

**“Closing the Achievement Gap:
The Path to Social and Economic Equity”**
Peace Islands Institute
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Good Evening! I am honored to be speaking tonight at the Peace Islands Institute Friendship Dinner. Not only do I count a number of personal friends in the audience, but the topic I am going to be speaking to you about tonight, closing the academic achievement gap, can only be solved if the leaders in our communities—businesses, government officials, educators, faith-based organizations, and community groups—join hands and work together.

Before I begin, I want to thank Sena Sahin and State Representative Kevin Ryan for inviting me to be your keynote speaker this evening.

I also want to recognize and thank the Peace Islands Institute for its work in promoting friendship, harmony and respect for people from all ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Working towards a more civil society, one that gives people more educational and economic opportunities, is a noble cause that follows my own beliefs and life’s work. Again, I am honored to be here.

The Achievement Gap refers to the disparity in academic progress between students of differing socio-economic status. At the national level, this gap is alarming—as much as two grade levels in certain subjects by the fourth grade. And what should be shocking to the people in this room—Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the nation, both when family income and ethnic background is compared.

I want to share with you some thoughts on what causes this academic achievement gap, its impact on students and their families, and what it means to our nation’s economy. I will also share some of the things we are doing on my own campus to address the achievement gap among college students.

The Achievement Gap is fundamentally about the impact of poverty on a student’s academic performance. Far too many people in the United States, whether they are immigrants or native-born Americans, face a lifetime of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, poor health and other misfortune. A cycle of poverty and neglect continues to be passed down from generation to generation in far too many families and neighborhoods. In fact, there are almost 50 million people living in poverty in America.

What is their future like? Will they ever get as far as a college campus to embrace the improved life potential that higher education affords its graduates?

Students in our inner cities and those from low-income families often have no college graduates in their immediate families. They have no sense of the value of a college degree; they work while they go to high school, or have to quit school to work full time to help support their family. Some may be expected to stay home to care for younger siblings. Those who do well in school fear ridicule from their peers at school for succeeding academically.

Numerous studies have documented the fact that students who come from impoverished families are more likely to have problems in school than students who come from middle-class or upper-class families. For instance, the dropout rate for the poorest students in America is almost six times that of the most affluent students.

Students from low-income families consistently — regardless of ethnicity or race — score well below average on any number of tests. Let me reiterate that—academic performance is a function of socio-economics, not ethnicity.

The distressing fact is that the number of children living in low-income families in America is increasing, and one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population are families with children. In 2007, 23 percent of all homeless people in our country were members of families with children.

This trend is important because without dramatic intervention in our schools, the numbers of low-achieving students is certain to increase as poverty grows, and the Achievement Gap I am describing today will be more difficult to address.

When I say “Achievement Gap,” what exactly am I talking about? This gap refers to the difference between the test scores in reading, writing and mathematics of public school students who are from low-income families compared with those from more affluent circumstances. How does family income make a difference in the achievement gap? Students in the top quartile of family income (more than \$108,000 a year) are **10 times** more likely to have completed their bachelor’s degree by age 24 than students whose families make less than \$36,000 a year.

Does location makes a difference? National data indicates that the achievement gap exists particularly in urban areas where a large proportion of low-income citizens reside, with African-American and Hispanic students disproportionately affected.

How early does the Achievement Gap start? Data from the National Assessment of Education Progress tells us that at age nine months, **all babies will have the same level of motor skill development and mental acuity, regardless of ethnicity, the educational level of the mother, and whether or not she has a parenting partner.**

That same data, however, demonstrates the importance of privilege and opportunity. By age two, mental and motor skill performance is differentiated based on income, ethnicity and other socioeconomic factors. By age four, those differences in performance are even more pronounced. Once those babies grow up and go to school, the paths to prosperity or poverty—and their impact on academic performance—continue to diverge.

NAEP data is gathered from every state of the Union, and it shows significant gaps in academic performance across our nation on reading, writing, math and science tests at the fourth, eighth and 12th grade levels, based on ethnicity, family income, and residence—urban students performing at lower levels than rural and suburban students.

These gaps are not small, and in many states—Connecticut being one of them—the gap between Hispanic and African American students, largely from low-income, urban neighborhoods and their white, more affluent counterparts grows larger as students move through school.

What is the impact of the 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.

Many low-achieving students drop out of school, forfeiting the knowledge they need to join a skilled workforce.

In our own state, youth unemployment is double that of the adult population. Among Latino and African American youth in Connecticut, the unemployment rate is double that of whites. And in Bridgeport, youth unemployment approaches 50 percent of those looking for work.

What does the academic achievement gap mean to our nation? In 1990, we were number one in the percentage of adults with a college degree. We were proud of that fact—it represented innovation, productivity, and a vibrant economy. Today, we are 12th on the list.

For years, the other countries of the world looked up to America and worked hard to catch up to us. We have lost our economic edge.

Only the kind of effort that cured polio, put a man on the moon, and uncovered the mysteries of the atom will regain that edge. We have to educate more of our young people and give them a higher skill set to compete on the global stage.

As President Obama has noted, “If we want America to lead in the 21st century, nothing is more important than giving everyone the best education possible — from the day they start preschool to the day they start their career.” The President’s College Completion Challenge 2020 has a goal of increasing the number of community college graduates to five million students a year by 2020, and an additional 10 million college graduates annually from all sectors of higher education.

With two-thirds of all jobs needing some form of college education by 2018 we need to increase educational participation and improve outcomes all the way from preschool to graduate school. If we do, everyone benefits.

