

**Connecticut Association of Boards of Education/  
Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents  
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Thank you all for getting up to listen to me so early on a Saturday morning! You could be relaxing at home or getting ready for the holidays! Actually, I know that you have been here the past two days working hard to share solutions to the common challenges you are facing in our schools. I applaud the dedication shown by the school board members, superintendents and other school district staff in the room today. You are your community's citizen leaders, serving a diverse student population while responsibly meeting your fiscal responsibilities. I face those same challenges on my own campus, and I know how difficult your days can be.

I truly believe that there is no more important work than teaching our children. What you do gives this nation the promise of a better future, so thank you for the support and care that you provide the children in your schools. They continue to be America's hope.

I want to thank Executive Director Robert Rader, Immediate Past President Richard Murray, staff associate Lisa Steimer and their other colleagues at CABE for inviting me to speak with you today. I also want to say how proud I am of Ann Gruenberg, who retired earlier this year from Eastern Connecticut State University after a sterling career as a professor of education, and who was just installed last night as CABE's new president. You are in good hands!

CABE is doing a wonderful job of providing important services to our local school boards, ranging from professional development programs to communication support and policy services, advocating for more funding for public education, and working together on such issues as the Common Core state standards, performance evaluation and other issues facing Connecticut's school boards. Again, congratulations to CABE, to the superintendents association, and to all the representatives of our public school boards present today.

I was asked to provide my perspective on this year's convention theme—"Changing Faces, Changing World. Are We Prepared?"

I can tell you that our world—the world of education in Connecticut—is absolutely changing, as the faces of the students we serve continue to look different than in prior generations. For one thing, we will have fewer faces—fewer students—to serve. And more and more of the students we will be serving will be from ethnic minorities.

Over the next 10 years, the school-aged population in Connecticut will decrease by 85,000 students. Of our 166 school districts, only 16 project having more students in 2025 than they have today. At the same time, as is the case with most of the states, the fastest growing demographic sector in Connecticut is our Latino community. In fact, the last Census showed that most of the growth in our national population—and Connecticut reflects national data—is coming from the increase in Latinos in our nation.

Those of us in this room cannot change these demographic trends. What we can do—what we must do—is find a way to improve the chances of success for the increasing number of minority students who will make up our student population.

As the citizen leaders in your communities charged with ensuring a quality education for your children, you know better than anyone of the challenges that low-income children, urban children, and children of color face in completing their elementary and secondary educations, let alone attending and graduating from college. Of course, not all African American children live in the cities. Not all Latino families are poor, and not all low-income families are ethnic

minorities. However, these sectors of our population continue to underperform academically in our schools when academic achievement rates, dropout rates, college attendance rates and other factors are considered.

The people in this room have been dealing with the academic Achievement Gap for decades. We read about it in the CAFE Journal. We see it in the newspapers, and you and I talk about it with other educators. We are very close to the issue, perhaps so close that we do not always see the forest from the trees. Let me share some insights with you that I hope will provide a fresh perspective on the Achievement Gap.

**First let me say that the Achievement Gap has always existed in this country!** It isn't some recent trend that has come to pass because teachers aren't doing their jobs, or because children from low-income families lost knowledge that their parents possessed. The Achievement Gap isn't some reversal of academic equality that existed in generations past among the different socio-economic sectors of our society. Theoretically, we have always had an achievement gap.

The gap exists because of social conditions that have always been prevalent in this society. Poverty, income inequity, racism, and all the related barriers to success and upward mobility that exist today for low-income, minority, and urban families have always existed in the United States.

Today's urban poor are principally from African American and Latino families. For instance, two-thirds of the students at Hartford Public High School are Latinos, and most of the other third are African Americans. However, the challenges they face today are eerily similar to the barriers that existed for earlier waves of immigrants coming to this country.

Other than the members of more than 500 Native American tribes, everyone else in the United States originally came from somewhere else. When we retrace our family trees, we discover that we are all immigrants! There are three national groups that I want to spend a moment on—they were the precursors to the influx of Latinos that we have seen in this country over the past 60-70 years. I refer to people from Poland, Italy, and Ireland. We talk about stereotypes, racism, and prejudice today, but Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrants faced those same issues when they arrived decades ago.

