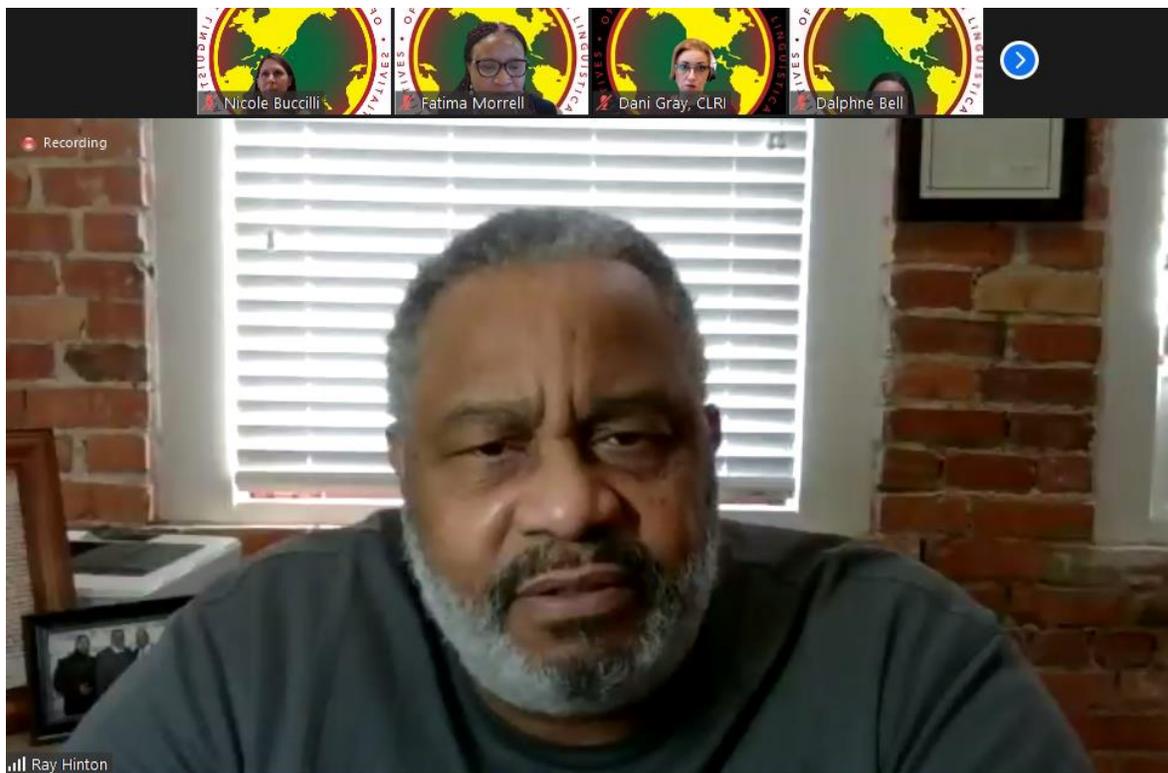


On December 15th and 16th, 2021, the Office of CLRI was honored to host **Anthony Ray Hinton** as the distinguished speaker at the **December Disproportionality Culturally Responsive Education Training Sessions**. In 1985, Mr. Hinton was wrongly convicted of murder and served nearly 30 years on death row before being released in 2015! In telling his story, Mr. Hinton highlighted the unjust treatment from our justice system, stating, “Just because I was born poor and Black the State of Alabama knew they could give a conviction. I sat on Alabama death row for 28 years and in county jail for 2 years, all because my life was not worth the truth.” With the citing of disproportionate data from his state of Alabama, where African Americans make up 27% of the general population, but 86% of the prison population, Mr. Hinton emphasized systemic racial bias, saying, “I want you to know that here we are in 2021. We are not dealing with mass incarceration. We are dealing with a new form of slavery. I want you to understand that the state of Alabama took off the white robe and they put on the black robe. Now that they have the black robe on they have more power and duty to do whatever they want to do. We have a system that treats you better if you are rich and guilty, opposed to if you are poor and innocent.”



As is the title of his book, ***The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life, Freedom, and Justice***, Anthony Ray Hinton’s powerful and heartfelt talk was deeply personal, focusing on how he maintained hope in such dire circumstances and how his journey brought about his exoneration and freedom. Participants’ hearts were touched, with many brought to tears, during this emotional session. Themes of hope, healing, compassion, and forgiveness were woven throughout the time he spent with Buffalo Public Schools’ Disproportionality team members. While the State of Alabama has not offered their apologies to Mr. Hinton, he stated, “I want you to know that I have forgiven them and I want you to know that forgiveness is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. I want you to know that every day I get out and I try my best to be a force for those who don’t have a voice. Every day I fight for those who can’t fight for themselves because there was one day I didn’t have a voice.”

Mr. Hinton’s engaging talk naturally led to the audience reflecting upon how they center hope and joy for our students, as well as connections to the school-to-prison pipeline and this year’s Disproportionality theme, *Hope and Healing for Humanity*. A key takeaway during this session is a quote from Anthony Ray Hinton’s New York Times Best Selling book, ***The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life, Freedom, and Justice***, “I knew if the mind could open, the heart would follow.” Throughout his talk Hinton emphasized the power of listening, asking questions, and believing other’s individual stories and their own truths. An actionable step for all district stakeholders is to, “Ask your children, ‘What’s going on?’ Be open and not so quick to judge. I think kids are dying to have someone that they can talk to. Children need our time and for us to pay attention to them.” Additionally, there is collective value in acts of individual kindness. As Hinton reminded us, “Sometimes a person just needs you to say, ‘Have a great day today!’”

The following reflective comments from participants highlight the deeply inspiring work of Anthony Ray Hinton:



- “As much as these days make me think about my work as an educator, they also really make me think about what I’m doing as a parent. His words show that my words and actions are life altering in the role of MOTHER.”
- “His presentation was so powerful—I felt his pain. When we look at our students and our family members we can see these innocent children we are entrusted with educating and guiding on a better path. We have to be the village. The teachers are the village.”
- “His strength is something we have to teach our children. Never give up.”
- “His light is shining bright through the darkness without a doubt. May we all reflect that same light and make the world bright.”

The Office of CLRI wishes to leave you with Anthony Ray Hinton’s parting words to reflect upon, “What would you do if you were charged with a crime you didn’t commit. What would you do if you didn’t have the money to hire defense? What would you do if you passed a polygraph test but they cared more about the color of your skin than the results of that test? What would you do if you were found guilty and sentenced to death. What would you do if you had to spend the rest of your life in a room smaller than your bathroom? What would you do if you had been waiting all your life to die and finally one day you were set free? Who would you be?” As a reminder, the next set of Disproportionality Culturally Responsive Education Training Sessions will be held on January 19th and 20th, 2022.