

“Society and Economic Equity”
Delta Kappa Gamma Annual Convention
April 5, 2021

Greetings to my colleagues in Alpha Kappa, the Connecticut State organization of Delta Kappa Gamma. I am honored to have been inducted into this prestigious organization, and I am equally honored to be your keynote speaker at this year’s annual convention.

With 600 members in 14 chapters in Connecticut, Alpha Kappa is doing great work in our state to advance the teaching profession. Delta Kappa Gamma is also a thriving international organization, with more than 70,000 members in 17 countries.

Here in Connecticut, Alpha Kappa has a strong tradition — 82 years old yet keeping up with the times. I commend you for supporting early career educators, recruiting new candidates into the teaching profession, providing scholarships to support current teachers who are getting their master’s degrees, and offering grants to high school and college students.

I cannot see you today, but I know the women I am speaking to have dedicated their careers — their lives — to uplifting young people, giving them the skills they need to succeed in this world, helping them to develop their potential, serving as role models in your own right. You are the bedrock of your communities — and indeed, our nation.

You are not always recognized and thanked for your work, nor always paid a fair wage. But know this... I have been an educator for five decades, and I stand with you. I am also proud to tell you that Eastern Connecticut State University, which opened in 1889 to prepare women to be primary school educators, continues to have a national reputation for its teacher education programs. I am sure there are many Eastern graduates here today — you and your Alpha Kappa colleagues make me very proud.

I want to thank Pam Aubin and the other members of the executive board for inviting me to speak with you today. I have thought a great deal about what to say to you today, and I have decided I want to spend my time focusing on the issue of **social and economic equity** — I truly believe it is an issue that has never been more critical to our country’s well-being. Given the fact that teachers themselves often feel undervalued, I think talking about equity to a group of educators — women educators — is timely and relevant.

I want to start by giving you a quick outline of what I want to cover today. First I want to talk about the equity divide: when it starts and how it is manifesting itself during COVID. I am then going to share some personal stories of several Eastern alumni with you — schoolteachers whose own words will give you some context for what is happening in classrooms and in-home settings during COVID.

I also plan to share information on what makes a good toy for a preschooler. Believe it or not, good toys can help bridge the equity divide — I will tell you more about that in a few minutes.

Finally, I want to talk about what we can learn from COVID as we return to on-ground learning and our physical classrooms — things we can do differently as well as things we should adopt from months battling COVID.

Before I talk about “equity,” I thought I would share this graphic with you. As you can see, the point being made here is that **“Equality” is not “Equity.”** Giving all students the same books, the same software program in class, the same access to the library presumes an equal playing field from day one.

We know better. We know that a child from a broken home, a violent neighborhood, a poor family, a school with limited resources, is fighting for survival. A more affluent student likely has access to a home library, high-speed Internet, expensive summer camps, and parents with advanced degrees. That’s why we need to provide additional supports to low-income, first-generation, and minority students.

The fact is, for reasons that we cannot easily counter, the inequities we see among schoolchildren, and later, our adult population, are based on social and economic distinctions that start at a very early age. Let me share with you some national data that I found several years ago.

As you know, the National Assessment of Educational Progress tracks schoolchildren’s progress across the grades. It has done so since 1990. Beginning with the primary grades and all the way through high school, it focuses on mathematics, reading, writing and later science skills.

But they also look at preschoolers — down to infancy! And here is what they have found. **At the age of nine months, all children in America have the same level of mental acuity and gross motor development, regardless of ethnicity, the marital status of the mother, her educational achievement level, or other social-economic factors.** Our founding fathers—Thomas Jefferson gets credit for the statement—were right when they wrote, “All men (and women, we can safely say) are created equal.”

We know this with moral certainty in our hearts, but to have science remind us of it makes the point even stronger. As infants, all children have the same natural attributes, and we would hope, the same chance for success. However, NAEP data also shows clearly that by age 2, cognitive performance is differentiated based on income level, and by age four, both ethnicity and economic status translate into performance differences.

Children in affluent homes have more books to read, enrichment programs to attend, and family members with college degrees to look up to. Children from low-income families — disproportionately people of color — may not get enough nutrition. Many mothers are raising families by themselves; some are still teenagers. They may not have books at home or other intellectual stimulation. Fathers may be absent or unemployed. In cities like Hartford, for instance, low-skilled manufacturing jobs were exported overseas years ago. There is a great chance of violence in their neighborhoods. These are not stereotypes. They are very real social and economic separators that influence a child's ability to succeed in school.

