

SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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Geoffrey Canada visits Poughkeepsie

'Your moment to change history'

Geoffrey Canada took the stage like he was shot out of a cannon.

Walking to the podium at Morse Elementary Wednesday night following four speakers who spoke calmly about, among other things, his visionary contributions to holistic education in impoverished areas, Canada quickly grabbed the microphone and began stalking the space like a stand-up comedian.

Fittingly, the first topic the 73-year-old tackled was his experience level; unlike how he was introduced, he's been in education for 50 years, not "more than" 50 years. Regardless of how many miles are on his odometer, the tread left on his tires was immediately evident.

"I have young people who work for me who say 'Mr. Canada, I don't know how you do it, you're still going,'" he said. "I'm on a mission, because this thing is serious."

The mission the founder of the Harlem Children's Zone and its national outgrowth William Julius Wilson Institute has been working to break the cycles of intergenerational poverty that have plagued areas like Poughkeepsie.

"I don't know about you, I'm at war and I plan to win. I don't plan to lose this thing," he said.

"There's too much at stake for me to lose."

Canada was in Poughkeepsie Wednesday leading an event titled "Putting Kids First: Unlocking the Promise of Poughkeepsie," hosted by the Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet and the Poughkeepsie City School District at the Mansion Street school that will soon be renamed for Sojourner Truth.

Canada discussed how and why he founded the Harlem Children's Zone, the importance of a community taking responsibility for its own success without an outside savior and why he sets attending college as the goal for each child that comes through his programs.

"My belief is that you raise your expectations for these young people and they will meet your expectations," he said, "All of our kids have a creed they say. The end of the creed is, 'I will go to college. I will succeed. This is my promise. This is my creed.'"

"When failure is an option for poor children," he continued, "they fail."

The Cabinet's approach is heavily influenced by Canada and the work done by his programs. The William Julius Wilson Institute is a national resource for place-based, people-focused solutions that open pathways to



Geoffrey Canada speaks at Morse Elementary Wednesday.



Full replay online

Visit [the district's YouTube page](#) to see a full replay of "Putting Kids First: Unlocking the Promise of Poughkeepsie" with Geoffrey Canada, other speakers and a performance from Poughkeepsie High School's cheerleaders.

social and economic mobility. The Institute has also invested in the professional development of leaders in Poughkeepsie and supported the creation of [the Children's Cabinet's 10-year strategic plan](#).

The night featured not only the headlining speaker but a collection of education and community leaders eager to speak to the assembled families and community members about the value of the path the Queen City has been on since forming the Children's Cabinet in 2020 and where it is headed next. [A full video of the night is available on the district's YouTube page](#).

A 'bold' vision for city

The mission and actions of the Cabinet itself were highlighted by New York Board of Regents [Chancellor Dr. Lester Young](#), who called it a model that could be applied to each of the state's 733 school districts.

The Cabinet united leaders from the city's school, government and community organizations under the common goal of

building stronger educational and career pathways for students and ultimately ending intergenerational poverty. The Children's Cabinet's goals, progress and story so far were recently featured in [the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Redesign "Spotlight" publication](#).

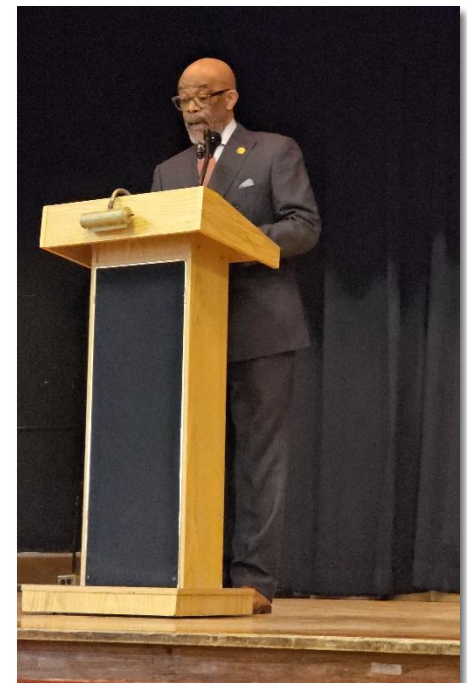
More than Canada himself or his ideas, Young said the evening "is really about a movement... how do we ensure that we can educate all of our children?"

Young called the Cabinet's vision "bold," one he was immediately intrigued by five years ago. He recalled inviting Cabinet leaders to Albany to present their goals and plans to the Board of Regents. The cradle-to-career philosophy goes in contrast with the current educational system which stresses "maintenance," he said. "It's an education system that, if we do nothing about it, it's just designed to keep everyone where they are," Young told the roughly 200 in attendance. "All too often our education institutions are designed to say 'Let's just get them out ... and let them go.' Not that we're concerned with what happens next."

Young recently visited Poughkeepsie along with other state education leaders to [observe how the tutoring partnership between Poughkeepsie and Ampact may be replicated in other districts](#).

"For me, when I think about schools in the 21st century, the schools of the future, we're talking about places where our young people have to be prepared to go beyond just the mere possession of knowledge," he said. The Cabinet's North Star goal, by 2033, is to connect more than 5,000 city youth and their families each year with transformative cradle-to-career opportunities that place them on pathways to postsecondary completion and socioeconomic mobility.

Children's Cabinet Executive Director thanked Young for his words and his presence before recalling the first time she heard Canada speak in 2007.



New York Board of Regents Chancellor Dr. Lester Young was one of several speakers.

