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Let's make 2018 a year of opportunity for every child in Charlotte

By James Ford and Andrea Smith

The coming year calls for action by Charlotte's leaders and citizens if we want to solve our city's biggest problem — that our children born into poverty are likely to remain in poverty their entire lives. Words won't turn this around. We must do the work. To create the needed change we are open to new ideas as we seek an aggressive approach to confronting and attacking the issues facing us.

Since March it has been our honor to serve as co-chairs of the 19-member Leading on Opportunity Council, which was borne out of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force that studied the issues of economic mobility in Charlotte.

This is a thriving city, full of opportunity to build rich, fulfilling lives. But to date, this has been true only for some, not all. In 2013, a Harvard/University of California Berkeley study revealed that Charlotte ranked 50th out of 50 in economic mobility among the largest U.S. cities.

Charlotte can't be a great city in which to live, work and play if opportunities abound only in some zip codes. It's in all of our best interest to ensure that every child has amazing opportunities to grow, learn and thrive.

We accepted the responsibility to carry forward the vision of the Opportunity Task Force and its co-chairs, Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown and Dee O'Dell. We realized quickly the magnitude of the work and the importance of building an infrastructure that would offer a foundation for that work. This has to be done differently than anything our community has done before. There is no road map; there are no easy answers. It took time to identify a truly representative group to help guide the journey as our Council. Likewise, we have taken care in the process for selecting an Executive Director and are in the final stages of identifying the leader who will be a key force in what we are able to accomplish together. We understand the sense of urgency from the community; we feel it too. We understand questions about the speed of the work over the last eight months. Be assured the time has been important to laying groundwork for the long-term. While we are inspired about what can happen in 2018, we are equally as inspired by some wonderful things that are already happening.

We are heartened to witness people, businesses and organizations that are already stepping up as a result of the call to action from the Opportunity Task Force Report. Even our recent election was filled with new and/or incumbent candidates who ran on a platform of implementing the Task Force recommendations.

Here's what gives us hope, and this is only a sample of the dozens of things that have occurred:

- Mecklenburg County commissioners are considering a plan to expand access to quality childcare and pre-K. As the Observer reported in September, by its sixth year, the pre-K program is anticipated to reach more than 6,500 children. Let your County Commissioners know you support this and that it is fundamental to the change needed here.

- The Charlotte City Council unanimously approved \$20.8 million from the city's Housing Trust Fund to help pay for five new affordable housing developments in Charlotte.
- United Way of Central Carolinas unveiled a new community strategy focused on economic mobility. The organization will invest \$16.4 million.
- Michael Jordan donated \$7 million to launch two Novant Health Centers in low-income areas.
- Leaders like Brian Moynihan, Bank of America CEO, pledged funding of \$1.5 million over three years to the LOOC work. In addition the \$2.8 million in grants previously announced by Bank of America to support 36 Charlotte nonprofits, including A Way Home Housing Endowment, Communities in Schools and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership with missions to increase economic mobility.
- Covenant Presbyterian Church invested \$2 million — raised by its members — in an affordable housing project.
- Lowe's and Habitat for Humanity announced a \$1 million affordable housing initiative.
- The YMCA of Greater Charlotte announced an expanded youth program designed to build relationships among teens, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police and community organizations. The Y is able to take this from a summer program to a year-round one thanks to generous donors.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and Sprint have partnered to ensure that students have home access to the Internet, ensuring stronger communication between teachers and families and promoting digital literacy and more enriching studies.
- And many Charlotteans have participated in conversations that help build collaboration and awareness across diverse communities like Soulful Sundays, Levine Breaking Bread Series and the recent On the Table events.

Programs that support families and our young people are important. But the focus must also be on changing structures — how governments, businesses, nonprofits and houses of worship function and where they place their priorities. And to change structures, we need widespread support — not just by select “leaders,” but by every concerned citizen.

This is a multi-generational problem that our community is tackling. It will take years to correct. But make no mistake; work is being done. There's something for everyone to do:

- If you're already taking action or know of great work being done in the community that helps target a key area of the Task Force Report (early childhood education, college and career readiness, family stability or the cross cutting factors of segregation and social capital), go to LeadingonOpportunity.org to share your story.
- Connect with the Leading on Opportunity Council. We have quarterly public meetings planned and want to meet you and hear your story. Join us for a Connect with the Council event on Jan. 17 at 5:30-6:30 pm at Johnson C. Smith University, 100 Beatties Ford Road. Please see information on the event on our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/leadingonopportunityCLT/>.
- Do your homework when you evaluate organizations where you want to contribute your time, talent and treasure.
- Ask questions of your elected leaders. Vote.
- Make sure you check our website in early 2018 for ways to connect to our work through work groups and community forums.

We are grateful to the group of people who have formed the Leading on Opportunity Council. Our voices and backgrounds are diverse. But we share a mission to create opportunity for every

child in Charlotte and we look forward to a new year of action. Our role moving forward is to amplify the issues, galvanize teams to work toward solutions and collaborate with grassroots community leaders, politicians, businesses and nonprofits who will be instrumental in the change our city and county will experience.

We applaud the 2013 study that offered Charlotte a much-needed wake-up call. Would we have paid as much attention had we been ranked just a little higher? Would our children be any better off? Our fellow Council member, Dr. Garmon-Brown, put it best in March when she said: “Sometimes disruption can be a gift. Had we been 46th out of 50, it probably wouldn’t have made the news” and inspired action across our community. This issue affects all of us and it will take all of us to solve it. It can be done and must be done - together.

James E. Ford is an award-winning educator and education consultant. Andrea Smith is Bank of America’s chief administrative officer and a member of the company’s executive management team. Ford and Smith are co-chairs of the 19-member Leading on Opportunity Council, which brings together a representative group of Charlotte-Mecklenburg leaders spanning a range of disciplines and backgrounds — grassroots, government, neighborhood, business, philanthropy, faith and nonprofit. For more on Leading on Opportunity: leadingonopportunity.org.