

Achievement Gap Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Monday, December 12, 2011

10:00 AM in Room 1A of the LOB

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 AM.

Dr. Miguel Cardona explained that co-Chair Senator Toni Harp would not be in attendance but is looking forward to continuing her work with the Task Force at the upcoming meeting. He asked members to briefly introduce themselves.

Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor and NAEP Coordinator Renee Savoie gave a presentation on the Achievement Gap and the NAEP Test and left it open to the task force for follow-up questions.

Senator Stillman thanked the commissioner for his presentation and hard work and asked for clarification on why we need to take into consideration statistical significance or increment when taking into account NAEP scores. Savoie explained that NAEP has a margin of error and the larger that sample is, the smaller the margin of error. Senator Stillman asked for followup materials regarding what the actual statistical variation actually is with whichever explanations go along with the data.

Dr. Miguel Cardona asked if data analysis done showed gaps by race and ethnicity or just by race. Renee Savoie explained that race alone was not taken into account in this presentation but at other times is. Dr. Cardona asked for follow up materials regarding academic gaps based solely on race, not poverty.

Gary Highsmith asked if they had information on Connecticut's degree of racial isolation with relation to the Achievement Gap. Savoie stated that NAEP couldn't answer questions regarding racial isolation. However, the requirements to be eligible for free or reduced price lunch are the same in every state, so that minimum income requirement is the same for every state except for Hawaii and Alaska. Given the high price of living in Connecticut, that could say that our economically disadvantaged students are facing an even tougher battle in our state.

Senator Stillman asked what the definition of 'town' was in the presentation. Renee Savoie said the census definitions are generally used, but in this report had to do with an address's proximity to urban areas. Stillman further pointed out that these are socio-economic issues but are not always taken into consideration.

Dr. Miguel Cardona moved on to the next part of the agenda, which had to do with members' ideas that had been passed around for prioritization to identify high leverage

policy, and recommendations that reflect the urgency needed, and are also sustainable and can establish a framework for change. Dr. Cardona then asked members to talk about major themes that members feel are needed to address closing the achievement gap.

Paul Freeman talked about the intense focus on literacy. He wants to be sure that we take into account what's being done with the Common Core State Standards, which are also focusing on literacy, and thinks our work needs to be modeled on that work. If we look at teacher and principal evaluation models as well as common core standards and use that in conjunction with Connecticut's Achievement Gap work, then we can have a fine product come out of this.

David Kennedy pointed to last year's report and focused on a "master plan" which he feels was really the best answer. He pointed to pages five and six of that report. He thinks one of the most important themes of that report was regarding the development of a center to develop educational methods that are culturally relevant to English Language Learners. He also thinks those districts that took funds and used them to develop tutoring opportunities in the classroom showed some marked success. (Time on Task). He also talked about certification reciprocity and believes that was an important element, as well as a focus on early childhood education. Where is the data changing based on what practices are being implemented?

Representative Giuliano believes we need a multi-tiered approach but wanted to focus on the "crisis to opportunity continuum" with regards to the state department of education. She is interested in a real opportunity for change at SDE. The agency could require some instructional alliances with school districts. The agency can assist us – the NAEP data gives us national scores, but SDE has the option to provide us with more longitudinal data that can provide us with more detailed information as to how Connecticut is doing. Giuliano also wants to track risk indicators, rates of absenteeism, pre-school vs no pre-school, and school entrance literacy levels. She feels this data can serve us well, and the state department of education can enter a new paradigm of providing us with this information.

Dr. Cardona has four thoughts – (1) place greater emphasis on legislative influence – to have a greater relationship between SDE and the Education Committee, as well as a greater influence on Education Inequity issues. We could also restructure governance by having a Secretary of Education in order to have Education on the agenda at all times to work with the Education Committee. (2) The Education Committee should increase more support and accountability/oversight than currently exists between the state legislature and local boards of education to make sure LEAs are making sound educational decisions. (3) Regionalization of services – if we regionalize it can increase coherence of implementation of best practices, and (4) Increase time in school through more early childhood opportunities, extended day and year.

Senator Stillman agrees with Mr Kennedy that pages five and six of last year's report are very important. Also, she would like to see more in terms of mentoring programs within the schools. She thinks they are very important and pointed to some school systems that

use volunteers in case the question of funding comes up. She said mentors could also be used in developing a particular student's interest in a specific topic and can turn that into a future career move for that student. She also thinks this taskforce needs to look at Vo-Tech schools with regards to students interested in a different approach to future careers. She also pointed to early childhood education and that we need to look at Pre-K through 12 instead of K-12 to help raise literacy scores. She thinks every school should have all-day kindergarten as well. Stillman thinks we need to do our best to "help parents" in teaching their own children and becoming more involved. Lastly, Stillman pointed out that we need to talk about housing when taking into account socio-economic status and how housing affects our children. Where do children go when they leave school?

Commissioner Pryor mentioned that a number of the comments resonate and he is grateful for them. He thinks there are strands of the analysis of the body that make a lot of sense. He touched on organization of SDE itself and stated they are analyzing the structure of the department to focus resources where they are most needed, and looking at how they can "get out of the way" to cut down on red tape.

Elaine Zimmerman talked about language acquisition of poor versus middle class families. She talked about a study that was done and there were hundreds of word differences and how those words were used in the home environment. She thinks we need to start with home visitations of the most vulnerable families. She thinks we need to marry a partnership between pre-K and home visitation. Elaine also talked about the "quiet secret" that we don't teach our pre-school providers on how to deal with language opportunity. She also talked about improving assessment tools and stated that the current instrument we use is not modern enough and doesn't tell teachers enough. She doesn't think our CEU system is aligned with the goals and objectives that this group is talking about.

Representative Rojas thinks teacher preparation is important – he wonders if our teachers are truly prepared to teach reading. Also, he touched on CEU's as Elaine Zimmerman did. He also stresses a focus on classroom management. He thinks management is a major problem in urban areas such as dealing with certain students who have mental health needs and how it is dealt with. Rojas thinks we should look for a waiver from no child left behind. He also echoed Dr. Cardona's statements about regionalization. He thinks the inter-agency taskforce will cover many of these issues. Lastly he talked about coming up with the actual number of school districts that require some sort of intervention and possible timelines to be set.

Gary Highsmith thinks we need people in hospitals the day children are born to teach parents how to start dealing with literacy from day one. He thinks kindergarten teachers are forced to deal with illiteracy while having nothing to do with it in the first place. Gary believes failing schools are indicative of failing neighborhoods. He echoed Elaine Zimmerman's statements about quality pre-school as well. Two things he thinks are left out of these discussions are Parent Responsibility versus Student Responsibility. Behavior in school is a learned skill and teaching children to behave starts with the parents. Gary also believes there are too many teaching schools around. He believes if

you have the money and the GPA to get into schools of Education, you can pretty much get in. He believes there needs to be less of these schools and much stricter standards regarding who can actually become a teacher. He stated that we need to take into account schools on an experimental basis just for African American males, since this is a group suffering more than any other. Lastly he talked about students who only need 3 years to graduate and some who need 5. If a student can finish in three years and already gets accepted to college before graduation, then we should be more open to students finishing early.

Rep Rojas also talked about re-visiting magnet schools and the amount of resources we invest in them at the expense of other public schools.

Commissioner Pryor thanked everyone for their input and excused himself for having to leave early. He stated that he looks forward to working with the group in the future.

Dr. Cardona talked about considering all this information in the development of a “master plan”. He asked that for the January meeting, other groups could come and make presentations for 5-7 minutes each and share their work with the group.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 P.M.