

Moving Toward Equity: A Thought Leader Conversation with Hal Smith
Session Transcript
August 21, 2019

- Karen Pittman: [00:02:14](#) Not only is your job title longer than mine, I think you actually have a harder and busier job than I do. So I'm delighted that you were able to carve out an hour to join us.
- Karen Pittman: [00:02:25](#) I know we want to talk about the equity and excellence work that the National Urban League is doing. I certainly want to talk to you about a lot of the work we have been doing side-by-side as partners, members, advisors on things like the National Commission on Social and Emotional Academic Development, and the Science of Learning and Development, and community schools and other initiatives in education.
- Karen Pittman: [00:02:53](#) But let's get started first by finding out a little bit more about what the National Urban League is and does for folks that don't know it, and how you actually got to the National Urban League. What was the path that got you there?
- Hal Smith: [00:03:08](#) Thank you very much for the invitation and for all who are participating on the call.
- Hal Smith: [00:03:14](#) The National Urban League is a historic civil rights organization founded in 1910. We have been working primarily to advance African-American achievement, opportunity, and equity primarily through our workforce development programs, our education programs, our housing and community development programs, our health programs, and our small business programs. There's a policy ancillaries along each of those lines also, but primarily we're known for work in local communities.
- Hal Smith: [00:03:53](#) We have affiliates in 36 states, plus the District of Columbia. Each of those is led by an outstanding civil rights leader, a service leader. They are separate 501(c) organizations, so they get to set their own agenda, but importantly they get build a programmatic advocacy and policy approach that takes best advantage of the opportunities and challenges that might exist in their local community. So we work hand in hand with our affiliate leaders, but primarily the work of the Urban League affiliates is locally defined, locally lead, and locally impactful.

- Hal Smith: [00:04:38](#) As for me, I came to the National Urban League 11 years ago next month. We thought about different ways to talk about the Urban League's work, and part of that redefining was what attracted me to the job. I had previously worked at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and previously to coming to the National Urban League, I was the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development for a few years.
- Hal Smith: [00:05:10](#) In that work I thought about what it would mean to operate on a national scale, particularly in the areas of education and youth development. How we might think about doing that work from both a practitioner and policy maker perspective, but also from participants, young people, and all those who were impacted by our programmatic approach.
- Hal Smith: [00:05:35](#) It was exciting to me to think about scale in those kinds of ways, so nationally, but also involving very different partners than was possible in either of my two prior positions, but also help me think about the ways in which I wanted to tie my own experience growing up in Roosevelt, New York on Long Island and then Wheatley Heights, New York where there was a great network of youth development and out-of-school time possibilities, programs, mentors, who really blurred the lines between the kinds of teaching and learning that happens in classrooms and the kinds of teaching and learning that happens everywhere.
- Hal Smith: [00:06:23](#) And help me think about how I could impact young people in the ways that I had been impacted and shaped also attracted me to the Urban League being very clear that I'm talking about underserved and historically underserved populations, the African-American community, other African disparate communities was really important for me to think about how those people in particular might benefit from some of the work I was doing.
- Karen Pittman: [00:06:56](#) That's a great straight line from where you grew up to where you are now, which is still in New York City. The equity and excellence project, which we want to get you to talk about certainly has a lot of facets to it, so we want to give you time to sort of take us through all that, and especially how you got to the standards of equity and excellence related to ESSA, because I know folks are interested in that.
- Karen Pittman: [00:07:23](#) But before we get started, these words have so many meanings, at the Urban League what do you mean by equity and what do

you mean by education? What are you're starting definitions for those two big words?

Hal Smith: [00:07:34](#)

Sure.

Hal Smith: [00:07:36](#)

Those are really important questions. So for us, equity is the intentional dismantling of aspects of privilege, of denied opportunity, of access, that it's really about the intentional process and less about some kind of fix end state. What are the kinds of things that are barriers to young people, to families, to African-Americans writ large, and what can we do to dismantle them? How do we unhook the kinds of predictive power of zip code, of address from life chances?

Hal Smith: [00:08:19](#)

The predictive power is important. I mean, I think the research shows the work that we've done has shown that there is far too much that is tied into that as opposed to individual skill, people who are interested in expanding opportunity always have to start with the barriers and the predictive nature of those barriers in determining what kinds of opportunity people are exposed to, prepared for, and can benefit from. So the intentional dismantling I think is key to our definition.