Language can be another barrier. One study has shown that Spanish-speaking children who lack English proficiency are a year behind their classmates the day they walk into first grade. By grade five, that margin is two grade levels.

No wonder that low-income students, disproportionately children from minority families, many of them living in the urban core, move through the grades fighting desperately to keep up. The NAEP data is collected again in grades 4, 8, and 12. What it shows nationally is that low-income students are generally achieving below average in all subjects and at all grade levels.

No one historically has had a bigger divide, a greater "Achievement Gap," than Connecticut. What is especially alarming is that in 2019, as has been the case for many years, as children of color and children from low-income families have progressed through the grades, the gap gets worse. Instead of mitigating inequities, our educational system extends them.

I know many of you have devoted your life's work to addressing the achievement gap, and some of you are doing so to this day. The past year has attenuated this challenge. How has COVID added another layer of inequity to the lives of People of Color and other marginalized populations?

We know that all students have had a hard time staying engaged in online learning settings. Children need to be active, they need the guidance of teachers, they need to interact with their peers. We have heard about "non-responsive students" during COVID — they don't simply leave online lessons — they

disappear entirely. Some districts are concerned that thousands of students will be permanently beyond reach.

This is especially the case with at-risk students, who, for a variety of reasons, have had a hard time staying connected. Some districts have gone to great lengths not to lose them — making house calls to stay connected with kids and their families, calling parents to check in, dropping off books and supplies.

Other students face the reality that their families cannot afford home computers or high-speed Internet, and while districts often can loan equipment, some families have simply not been able to keep up.

On top of the direct impact of COVID, other inequities are amplified. Some families depend on school lunch programs, for instance, to provide essential nutrition for their children. For other kids, the books at school are the only books they have.

Working in service industries has also put low-income households at greater risk. Many of them work in the healthcare field, with its 12-hour shifts, exposure to COVID, and the emotional toil of losing patients to the disease. Others work in food service, retail stores, or cleaning houses, with comparatively low wages and little financial cushion.

Compare those experiences to a white-collar family where both parents can telecommute and have home offices to do so. These inequities must surely have added stress to the schoolchildren in those homes just trying to survive.

I don't mean to paint a grim picture, and I know that members of Alpha Kappa are keenly aware of the inequity facing teachers in our schools. I do believe that understanding how COVID has added challenges to the students we need to provide additional support to can yield insights for the future.

Teachers have shown great courage during the pandemic. Alongside doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals, they are the true heroes of these extraordinary times. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began a year ago, more than three million schoolteachers across the nation — from preschool to high school — pivoted to online learning in spring 2020 and then came back to school in the fall to teach in person. I want to share the stories of several Eastern alumni who are now teachers in schools in Connecticut and beyond. How they are managing during COVID and serving children who need special attention is inspirational.

Alan Reichle '11 teaches special education at John J. Moriarty Elementary School in Norwich. He has been at the school for three years, previously teaching in New London, Montville and Windsor Locks. Like most schools across the

country, Moriarty School closed down on March 13, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioned to online coursework by mid-April.

This past fall Alan returned to school and worked with a cohort of 16 first- and second-grade students, with the children coming to school four days a week. The new “normal” has meant Alan has learned many new technologies and teaching techniques, including using Google Suite for meetings, document sharing and other functions, embedding questions within PowerPoint, as well as using the “SeeSaw” classroom app and Zoom.

With frequent cell phone conversations and the use of “Class Dojo,” another classroom app that connects teachers, students and parents, Alan has learned another side of the families. During the pandemic, he has found that families feel isolated at home and sharing those challenges has come with tearful moments. “The bond I have with my families is amazing,” he told us.

Alan also takes time to talk to his young charges about their feelings. He shared with us a conversation he had with his young wards in December: “The other day we talked about Christmas and the reality that they won’t be seeing many relatives this season. They shared their sadness, and I told them I was also sad about the social distancing we all must follow. We had a little cry together, and knowing we were sharing the same experience helped them realize we will all be okay through this.”

