

Connecticut's Achievement Gap
Connecticut Association of Boards of Education
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Good afternoon! I am very pleased to speaking to a group of people whose work is so fundamental to the future of our state and nation. You can truly be change agents in your communities. This is a special challenge but I know you are up to the task.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to thank Executive Director Robert Rader, Board President Lydia Tedone, staff associate Lisa Steimer and their other colleagues at CABE for inviting me to speak with you today. If you don't know, you should be aware that we are very proud of CABE Vice President for Government Relations, Ann Gruenberg, who is also a professor in education at our University.

Today I want to tell you about an issue that is impacting not just Connecticut, but the entire country. I am referring to what educators call "The Achievement Gap."

I understand that there are both new school board members and school board veterans in today's audience. Whether you are new to your school board or are an old-timer, I am guessing that the Achievement Gap already has your attention. I truly believe it is the most important educational, social, political and economic issue facing our state and nation today. Much like our nation's response to the threat posed by the Sputnik space launch 54 years ago, I believe the Achievement Gap poses a similar threat and opportunity today.

The term "Achievement Gap," refers to the gap in academic progress that exists in the United States between middle class, largely suburban white students, and students from low-income families, largely urban students of color.

It is a social challenge that will not be solved until all of us, not just government officials, local educators like yourselves, and the families that are impacted, meet the challenge head on.

This achievement gap has captured the interest of educators and community leaders alike, in Connecticut and across our country. Yet despite all the 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 today is the reality that Connecticut has the largest academic achievement gap among its schoolchildren in the entire nation. In fact, when the latest 2011 national figures came out two months ago on academic achievement, our new Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor called Connecticut's lack of progress "shameful." In 2011, Connecticut kids showed no progress over 2009. Urban students lagged behind their more affluent, suburban counterparts, and Hispanics lagged behind white students by 31 points in 4th grade math, to cite just one of the measures.

Where does the 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, babies of wealthy families, and babies born from families living in poverty.

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?

Let me repeat that. 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. 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 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, where the gap between low-income and minority students (blacks and Latinos) and white students in Connecticut is the highest in the nation.

This is the case in all four test areas — reading, writing, math and science — and at the three testing points of 4th, 9th and 12 grades.

What is most frustrating is that NAEP test scores among many minority students actually get worse the longer the kids are in school.

For instance, the gap between white, presumably more affluent students in Connecticut and their Latino and African American counterparts grows 4-6 points in reading, math and writing tests between the 4th and 9th grades.

Does income make a difference? Students in the top quartile of family income (more than \$108,000 a year) are 10 times more likely to complete their BA by age 24 than students whose families make less than \$36,000 a year.

Does location make a difference? Urban school districts, made up of largely low-income households, continue to struggle to make progress. The top 10 largest school districts in the country account for eight percent of all students in grades K-12; none have graduation rates as high as 60 percent. In New York City, the graduation rate remains under 50 percent, as it does in many U.S. cities.

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 lost income, lost opportunities, and unrealized dreams.

We cannot expect a black or Latino child to aspire to become a scientist, engineer, or attorney when they 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. For instance, 86 percent of white adults have a high school diploma, while only 77 percent of African Americans and 59 percent of Latinos do. African American high school dropout rates are 50 percent higher than white students; Latino dropout rates are double those of white students. White adults are 50 percent more likely to have a college degree than African

Americans and more than twice as likely as Latino adults. Finally, the poverty rate for Latinos and blacks is almost double that of whites in this nation.

Yet education can turn these students' lives around in terms of earning potential and personal income. National data indicates that a college education is worth \$1 million in additional lifetime earnings over 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, it would generate \$8 billion annually in personal income for those graduates, and hundreds of millions of dollars of tax revenue for the state.

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.

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 (fewer unemployment claims, lower health care costs paid by public funds, fewer welfare clients, 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, and we would be more competitive globally. A McKinsey & Company report indicates that if we closed the national achievement gap with nations such as Finland and Korea, we could raise our GDP by 9-16 percent, or \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion.

Closer to home, half of all the workers in Southern New England will be minorities by 2020, with two-thirds of those jobs requiring a postsecondary degree. So for us in Connecticut, the achievement gap is also an economic development issue.

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 terms, improving academic performance among at-risk groups is good public policy for those experiencing it as well as society at large.

