policies. The assumption is that performance will improve over time, based on starting with where students are now.

For example, for third-grade literacy, the expectation is that 47% of African American students will meet or exceed expectations. Meanwhile, 77% of white students will meet or exceed expectations. For eighth-grade math, it's that 25% of black students will meet or exceed expectations, while 75% of white students will meet or exceed expectations. The numbers are based on the achievement percentages from several years prior to the target date. Again, expect that each cohort's achievement will reflect the achievement of prior cohorts. But Cambridge hasn't said what our budgets and staffing would look like if we expected black and white students to achieve the same percentage now, right? Starting next year. So I think underlying this question of what do we do with all this money? There's also a question of what our underlying assumptions are about what we expect of kids.

This is actually the question that got the Algebra Project off the ground way back in the 1980s because a letter was written to all of the parents, and all of the parents were asked, well, do you

want your child to take algebra? And everybody said yes. And the second question was, do you want all the kids to take algebra? And some people said yes, and some people said no. Believe it or not, Cambridge is actually still fighting that fight around those same two questions today, all these years later. And so part of what we're running up against and running into is the way that the caste system operates in the education system. And so some of our dollars need to be spent towards addressing that question, like really wrestling with this idea of how caste lives and breathes in our education system and how we're in the process of making policy, making, spending decisions. How are we tackling that head-on? Because I think, you know, some of the things that Russlyn.... all the things that Russlyn talked about in terms of what the schools are doing and the algebra curriculum, it's beautiful, right? There's a lot. As she said, there's a lot that we know how to do in terms of engaging students, but we don't agree that all students should be engaged at the highest level.

Russlyn Ali: That's right. That's right. I mean, this is it's really the stubborn, the stubborn heart of this movement. And that is what, you know, President Bush used to call the soft bigotry of low expectations. It's not so soft. It's not so soft. We don't call it a caste system. Right. But it is one, it is one, you can see it as early as second grade. Wanna know why because that's actually when algebra starts. Any standards of algebra actually map back to second grade, but BJ, to try and answer your questions, to add to what Maisha says, to answer your questions, and to listen, cruxes up what to do now.

What if we had the civic and political will to actually close the achievement and opportunity gaps? What if we had it to act on what everything research says makes a difference, then we'd actually make serious progress. And again, for the first time in our lifetimes, at least we have an unprecedented amount of resources to see it gets done. Now, the way these monies get distributed makes what to do a little bounded; that is, we have three years. So, while the reflex might be to hire staff, we have to think about it in three years. What happens when we follow up that proverbial cliff because the resources to keep them aren't there. So by, an example is one of the constraints we have when we think about how to spend these monies.

We also know that distribution is two really important things. First, stakeholders have to be involved, according to the feds, in ways that, having served in a sub-cabinet position as assistant secretary, I had never seen where this administration has really articulated the level in-depth of community participation and stakeholder engagement that is powerful. Second, 10% of this money stays in the state. 90% goes to the districts. So with those things in mind, what are the kinds of things we can do?

We certainly can invest in infrastructure, right? It lasts the kind of technological infrastructure. We need to create new systems of continuous improvement. We bear both the data side and the assessment side. COVID has also upended assessments. We weren't great at assessments for a long time, but we have to be able to measure kids and determine whether they're learning.

We have to be able to measure whether teachers are teaching. We can take some of these new monies and really invest in world-class assessment systems that are not solely about one summative assessment. We can make buildings and learning environments that are innovative, fun, exciting, rigorous, and technology-based. We can empower communities to make schools the hub of community.

We've seen it with, with, with increasing super storms, not just on the Gulf coast and throughout, for example, the Caribbean, but we're now seeing it in Rhode Island, that was hit by a super storm not too long ago, we ought to be able to make schools that could withstand superstorms, that are the hub of the community that are safety nets for communities that can feed themselves that can or grow their own food, rather. That can make their own water that can serve as the great equalizer which our public schools were designed to be. We could take those monies and really deliver more effective daily learning experiences. Again, the best schools that we have seen are schools that don't just sit, have kids sit at a desk, and teach with an adult in front of the classroom on a worksheet. Those are, in fact, the worst schools, but really thinking about learning experiences that are engaging and rigorous.

