

## **Remarks to NAACP**

**Delivered by Stacey Stewart, U.S. President, United Way Worldwide**

### **Intro**

I'm so honored to be here, to help celebrate the NAACP's achievements in Fairfax County, and to celebrate the leadership of so many of you who've helped move our community forward.

This is an historic time for our country, as we gear up for the opportunity in a few weeks to raise our voices once again. It's an important time for all of us in this room, as we work to create opportunity for every disadvantaged man, woman and child in America.

And it's an important time for United Way, as we step into a new era as well.

I found a quote about the NAACP's mission that really spoke to me, at this point in time:

*From the ballot box to the classroom, the thousands of dedicated workers, organizers, leaders and members who make up the NAACP continue to fight for social justice for all Americans.*

That fight is truly in my blood.

My mother was a veteran city leader who was part of the first black-majority city council in Atlanta's history. My father was a physician who helped desegregate hospitals across America and helped win for black Americans the right to equal access to health care.

I started my career in public finance and investment banking – with a focus on using capital to do good and create social change. But I felt called to do more to help my community.

So having the opportunity to lead United Way USA – a network of 1,200 state and local United Ways – right now is such a privilege.

I see my job as fostering a nationwide movement that builds opportunity for all, helping United Way USA fulfill its potential to be part of the change that you all are working so hard for.

### **United Way Snapshot**

United Way's focus is the building blocks of individual and collective opportunity. Education is essential to getting and keeping a good job that can support a family and has health benefits. An income that can cover today's expenses and save

for tomorrow builds a family's solid foundation. Good health helps children stay on track at school and adults be productive at work. Remove any of these building blocks and the other two topple. Build them all up -- and you've created the foundation of opportunity.

By 2018, America must:

- **Cut in half** the number of young people who dropout of high school
- **Cut in half** the number of lower-income families that lack financial stability
- **Increase by one third** the number of youths and adults who are healthy and avoid risky behaviors

Of course, none of us can do it alone. All of us have to work collaboratively with diverse partners to elevate these issues, build coalitions to advance solid strategies, invite individuals and organizations into meaningful action – and advocate collectively for lasting change.

### **The Education Challenge**

As the mother of two young girls, the issue that's closest to my heart is education. I want all children to have the same opportunities as my girls. All kids deserve the opportunities afforded them by access to equal and high-quality education.

As a country, we are making some ... slow ... progress. The high school graduation rate has increased from 72 percent in 2001 to 75 percent in 2009. And more black males are graduating -- 10% more over the last decade. (*Schott 50-State Report on Public Education & Black Males, 2012*)

But nearly 76 % of black and Hispanic students in 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades are unable to read or do math at grade level. That correlates to poverty, as we know that more than a third of African American students are attending the most disadvantaged schools.

We still have a long way to go.

Every year, more than 1 million American students fail to graduate high school on time; 4 in 10 students of color fail to earn a diploma.

For those that do graduate, we have a growing skills gap between the skills that our youth leave high school and college with and those that are required by today's employers.

There are persistent growing gaps in education and opportunity:

- Poor and minority students have fewer opportunities to attend high-performing schools (*Schott Report*)
- Gaps in educational achievement and attainment persist (e.g. student academic performance; HS grad rates; post-sec rates, etc.)
- Currently there are 6.7 million Americans ages 16-24 who aren't in school or in jobs. This is costly – to taxpayers (\$93 billion) and to the youth themselves (in terms of lost wages/earnings)

This is why President Obama's focus on education is so important. From early education to HCBUs to the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans that the NAACP helped create – he's leading our country forward on the things that can truly shift the odds for our children.

### **United Way's Response**

Of course, no sector can fix this problem alone. Government has a role to play, but so do nonprofits, business, the faith community, community organizations and individuals. All of us are part of the solution.

I want to share with you some of the inspiring work that's I'm hearing about across America, as people are coming together around our children to boost their opportunity for success in school, work and life.

In **Grand Rapids**, the community is zeroing in on first through third graders in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods. The Grand Rapids community, including faith leaders, employers and school districts, has come together around 900 young students who need the most help. About 1,200 community volunteers – including college students and retirees – work one-on-one with kids in schools for 30 minutes a week. More than 60 companies give employees paid time off to mentor. Congregations host after-school and family literacy programs. The United Way is facilitating this work, but it's the faith communities that are really fueling it.

One of the leaders of this effort, who is an ordained pastor, said at one point: "Only 900 kids? Surely we can wrap our arms around 900 kids. If we know who they are, we know what to do."

It's working. Students in the Schools of Hope program are making greater reading gains than their peers. And those in the afterschool program are gaining a year and a half's worth of academic growth in just nine months.

In **Winston-Salem**, North Carolina, the community is focused on *Graduating Our Future* – bringing new partners and proven practices together to increase the academic success of middle and high school students in the toughest neighborhoods and most struggling schools. Educators, afterschool providers like the Y, mentoring organizations like Big Brother Big Sister, and United Way are focused on the high

school with the lowest graduation rate and the biggest feeder middle school. Here are some of the things they're doing:

- A summer transition program for incoming 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders targeted to students below grade level.
- Intensive before/after-school and in-class tutoring and credit recovery opportunities.
- Mental health and family counseling.
- Mentoring/coaching.
- Attendance counseling for students and families.

In three years, the high school's graduation rate has increased 13 percent and the percentage of students passing end-of-course tests has increased 67 percent. In the middle school, the percentage of students testing on grade level has increased 137 percent in math and 115 percent in reading. That is so heartening.

The things that are working in Grand Rapids and Winston-Salem aren't unique – it's good people coming together to offer the right supports to our children. We can do that for all kids, if we can come together neighborhood by neighborhood – and by connecting the dots between education, health and a family's financial stability.

### **Family Engagement**

One of the keys to success is engaging families, parents and grandparents. Research tells us that engaging and empowering families to support student success is a proven strategy to boost high school graduation.

If we work together to engage families early on, we can keep them involved, informed and supported throughout the child's school experience.

That means helping families understand that attendance counts from day one, and that reading and math problems must be tackled early on. Some families may not seek help for learning problems because of labeling. But we know that 88% of 1<sup>st</sup> graders who read below grade level will still be behind by 4<sup>th</sup> grade, without intervention. So getting the word out to parents – and giving them information, resources and tools – is critical.

In Winston–Salem, the community reached out to parents through neighborhood meetings in the poorest communities to ask what they needed. In response, United Way hired three school-based family coordinators – working in the schools – dedicated to building personal relationships with families of 400 target students. These relationships – especially with families that have had negative experiences with schools – formed the building blocks of trust and meaningful communication that fueled the results I mentioned earlier.

### **Close**

Reaching out. Listening. Building trust. And co-creating strategies with families to help them help their kids. Those are the kinds of things we're seeing get results across the country.

It may sound easy. All of us know in this room that it's a constant fight – for equity, for access, for opportunity.

But I believe that when all of us work together, we can achieve great things. All of us -- NAACP chapters, faith communities, employers and business leaders like the ones here tonight, young people like the high achievers in this room, sororities and fraternities, professionals, senior citizens -- can help drive those solutions as well.

Dr. King once said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

That's what binds all of us together, and what propels us to work for educational advancement of communities of color.

I am honored to be on that path with you, and appreciate you having me here tonight.