2023 DFSME Equity Summit Strand

"Delaware Educators and Businesses Share STEM Successes"

By Jan Castro

On October 13, the DFSME Equity Summit brought educators and education professionals from throughout the state and beyond together once more in the shared pursuit of equity in STEM education. The Equity Summit, led by the Delaware Foundation for Science and Mathematics Education (DFSME), is a key part of the Delaware Department of Education's annual statewide professional development program centered around equity.

The success of this year's Equity Summit, entitled "What Does STEM Success Look Like from Your Fellow Colleagues?," is thanks to the continued collaboration of many of the state's biggest advocates for STEM equity, including DFSME, the Delaware STEM Council, the Delaware Math Coalition (DMC), the Delaware Council of Mathematics Leaders, Forum to Advance Minorities in Engineering (FAME, Inc.), and the American Chemical Society of Delaware (ACS-DE).

The Summit opened with messages of support from Delaware state representatives, including Governor John Carney.

"The work that each of you do every day has a big impact on our students and their success in life," Carney said. "And when our educators demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning, it helps our students grow in and out of the classroom."

Delaware Secretary of Education Dr. Mark Holodick also joined educators at the Summit to reiterate the central importance of Equity to the mission of K-12 education in Delaware.

"Each fall, the State chooses to focus on Equity for our state-wide development time, because this must be the guiding focus of the work of each of every one of us," Dr. Holodick said. "Whether we are designing a lesson, providing behavioral support, or drafting regulations, this is the lens through which every decision we make must be made."

The overarching message of the Summit's introductory speakers was elegantly captured by LeDerick Horne, a poet, author, disability rights advocate, and special education consultant. Having grown up in the American education system as a student with dyslexia, Horne stressed the need for disability equity and inclusion through his poem, "Until Every Barrier Falls."

"This is for the ones who would not be trapped behind exclusion's shameful wall," Horne said, reciting his poem. "This is for the ones who will continue to push, until every barrier falls."

The Summit, divided into three sections, was kicked off with "Promoting Equitable Teaching in the STEM Classroom through the Lens of Teachers and Administrators," wherein teachers and administrators from across the state shared notable stories that championed equity and shed light on strategies that ensured that their students were granted equitable access to instruction, assessments, and high-quality materials.

“When I became a teacher, I made a promise to myself: To never forget how I felt as a teenager, to always put myself in their shoes,” Bertha Martinez-Ramirez, a 6th grade science teacher at Appoquinimink School District, said as she presented classroom equity strategies during the first section. “This is one of my favorite quotes: People will forget what you say, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. And I want to make my students feel safe and capable of everything.”

The following section involved the exploration of partnerships between teachers and business partners. This section’s panel discussions outlined ambitions to strengthen support across teachers and Delaware business partners and STEM advocates to ensure student access, opportunities, deeper learning, and career preparedness.

Mini-presentations were given by leaders from DuPont, Agilent, Croda, ACS Delaware, FAME, Inc., ChristianaCare, Mountaire Farms, Bloom Energy, and Ashland.

“We are in the business of making sure that students as young as first grade have access, and are fully aware that a STEM career can be in their future,” Lakia Belcher of FAME, Inc. said, describing the FAME curriculum.

Dr. Carol O’Donnell, the Director of the Smithsonian Science Education Center, wrapped up the Summit in the day’s closing strand. Her keynote address, entitled “Addressing Computational Thinking through the Lens of Integration in STEM,” highlighted the importance of preserving object-driven learning in the increasingly digital environment of the science classroom, and how such emphasis on physical learning can simultaneously help bridge the equity challenges of the digital divide.

“States are saying that we have to introduce the fundamental concepts of computer science to all students, beginning in elementary school. Why? Because it creates an opportunity for equity,” O’Donnell said. “According to the OECD, which works internationally, integrating high-touch learning in computational thinking does more to create equity in a digital world than can be achieved by just expanding the number of high-tech devices that are available to students.”

Jan Castro is a writer, University of Delaware alum, and native Delawarean who has been a proud student of Delaware educators.