To celebrate Constitution Day, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan joined civil rights leaders and educators at the Dorothy I. Height Community Public Charter School in Washington. The speakers encouraged students to honor the freedoms provided by the Constitution by working hard to shape their own destiny.

Julieanna Richardson, the founder of HistoryMakers, kicked off the program, explaining that her motivation to study history came when she was embarrassed as a child in school. When everyone in her class was asked to describe their ancestors, Richardson had nothing to say. "Others talked about their rich European heritage," she explained, but the only African Americans she had learned about were George Washington Carver and slaves. The experience later motivated Richardson to begin the HistoryMakers project, which is a 7,000-hour video archive of testimony from well-known and unsung African American heroes.

Both Secretary Duncan and featured speaker Rev. Al Sharpton said that as children they were inspired by great African American leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dorothy I. Height, for whom the school is named.

Roger Wilkins, who worked with Dr. King and other civil rights leaders in the 1950s and 1960s, described growing up in a segregated Kansas City in the 1930s and attending a segregated school with a roof so leaky that rain dripped into his classroom.

The speakers urged students to not let their circumstances or backgrounds determine their future. "If you work hard and get a good education, there is nothing you can't achieve," Duncan said. Sharpton echoed Duncan, reminding students not to take short cuts along the way. "Talent is good," he said, "but undisciplined talent is a disaster."

In a question-and-answer session, Secretary Duncan described the importance of remembering the Constitution and using it to make decisions for today. "The signing of the Constitution was a seminal moment in our country's history," he said. "We learn about what to do now by studying history."
Principal Kent Amos, who left a successful career at Xerox to start the Dorothy I. Height Charter School, introduced a class of students who would be leaving later in the day to continue their study of the Constitution at a local history museum.

Learn more about Constitution Day.

Click here for an accessible version of the video.

More Photos

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