The Irish were the first—and it turns out the largest—group of immigrants to come to America. In fact, almost 11 percent of our entire population today reports Irish ancestry. One hundred years ago, at the height of Irish immigration, there were more Irish people in New York City than in Dublin. Like so many people leaving their homelands, they came to the United States with dreams and hope, but little education and skill. In addition to living in slums and working in low-wage jobs—usually as laborers—they were stereotyped as lazy alcoholics who were prone to violence.

The Irish families who escaped the Potato Famine of the 1840s faced squalid conditions in New York City and elsewhere. Most were illiterate and if their children went to school, it was in Catholic schools they created. Women, who constituted the majority of later immigrants, were discouraged from getting an education. However, from the time of the early monks, the Irish valued education in their homeland, and over time, educational attainment rates of Irish Americans have soared. By 1983, second generation Irish immigrants averaged 13 years of education, higher than the national average of 11.69, and Irish Americans overall had an average of 13.3 years of education, well above the national average of 11.9 years.

People from Poland came later, but faced many of the same conditions. They were called “ZA CHLEE-BAM”—“For Bread,” because most were peasants in Poland who did not own

land, were uneducated, and came to this country to put bread on the table for their families. They were unskilled, and worked in steel mills, mines, and meatpacking plants in their new land. In Poland, the children joined their parents in the fields and more than half of the children were illiterate.

Depending on one's children's labor to help feed the family continued during Polish immigration to the United States and in 1910, only 10 percent of Polish, Italian and Slovak children in Chicago went to school past the sixth grade. Eventually, child labor laws were passed and Polish children began attending school in larger numbers.

Like the Irish, Poles also faced mean-spirited stereotypes. Poles were stupid, unstable, and lazy. Even President Wilson wrote that they "possessed neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence." Perhaps no other people have been the butt of misplaced humor more than the Polish people. There are books full of Polish jokes even today, and many Polish families coming to this country have changed their name to protect themselves from this blatant discrimination.

Those early challenges facing Polish families are a bittersweet but distant memory. Today, as a result of familial and cultural values that place a premium on education, 38 percent of Polish Americans have a college degree, almost 10 points more than the national average, and household income of Polish American families—at \$62,000—is \$11,000 over the national average.

While many Polish people ended up in cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and other places in the Midwest, Italians coming to the United States have principally settled on the Eastern seaboard from Boston to Philadelphia.

Like the Polish and Irish families before them, most Italians migrating to the United States were agricultural workers with few skills. Most of the five million Italians who came to the United States from 1876-1924 came from southern Italy and were poor sharecroppers and farm workers. They lived in city slums, worked on farms, in factories and mills, or in the mines next to other immigrants. They faced the same prejudice as the Irish and Polish before them. They were deemed to be poor, carried disease, were criminals, were illiterate, and kept to themselves.

Some of these stereotypes were simply false, and others were the result of the living conditions faced by Italian immigrants. If you are poor, cannot speak English, and are subjected to constant ridicule, of course you are going to band together with your relatives and countrymen!

As was the case of the Polish migration, immigrants from the southern regions of Italy were largely illiterate—as much as 70 percent, which was 10 times the rate of illiteracy in England, France, and Germany. Families distrusted the public education system and needed their children's wages to augment their own. As a result, less than one percent of Italians attended high school in 1910 and there were high levels of truancy for those who did. It wasn't until the 1980s that educational attainment levels for Italians had caught up with the overall population.

It has taken these three European groups 100 years or more to assimilate into American society, break the manacles of poverty, go to high school and college in representative numbers, and begin to move up the socio-economic ladder.

Therefore, those early waves of immigrants would not have shown up in the educational testing scores that we have been conducting in middle and high schools since 1969. Imagine what those test scores would have shown 100 years ago! **The Achievement Gap has always been with us!**

In the 1950s and even into the 1980s, our urban poor were largely African American families. In 1850, we didn't call black people African Americans; they were called slaves.

Today, 60 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, when I see the violence against black males in Ferguson, Missouri, in New York City, and elsewhere, I wonder if we have made any progress toward an equitable life for African American citizens.