And we have enough science and models on how to do that at scale. And lastly, really understanding the pathways, uh, high schools, for example, represent about 30% of typical districts populations. 30% of this monies ought to go to high schools. For that reason, we ought to think, and we ought to think about schools as the pipeline all the way up to ready, not just for college, cause all kids aren't gonna go for college, but we certainly want kids to be empowered to make a choice. The data about access to rigorous courses that Myesha speaks about are pervasive and persistent. It's not just algebra.

You can see it all the way up to calculus. You can see it from biology all the way up to chemistry and beyond. It's as simple as this: if we don't teach kids and provide access to a rigorous curriculum, they won't learn these skills that are necessary to live out their life streams. So starting there and not just offering courses without the preparation for teachers and students to be able to succeed in them. So sorry I'm a little repetitive about this BJ, but again, we have the know-how; the civic will is what's been lacking for far too long. Hopefully, at this moment in time, we will have the opportunity to drive real action.

BJ Walker: Maisha, I really wanna focus part of this back to you because there's a lot of people, all of us know them who are saying, you know, all of us can read, but come on now, all of us cannot do mathematics beyond the basics. And certainly not, you know, all of that, uh, complicated algebra, trigonometry, calculus, it's flowing through the lifeblood of our psyches, and we just can't all do it. And what I'd like you to do if you would? I'm asking for it briefly because I know it can get long. The thing that convinced me when I first met your dad was when he went through the five-step process. Yes. I realized if somebody had just known to take me through the five-step process, I might have been able to conquer more of the math landscape than I was able to conquer.

And so I think some of this is, as you guys are talking, I'm saying there are things out there that we know that open up this floodgate. So, I'd like you to talk a little bit about the five-step process because it's a way of bringing math to young people that engages them and involves them rather than just putting something out there for them to memorize. And transactional stuff to do. Just talk a bit about it, just to kind of be, to convince everybody who's listening there. All of us really could do the math. Really? We could.

Maisha Moses: So, um, the five-step process was actually an answer to a sixth-grade teacher's question, Lynn Garre. She wanted to know, okay, how am I gonna teach all my children algebra once the school decided, now everybody gets algebra, not just the so-called, you know, math genius kids? So she wanted to know how she gonna now teach all of her children algebra. So my dad was studying the philosophy of math at Harvard. He was in the middle of a doctoral there, and he was looking at how ordinary arithmetic gets off the ground by structuring our everyday language and our everyday experiences. So, the five-step process starts with experience.

It could be a very simple experience like observing two people standing next to each other and asking a question about who's taller or who's shorter and then just making it explicit. Then, in the five-step process, students would talk about that little event. They would write a picture about it, right? For their picture of this person standing, I can use Maisha and BJ because I know Maisha is taller than BJ. So draw a picture of Maisha and BJ standing next to each other and write a few sentences stating that those, um, steps belong to the students. Anybody can do it. Every single person can do it if you're willing to pay attention. And then the question is, well, that question of who's taller in our ordinary talk. People talk. So call people to talk. We would answer that question like this: Maisha is taller than BJ, but mathematics won't let you say that.

Mathematics will only let you say Maisha's height is greater than BJ's height. And in order to use the math symbols that you would need to use to talk about that experience, that's what those symbols would say. Mica's height is greater than BJ's height, but nobody talks like that. That's not part of anybody's ordinary discourse. Um, as my dad famously said, no matter what language you speak, it's not the way people talk. And so math has its own syntax and all scientific disciplines, right? Have their own syntax or grammar. So, the five-step process made explicit some really important algebraic concepts like positive and negative integers, which actually bring the idea of direction into numbers. So all through elementary school, students typically answer questions about a number, about how much or how many, and the idea that a number would also talk about which way you're going isn't necessarily intuitive.