Hal Smith: [00:08:56](#)

Education though, I think is more expansive than perhaps what most people might consider. For us, similar to I know The Forum, we believe it's teaching and learning wherever it takes place. And I've expanded that recently to talk about teaching, learning and development wherever it takes place.

Hal Smith: [00:09:18](#)

Most of this takes place in a building we call school. But all of it doesn't take place there. We have youth centered approaches in out-of-school time, and in after school, and in youth development programs, but we should also not ignore peer culture, the worlds that young people build for themselves, the world that young people push to be understood in.

Hal Smith: [00:09:45](#)

Those are the kinds of educational settings that often get dropped from the conversation when we start thinking about education reform, education policy, and we'd like to reintroduce those and help those be at the center of education reform. We are very skilled in doing K12 school reform, but we are also quite skilled at getting people to think about the larger education system, the kinds of ways we are able to connect partners in thinking about education as a responsibility of more than just the school system.

- Hal Smith: [00:10:30](#) I'd similarly like to talk about education as teaching, learning and development wherever it takes place, but also the ways in which we emphasize ownership and responsibility. Oftentimes we hear people refer to schools as having communities, right? Communities that are there to help the school do its work.
- Hal Smith: [00:10:56](#) Instead, I believe schools are there to help communities do their work, right? The point of emphasis is off. Schools have communities, I mean, communities have schools, schools don't have communities. The ownership and responsibility to provide a more well-rounded education, a full set of education experiences, is the responsibility of the community. That might be the museums, that might be the workforce development sector, that might mean youth development and after school, it certainly is going to mean schools, but it is not exclusively schools.
- Hal Smith: [00:11:35](#) For us, we really want to tie together those opportunities, that training, that subject matter, the set of relationships that help young people be ready for college, work and life after high school. That is one of our empowerment goals and we think a more expansive definition of education that again talks about teaching, learning, development wherever it takes place, rather than limited to a school building, a central office, teachers and classrooms, is certainly more impactful and is much more along the lines of what will be necessary to fully achieve equity and excellence.
- Karen Pittman: [00:12:17](#) Well you know that we agree with that definition. As you do this work in communities and as your affiliates do this work in communities, does that broader definition resonate [inaudible 00:12:28]? How does that broader definition play out as people are thinking about education?
- Hal Smith: [00:12:35](#) So it plays out in really important ways. Not just in our policy work, which I'll talk about in a moment, but in our programmatic work. We require all of our affiliates to work in partnership in their local communities, whether that's in education, or in housing, or in workforce development, and really desilo the work that we expose communities to. We really want to center people at the heart of our work.
- Hal Smith: [00:13:08](#) So if people are at the heart of the work, they may come in for one part, or one problem that is best handled by the staff of let's say the health department, but we also know in the fullness of their lives, they have other issues, other

opportunities, other things that they want to achieve that aren't going to neatly fit into buckets.

Hal Smith: [00:13:33](#) So we are comprehensive in our approach and if you come in for a health screening, we'll also talk to you about your job prospects, we'll talk to you about education, we'll talk to you about buying your first home, or saving your home if it's fallen into foreclosure or you're nearing those things. Financial literacy, literacy across multiple dimensions is also important to us.

Hal Smith: [00:13:59](#) So people come in to the Urban League affiliates expecting to be served in the one thing that brought them there that day. And that's great. The Urban League will always be there to support you singularly, but we will also be there to support you more interdependently than perhaps others. This means sometimes that depending on where you live, your Urban League affiliate might be known for housing and people would be surprised to know that the Urban League also cares about education or small business development.

Hal Smith: [00:14:38](#) So we're always fighting against our own success in that way. People will know us for the service that they came in for, the support, the advice that they came in there for, but we do much more than that one thing and are often thought as a single entity, a single service entity. We are a multi-service, comprehensive set of entities. And when we talk about things in isolation, it is I think the natural approach of Urban League affiliates and their staff to talk about things multi dimensionally and how this might be connected to something else.

Hal Smith: [00:15:22](#) How food deserts might in fact impact the ways in which young people perform in school, how housing insecurity may in fact undermine people's ability to hold onto a job in all the ways that we'd want them to, showing up on time, when they in fact are unable to meet the rent, or have issues of homelessness that are pervading, not just their personal life, but have impacts in their professional life, in their academic life, along health dimensions.

Hal Smith: [00:15:58](#) Each of these is something that we care about and we spend a great deal of time not only working in communities, but studying, researching, working in partnerships with organizations such as The Forum, The Alliance for Excellent Education, and trust to help us sharpen our approach and think as comprehensively and act as thoughtfully as we can when confronted with community opportunities and challenges.