Demographic trends have now shifted the focus to Latinos. As a native of Puerto Rico, I can tell you about our common experiences. I came to the states when I was eight, not knowing a word of English, as a member of one of the first Puerto Rican families to migrate to Newark, New Jersey. My father and mother worked in the factories, without benefit of a high school education. My mother still cannot read or speak English.

People from Puerto Rico, and more recently from Mexico and other Latin American countries, do not leave those nations as professionals with college degrees. What doctor, attorney, or college professor would leave a stable life to come to a country that may not recognize their professional credentials?

As my father did 60 years ago, most Latino immigrants come to the States for the hope of a better life, armed with little education or skill, but much grit and determination as they seek a better life for their families. Italians, the Poles, and the Irish can relate!

Latinos in Connecticut faced similar challenges to those my family faced in New Jersey. Almost all of the Latinos migrating to Connecticut were Puerto Rican. They faced harsh working conditions in the factories, in the apple orchards, and in the tobacco fields. Let me tell you about the tobacco fields. More than 200 tobacco farms ran from Hartford to Springfield, Massachusetts, attracting thousands of workers from Puerto Rico. Some workers slept in barns on flimsy cots, 50-60 to a barn. Sanitation and plumbing were meager at best.

Others, recruited by the Shade Tobacco Growers Association, lived in 14 camps in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts, surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards. Workers faced 12-14 hours days, seven days a week, and no overtime pay. Deductions for airfare from Puerto Rico, meals, health insurance, and other expenses often took as much as two-thirds out of a man's paycheck.

Willimantic, where my campus is located, had its own story. Just as I was arriving in Newark, New Jersey in the mid-1950s, Hartford Poultry Company recruiters from Willimantic were flying to Puerto Rico to bring back people to work.

One worker at the local poultry plant shared this story in a 1984 interview: "We were 14 young girls who were brought here (from the south coast of Puerto Rico) to work at the chicken factory. The beds were in a line and two of us would sleep in each bed. (Our sponsor would) lock us up to prevent us from leaving the house late at night." Rosario and her friends processed 3,000 chickens an hour: "The work was fast and sometimes the girls would cut themselves with the scissors."

Who had time to learn English? Who had time to go to school? And what services were available if they did?

Fifty years, later, the number of Latinos in Connecticut has skyrocketed, and we are keenly aware of the Achievement Gap. But I am optimistic. The fact we are speaking about the achievement gap is not a sign of failure, it is a sign of success. Social and economic changes have occurred that made this a national priority. Let me describe a few of those forces to you.

**Public Policy:** As the United States' public education system matured, new laws at the state level set standards for instruction, teacher preparation, and other aspects of the educational enterprise. In particular, mandatory high school attendance laws in and of themselves had the effect of expanding educational attainment levels of all Americans, including immigrant groups. Texas and South Carolina (1915), Mississippi (1918) and Alaska (1929) were the last states to pass such laws.

**Economic reality.** Even into the 1980s and 1990s, semi-skilled workers—people who might have a high school diploma at most—could find good-paying jobs in our factories and manufacturing plants. You could be a high school dropout and still get a job in the automobile manufacturing plants of Detroit or on the docks of New York City, Houston, and San Francisco. Automation and foreign competition has eliminated most of those jobs or forced them offshore.

Connecticut alone has lost 140,000 manufacturing jobs since 1990, almost half of our manufacturing base. We now live in an age where most jobs require employees to think independently, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and stay current with technological change. Georgetown University researchers project that two-thirds of all the jobs created in the United States in the next decade will require a two- or four-year college education.

With most of our population growth occurring due to birth rates among Latino families, policymakers now realize that our economy cannot be sustained without a dramatic increase in the number of Latinos and other minorities completing high school and going on to graduate from college.

**Familial Expectations.** Families without skills and education send everyone in the household into the workforce to make ends meet. It is a tough life. No parent in that situation wants their children to continue that lifestyle. That is why my own father, more than 50 years ago, told me that education was the only way I could escape the “hellhole” of the projects.