But once somebody makes that explicit, then it's straightforward to see. And, of course, the question of which way to answer, the question of direction, is something that students own. It's something that children own, and people own as part of our experience. The five-step process links experiences that can become grounding metaphors for mathematical concepts to make them

meaningful. And so this is the idea that this is a tool that can be used to help drive math instruction as a literacy, as a basic literacy that yes, everybody can do math. Everybody can actually do the math. And so if we can do it, then we should do it. And actually, we need to do it for all the reasons we've been talking about for the last hour.

BJ Walker: Oh, the thing that always engaged me around the five-step process is that you're starting with something, a concrete experience. It's just like the best readers construct new knowledge from their own knowledge. They can add construct meaning. I think the point here, and that I really wanted to make, is that we have ways to help young people construct knowledge and meaning from the world that we can, even for teachers who themselves never had the advantage of getting that we can begin to spend the dollars we have on offering that experience not just to the students, but to the teachers and inside the training and technical assistance that goes on in schools. There's a great deal of it. It's a marketplace.

I think one of the things we need to do in this country is figuring what are the essentials, what are the things that are must-dos, and invest in the must-dos. And we must have a conversation about that, and we need to bring experts to the table experts from the community because they know what their experience and knowledge are and, and where they are, and experts from academia and experts from the professional realm. So I hope that there will be some opportunities in this country to do that kind of work. I'm gonna go now to a question because we are getting close to the end, but I think this is a really important question maybe to try to bring some closure around the question is how do we get the larger society, the muster, the will to have a more inclusive curriculum.

Right now, we have a curriculum that does not invite everyone in; no matter how you come to it, it invites you in based on a perceived sense of your prior performance in the curriculum. So, I wonder if you all would spend some time talking about how we're gonna get the nation to care about this enough that we can turn on MSNBC, and we will hear some conversations about this. So that we can see people in neighborhoods and communities gathering together inside their schools and out to talk about this issue of 21st-century access to quality education and how we make it a civil right, something that we should all expect and that if it's not happening, there's a problem. So, I'll open that question and ask you all to burn some closure around that question in the next five minutes. That's on the question list.

Russlynn Ali: Sure. Let me try to be super brief about that because it's a really important and multi-layered question in conversation. So this idea of curriculum and a national curriculum, we're never gonna have that in our country. We never will. We don't have a federal ministry of education, unlike, say, Great Britain and so many other Western countries. So it is gonna be up to each state. The state board and school boards in Texas are going to get to decide whether the

⁷Indigenous peoples and the impact on them of both slavery and Columbus is something that is taught in schools. That is true, right? The same conversation is happening in California, and too often, facts and politics get meshed together. I don't know how we change that BJ. I thought I've spent a lot of time thinking through it is, and I think there will be a residual effect if we can together create the world that you laid out.

One of which this issue is at the top of the national, civic, and political conversation. The journal on TV, where you see movements everywhere. You're talking about why my school doesn't offer algebra or other rigorous courses. Why don't I have access to the best teachers? Knowledge is currency. Why is it being withheld from me? Part of that is about awareness and sharing and conversations like we're having today. Part of that is really trying to figure out this culture shift and turning point moment that our organization, and so many others in the field, are trying to study and figure out.

And, so much of it, as we've said, is building on the shoulders of folks in this room and listening and watching to make this the civil rights issue of our generation. Will we have a federal civil right to an education? Probably not, that court that that court case has been asked and answered many years ago. Will it be revisited again for sure? There are seminal cases that might come back up, such as cases around money and cases around the federal government's need to intervene in poor-performing or low-funded schools, but the legal Tre to make that happen is one that is slow running. If it happens at all, the civic and political movement stretch to make that happen is one we can all participate in from now on.

