



NEWS RELEASE

NYSUT • 800 Troy-Schenectady Road • Latham, NY • 12110-2455 • www.nysut.org

CONTACT: Media Relations
(518) 213-6000, ext. 6313
e-mail: mediarel@nysutmail.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ACHIEVEMENT GAP CONFERENCE TACKLES PUBLIC EDUCATION'S NO. 1 ISSUE

ALBANY, N.Y. October 25, 2007 – More than 400 community leaders and key stakeholders in education, state government and business will be challenged to take risks and “leave their comfort zone” at a unique conference devoted to the most pressing issue facing New York’s schools – an achievement gap that leaves behind far too many children.

The New York State United Teachers’ conference, *Every Child Counts: A symposium dedicated to ending the gap*, begins Thursday evening with a keynote address by CNN commentator and national political strategist Donna Brazile, who will offer insight and analysis on issues of class, race and public education. The program begins at 5:15 p.m., Thursday, October 25, at the Desmond Hotel, 600 Albany-Shaker Road, in Colonie.

The symposium continues Friday and Saturday with thought-provoking discussions on problems affecting students who live in poverty and, disproportionately, children of color. It features national experts in education, urban sociology, language development and community involvement.

A provocative dialogue on *What Does and Doesn’t Work to Close Gaps* begins Friday at 9 a.m., following an address by Education Trust President Kati Haycock. The session features Manuel Rivera, Gov. Eliot Spitzer’s deputy education secretary; United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten; Johanna Duncan-Poitier, senior deputy commissioner of the New York State Education Department; David Shaffer of the Business Council of New York State; and Harvard Professor Ronald Ferguson.

Additional highlights of the weekend’s discussions are attached. A complete schedule of speakers, as well as their biographies, is available at www.endingthegap.com.

NYSUT President Richard C. Iannuzzi, who will set the stage for discussion in his opening remarks Thursday, said he plans to challenge teachers, union leaders, the business community and others to set aside their notions of “what’s acceptable and what’s unacceptable and to be open to new ideas.”

“All the parties will be at the table. This is an exciting opportunity to challenge ourselves, to ask ourselves hard questions and explore ways we can help children in poverty achieve at the same high levels as other children,” Iannuzzi said.

NYSUT Vice President Kathleen Donahue, who is coordinating the symposium, said its ultimate goal is to produce new ideas and an action plan for educators, government and business leaders and community advocates to take forward. “This will require true collaboration,” she said. “We must be equal partners in arriving at and implementing a plan of action.”

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Iannuzzi noted the achievement gap is present not only in urban centers, but in small city, rural and suburban districts. And, while there has been notable progress toward improving student achievement overall, “The drop out rate is still too high and the achievement gap too wide. If our state is going to be economically competitive, every child must graduate and be ready to fill the employment opportunities that business creates. It is an economic and moral imperative that we educate all children to their fullest potential.”

Iannuzzi said class size, teacher preparedness, prenatal care, nutrition, access to early childhood education and quality health care all play a role in widening – and narrowing – the gap in student achievement. “All reflect wealth, or the lack of it,” Iannuzzi said.

Iannuzzi, who taught elementary school in a low-wealth school district on Long Island for 34 years, said the achievement gap is “caused not by any innate failure on a child’s part, but rather by variables beyond the child’s control and, in many cases, beyond the classroom walls.” He added, “For five or six hours a day, schools are a sanctuary for children in poverty, and educators have the unique opportunity to use that time to not only address academics, but assist students in coping with those variables.”

“The achievement gap can only be closed by improving the lives of children and their families,” he added.

NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira said the symposium will also explore strategies for engaging families in their children’s education.

“Public education is the key that opens the door to opportunity,” she said. “We want to explore strategies for engaging parents to be active advocates for what their children need to succeed in school.”

Donahue noted all stakeholders have a role and responsibility in eradicating the achievement gap. “This is a fight we cannot afford to lose, and we will not lose,” she said.

NYSUT represents 585,000 teachers, school-related professionals, academic and professional faculty in higher education, professionals in education and health care and retirees. NYSUT is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.

Every Child Counts: A symposium dedicated to ending the gap

Thursday, October 25

5:15 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Welcome and Opening Remarks

- NYSUT President Richard Iannuzzi
- State Education Commissioner Richard Mills
- Keynote Address by political strategist, activist and author Donna Brazile

Friday, October 26

9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Plenary Session: What Does and Doesn't Work to Close Gaps

9 a.m.

- Address by Kati Haycock, the Education Trust
Panel discussion with:
- Ronald Ferguson, Harvard University
- David Shaffer, Business Council of New York State
- Johanna Duncan-Poitier, New York State Education Department
- Manuel Rivera, Deputy Secretary for Education
- Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers

Lunch Speaker: Pedro Noguera, New York University
Placing Equity at the Center of School Reform

12:15 p.m.

Plenary Session: No Child Left Behind: A Diminished Vision of Civil Rights
James Crawford, president, Institute for Language and Education Policy

4 - 5:30 p.m.

Saturday, October 27

9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Plenary Session: Understanding What Schools Can (And Cannot) Do
*Richard Rothstein, research associate, Economic Policy Institute and professor
Teachers College, Columbia University*

9 a.m.

**Plenary Session: Making a Better Connection Between the School and Community:
The community's role in raising achievement**

10:30 a.m.

Panelists include:

- Norm Fruchter, director, Community Involvement Program, Annenberg Institute for School Reform
- Karen Scharff, executive director, Citizen Action
- Debbie Benson, acting executive director, NYS Children and Family Services
- Warlene Gary, executive director, National PTA