Karen Pittman: [00:16:29](#) I don't want to hold you up from getting to the policy work, but as you're talking I'm curious about what is the importance of data that you collect locally that allows you to tell that more complex story? What have you done in that space? Because so often... I was just with a group of people who were talking about trying to create supports for young people who are system involved youth, and the data they put up for us to start with was here's how many young people are homeless, here's how many young people have dropped out of school, here's how many young people are teen parents, but when you ask the question, "Well, how many are all three?" They didn't know. So that siloing...

Hal Smith: [00:17:14](#) Right.

Karen Pittman: [00:17:16](#) What kind of opportunities are there for the Urban League actually sort of blend this data together to tell those more complex stories?

Hal Smith: [00:17:26](#) That's a great question and a question I think we would've answered ourselves differently five or six years ago. But we've moved to a case management data system that allows us to see if Hal Smith comes in, is Hal Smith connected to anyone else we're also serving? Is it the same family group, family unit, same address? And we get to see people in their complexity because of that.

Hal Smith: [00:17:57](#) Now, I would never say that this is infallible. We certainly would all benefit from having public systems that talk to one another, to do precisely the kind of analysis that your question suggests. But I think we do have a step up in that we can see family groups defined as broadly or as narrowly as you would like.

Hal Smith: [00:18:25](#) We get to see participants over time and see the ways in which their needs, their questions, the support that is required, the kinds of opportunities they'd like to be exposed to, changes over time. I think we're getting better and better at that each day, but in comparing where we were to where we are today, I'd say we're in a much better position to understand community context fed by data.

Hal Smith: [00:19:01](#) And part of that is, yes, the data we collect on the programs that we operate and report back to funders, and partners and government, but also the internal review of that work to understand what's happening in your community also happens at the national level so that we're able to maybe see some trends across communities, across the country that are

interesting to us and may cause us to rethink the training that we offer our affiliates, the kinds of partners that we try to engage, and the kinds of learning and questioning we are ourselves need to participate in because as you say, it's complex, it's not always a straight line, but data informed, researched, informed perspectives, programmatic approaches and strategies, we think our best.

Hal Smith: [00:20:02](#) As complex as they can be, and sometimes as costly as they can be, both in time and other resources, to make sure we have data points across multiple dimensions for people we come in contact with and not simply, "You are a participant in this program and no one has any other idea about what else you might be interested in, or what else might be connected to what you brought you in this day."

Hal Smith: [00:20:33](#) I think we're getting better. I think we are very much in a position to continue learning from other people who are approaching it similarly, but perhaps doing it to better impact. But I would say we're right there with others thinking about how best to use data to drive programmatic approaches, supports, partnerships and ultimately helping people improve their lives.

Karen Pittman: [00:21:03](#) That's great. We've gotten, you've said the word partnerships a couple of times and we've gotten a question about partnerships. Can you talk a little bit specifically about the kind of organizations that you're working with in partnership and community, how you find them and how you bring them into this particularly comprehensive approach that you have? And you may want to do that specifically around, since we're talking about [inaudible 00:21:27] development for young people, sort of the young people in the community. What kind of partnerships are you working with to do that?

Hal Smith: [00:21:36](#) Partnership for us is critically important, and I ask our affiliates always to be thoughtful about who you approach as a partner. And I should first say that a partner is very different from a consultant or contractor. Right? Those are very contract-driven relationships. Yes we have MOUs, memorandum of understanding, but we're much more about people who are interested in common cause and impact, perhaps from a unique perspective and background.

Hal Smith: [00:22:14](#) Most of the Urban League affiliates partner very, very deeply in their local community. And that will include the school systems, the public health system, higher education, early childhood and

early learning settings, with the intention of best serving a given community, best aligning assets and resources in the service of that community.

Hal Smith: [00:22:44](#) So these are relationships that go beyond kind of showing up once or twice at meetings, but are really driven by common goals and causes. How do we work together? Perhaps you have a more robust data system. Perhaps you have underutilized space in your building. Perhaps the Urban League has a great deal of content that we can offer, but struggles to serve communities that are not in our kind of traditional service area. Right? People don't recognize us. As new families come in, as immigrants come in, people typically have the same sets of questions about how to thrive in this community. So it causes us to constantly be on the lookout for new kinds of partners. But these are reciprocal relationships built on trust, built on common aim and goal, that help new strategies emerge. These are not static.