Jasmine Stakley ’12 teaches English at Brooklyn Preparatory High School in New York City. In addition to her teaching duties, she is the department head and leads weekly meetings. She told us: “In March 2020, my role as a teacher suddenly switched from playful relationships, lively discussions and group poster projects to black screens and silence. My students became distant, and due to the lack of in-person interaction, our relationships suffered. Meanwhile, I would look out my window to see a city that supposedly never sleeps now slowly dying. The shops were closed, restaurants were boarded up and my students were trapped at home where I couldn't reach them beyond my screen. It became hard to know which student needed me more as I was spread thin and pulled in many different directions. Some students were suffering abuse in their own homes, some were experiencing homelessness and were in shelters . . . many of our students were struggling and hungry.”

Jennifer (Royals) Frankel ’10 described her unique experience at Alphabet Academy — four Reggio-inspired early learning centers in the greater New Haven area. “In the summer of 2020, school districts, teachers and families grappled with the decision of whether or not in-person learning was a safe choice. Our

executive director proposed an incredible solution, to expand our existing kindergarten program to three classrooms and spend as much of the day outdoors as possible. I was offered the chance to be the teacher of one of those classrooms.”

“Setbacks have been plentiful — a tornado three days before the start of the year; sweltering September weeks; a soggy October and the learning curve of how to keep paper from always being damp. Not to mention a mischievous raccoon who completely decimated a harvest display.

“As December and cold weather approached, our time spent inside increased but outdoor time remained an integral part of our day. I went home every day sunburned, muddy, wet or chilled. But the payoff? As of writing this, we have had zero cases of COVID-19 across four schools since our reopening in June. Additionally, in 58 days of school, only one of my students has stayed home for a single day due to illness.

I look forward to the day when COVID-19 is past us, not because I want things to go back to the way they were. I just want my students to be able to see the smile they put on my face each day we spend outside.”

Some of the heroism and dedication to children are taking place on my own campus. After being remote for the spring 2020 semester, teachers and preschoolers at Eastern’s on-campus Child and Family Development Resource Center (CFDRC) were happy to be reunited on ground this past fall despite the pandemic.

“Everyone is much quicker to adapt than we thought we could be,” said Heather (Oski) Standish ’15: “faculty, families, students, support staff — everyone! What surprised me most was how great relationships with families are despite not seeing them as much. Capturing photos to send daily and use in portfolios has reminded me just how important play is — children do amazing things if you just watch!”

“Teaching during COVID has been a challenge if only just for the logistics — we balance sanitizing and teaching throughout the day,” said Patricia McCarthy ’05. “I miss seeing their whole faces, and I miss the children being able to read my facial expressions as well. We have become very adept at communicating smiles and joy in other ways. I intentionally smile all the way up to my eyes all the time now, in addition to doing thumbs up, and making a heart with my hands.”

I began my remarks by mentioning that I was going to share some interesting insights into toys for preschoolers. I want to talk now about a

research program at Eastern we call “TIMPANI” — Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination.

I am sharing this with you not because it is about Eastern, but because this 10-year study has yielded two critical insights that relate to equity.

For millennia, toys have elicited joy and laughter in children. They are also fundamental to a young child’s intellectual and social development. In this modern world of smart phones, smart houses and smart automobiles, surely the best toys for a preschooler are “smart toys” — full of microchips, long-life batteries, robotics and other technology.

Our student researchers—dozens of them looking at more than 100 toys over the past 10 years — have consistently confirmed a fundamental if not paradoxical finding: the simplest toys support the most complex play. Based on careful observation, using remote video and audio technology and empirical data, the results are clear — children’s cognitive, social and language skills are best developed when they play with toys that allow them the greatest freedom of imagination. In fact, toys that may be attractive to children — with flashing lights, sounds, and other computerized features — ultimately fail the test.

Look at these toys with me — in 2010, the best toy was these simple wooden vehicles; in 2011, it was the classic Tinker Toys. In 2012, it was the popular Duplo Blocks, while in 2015, it was this simple wooden cash register.

