

On Wednesday July 27, Rutgers Newark hosted this month's prayer breakfast to celebrate the induction of the State District Superintendent, Cami Anderson. Faith leaders and supporters from Newark and surrounding communities gathered to advocate for the needs of Newark's schools and children. Pastor Jefferson and Emaam Shareef welcomed guests and offered inspiration through their prayers. As preachers of religious faiths, they are in many ways like teachers, and feel passionately about positively impacting the future of Newark's education system.

Mayor Cory Booker addressed the audience next, and stressed the importance of accepting responsibility for "the problems that face the city.....Newark is filled with hurt people." Many have been continuously "robbed by society" which has, in turn, created problems in the community. Booker implored the audience to stop pointing fingers and blaming others----"there is nobody to blame, but ourselves," he stated. His prayer to the audience was one that yearned for physical action, and not just empty words and promises. The "children need us [during these] difficult days," and instead of being "mired in a quicksand of cynicism" the Newark residents can take responsibility, empower their youth, and make the city "a place for liberty and justice for all." Mayor Booker, who was enraptured by his elevating words, descended from the podium prematurely. The audience erupted in laughter as he humbly returned to the podium, asked for forgiveness for his foolish mistake, and introduced the main speaker, Ms. Anderson.

Cami Anderson, the former Senior Superintendent of New York City's District 79, graciously began her speech emphasizing the priority of improving the public schools of Newark, and her clear commitment to make every child in Newark college-ready before graduation. "Three fourths of the fastest growing jobs require college after high school," she

said. Although “college is not for everyone, every single kid deserves the opportunity to make that choice.” Cami enumerated her core beliefs, or “five C’s” (named after the C in Cami). The first is *candor*; she is not afraid to be very honest about what needs to be changed in the school district. She is also up front about the importance of having tough conversations about race and class. *Confidentiality* was second; she does not trade information as currency. Cami vows to treat information very carefully and use it only for making improvements in Newark’s schools. *Creativity*, keeping kids at the *core*, and *courage* were the final beliefs mentioned.

Cami stressed her convictions in regard to rigorous selection processes for teachers and principals, and raising expectations for family members. “Leadership is everything,” she said. She aims to ensure that great leaders, comparable to CEOs, are in the school system and are scrupulously putting the interests of children first. In addition, Cami will not accept any excuses from family; she believes that every guardian is capable of supporting his or her child’s education, and even if not college educated, is still able to know what is expected for academic success.

Unfortunately, there is a misunderstanding of what it means to be smart. Families and young people tend to believe that “smart is something you are born with, rather than something you get.” Cami lamented over the “false divisions in schools” and what has become a two-tiered system, where the students who are perceived as brighter and more gifted, and who seem to “get it,” are lauded over the ones that struggle. This distortion is abysmal for the education system, as certain students are disregarded and not given adequate attention. In this scenario, natural aptitude supersedes hard work and the assurance that every young person is at an excellent school. Cami looks to the faith community as an integral part of this process. 70% of students are still attending their classes in Newark; “our goal is to be as persistent as the kids,” she said.

I thought the prayer breakfast was a wonderful and uplifting event. Cami spoke from her myriad experiences as a teacher in addition to her former position as Superintendent in New York City; she was extremely impressive. It was also especially powerful to see representatives from various faiths come together for the betterment of Newark. Once the ceremony concluded, we were asked to move to the front of the room and hold on to the person standing next to us. The attendees formed a human chain of hope and strength, ardent about taking a stand and remaining committed to the children of Newark.