Hal Smith: [00:23:53](#) So as we come up with a strategy, we may have to rethink it as conditions change, as our visions becomes sharper, as new partners come in and say, "How do I contribute to what it is we want to accomplish to the community's health and well-being?" Those are the kinds of drivers for partners locally. And nationally it's very much the same. We partner very well with the civil rights community, with the ed reform and innovation community, higher ed, the foundation of philanthropic community.

Hal Smith: [00:24:33](#) Very clear on what we can do and owning that proudly, but also being open to learning new approaches, to being introduced to new people who might help us think differently or more deeply about our work. But again, always with the idea of better serving young people, students, their families, in all the ways that we can and to all the assets that each partner can bring.

Hal Smith: [00:25:05](#) We don't need everyone to do the same thing, but we do need more coherence than alignment. Right? So everyone being very clear on what they do and what others bring to the table, including their perspectives and strategies, but alignment is not always necessary. Meaning that we've decided that you're going to do this one thing, and I'm going to do this other thing, and as long as we don't kind of cross into each other's lanes, everybody's fine.

Hal Smith: [00:25:35](#) Well no, everybody's not fine. Because perhaps those two things are but a part of what we need to accomplish, so we

need to think about exponential impacts, not just kind of serial, "You do this, I do that," for eternity kind of partnerships, but much more dynamic, much more flexible, much more based on dialogue and reflection, working together beyond kind of the four corners of any given contract or MOU, understanding that that ties us together, but that's not the only thing that ties us together.

Karen Pittman: [00:26:12](#)

Good.

Karen Pittman: [00:26:14](#)

We're coming up quickly on the halfway point. I want to get into equity and excellence. I think there's [inaudible 00:26:20] questions about partners and how you sort of push partners, handle controversial partnerships, et cetera. You touched on it a little bit with you know, you don't all just want to be sort of being nice, but you really want to be on the same page. But why don't we go ahead and learn a little bit more shifting up into more of the advocacy work that you help your affiliates do and learn about the project.

Hal Smith: [00:26:46](#)

Sure.

Hal Smith: [00:26:48](#)

The Equity and Excellence Project is a project that we developed a few years ago, now I think almost eight years ago, where we thought about the ways our affiliates CEOs could drive questions of fairness, of opportunity, of equity and excellence in their local districts, in their local county, region and ultimately at the state level.

Hal Smith: [00:27:16](#)

We got into this work in this particular project because at the time we had Urban League CEOs who were serving on the State Board of Education and on local school boards who were known as being very powerful advocates for students, students of color, underserved students, girls. But people completely disconnected them from their Urban League role. Right? They could only see them as a person on the school board, but their day-to-day work as part of the Urban League, even amongst other board members, was completely forgotten, and we thought that was strange, and wanted to really elevate those particular voices, but also prepare our CEOs to be different kinds of partners locally around ed reform and innovation.

Hal Smith: [00:28:14](#)

So that meant putting them forward as critical friends to their local superintendent, state chiefs of education, philanthropic sector, anyone who was invested in the success of children and youth, we thought we needed to bring our CEOs there and have their full weight be brought to bear on education reform. And

rather than come up with one or two items that might be the particular interest of philanthropic partner, a foundation, a corporation, we said, "Instead let's focus on the things that we know are going to be more at issue in any community." And if you are able to conversant about these issues, that we will ultimately start a conversation, and setup strategies in motion that will lead to greater equity and excellence in that community.

Hal Smith: [00:29:21](#) So you see here the areas of focus, I won't go into them in particular, but we believe that one of these seven is at issue in your community. Some take off on it, some nuance, but most of what is going to be in driving the education conversation in your community would be found here.

Hal Smith: [00:29:45](#) We talked to our CEOs and said, "Rather than come in believing you need to be conversant in all seven, you need to find the thing in your community that if you don't lead with, no one will take you seriously. No one will believe you're serious about education reform if you're not here to talk about standards, at least to start with. If you're not here to talk about the distribution of teachers, if you're not here to talk about community partners, after school and out-of-school time learning, we can't get you to anywhere else because you're not serious and knowledgeable about what's happening in this community.

Hal Smith: [00:30:27](#) So the five, which now are seven, were our way to organize ourselves, our thinking of the necessary sets of partners, the policy levers that we wanted to pull, and have them be in each of the communities we started with, which originally were two states, then became five states, now is just over 20 states. And take that feedback from our local affiliate CEOs and begin informing the national strategy and our national partners. Right?

Hal Smith: [00:31:05](#) So we can't float just at the 30,000 foot level, we have to be on the ground, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder with the communities we serve. But we always want that work to be informed by a national, if not international perspective, and similarly our national perspective sharpened by local data, circumstance, participation, et cetera.