How do these toys impact equity? For one thing, it doesn’t take a lot of money for a classroom teacher or a parent to buy some Tinker Toys. You don’t need a computer chip in a toy for it to develop a child’s imagination, cognitive skills, communication skills, or social skills. Quite the reverse. It may seem paradoxical, but we have found that the more expensive the toy — talking toys for instance — the less engaged and involved the child. Playing with toys is critical to a child’s development. As retired early childhood education professor Jeffrey Trawick-Smith has noted, “The quality of children’s dramatic play is one of the best predictors we have of later school success.”

What is more, there is no better example of multi-cultural interaction than a pre-school environment. When the toys that young children play with promote their individual imaginations and thought processes, while also supporting socialization, equity is served on multiple levels.

We have learned other lessons from this toy study, especially for early childhood teachers. Alyssa Barry, one of our student researchers who graduated in 2020, said: “TIMPANI taught me the importance of taking a step back and observing the children’s minds taking them on an adventure. “I once felt that I

had to be hands on and engaging constantly to be a successful teacher. It's through this study and my early childhood classes that I've witnessed the positive interactions among children when adults aren't around to interfere."

But enough of me talking. Let me share a short video with you that goes into our preschool classrooms. See for yourself how children play with our TIMPANI toys — together and with great imagination.

I hope you enjoyed that glimpse of children's play, and how it promotes socialization across cultures while supporting individual development of preschoolers from different backgrounds.

I started my remarks today by talking about the history of inequities in this country, especially as they relate to schoolchildren. I shared some insights into the stresses that COVID has placed on schools, teachers, and students, especially those already fighting to survive due to social inequities. I shared what I hope were inspirational stories from teachers who got their start at Eastern. And I gave you a glimpse of how the simplest toys can have the greatest impact on young children.

We cannot solve the inequities of hundreds of years quickly or by ourselves. But the professional, caring teachers represented by Alpha Kappa are doing heroic things in our classrooms. I know they are ready to take the lessons we are learning during COVID and support meaningful change in our schools. Here are just a few thoughts of my own on what we have learned.

COVID has shown us both the strengths and weaknesses of online learning. Researchers are already at work identifying what types of learning works best online and for what students. I think we all realize that more, not less, online learning is in our future. In addition, other technology, such as the apps used by teachers to stay connected with parents and students, will no doubt be used more. Let's support them in that effort.

A second lesson we have learned — even as we find ways to use technology more effectively — is this. If anything, COVID has taught us that you cannot replace face-to-face contact. The affirmation of a smile, especially for disadvantaged students, cannot be replaced, let alone a hug for an innocent four-year-old. Teachers don't just process curriculum — they build spirits at the same time.

A third lesson we have learned is the role of parents and the relationships teachers have with them. Low-income families have a tough time, especially in Spanish speaking households, reading a math book in English when parents are working two jobs and focused on paying the rent and other bills. Even so, we

need to support expanding outreach to families, through technology, through home visits, through whatever means we have available.

Those three insights are COVID related. The next one isn't, but it bears our attention. I talked earlier about the impact of the lack of English proficiency on preschoolers. As a native of Puerto Rico, I moved to Newark, New Jersey when I was eight. There were no ESL programs in the 1950s, no bilingual education. Today, more than 60 years later — with more than 600,000 Latinos in Connecticut — we continue to face a shortage of bilingual teachers, something I encourage Alpha Kappa to work on. This is especially important at the pre-school level. We need to recruit more bilingual teachers — it's that simple.

My final suggestion relates to cultural awareness. On my own campus, we have found that white students from Greenwich and Darien, as well as African American students from Bloomfield and Latino students from Hartford Public High School, often witness diversity for the first time on our campus. That's too late.

We need to promote diversity in our high schools. That means cultural awareness programming even if we don't have diversity in the student body. And it means promoting diversity of opinion. Today it is politically incorrect to support conservative opinions on our campuses. The noted UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, *"When all of us think alike, none of us is thinking."* The current political correctness must be contested at every turn.

We need to embrace the cultures of the world. We also need to allow freedom of thought and expression, even when we don't agree with what is being said.

Thank you again for having me speak with you today. Thank you for supporting teachers and the teaching profession. I hope I have given you some food for thought and some inspiration from familiar and unexpected sources. Let me leave you with a quote from an African American schoolteacher from 1841; it reminds me of why we all are teachers:

"A good education is another name for happiness."

Ann Plato, a free African American schoolmistress in Hartford in 1841