For instance, if African Americans and Latinos graduated from college at the rate of white students, our national Gross Domestic Product would grow \$2 trillion a year. In Connecticut, that same level of educational equality would generate an additional \$8 billion in income for African American and Latino college graduates.

So what can we do here in Connecticut? In addition to national initiatives such as the President’s College Completion Challenge, each state—including Connecticut—has its own plan for closing the achievement gap.

Let me tell you of some of the things we are doing on the campus of Eastern Connecticut State University to address the achievement gap. Not only is the work being done on our campus most familiar to me, Eastern draws students from 165 of Connecticut’s 169 towns—our students are literally from each community represented here tonight.

In fall 2008, Eastern used funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education to create a one-stop Academic Services Center on the ground floor of our library. The center combines professional and peer tutoring, specialized math/writing assistance, academic advising, and other support services in one convenient location. Each year, more than 2,000 students visit the center, logging more than 10,000 visits a year.

We also depend on data to identify at-risk students. Using measures such as high school performance, family income, and ethnicity to predict academic risk, we place incoming students in one of four advising groups, with interventions ranging from intensive tutoring and advising for the most at-risk group to simply monitoring progress of the students in the highest performing group.

We back up this predictive model with a team of faculty members and residence hall staff who are the first responders in our “early warning system.” When a professor finds that a student is not performing academically, one click of their computer sends an alert to a staff person in the advising center, as well as the student’s academic advisor. Resident assistants in the dormitories are also part of this early warning system.

In addition to our ASC Center and data-driven early-warning system, we also have created a special program for inner city students from Hartford. Since 2008, the Dual College Enrollment Program has enrolled a cohort of graduates each fall from Hartford Public High School, students who had either no intention or no clear path for attending a four-year college.

In the first semester of the program, students take four remedial courses at Quinebaug Valley Community College, conveniently located down the street from the Eastern campus.

I cannot stress enough the importance of having QVCC as our educational partner.

At the same time they enroll at the community college, Dual College students take one course at Eastern and live on our campus, immersed in the residential life and campus activities

that all Eastern students enjoy. Each Dual College student is assigned a one-on-one mentor and hired in an on-campus job. By their second semester, most of them enroll full time at Eastern.

By taking the students out of their home neighborhoods, housing them on campus, and surrounding them with support services, we are seeing lives reshaped. These students have discovered that they can succeed. Being on our campus has built their confidence and expanded their social horizons, while helping them achieve their academic goals.

I am amazed by the changes that have taken place in these young people. One student in the program's first year had experienced a shooting down the street the day before he came to our summer orientation. Some have language barriers. Others have grown up surrounded by gang violence, the products of broken homes and lowered expectations. We have brought them to a place where they do not have to look over their shoulder every day, a place where they can be challenged yet supported—perhaps for the first time.

The students in the program have responded favorably to life on a college campus. One became the president of his residence hall in his first year. One student ended up studying in Italy for a semester; another studied in London; and two went to Jamaica to work in the schools there during Spring Break in March 2011. Three graduates are enrolled in graduate schools. Each of these students is a success story.

So far, in speaking of the success we have had in serving students from all walks of life, I have focused on programmatic initiatives. Underlying those special programs are the values of inclusion, diversity, and empowerment that have marked our campus for decades.

Did you know that Eastern hired the first African American college professor in New England in 1948? Today, Eastern has the highest percentage of minority faculty in Connecticut; more than UCONN, more than Yale, more than Wesleyan; more than any other college or university in our state. That means that Hispanic students, African American students, and other minorities often see someone they can relate to at the head of the class.

In addition to a culture of inclusion on our campus, Eastern is known for its personal touch. When Dual Enrollment students tell me stories of a faculty member or staff person who showed them a special kindness—it means the world to them. I cannot emphasize the importance of this human factor enough. We had one student who couldn't find his family but wouldn't tell us. His mother and father were both literally missing in action.

We helped him apply for financial aid as an independent student and made sure he had the support system on campus that he needed. Another student was stuck on the side of the road between Willimantic and Hartford, trying to get back to our campus, when one of our administrators drove by on her way to Hartford. She turned around and brought the student to campus, where he was able to make it to class, take his exam that day, and keep his dream of succeeding in college alive. Our faculty and staff literally go the extra mile for our students!

In closing, I hope I have given you a sense of the work being done on our campus to transform the lives of young people from our inner cities. Given opportunity and support, these students are demonstrating how personal resolve can overcome social and cultural challenges that have presented a barrier to educational achievement for generations of inner-city youth. I could not be more proud of them. I hope their story has been inspiring to you. They are certainly an inspiration to me.

In addition to raising their own standard of living, the students we affect will become the future middle class in our country, because higher education continues to be the underpinning of our nation's social and economic stability.

In the United States, it has been college-educated people who have become the teachers, engineers, lawyers, businesspeople, and doctors of the middle class.

And our community college graduates become the EMTs, manufacturing technicians, and registered nurses who are equally critical to our economy.

There is no greater system of higher education in the world than ours. It is not your family's wealth, a famous last name, who your father knows, or who you socialize with that allows you to get into college – we have built a system of meritocracy that is second to none. Education is the “social equalizer” that allows people to rise to the middle class.

To erase the achievement gap and provide the transformational power of a college education to all of our citizens will require the ultimate team effort of people like you.

Educators, politicians, business people, nonprofit agencies, faith-based organizations must all come together in our neighborhoods to encourage and support students on the path out of the housing projects and onto our college campuses.

If you are already part of that effort, thank you. If you want to join the cause, let's talk.

Again, thank you for having me tonight as your speaker at tonight's Friendship Dinner. It has been my honor.