

“The Achievement Gap”
Darien Rotary
February 3, 2011

Good evening! I want to thank Patti Conklin Thompson and the Rotary Club membership for inviting me to speak with you this afternoon. And thank you for that marvelous meal; I always enjoy the chance to break bread with new friends and colleagues.

My topic tonight is a very serious one. In fact, it may be the most important domestic issue facing our nation today. I am referring to the academic achievement gap that exists between middle class, largely suburban white students, and students from low-income families, largely urban students of color.

This achievement gap has captured the attention of educators and community leaders alike, in Connecticut and across our country.

Yet despite all that attention, the achievement gap has not substantially improved in the 30 years that national data has been gathered on this issue. What is most disturbing and what I want to focus on tonight is the reality that Connecticut has the largest academic achievement gap among its schoolchildren in the entire nation. Here in Darien, perhaps you can appreciate how far apart are the experiences of schoolchildren in Greenwich and Bridgeport, despite the short drive to each on I-95.

So, where does this achievement gap start in a child’s life? What is the impact of this gap on individuals and on society? And what can we do to turn this situation around in Connecticut?

Imagine for a moment a hospital nursery full of newborns, babies from all socio-economic backgrounds — white babies, brown babies, black babies. Imagine that all of them go home healthy, brimming with new life and potential. We know their lives will be vastly different soon enough, but did you know that at age nine months, all those babies will be performing at the same mental acuity level?

National Center for Education Statistics data shows that, at age nine months, babies in this country demonstrate the same mental capacity, regardless of ethnicity.

In fact, even when the educational level of the mother, whether or not the mother has a parenting partner, or income levels are considered, there is no significant difference in mental acuity at 9 months of age. The only factor that seems to make a difference at that age is the weight of the child at birth. Babies who weigh less than they should at birth don’t perform as well mentally at nine months.

So our hospital ward is full of babies truly created equally at birth. But from there, their paths begin to diverge. Even in preschool, we start to see various factors converging to impact educational performance.

While children with preschool experience are 30 percent more likely to go on to finish high school and twice as likely to attend college, only one of every seven children who are eligible for preschool subsidies receive the funding.

For Latino children, the language barrier is especially troublesome. Latino preschoolers who enter first grade without English proficiency are at least one grade level behind the day they walk into school.

Considering that 73,000 Latino families in Connecticut speak no English in the home, you can see what a challenge this language barrier represents in our own state.

By grade four, low-income, urban and minority students are performing 20-40 points below their white counterparts in writing, reading, math, and science, on National Assessment of

Educational Progress (or NAEP) scores. This is true nationally and as I said at the outset, it is especially true here in Connecticut.

In fact, the gap between low-income and minority students (blacks and Latinos) and white students in Connecticut is the highest in the nation, in all four test areas — reading, writing, math and science — and at all three standard testing points of 4th, 9th and 12 grades.

What is most frustrating is that NEAP test scores among many minority students actually get worse the longer the kids are in school — our educational system is failing them. For instance, the gap between white, presumably more affluent students in Connecticut and their Latino and African American counterparts worsens by 4-6 points in reading, math and writing tests between the 4th and 9th grades.

What is the impact of this educational achievement gap? You can measure it in a number of ways. To the individual student, it means a life of struggle, of unrealized dreams, of lost income, and lost opportunities.

We cannot expect a black or Latino child to aspire to and become a scientist, engineer, or attorney when they consistently fall below the minimum threshold on reading, writing, and math skills, the basic ingredients for these professions.

Latinos and African American students end up with significantly higher high school dropout rates, lower college attendance and graduation rates, and higher poverty rates than whites.

It is important to acknowledge that not all Latinos are poor, that not all African Americans live in our cities, and that both groups are not inherently going to achieve academically at lower rates than their white counterparts.

But clearly, the Achievement Gap disproportionately impacts students of color, inner-city students, and students from low-income families. This is where our focus should be.

Education can turn these students' lives around in terms of earning potential and personal income. A college education is worth \$1 million more in additional lifetime earnings than a high school diploma.

In Connecticut, if we were to close the achievement gap and see Latino and African American college graduation rates at the levels of their white counterparts, \$8 billion in personal income for those graduates would be generated, and hundreds of millions of dollars of tax revenue for the state.

Closing the achievement gap is not only a moral obligation to those less fortunate. It makes sense for all Connecticut residents, and indeed, all Americans. Every college educated person also saves the taxpayer \$1 million in avoided costs over a lifetime (unemployment, health care, welfare, etc.).

In addition, experts suggest that closing the achievement gap between America's haves and have nots could add as much as 2-4 percent to our Gross Domestic Product.

Whether we look at closing the achievement gap as a moral imperative to give those less fortunate than us a better chance of living the American dream, or we see this in stark economic and public policy terms, improving academic performance among at-risk groups is good public policy for those experiencing it as well as society at large.

As this community's leaders, I know you care deeply about the needs of others less fortunate. I have no doubt that you share my own belief that everyone in our nation deserves the increased social and economic mobility that comes with academic and educational success. I also suspect you can appreciate the societal benefits of closing the achievement gap that I have just detailed. So what can we do?

State-level Public Policy Initiatives.