As leaders in your communities, I know that each of you care deeply about the needs of others less fortunate. As members of your local school board, you have the unique ability to impact public policy in your own neighborhoods. 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.

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators and National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators came together six years ago to put forth a strategy for educational reform that called for comprehensive statewide campaigns in seven states — Texas, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Arizona, Ohio, and New Mexico. Five years later, four of those six states — Maryland, Texas, Illinois, and Ohio — are making national headlines for showing significant progress in closing the achievement gap.

David Plank, executive director of the Bureau of Policy Analysis for California Education, notes that Texas and New York, as well as Florida, are succeeding in addressing the achievement gap because, “Each has enacted multiple policies simultaneously” . . . helping 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.

Here in Connecticut, I was fortunate to chair a committee of the Connecticut State University System last year that came 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.

I am confident that the new Commissioner of Education for grades K-12, as well as the new Board of Regents for Higher Education, is committed to tackling this issue.

Local focus.

Even as we look at statewide strategies for impacting the achievement gap, the reality is that all change occurs locally. As local school board members, no one has more capacity to make a difference in your community than you do.

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 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, parent leaders, and faculty leaders. It certainly means school board members like yourselves. Not to put an extra burden on you, for the task is daunting, but is there anyone in your community right now who has a greater ability to effect change in your schools and neighborhoods than you and your colleagues on the school board?

Let me share the progress being made in two school districts in Texas and Florida as examples of how local officials have come together, stepped up to the plate, and challenged their communities to impact the Achievement Gap. 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 came 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 provide additional support to teachers in the school system.

In the Miami-Dade school district, an early reading initiative, as well as Parent Resource Centers and a new Parents Academy, are two of the strategies cited for the progress they are making in Florida's largest and most diverse school district. Both Miami and El Paso are seeing statistical success in closing their NAEP scores, and both demonstrate what can happen when a large group of local leaders — business, educational, civic — accepts change as a shared responsibility.

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 it takes to see improvement. I want to tell you about a good idea we came up with at my University, not because it is about me and Eastern, but because it demonstrates the power of a good idea. I am speaking of the Dual Enrollment Initiative, a collaboration between several high schools, Eastern, and our local community college. The concept is a simple one.

Four years ago, I went to Hartford Public High School and asked the guidance counselors there if they could find students with the potential to go to college who nonetheless had not planned to do so for various financial, family and personal reasons. They said yes, and from there we launched the Dual Enrollment Program.

Now in its fourth year, the program enrolls a cohort of 10 graduates of Hartford Public High School who attend one class at Eastern in the fall while taking three remedial courses at Quinebaug Valley Community College. 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, tutoring and other services. This fall, we added a cohort from Manchester Community College. 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. Most of the students enroll full-time at Eastern in their second semester. Not every student in the program succeeds, and we understand all too well the hurdles each of them faces. But we are encouraged by the responses we have received from the high schools we are working with, and we are inspired by the individual success stories we witness.

Perhaps the most inspirational moment I have had personally in this program was the first day that I met our first cohort of 10 students from Hartford Public High School in the summer of 2008 during their initial orientation. Our Director of Admissions, Christopher Dorsey, introduced me to a young man whom he had gone to Hartford to personally pick up and drive back to Willimantic. There were blood stains on the sidewalk when Chris arrived in front of the young man's house, and the student had literally jumped into Chris's car for the ride to Eastern. A street fight, not an unusual occurrence in that neighborhood, had occurred the night before, right in front of this young man's house. "I have to get out of here," he told Chris. "If I stay, it will kill me." He wasn't talking figuratively.

When I heard this story, I realized the power of our idea. We were not going to be able to simply alter someone's life for the better. We could well be saving lives in the process. This story has given me and my staff much motivation over the past four years, and as we

continue our program, it drives home the point I share with you today — find a good idea and don't let it go.

- 3. Good teachers make all the difference.** The data on this are stunning. Figures from Boston, backed up by research in Tennessee and Texas, have shown that students who are taught by the best teachers do upwards of six times better on tests than students taught by teachers with lower performance evaluations. Let me stop and bring this point into our own personal frame of reference. Good teachers make all the difference — each of us knows that! All of us can think of at least one teacher we have had in our lives who impacted our own learning and the paths that we have taken. If I asked each of you to think of such a person in your life, I know you could do so.

