

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 400 community leaders and key stakeholders in education, state government and business participated in NYSUT's three-day symposium devoted to the most pressing issue facing New York schools — an achievement gap that leaves behind far too many children. Here is a digest from the October 2007 event:

“Every Child Counts: A symposium dedicated to ending the gap” was sponsored by New York State United Teachers as part of its deep commitment to ending the achievement gap that, while impacting children of every ethnicity in urban, suburban and rural communities, disproportionately jeopardizes students who live in poverty and students of color. This is a summary of a full, detailed report on presentations and wide-ranging discussions at the symposium and 10 key themes that emerged. These themes lay a foundation for possible future steps on this important issue.

Borrowing some advice from Eleanor Roosevelt, NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi opened the conference by challenging parents, educators, policymakers and other stakeholders in the future of all children to “do one thing every day that scares you.” That could be as simple as asking a question that might make you vulnerable or entering a dialogue from the position of “what might work instead of what doesn't work.” From there, more than 400 participants from every stakeholder group rolled up their sleeves and opened their minds to reflect on ways we could work together to make meaningful changes.



Invest

Pursue

Discuss

Research

Change

Advocate

Act

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills and other symposium speakers underscored the collaborative nature of the challenge — educators alone simply cannot close the gap in educational achievement. As the symposium made clear, support for that mission is shared not only by educators, but also by parents, health care professionals, business leaders, elected officials, education policymakers, clergy and community activists. The interlocking nature of the conditions and remedies for the achievement gap require a concerted effort by all stakeholders in the enterprise. The research presented at the Gap symposium, and the discussions that followed, created areas of debate and disagreement — but also points of intersection.



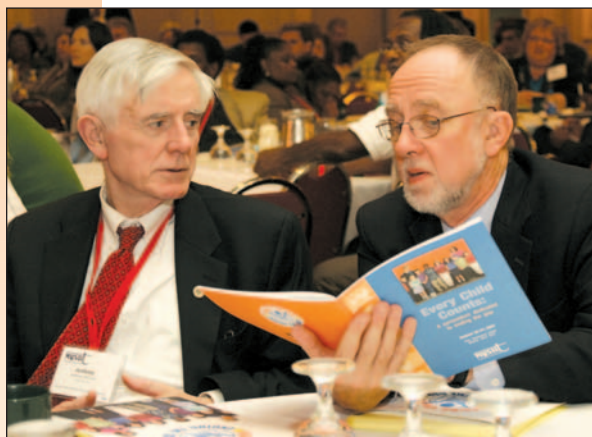
Albany Common Councilwoman Barbara Smith listens during the packed session for the keynote address. At rear is Binghamton TA's Candy Stroud.

Reversing the cycle demands action in many places at once. That was a constant theme throughout the symposium: housing, nutrition, prenatal care, child care, preschool and early childhood education, access to health care and so many other critical social and economic factors all impact a student's ability to perform in school and contribute to creating and widening the achievement gap.

“We can't pretend we're going to compete with other wealthy nations unless we're doing what they do,” urban sociologist Pedro Noguera of New York University told conference participants, referring to countries that have been more aggressive than the United States about providing universal health care and quality nutrition programs to low-income populations.

Richard Rothstein, an education researcher, also put the focus on how a lack of health care accessibility negatively impacts a child's ability to learn. He suggested that establishing full-service clinics in schools — including medical, dental and optometric care — would ultimately be more cost-efficient and effective than remedial programs and other education initiatives.

Other topics for continued discussion that were ignited at the symposium included research-based strategies that improve student learning; targeting funding to the neediest students; teacher preparation and training; mentoring; assessments and use of data; special education; and the needs of English language learners. Business leaders stressed the importance of discussing workforce preparedness and the economics of paying for public education. Many participants called for ongoing discussions to promulgate ideas for attracting teachers to the challenges of high-poverty schools and retaining them.



Union leaders Tony McCann of Shenendehowa TA and Bill Ritchie of Albany Public Schools TA.