Hal Smith: [00:31:31](#) So that was the genesis of the Equity and Excellence Project and it's the way we think about our work. Accordingly, about a year and a half ago we began having conversations about ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and put out a number of reports,

particularly when it was in the state planned development stage, and said, "What kinds of things are going to be necessary for the states to achieve additional equity and excellence? What kinds of things are going to be necessary for us to ensure that there's greater participation than even the law demands?"

Hal Smith: [00:32:19](#) We thought that having community conversations, standing up local convenings, meetings with state boards of regents, state boards of education, state chiefs, the governors, about the opportunity that ESSA provides. We're very clear ESSA is not a perfect law. There were real issues that we had, both in the conversation leading up to the legislation being proposed and then of course as law, it being implemented. But we thought it was important enough to support because it represented a real chance to have a galvanizing conversation.

Hal Smith: [00:33:04](#) What we saw in the early days of plan submissions were that very few states were taking advantage of that promise. So we were stuck with how best to get this raised to a national level. Although the plans had been approved by the department, there were still a lot of work to be done.

Hal Smith: [00:33:29](#) Equity was mentioned in an off-hand manner. Many of our friends and partners asked us to be patient because they didn't want to be locked in to language at the plan level that they would have to go back and revise as they began thinking more deeply. So they were intentionally vague and asked us to trust in them, and our relationships that they would ultimately get to where we'd like to go.

Hal Smith: [00:34:02](#) Unfortunately, we didn't see much of that even as plans were refined and then the districts began working on that. So our Washington bureau we have the affiliates and then we have our Washington bureau began thinking about how we could make a contribution beyond plan review and talk about what could come out of those plans, a review that was suggestive of what might come next.

Hal Smith: [00:34:37](#) So we moved into a review led by Suzie [Savedra 00:34:43], Jasmine Owens, [Adenique 00:34:45] Huggins, of our team and then partnerships that led us to conversations with the Alliance for Excellent Education to think about how else we might do this. And I'm sorry, I can't seem to advance the slides. But we talked about what else might be necessary. And for us, it was one of the elements of equity that we'd like to see in plans, that we expected to see in plans, hard stop. But more importantly,

that we think are actually going to bring about additional equity, opportunity and excellence.

Hal Smith: [00:35:27](#) So, although the factors, the indicators that we use were not the ones that states were on the hook for, they were not particularly things that had been called out specifically by the law, we said, "It's immaterial." We don't want them to be bound them by the law, we want them to be guided by a focus on equity and excellence.

Hal Smith: [00:35:55](#) So in the states in which we operate, and you see here a map of those states, again, 36 states plus the District of Columbia, we decided to review those plans. Unfortunately, we did not have the bandwidth to do all the states, but we thought 36 and Washington DC was a representative enough of a group, of a sample size to say, "We have some ideas about what you have put forward thus far, and what we think of those, but also where we think you need to go next."

Hal Smith: [00:36:35](#) We spent six or seven months going over each of the plans, using the indicators we ourselves identified, coming out of the focus areas for the EEP, but not limited to those, and talked about the way the states incorporated equity into their plan. And we want to be really, really clear, this is not about the implementation. We did not judge that. We did not intend to judge that. This is literally how people talked about it in their state plans. Right? What was in their plans that perhaps tied to a vision of equity that we could stand behind? What things were open questions for us? And what things, either by silence, or by stated strategy were in fact dangerous at best, but likely to undermine equity at worst?

Hal Smith: [00:37:38](#) Our 12 indicators that you see here are really focused on the kinds of things we think make a difference. There are many other things that we might add to this, and certainly a consultation with our partners. We might come up with a list that is either shorter and sharper on a particular aspect, or more expansive. But we're also clear that these are the kinds of things that community members, that young people themselves, that teachers could look at and say, "Yes, I want that in my state." Right?

Hal Smith: [00:38:18](#) It was not so esoteric that you could look at this and say, "I don't know what these people are after." But you could look at this instead and say, "Yes, I think all young people, including my child, should have access to high quality teachers, content, principals, standards." That makes sense to me. I think we

should all be hopeful that there's a way to tie early childhood, K through 12, higher ed, out-of-school time, after school together to build an education system that expands beyond a school system.

