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**UNIVERSITY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL TO
IMPROVING URBAN EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES,
SAY PANELISTS AT THE EIGHTH ANNUAL GESU SYMPOSIUM
ON INNER-CITY EDUCATION**

PHILADELPHIA (January 2006) – Colleges and universities have an obligation to improve urban education by partnering with public and faith-based inner-city schools and the communities they serve, concluded a panel of nationally recognized academic leaders and children’s advocates at the eighth annual Gesu Symposium on Inner-City Education.

At the symposium, which was hosted by the Gesu Institute for Inner-City Education and held at the University of Pennsylvania, panelists discussed the topic, “How colleges and universities can partner with faith-based schools and urban communities to serve children in need.”

“We can improve the life prospects of truly disadvantaged inner-city children, youth, families and communities by having partnerships where universities step up to the plate and really play their role in human and financial terms,” said John J. DiIulio, Jr., a University of Pennsylvania professor who founded the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and serves as a Trustee at Gesu School, the North Philadelphia independent Catholic elementary school that has been heralded as a national model for urban education.

“We are in a country where we have many of the greatest universities in the world but many of the worst public schools in the world,” said Linda Wing, deputy director of the University of Chicago’s Center for Urban School Improvement. “It is time for those two entities to join together. If you go alone, you can go fast, but if you go in partnership, you can go far.”

Symposium panelists shared several relevant examples of how these partnerships can succeed for universal good. Drexel University President Constantine “Taki” Papadakis described a partnership that the university has established with the School District of Philadelphia to provide University City High School and its eight feeder schools with mathematics and English tutoring, college prep assistance, art and music education, instruction in nutrition and physical activity, information technology infrastructure assessment and training, and counseling and library support. Initial results of the program have been extremely positive. “We believe our students derive almost as many benefits from this service as the children they serve,” said Papadakis.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Associate Vice President Ira Harkavy founded the Center for Community Partnerships to enable the university to make a difference in the community. “When [Benjamin] Franklin founded Penn, he said, ‘Educate every student with an inclination joined with an ability to serve,’” said Harkavy. “The partnerships between

universities, schools and communities of faith are absolutely essential for the quality of life of this society and for transforming the American city.”

At Gesu School, such partnerships are increasingly commonplace as school leaders employ an entrepreneurial approach to securing resources and developing innovative programs to benefit its 433 pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students. “Gesu School is a safe haven where children learn and achieve with good outcomes and results...but our safe haven cannot and should not exist in a vacuum, so to fulfill our mission successfully we try very hard to partner in as many ways as we possibly can,” said Gesu School President Christine S. Beck.

The school has brought in high school and college volunteers working for Community Tech Serve, a nonprofit organization founded by Penn’s Fox Leadership Program, for help with technology upgrades. And Gesu teachers can earn their master’s degrees at no charge at St. Joseph’s University, which offers college prep for Gesu graduates and places its undergraduates in Gesu classrooms and summer reading and math programs.

“It’s very generous of the universities to open their hearts and hands to the problems of the inner city,” said Gesu Board of Trustees Chair Win Churchill. “It is not just advisory help...[it’s] feet on the street, help in the classroom, and help in the halls of our inner-city schools. It is a very, very important alliance.”

A recurring theme during the symposium was the need to bring an integrated approach to improving urban education by focusing on the health, education and well-being of entire inner-city communities rather than just the students schools serve. Evan Dobelle, a former U.S. ambassador who served as president of four colleges and universities and is now president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education, pointed out that students spend no more than 9% of their lives in school.

“Youngsters at 10 or 11 years of age have lost hope, and their families have lost hope – they don’t have any jobs to lose; they don’t have any home ownership to lose; they don’t have any futures to lose. Then pretty soon you have a community that has nothing to lose,” said Dobelle. “We have an obligation to fix community. And we have to hold our elected officials accountable and tell them to put together a plan that says, ‘Fix these communities where these kids spend 91% of their life when they are not in school.’”

While serving as president of Trinity College, Dobelle initiated a learning corridor project to revitalize Hartford, Connecticut, by building a Montessori elementary school, a middle school, a community center, a science and math high school and a high school of performing arts. “We embraced the community, and it changed the community and the institution dramatically,” he said. “Students applied because they wanted to go somewhere that lived their values.”

Universities can also play a role by partnering with organizations that provide funds to support schools of all kinds in their efforts to educate inner-city children, said Darla Romfo, president and COO of the Children’s Scholarship Fund. The national nonprofit works with 38 partner programs and more than 7,000 independent, private and Catholic schools across the country to provide scholarships for low-income children in kindergarten through eighth grades. “There is a huge demand for alternatives among the poor,” said Romfo. “They are

not very satisfied with the options they have and are willing to sacrifice a great deal on their own account.”