Here in Connecticut, I was recently honored to chair a committee of the Connecticut State University System that has just come out with recommendations to refocus our system's attention on this important issue.

Strategies include strong commitments from local educational and community leaders; improving the college readiness of high school graduates; better data collection; stronger partnerships between K-12 school districts, community colleges, and universities; and strategies at our colleges and universities to improve retention and graduation rates.

Local focus.

Even as we look at statewide strategies for impacting the achievement gap, the reality is that change occurs locally. I want to share a model for success at the local level that has been developed by a research and advocacy group at Harvard University.

The Achievement Gap Initiative (or the AGI as it is known) is being funded by Harvard, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other philanthropists for the purposes of analyzing, advocating and supporting best practices occurring across the country on this critically important national issue. The AGI staff is working very hard to share best practices occurring in school districts throughout the United States.

Recently they reported on 15 high-performing schools in Massachusetts, Ohio, Illinois, Texas, Maryland and Washington, D.C. They found five common characteristics in those 15 local schools:

1. Local leadership has to accept responsibility for change. That means principals, school boards, parent leaders, faculty leaders. That means the leaders in this room.
2. Focus on a few good ideas. Nothing startling here, but we live in a society of one-day headlines, instant gratification, and constant change. Children deserve stability, continuity, and the time to show improvement.
3. Good teachers make all the difference. The data on this are stunning. Data from Boston, backed up by research in Tennessee and Texas, has shown that students who are taught by the best teachers do upwards of six times better on tests than students taught by the lowest third of teachers.
4. Use clear, relevant assessment measures. Schools in the AGI review use both formal and informal measures, and internal and comparative ratings against state and national norms. The people in the room can appreciate the point here — data helps us make better decisions.
5. Implement your plan relentlessly. The AGI people use the term, “relentless” a great deal. It makes me think of the Apollo mission. D-Day. Stamping out polio. I am not being dramatic here. Attacking the Achievement Gap means building what amounts to an army and showing up to work every day, day after day, totally committed to reaching your goal.

The people at AGI also say that any campaign to lower achievement gaps is misplaced if our primary goal is not to find ways for all students to improve performance. They say, “As adults, students will compete with the rest of the world, not with their current classmates.”

So that's a national model we can incorporate in our local schools. Let me add a couple of ideas to that model.

- Early childhood education and preschool literacy must be a component of local communities' achievement gap efforts. I already mentioned that children who enroll in preschool are 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school and twice as likely to go to college. Nutrition, socialization, and intellectual stimulation are cited as being important for all young children. For Latino children, preschool English literacy instruction is fundamental.

At my University, we are fortunate to have received a \$3.9 million Early Reading grant from the U.S. Department of Education to provide English language instruction to more than 700 preschoolers and professional development to preschool teachers in our town. Effective literacy education must also include literacy programs for parents and other family.

- We need to forge stronger ties between community colleges and local universities. In Connecticut, we have a formal compact between the community colleges and the state universities so that entering freshmen can co-enroll and ensure that their full associate degree transfers without incident to a state university when they enroll as juniors.

There are other examples of local success around the nation in dealing with the achievement gap, and I hope they can give you ideas on ways you can work right here in Darien to impact the gap in your own local schools.

In El Paso, Texas, where 80 percent of the students are Latino, the local school district, the local community college, and the University of Texas-El Paso have come together to address the educational achievement issue. Several nonprofit agencies have joined in the effort. There is a role for everyone — a community collaborative of businesspeople, parents, and other adults provides additional support to teachers in the school system.

Here in Connecticut, we can see best practices in many communities. New Haven's Amistad Academy — a middle school whose students are 98 percent African American or Latino — achieved the largest performance gains between the 6th and 8th grade in the state.

And Dwight Elementary School in Hartford, with 95 percent of its students from low-income families, has doubled the percentage of students within goal range on state achievement tests.

I already mentioned the early reading program we have implemented for preschool children in Willimantic.

Another project we have is the Math Brigade, where Eastern's education and math students are going into the local middle school to help those children improve their math skills before it is too late. Programs like those in El Paso and here in Connecticut are happening throughout our nation and show much promise as models for other schools and universities.

Some of the country's underprivileged have been fortunate, and have overcome the obstacles I have discussed tonight. I was born in the western mountains of Puerto Rico. My father moved our family to Newark, New Jersey when I was very young, so that my family could have a better life.

Through my parents' sacrifices and the help of many people along the way, I was able to get a college education. As my father often said, education truly is the path out of the projects.

There is no greater system of higher education than that of the United States. Within your lifetime, you can change your social class through a college education. In many countries only people who have connections or a fancy last name can get into a University.

In Turkey, for example, only one percent of the eligible population is admitted to college. Here in America, your mother can clean toilets, yet you can go to Harvard. We have a meritocracy and a first rate one, as we know.

Perhaps the biggest reason to raise the educational achievement and competence of all Americans is so that we can protect our great Democracy.

We educate people to critique government, business and overall public policy. By educating everyone, you and I allow this great Democracy to flourish and protect its roots which allows our nation to be strong, vibrant and truly democratic.

I hope that you discover your own ways to help close the achievement gap right here in Darien. Know that Eastern is on your side. Again, thank you for having me speak with you on this important subject tonight.