- Hal Smith: [00:38:57](#) If we have those kinds of conversations that emerge, we think that the review was worthwhile. For example, here we have stakeholder engagement as a part of what the law required. Some people took that as an authentic challenge to work differently, to talk to people they had not talked to, to talk to critics who they had typically run away from. And others gathered together, four or five of their friends and said, "Well yeah, this is a representative sub group, and we're good to go. We talked to all the people we need to talk to. Everyone else can respond to the written document."
- Hal Smith: [00:39:43](#) We wanted to critique those different approaches, those who stepped out and said, "We're not even sure where we're going here, but this is instructive in helping you think through the strategies that we propose." And others kind of continued on with what they've been doing, rightly or wrongly, with little additional explanation and said, "This is everything." And we wanted to take a moment to look at both of those approaches and approaches in between and say, "How do we do this well? What kinds of questions should we raise? How do we dig deeper around aspects of equity and excellence to actually improve what happens in this district, in this county, in this state?"
- Hal Smith: [00:40:39](#) The more we can get people engaged in the conversation, the more refined, the more thoughtful, the more impactful set of strategies and investments are possible, is our belief. And we thought that the indicator conversation was important enough to talk about where we might go next locally and at the states, but also to set us up for the next reauthorization of ESEA.
- Hal Smith: [00:41:13](#) Know that might not be forthcoming in the next 12, 18, 36 months, but what it is suggestive of is a set of conversations that are happening locally, in districts, in states, and nationally that might help frame what's next. What kinds of things are on the table, are off the table, what you need to address in order for us to think you're serious improving equity and education. The more people we can get involved in this, the more people we can become informed about their role and responsibilities in improving equity and educational outcomes for young people, the better off we'll be. And we thought that this report was the best way to do this.

- Hal Smith: [00:42:07](#) In April, we will continue these conversations in each of our affiliates and nationally and look forward to people who build on this idea as we built on the ideas of others. To again, have a genuine conversation about equity and excellence in American education. More holistic than perhaps a simple school-based conversation important as it is, but a full education system conversation I think is what we're hopeful will spring out of this conversation, or a series of dialogues about what's needed, what's going well, what kinds of things and success can we build on rather than have to throw everything out whole cloth and innovate our way to success.
- Hal Smith: [00:42:59](#) We believe there's enough great examples in current practice that can be built upon and invested in properly to lead us to the outcomes that we seek. We do not need 101 new ideas every year in order to be successful.
- Karen Pittman: [00:43:22](#) Well Hal, I think people have been engrossed in the discussion. We've sent out the link to the website. People want to know more information. So this kind of approach, and I think in particular, the way that you've pulled back from the plans to write questions that really have real meaning as we're thinking about, again, equity as that intentional process of really analyzing and looking at and dismantling barriers, you've pulled out ones that are important.
- Karen Pittman: [00:43:57](#) I can't help but notice that the places where states have the fewest number of excellent marks are around out-of-school learning and around early childhood, and around teacher, educator equity, even before we continue to broaden the definition of educators beyond just to teachers in the classroom, to the other folks who are in the building who are important for our young people and other folks in the community.
- Karen Pittman: [00:44:27](#) So with this huge agenda and this commitment to get more people into the conversation, and more people fully prepared in the conversation, talk a little bit in the remaining minutes about why it was important for the Urban League to be at the table with these important but time consuming admittedly, initiatives around social and emotional learning, and social and emotional and academic development, and the science of learning and development. Why was it important for you to be at those tables and those conversations were unfolding? How does that fit in with this agenda?
- Hal Smith: [00:45:04](#) Yes. Thank you.

- Hal Smith: [00:45:08](#) For us, it's really important that we think about the framing of issues and opportunities, but also the framing of young people. Right? And too many of the policies, the investments, the stances of practitioners and reformers alike, are deficit models, that these are young people that are broken, these are young people that need to have very specific things done to them and for them, not because of something else that we've deprived them of, but because it's inherent in them from that part of town, or who look like this, or who come from this background.
- Hal Smith: [00:45:58](#) So when we're there, we always want to raise the questions around equity and the ways in which this might play out in communities. What are the underlying assumptions about this policy formation and the levers that we use? We don't want people to believe that the only way to address young people is to do something on behalf of them instead of alongside them.
- Hal Smith: [00:46:28](#) That similarly is true for parents and community members. We often say particularly when we're invited to new spaces, that part of our challenge is that communities of color, civil rights organizations, individuals who are trying to achieve equity, are often treated in the same ways by the school system and by reformers as the students. Right? That we are to be audience and we are to be commenters, but we are not the intellectual leaders. We do not hold the intellectual social capital to contribute to the conversation, to drive the conversation, the research before it begins to ask the questions. You know, the meeting before the meeting.
- Hal Smith: [00:47:26](#) Often things are handed to us and said, "Look at what we did. We'd really like your support on this." While we're happy to support, we're also obligated to challenge and to say outright, "This is wrong. This is dangerous." Thankfully, over the last two or three years as social-emotional academic learning, the science of learning and development have rolled out, partners have seen value in that and have invited us earlier and earlier into the conversation. Not just the National Urban League, but others who think similarly and represent a vast array of constituencies and stakeholders.
- Hal Smith: [00:48:11](#) So it is our obligation to attend, but it is also our obligation to push. What you see before you is something that came out of the Aspen Commission. We were asked, along with our colleagues at UnidosUS, to convene a civil rights and equity partners around social-emotional academic learning. There have been a number of groups that have been convened similarly. We came in fairly late, but still individual organizations