BJ Walker: Maiahs. We've got two minutes, I believe, or so

Maisha Moses: So I think that we have to keep organizing. That It's a problem that's deep and big and and broad enough that it creates lots of spaces and opportunities for us to organize, to organize with young people, with parents, with teachers. I think it was [Charlie Cobb](#) who said yesterday on a talk that organizing continues to be available to us and that we should earn our right to work with the people who have the problem to organize around the problem that continues to be available. And if we continue to do so, then there will be a generation of Americans, of young people who do rise up and take this on in the way that the questioner is asking about that.

I really do believe. But for me, it's about continuing to just chip away and chip away and chip away. It's hard to get the country to pay attention for any sustained period of time to a question like this, and that is just very noisy. But as Russlynn said earlier in the conversation, it is one of the most important issues of our generation. It's not gonna go away. And as long as it's here, people are going to continue to rise up to dedicate really their lives to working on the problem. I absolutely believe that.

⁷ Indigenous People- refers to those peoples with pre-existing sovereignty who were living together as a community prior to contact with settler populations

BJ Walker: Well, I think we have about five minutes left. I thought we only had two. So I certainly invite you to invite both of you if you've got some burning closing remarks and want to put them on the table. Now, this would be a good time to do that.

Maisha said it, we have to make this a movement. We have to stand up. We have to understand that something is being taken away from us when we don't have access to these rigorous courses and that there's nothing good in that for us or our children. In fact, it's harmful and can be devastating. And it's up to us, those who are paying attention to the walk and seeing the link between courses like algebra and chemistry and success in life; whether you go to college or not, it isn't incumbent upon us to make that knowledge shared and heard. Again, this is for the first time in history, and this is where we all need help.

How do we seize this moment? At this moment, \$190 billion is going to our schools. We've never had it before. We're never gonna have it again. How do we seize this moment and get a country to pay attention? How do we make our policymakers have to account for us, to me, to you, to our communities? This is how we're spending the hundreds of million, 15 billion. California's getting 15 billion in K12 influx. Rhode Island is getting over 115 million. And what I've just articulated is the CARE Act alone. That's not the other stimulus funds that are about all of COVID relief. So we now have the money to do it, and now is the time to make progress on having the civic will and political will to get it done.

Maisha Moses: And so that you said that, it brings me back to something I wanted to say earlier because I went one way with the question around, well, what's one of the most important things to do or, if you know, top two things to do. Um, and so it also, you mentioned it when you talked about XQ, Russlynn about you have the best teachers and if there were one thing to organize around,

Students, students at the bottom, need the best teachers, the country needs to invest in teachers. And so far, it hasn't shown the inclination to do so, but it's absolutely not trivial teachers who have the content knowledge, who are steeped in the kind of curricular processes that BJ asked us to think about, who are experts, who are learners, who are engaged, who are researchers, right? All of that. Our children deserve the best teachers.

BJ Walker: Boy, this conversation has certainly been great for me; if I had to offer a closing, one of the things I would do every day is work with public sector leaders. I myself was one. I can say this to you if we don't begin to think about how we both develop, recruit, and sustain public sector leaders who learn the public environment well enough to manipulate it, to make it work on their behalf, to make bureaucracies dance around the issues and the needs that we have in the communities, and under resource and underserved communities, communities of color, communities in rural areas.

There's a lot of a leadership problem we have here, which is probably enough for a whole another session around what does it takes to stand in a public sector arena and make things happen differently on behalf of people who need for it to happen differently is a question that we need to start organizing around this. Well, because public sector leaders, if you give me \$4 billion, trust me. When you come back, I'm gonna be accountable for having done something nobody ever did with \$4 billion before.

That's right. So I wanna thank each one of you for participating for the work you're doing, for being a colleague, for being someone that I know is out there in the space that I could reach out to, for being engaged in organizations that are moving are moving stuff. You know, we're not standing still for really taking the time today to meet. So thank you, and have a great rest of the day. And thank you to those of you who listen.