

Interviews with Influencers: Secretary John B. King, Jr.



Interviews *with* **INFLUENCERS**

John B.
KING JR.

***President and CEO,
The Education Trust; former
U.S. Secretary of Education***



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Having dedicated his entire career to education and improving outcomes for all students, it is unsurprising that President Barack Obama called former U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King, Jr. “an exceptionally talented educator.” King began his career in the classroom as a high school teacher in Puerto Rico and now runs The Education Trust, a national nonprofit organization seeking to identify and close opportunity and achievement gaps, from preschool through college. His story is nothing short of remarkable, and evidence of the incredible power of education.

Q: You’ve credited your teachers with helping raise you. What are a few life lessons they taught you that helped shape who you are and what you do?

A: Most importantly, my teachers at P.S. 276 in Canarsie, Brooklyn and Mark Twain Junior High School on Coney Island in New York saved my life. They created a space in school for me that was safe, supportive, and engaging. They made

school a place where I was allowed to be a kid when I couldn't be a kid outside of school. Those experiences really shaped my whole career because I went on to be a teacher and a principal, and I have been involved in education policy because I know the difference that schools can make in kids' lives. School was also engaging for me because I had teachers who made their classrooms compelling – everything from performing productions of Shakespeare in elementary school, to conducting science experiments, to completing hands-on projects in middle school social studies. I was fortunate to have teachers who really focused on making sure school was not only academically rigorous, but also fully engaging. That approach certainly shaped how I think about teaching and what school can be when you provide a well-rounded education, integrating more than academics.

Q: What is your proudest accomplishment from your time as Secretary of Education?

A: If you look over the course of the Obama administration, we really tried to focus the education conversation on issues of equity – that served as the overarching goal of all of our work. Whether it was work around improving college completion, or rethinking discipline in elementary and secondary schools, or expanding access to early learning, it was in the context of a wider commitment to education equity and an understanding that equitable educational opportunity is essential to the long-term success of our nation's economy and democracy.

"Equitable educational opportunity is essential to the long-term success of our nation's economy and democracy." —@JohnBKing



Q: If you could make one recommendation to the federal

government for how to improve outcomes for students in higher education, what would it be & why?

A: (Perhaps unsurprisingly he had difficulty choosing just “one” thing to change). The reality is that in our current system the incentives are not aligned to completion. The incentives are focused instead on enrollment; and we really need to shift the goal away from just enrolling first-year students, to the goal being about students completing their degree or credential, thereby allowing them to be successful in the 21st century economy. And that could take on a variety of forms. But ultimately we don’t organize the allocation of resources or accountability systems or institutional decision-making around the goal of completion. The Education Trust has written extensively on what it will take to close the completion gaps that separate Black and Latino college students from their peers, and we have identified top- and bottom-performing institutions in that regard. We also just released new briefs that highlight degree attainment for Black and Latino adults across the country. We hope these resources will start meaningful conversations at the institutional and policy levels.

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Q: What’s the most rewarding aspect of your job as President and CEO of Education Trust?

A: Ultimately I'd say the most rewarding aspect of the job is improving outcomes for low-income students and students of color. That is how I approached my role as a teacher and as a school principal, and it's still how I think about the work that I do at Ed Trust. When we are able to see shifts in the national conversation on education and what it will take to improve educational excellence and equity for low-income students and students of color—from preschool through college—we, as an organization, are heartened that our work is making a difference. I'm proud of our recent effort to call out resource inequities for historically underserved students—including in terms of school funding. I'm proud of our analyses of classroom assignments that reveal far too many students are not being challenged by coursework that align to rigorous academic standards. And I'm proud of our qualitative reports that have illuminated the perspectives and experiences of Black and Latino educators. Additionally, when we are able to see shifts in either state or federal policy that translate into better outcomes for historically underserved students, that is beyond satisfying and ultimately that is what the work is all about.

Q: Who are your influencers in education, and why?

A: The thing I find the most inspiring is when individuals are actually changing the path of opportunity for young people through their leadership. I think of folks like Marian Wright Edelman who through her work at Children's Defense Fund, and the work of the Freedom Schools, is helping change the trajectory of young people in our elementary and secondary schools, and also engaging young people who are in college to become educators and mentors for younger generations, thereby changing the face of the educator workforce – that's inspiring.

I also think of people who have done important research like Beverly Daniel Tatum and her incredible book that was just reissued, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" Or the work Sara Goldrick-Rab (Professor of

Higher Education Policy and Sociology at Temple University) is doing on food and housing insecurity on college campuses and how our nation can take steps to address this issue.

Examples of great institutional leadership also come to mind, like Dan Porterfield (former President of Franklin & Marshall College, and current President and CEO at The Aspen Institute). His work to dramatically increase the percentage of Pell-eligible students, and students of color at F&M was nothing short of extraordinary. Or the work happening at Georgia State University, led by President Mark Becker and Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success Tim Renick around rethinking advising as a tactic for closing attainment gaps. And Ruth Simmons, who had an exceptional career in institutional leadership (as the first Black president of an Ivy League institution), who came out of retirement to lead Prairie View A&M University, an HBCU, in an effort to continue working on expanding opportunities for students. The other example would be the folks who launched the CUNY ASAP program, including Donna Linderman. They built this fantastic program that is doubling completion rates for community college students, and pointing the way for the country on how we can tackle closing completion gaps.

Q: What does your middle initial “B” stand for? (*Okay, okay. I know this is a non-traditional question, but I scoured the Internet far and wide for the answer about the illusive “B”, and came up empty handed. So naturally I thought it simplest to go to the source directly!*)

A: As it turns out, the letter “B”, just stands for the letter “B”! On my birth certificate, it’s just the letter. Sort of like the “S” in Harry S. Truman.