have been a part of a larger conversation, but us as a constituent representative group coming together fairly late in the process, allowed us to continue kind of sidebar conversations we had had with one another about the particular dangers that we saw around SoLD and seed following the misuse of grit. Right?

Hal Smith: [00:49:13](#) It became weaponized. Again, became something where people pointed at this group of people and said, "They are so unique." So perhaps uniquely broken that we need to talk about them separately and celebrate those who overcame because of their grit, rather than a really sustained analysis of the barriers that they had to overcome. And why did those need to exist? Why do we need to talk about people having absurd amounts of grit in order to get what everyone else receives on a normal basis. To stretch themselves so much that they are recognized as full participants and humans in this process.

Hal Smith: [00:49:58](#) What we saw, and had seen I think in the seed and SoLD work, is that there's a lot of opportunity for refinement. There's still a lot of people who have questions about the ways in which this is appropriate for their community, and we're happy to sit with them, and talk with them, and learn from them. I believe, I think the National Urban League believes that there is enough promise here to continue working, but we have to talk about the ways in which it isn't a static thing that we're going to implement, but it's something that's going to implement and have real consequence in communities. Implemented poorly, implemented well, it's going to have consequences, some foreseen, some unforeseen.

Hal Smith: [00:50:50](#) How do we engage young people themselves in this discussion? How do we engage parents? How do we engage stakeholders, higher education, early learning? To go back to your earlier point, I think it is no mistake that early learning and out-of-school time as systems were unmentioned, or rarely mentioned, in the state plans. Again, because it was not an education plan, it was a school system plan. I would have been surprised if it was any other way.

Hal Smith: [00:51:26](#) But can we bring everyone together to talk about the well-being of children and young people and what is going to be necessary? What does public health have to contribute? What does housing have to contribute? What does an education focus require of all of us to achieve outcomes?

- Hal Smith: [00:51:48](#) So the equity group, our recommendations are much more about that. Ensuring access to equitable learning environments, aligning and allocating resources. Yes, this is about dollars, but it's also about their use. It's also about the ways in which we intend for things to be brought to scale, or to not. The way they're designed to remain boutique and not. All of those are things that the equity group considered for social-emotional academic learning. We were very clear that there were some real limitations about this absent additional conversation, additional dialogue.
- Hal Smith: [00:52:35](#) We did not want this to be seen as innovation. We wanted it to be seen as the spread of excellent practice already. You know, Miss Johnson has been doing this in her classroom for 25 years without it having a name. We've now got a language to talk about it and elevate her work and celebrate the impact she's had for generations of students. We need to find her, elevate that. Not say to everyone, "None of you have been doing this right. Here's some new thing that we want you to do. And some of you old-timers know, hang in there for two or three years then this will pass too."
- Hal Smith: [00:53:16](#) But it's a fundamentally different way of approaching this work if you can say there are exempt laws all over this community. Not some far off community, this community. The coach who's been doing this for years, the art museum educator who's been engaging people around how they should think about public art, and the ways in which success might be transferrable from one of these settings to other settings.
- Hal Smith: [00:53:48](#) That's the kind of conversation I think we imagined as a part of the equity work group. And really resist this idea we can only achieve equity and excellence by innovating every day, all day. But instead, what are the day-to-day practices, investments that we can build upon here? What are the things that we can import from other places, other settings that help us think about this? How do we have a comprehensive approach that calls for responsibility from multiple stakeholders, not just the schools?
- Hal Smith: [00:54:26](#) I think that's where we hope to land at the end of that meeting, but really what we home to accomplish over the next few years as science of learning and development, the social-emotional academic learning, social-emotional learning, all of these acronyms gain more power, and more traction that there are ways in which we can act upon that in our policy investments, our resource investments, and our public conversation, will-

building and narrative about what education can achieve in the lives of young people and their families.