I have also spoken to hundreds of parents from minority families whose children are attending my university. They clearly understand how much value employers place on a college degree these days, and realize that the best way for their children to break the cycle of poverty is to attend and graduate from college.

While many Latino adults in the United States may not speak English at home, the majority believe English proficiency is essential to success in this country. And 90 percent of Latino young adults recognize the importance of going to college today. Expectations have changed.

**Peer Influence.** Spanish may still be heavily spoken in the homes of Latinos, but the children of those families speak fluent English and have been assimilated into the same popular culture as their Anglo counterparts. They want the same X-Box as the next child. Everyone has an I-phone. Today's “Generation Z” is also more accepting of cultural and ethnic diversity and is also more committed to issues of justice and equality than previous generations.

The result is that our new generation of high school and college students believe in each other, support each other, and expect our society to truly give all of them equal opportunities of success. They share mutual aspirations.

In this new world, our end goal cannot be simply to see students of all backgrounds graduate from high school in your districts. Nor can getting them admitted into college be our resting point.

We need to dramatically increase the number of students from underserved populations who graduate from college. For our economic prosperity, to ensure the social order, and to preserve our great democracy, we must find a way to overcome the achievement gap that has existed for generations.

So what can you do about the Achievement Gap that you are not already doing? The fact is, educators in Connecticut are doing a great deal already. We know we need to support children earlier in life, and so Governor Malloy created the Office of Early Childhood two years ago. We need more bilingual teachers, and our school boards and teacher preparation programs are partnering on that.

Our school boards are working with the State Department of Education on everything from improving clinical experiences for student teachers to performance evaluation of teachers and other school personnel. School districts are working with the Education Preparation Advisory Council on a host of initiatives, ranging from a mentoring program for fledgling teachers to improving standards and program quality in teacher preparation programs at Connecticut's colleges and universities.

With all that you are doing, I don't know that I can give you any advice to do anything differently in your schools. What I can say is this. Earlier in my remarks, I tried to make a clear case that the academic achievement gap we see in our schools today is not new.

I hope I was able to show that poverty, not race, is the determining factor in predicting academic performance. Since that is the case, what I am about to say should not be surprising. When we look at all you are doing in our schools, yet see the relatively modest gains we are making in addressing the achievement gap, we must conclude that **the solution to the achievement gap is not chiefly an educational remedy.**

That may seem counterintuitive, so let me say it again: **The Achievement Gap is not chiefly an educational issue.**

The gap in academic performance that exists between different sectors of our student population cannot be solved if we consider it as simply a matter of educational reform.

Pedro Noguera, professor of sociology at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University, offered the following insight in a 2010 article: "Over the past 40 years, studies have shown that education policy must be devised in concert with health reform, poverty alleviation initiatives, and economic development in order to address the roots of failure in the most depressed areas. From crime and unemployment to teen pregnancy and even racism, education—or the lack thereof—is implicated in many of our nation's social and economic problems. Education can be part of the solution to these and many other problems if reforms are designed and implemented in concert with key constituents—parents, teachers, local leaders and students—and with an understanding of how they must be coordinated with other aspects of social policy."

If poverty is the root cause of poor academic performance, then we must attack the conditions that create and sustain the generational cycle of poverty found in our cities and among our minority populations.

**One way to do that is by influencing national and state policy.** As members of this organization, and with the relationship you have with the National School Boards Association and other advocacy groups, you have the opportunity to educate and energize other citizens in effecting state and national policy change. Let me give you an example. States like Texas, Florida, and New York, are successfully addressing the Achievement Gap because they understand the need to systematically address the root causes. As David Plank, executive director

of the Bureau of Policy Analysis for California Education, notes, these three states have “enacted multiple policies simultaneously to create a coherent and comprehensive policy framework.” Common strategies include health care reform, nutrition, pre-school literacy, parental involvement in education, adult literacy, after-school programs, workforce training, and other family support systems, a full range of public policy initiatives.

While you work to influence state and national policy, **you can also find ways to leverage social services in your own communities to improve low-income children’s chances of success in school.** Who works on nutrition issues in your town? What agency handles literacy? Who coordinates youth employment programs? All these could be leveraged to benefit your students.