"Geoff Canada was the first person I heard who wore his unwavering belief in the limitlessness of children on the outside," she told the crowd. "He had no room for doubt. That night, I saw how his passion and his words helped others in that room." Mayor Yvonne Flowers, a co-chair of the Cabinet with Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, superintendent of schools, then formally introduced Canada. "One of the models that has inspired our work is the Harlem Children's Zone, a powerful testament of what's possible when an entire community unites around its young people. It's a model that deeply aligns with the future that we're trying to build here in Poughkeepsie," Flowers said, noting Canada "not only brings solutions to conversations we have with our youth but he also brings those questions that we need to ask ourselves to ensure that we're effective in our own efforts. ... He keeps it real."



Geoffrey Canada was joined by Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet Executive Director Jill Gomez, left, and co-founder Rob Watson Jr. during a Q&A session.

'It has to be designed to work'

Canada shared why he came out of retirement to continue his work and eventually found the William Julius Wilson Institute, feeling he had been given a mission from God. The impact of COVID, he said, reinforced that need for a national organization to provide guidance.

"If I thought poor children in this country, in this state, in this city were doing bad before COVID, you do two years of no school for our kids and you have ruined a generation of children," he said. "I know folks think this is the old days – this is not what it was even before we weren't serious. Now, you look at every indicator, literally two years ago I was saying COVID loss is not going to get made up, it's going to get worse. You cannot have kids who have no supports at all."

Through the Children's Cabinet's work with Canada, though, Poughkeepsie's students are receiving support they didn't have before COVID. He explained, after meeting with the Cabinet's leaders years ago, he knew it was a city worth his time.



Students, like Class of 2025 valedictorian Jhane Stewart, were among those asking questions Wednesday.

"I am here because I need Poughkeepsie to demonstrate to the rest of New York State and to the rest of this country what it means when a community comes together to save its children," he said. "If you can do it here, people are going to be doing this all over the country. ...It has to be designed to work. This Children's Cabinet is designed to work."

Canada recalled his own childhood in the south Bronx, sharing that, while he has found success and acclaim, none of the friends he grew up with are still alive.

"Understand, poverty is a killer," he said. "When I tell you this is a war, I'm not kidding."



The solutions have been harder to find than the problems, of course, even though he said he always believed there was someone out there with them. He told the crowd, through his years he's met Presidents, Secretaries of Education and Secretaries of Health and Human Services.

"You know what I found out? They don't have a plan," he said. "They don't know. If you want to save your children, you save your own children."

His solution, he said, was forming the Harlem Children's Zone, a long-range vision for supporting students from birth through college. Though it began with a \$30 million plan and a group of 50 kids in an area of 10,000, it's grown.

"I got 980 kids in college right now. I've graduated over 2,000 kids with college degrees," he said. "This thing works. But, you've got to be prepared to work it. You've got to be prepared to make sure that we're holding ourselves accountable."

The event closed with a brief discussion session that included himself, Gomez and Cabinet co-founder Rob Watson Jr., a Poughkeepsie graduate, in which students and others were able to ask questions. But before he put the microphone back on the podium and stood still for the first time of the night, Canada issued a challenge to Poughkeepsie:

"I've been involved in a few things that have changed history," he said. "This is your moment to change history in this city and in this country. You can do what no one's done ... you could come in and create an environment that lifts these children up and 10 years from now we could all be seeing this on '60 Minutes,' – How did this city do what no other city in America has been able to do?"

Other newsletters to keep you informed:

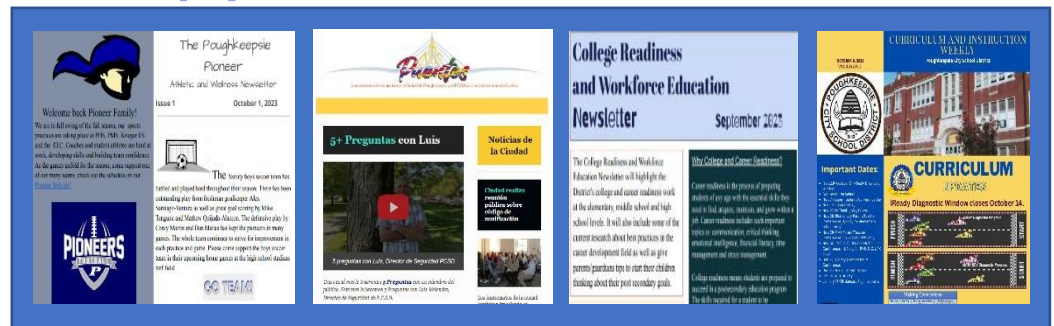
Poughkeepsie City School District publishes a variety of newsletters throughout the year. Here are the available newsletters:

[Curriculum & Instruction Weekly](#), April 11, 2025;

[Multilingual Learner Weekly](#), April 11, 2025;

[College Readiness and Workforce Education](#), March

2025; [In the Spotlight](#), April 2025; 7 Mindsets [for Parents](#), [for Parents \(Spanish language\)](#), [for Staff](#); March 2025.



Upcoming events

- **April 14-21:** Spring Recess (schools closed; district offices closed April 18; all buildings reopen April 22)
- **April 22:** Board of Education meeting: 6 p.m. at the Jane Bolin administration building, 18 S. Perry St.
- **April 24:** Spring Parent Night at Poughkeepsie High School: 5-8 p.m., 70 Forbus St.: High school parents can learn more about the school and community organizations, while enjoying music, entertainment, food and drinks. Free babysitting is provided by National Honor Society members and parents will receive a raffle ticket for a number of prizes and a ticket for their student to purchase an item from the school store.