- Karen Pittman: [00:55:09](#) Now, I think your points Hal, about the importance of not sort of, not scaffolding on new practices without really doing the analysis that's suggests that the system itself is inequitable, or that other things are going on that are inequitable.
- Karen Pittman: [00:55:28](#) You're wonderful comment about the idea that young people would need an amazing amount of grit to be able to succeed because other things were not in place. And I think one of the things that's valuable about the slide that's up now from the science of learning and development, which really focused in on that middle recommendation about really creating equitable learning environments, is it speaks to your caution that we shouldn't just immediately assume that what we have to do is come in and help fix young people by helping them build social-emotional and cognitive skills without first recognizing the need for them to be in environments that have strong relationships in which they feel safe, they feel belonging, that they really do have rigorous instructional practices. Whether that's academic, or they're learning to do art, or they're learning to repair car engines, whatever they're doing, they're getting rich instructional experiences.
- Karen Pittman: [00:56:32](#) People getting to know them well enough to provide individualized supports, formal or informal. And then we really are bringing that science in to help practitioners, volunteers, community practitioners, teachers, school professionals and others really be able to help young people name and strengthen these specific skills and competencies that we know are important, those mindsets and habits.
- Karen Pittman: [00:56:59](#) But your point about the caution and in some ways, skepticism of folks in the civil rights community thinking, "Here's another list of skills and competencies that you're going to tell us our kids don't have and need to somehow get," is an important one as we sort of up wrap up this conversation.
- Karen Pittman: [00:57:26](#) Going forward, we've got the science, you're clearly connected to all of these things, what do you see as the key things that have to happen to really take, not so much as you said this isn't new, but the documentation and the specificity of how important it is to get this right for young people is very important. Who should we be taking these messages to and what's the best way to do that? How do we get to parents and communities? How do we move this forward?

- Hal Smith: [00:57:57](#) I think part of what the answer is, is engaging in real dialogue with young people. Not just about the experiences they have in the settings that we created for them in school and out, but also where they find the opportunity for development, for challenge, for learning. Whether they've constructed it or they've found their way. I think you suggested this a few minutes ago, but I think that's really important that we begin to think about all learning as social and emotional, and where that learning and development takes place being valued equally to a building we call school and a room we call classroom. That those are important reframings.
- Hal Smith: [00:58:54](#) I think it's also really important to think through the other side of the equation, which is the adults. Right? Much of this work talks about what young people need to be exposed to and how we might think about the ways in which we can create settings for them to thrive. I think similarly we have to ask ourselves the question, "How do we help adults thrive?"
- Hal Smith: [00:59:23](#) Those of us who've at reform for a long time, know that things will come back in fashion five, seven, 10, 12 years from now. You'll be faced with the same kind of idea. But what kinds of social and emotional health is it to be in a school that faces closure? And what can we do to help support those adults? How do we help them in their own learning and development to create these new spaces? How do we help them make sense of the fourth reform under the third superintendent in five years?
- Hal Smith: [01:00:02](#) Those are the kinds of things that are left out of this. As student centered as much of this work is, there are adults who are responsible for implementation and practice, that must similarly have their learning and development attended to.
- Hal Smith: [01:00:18](#) I think lastly, really being clear about equity and excellence in your own definitions. That might mean different things in different places. It should not mean less, but it can mean different. It can mean that you have a high-quality current technical education program, an automotive program, a plumbing program that is every bit as challenging and developmental as an AP course for young people who've made that decision.
- Hal Smith: [01:00:48](#) It doesn't mean that should they decide five years from now they don't have access to college because they chose another path, I think we're smart enough to figure out a way that they can do both. But we have to honor local perspectives, national perspectives together that might produce a different way of

thinking about teaching, learning, development than we're used to and become comfortable and conversant in what that might mean.

Karen Pittman: [01:01:21](#) I love it.

Hal Smith: [01:01:22](#) [crosstalk 01:01:22] scaffolding on top of current ideas.

Karen Pittman: [01:01:27](#) Well Hal, we could have this conversation go on for another hour, but I know people have to go back to work. I want to thank you for being provocative.

Hal Smith: [01:01:36](#) Thank you.

Karen Pittman: [01:01:36](#) And pushing us forward on this. I look forward to working with you in partnership as we continue to do this work. And I'm going to hand it back to Ian for a quick next steps.