Finally, **I encourage you to access resources that are available to all of us who are working to close the Achievement Gap.** I will mention only one resource you can look to. If you haven’t heard of it, I want you to check out the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University. Funded by Harvard, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other foundations, the initiative assembles and analyzes data, issues reports on best practices, holds frequent conferences and seminars for school districts who are innovating to narrow the Achievement Gap, and provides other services. And it’s not hard to find on the web: [www.agi.harvard.edu](http://www.agi.harvard.edu).

AGI understands that the achievement gap is not simply an educational reform issue, and they have projects ranging from supporting parenting skills to examining youth culture, to offering training for youth employment supervisors. They also have a major project to find ways to leverage foundation support in what they call “Collective Impact” projects, reorganizing resources to improve the quality of life in targeted communities . . . again with an appreciation that we cannot improve academic performance with a focus only on educational reform.

I want to close by telling you about a program we have at Eastern that has been working for eight years to change the lives of inner-city students. While it may not be a model you can use verbatim in your schools, I think it is instructive in terms of what it takes to turn these students’ lives around.

Eight years ago, I used lessons learned from my own experience to start a program for inner-city students at Eastern. We call it the Dual Enrollment Initiative. We recruit students from Hartford Public High School and other Hartford-area schools, students whose SAT scores, GPAs, and other traditional measures would not qualify them to attend Eastern.

Most of them come from families who have no college graduates, and most of the students we recruit have not had college on their horizon. But they have **spark**. They want to **succeed**. In their freshman year, they attend one class at Eastern in the fall while taking three remedial courses at Quinebaug Valley Community College in Willimantic. Most of them enroll full time at Eastern in their second semester.

The students live on our campus — getting them out of their urban environment is the key — and participate in the typical campus activities you would expect. They hold down campus jobs and receive a full array of mentoring, counseling, tutoring and other services. They get significant financial aid—because they have such limited family resources. They are on our meal plan, so they are getting enough to eat every day. Each has a personal mentor.

What we have found is that the students rise to meet expectations. When they are placed in a new environment with other students their age, given positive reinforcement and opportunities to grow, they can succeed.

Graduates of the program are prospering. One 2012 graduate is pursuing her master's degree in clinical psychology at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, where she works at a center for children with special needs. Another graduate is a hall director at Providence College, where she is working on her master's degree in education and counseling. A 2013 graduate is the Nurturing Connections Coordinator at St. Francis Hospital, where she works with young mothers and their children, while also being enrolled in the Master of Social Work program at Springfield College. One of her classmates is the assistant director for the African American Cultural Center at the University of Connecticut. What I find gratifying is that these graduates and several others have found professional careers in service to the community. They are giving back.

Please understand this about our Dual College Initiative. **It has been expensive to run**, and we are grateful for the support we have received from foundations, federal grants, and other funding sources. It is a huge investment of time and money. And it is proof that **there is no shortcut to overcoming the impact that poverty** has had on generations of families in our country.

Economic stability. Social equity. These are two good reasons why we need to close the Achievement Gap in this state and nation. But there is one more reason why we must educate all of our people.

Education, a college education, is a symbol of our very identity as a free democracy. In many other nations, societies that are hardly free, you can only get into college with connections. In Turkey, for example, only one percent of the eligible population gets into college. Our meritocracy is far from perfect, but people from all walks of life can attain the highest academic ranks, based on their talent and their hard work, not their pedigree. I am but one example of that truth.

In the process of raising the educational attainment and competence of all Americans, we can protect our great democracy. In a vibrant, unfettered marketplace of ideas, where diverse opinions are debated, differences are respected, and compromises are forged, we can continue to protect our freedoms and allow the rich diversity of culture and life experience that makes our nation strong.

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is my hope that more children of color, urban children, and children from poor families are given an equal chance to succeed as they walk the path of life.

Again, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I want to close by sharing some of the first-hand experiences of several students from our Dual College Initiative. It is a stirring reminder of what can happen when we invest in students who have been struggling to manage life's difficult circumstances for all of their lives.

After we watch the short video, I would be happy to answer any questions. **(SHOW VIDEO)**