Some universities are actually operating inner-city schools themselves to maximize their involvement in improving urban education. Progress shown by the children in charter schools opened by the Center for Urban School Improvement has been so swift that the University of Chicago is launching a university-wide urban education initiative. “What we hope to do is to not only embed high-quality teaching and learning in these schools, but to embed them very deeply in the community,” said Wing, who has helped create a research and development network of 20 schools on Chicago’s south side. “In the end, we are accountable to parents for the quality of our schools, so we’ve worked very hard to gain the trust of parents so they see that our schools are a place where they can realize their hopes and dreams for their children.”

Several of the panelists noted that the potential for progress is limited unless there is strong leadership in inner-city schools. “You can tell when you have leadership in a school that embraces change, embraces ‘let me learn’ new tools,” said Romfo, who is a member of a University of Notre Dame task force exploring ways to develop leadership potential and train school leadership. “It makes all the difference in the world.”

Panelists asserted that universities are obligated to teach students not only academic content but the importance of being good citizens in the world and in their own communities. Harkavy described the Center for Community Partnership’s efforts in developing university-assisted community schools that are open extended hours and offer nutritional programs, health programs, GED programs, sports programs, recreation and job training.

“Students should become engaged in ways that integrate research, classwork, teaching and service to help solve the problems of the community,” said Harkavy. “A great university should be involved in solving the structural problems such as the problems of poor, inadequate schooling [and] involving its students and faculty to help solve the problems of hunger and homelessness in partnerships with their communities. Universities need to be involved with schools, communities and communities of faith to create community economic development that strengthens those neighborhoods, long-term and permanently.”

In one of its many academically-based community service programs, Penn students develop a curriculum to teach public schoolchildren about nutrition, food ecology and economic issues and work together to create on-campus farmers’ markets. Essential community efforts such as after-school programs, tutoring, mentoring and community computer labs have been created through Penn’s Program for Universities, Community, Faiths, Schools and Neighborhood Organizations. And a group of undergraduates wrote a proposal and obtained funding from the City of Philadelphia to establish a community health program that draws on the talents and services of students across multiple disciplines.

Leaders at Drexel also value community partnerships, which is why the university’s College of Nursing and Health Professions has teamed up with the City of Philadelphia to provide health promotion and disease prevention services through a health clinic for a neighborhood deemed medically underserved. Papadakis said that the services the clinic

provides support the effectiveness of nearby inner-city schools by increasing the numbers of healthy children ready and able to learn. And through Drexel's mandatory Civic Engagement Program – the largest such program in the United States – 2,500 freshman obtain service learning assignments that enable them to serve the community while enhancing their educational objectives.

Regardless of the types of initiatives undertaken, all of the panelists underscored the importance of working with schools and communities to improve lives and futures. “Hope is such a key ingredient,” said Dobelle. “We have the responsibility to be able to engage the community and to give people hope.”

While Gesu School has held seven symposia in previous years to explore urgent issues in urban education, this year's symposium represents the first hosted by the Gesu Institute for Inner-City Education. The Institute is a national nonprofit organization recently formed as a subsidiary of Gesu School to transform inner-city education by exploring ideas and realistic solutions to bridge the gaps in education, economic power and opportunities for poor inner-city students and their families. Locally, the Institute is expected to serve as a technical assistance and capacity-building “resource center” for Greater Philadelphia's inner-city public and non-public schools. Nationally, its leaders plan to develop training modules that can be shared with schools across the country so that they can apply key successful elements in their own neighborhoods. The Institute will build the kind of partnerships with universities that Gesu School has and will communicate its findings through conferences, web casts, audio conferences, research, articles and other publications.

Since its 1993 rebirth as an independent school, Gesu School has attracted prominent national figures and media attention from the likes of USA Today, the Associated Press and MSNBC for its success in educating inner-city children. Its annual symposia have drawn such accomplished leaders as NBC's Tim Russert of “Meet the Press” fame and Joe Klein, a TIME magazine columnist and best-selling author of the book, “Primary Colors.” The school has also been profiled by award-winning author and former Newsweek Senior Editor Jerrold K. Footlick in his book, “A Model School: How Philadelphia's Gesu School is Remaking Inner-City Education,” which has been used as a textbook in a sociological education course at Georgetown University.

For a complete symposium transcript, visit the Gesu School website at www.gesuschool.org or call 215-763-9077.

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