Let me tell about my special teacher. His name was Morris McGee, a World War II veteran and paraplegic who was my freshman English professor at Montclair State University. At the beginning of each class he would take the roll, and would say, “Elsa Maria Nunez: What a beautiful name!” “Elsa Maria Nunez” had a very different sound from William Smith or Teddy Doyle — so my name stood out. It made me feel wonderful. Dr. McGee, of course, was trying to make me comfortable. I got a paper back from him one day with a great number of red marks and a note...”See me in my office.” I went to his office for the entire semester and wrote side by side with him. As he read or wrote a paper, I worked on my writing. He would occasionally look up and take my paper and comment on what he read as well as on my progress. I graduated from college because of Dr. McGee — he saw my own “Achievement Gap” and was determined to help me close it. I hope you spend a little time today thinking about what impact your own Professor McGee has had on your life. We need to hire better teachers in our schools; think of the difference they will be able to make.

- 4. Use clear, relevant assessment measures.** Schools that the AGI reviewed use both formal and informal measures, and internal and comparative ratings against state and national norms. You can appreciate the point here — data helps us make better decisions. I encourage you to go to the websites of the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the AGI project — there is a mountain of data there to learn from. And at some point, you will begin to find data points in your own school district that will help you to make 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 an army and showing up to work every day, day after day, totally committed to reaching your goal. Americans are very good at focusing on an issue when necessity calls; is there a better time than now and a better issue than the Achievement Gap to get our full attention? What would it take to be relentless in your town, to create an army of paid professionals and volunteers, all working on this same issue?

The people at AGI also make the point that any campaign to lower achievement gaps is misplaced if our primary goal is not to find ways for all students to increase achievement. They say, “As adults, students will compete with the rest of the world, not with their current classmates.” So this is a matter for all students, all school districts, all parents, all of us.

I said it earlier, but let me say it again, just as closing the achievement gap should benefit all students, this is not solely an educational reform issue — it's everyone's business. As Pedro

Noguera, professor of sociology at New York University, who has written extensively and eloquently on this subject, has said: *“Over the past forty 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. (Educational reforms) must be coordinated with other aspects of social policy.”*

I have spent a great deal of my time today describing the Achievement Gap and what we might be able to do to address it, largely at the K-12 level. Of course, our educational system is a continuum, and increasing college graduation rates needs to be our ultimate objective. The value of a college degree is fundamental to our economic, social, and political future.

I think you would all agree, 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. Again, allow me a moment to personalize this point. I have already mentioned the professor who meant so much to me as an undergraduate. My path to realizing the American Dream started much earlier, however. My family comes from the western mountain town of San Sebastián in the coffee-growing region of Puerto Rico. My maternal grandmother lived in the slums of San Juan.

My father was determined to give his family a better life, and he borrowed money to fly to the United States in pursuit of that dream. He moved us to Newark, New Jersey, where we grew up in the housing projects while my mom and dad worked hard every day in the factories there. My father is not educated, nor is my mother, but my father always told me that getting an education was my ticket out of the projects. He was right. I have been very fortunate to have had my parents support and the help of people like Professor McGee along the way.

Every child in this country deserves to have that same support, regardless of their beginnings. That is fundamental to our principles and values as a nation, and it should be at the core of your work as school board members.

Perhaps the biggest reason to raise the educational achievement and competence of all Americans is to 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, allowing our nation to stay strong, vibrant and truly democratic.

CONCLUSION

I was asked to give an inspirational talk today. Sometimes we are inspired by light prose, lofty ideas, of grand successes in our midst. Sometimes inspiration comes in more concrete fashion, grounded in reality. The Achievement Gap is certainly a sobering reality before us. But I hope the personal stories I have shared have given you hope as well.

There is no more important social issue facing our nation than the Achievement Gap, and no one is better positioned than the people in this room to address this issue. If we want to improve the quality of life for an increasing portion of our population, if we want to ensure that we have a trained workforce ready to help America reclaim its economic position in the world, if we want to protect our free democracy with an educated citizenry able to govern itself with

wisdom and an open mind, then the people in this room must become an army of Connecticut citizens, steeled by the truth and determined to seek out change and see it through.

Those are the stakes at hand. I wish you good luck and God Speed. Again, thank you for having me today. It has been my pleasure.