Conference participants also took note of the shifting political climate, with state leaders making a historic commitment to public education in 2007-08. After a decade of court challenges, Gov. Eliot Spitzer and the Legislature recently took the first step in targeting resources to the neediest schools. State policymakers also have begun to dramatically expand universal pre-K and encourage districts to offer full-day kindergarten. A number of conference-goers embraced the idea of urging state leaders to continue their good work and “keep the promise” by sustaining state funding.

The promise of public education as a route out of poverty must be coupled with the expectation that the road map for all students is clearly marked with high expectations. Some speakers, including parents, said too often there are different standards for students of color, students who live in poverty, students who are English language learners, or students with special needs. Rothstein argued that the federal No Child Left Behind Act, with its overemphasis on standardized testing, is widening the achievement gap. Taken to its extreme, Rothstein said, eventually “Rich kids will study philosophy

and art, while their poor peers fill in bubbles on test sheets.” James Crawford, president of the Institute for Language and Education Policy, agreed, calling NCLB a diminished vision of civil rights. “It’s actually perpetuating a two-tier education system,” Crawford said.

With higher expectations for the neediest children must come resources. Kati Haycock of the Education Trust presented some encouraging statistics and sobering realities. While New York is making progress, she stressed that a gap remains and much work still needs to be done. “We take kids who come to school with less and what do we do?” Haycock asked. “We turn around and give them less in school, too.”

Several speakers, including keynote Donna Brazile, noted how school, perhaps more than any other place, is a sanctuary for the neediest children, a place where every child can believe that he or she counts. “They never once looked down at me or my brothers and sisters,” Brazile said of her teachers who taught her the power of education and encouragement. “They never told us that we were nothing. They made us feel like we were the best kids on the planet.”

“The painful realities of the achievement gap are contrasted by the hope that comes out of these three days,” Iannuzzi said during the closing session. “It is now our responsibility to move forward and meet the challenges before us.”

In an online feedback survey conducted after the conference, participants identified four priority action items: expanding early childhood programs; improving the federal No Child Left Behind Act; creating high expectations for all students and pursuing parent partnerships. What follows are 10 key themes that emerged from the conference’s wide-ranging discussion — themes that lay a foundation for next steps.

Key themes

- **Expanding pre-K and early childhood programs:** The value of universal pre-kindergarten for students at risk was underscored by a number of participants, including an expansion of pre-K programs, more full-day opportunities and encouraging more school districts to take advantage of state funding for such programs.
- **Creating high expectations for all students:** Speakers said creating a culture of high expectations for all students is essential — in school, at home, at work and in the media. Some speakers, including parents, said too often there are different standards for students of color, students who live in poverty, students who are English language learners, or students with special needs.
- **Changing the No Child Left Behind Act to make assessments more meaningful and improve instruction:** A number of educators and parents agreed with speakers who said the federal No Child Left Behind Act, while intended to help needy students, has actually widened the achievement gap. As Congress moves to reauthorize NCLB, educators and parents proposed changes in the law to make assessments more meaningful and improve instruction.



- **Pursuing parent partnerships:** Some participants suggested educators need to meet parents “where they are” and pursue sustained partnerships and two-way conversations with parents to help close the achievement gap. This includes ensuring parents feel welcome and respected at school, meeting with parents in community settings and outside of typical 9-to-5 hours, and communicating with parents not just when a child missteps, but also to share progress, encouragement and advice.
- **Investing in school-based health clinics:** Speakers advocated for investing in school-based primary care, dental and optometric services in poor communities to address health problems that can prevent children from learning.
- **Continuing wide-ranging discussions with stakeholders:** Attendees spoke of the need to extend the conversation launched at the Ending the Gap symposium with community groups, business leaders and elected officials.
- **Using research-based educational reform programs:** Participants called for emphasizing what works in the classroom — as opposed to theoretical models or fads — as the key to sustaining and replicating success.
- **Stakeholders must be open to bold solutions:** To turn around consistently failing public schools, all stakeholders were challenged to be open to bold solutions, including restructuring, school choice, extended school day and extended school year.
- **Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and school leaders in hard-to-staff schools:** Advocates said schools that serve many children in poverty need the best teachers and school leadership.
- **Using the union’s continued activism to spur real progress:** A number of participants said the union’s political voice can be used to block or promote change. Participants urged the union’s continued activism to spur real progress on closing the achievement gap.



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