



Business and Public Policy Round Table
March 13, 2014
University Club of St. Paul

“The Achievement Gap”

Introductory presenters: Gary Davison, Director of the New Salem Educational Initiative; Don Fraser, former Mayor of Minneapolis and former member of Congress; John Harrington, Chief of Metro Transit Police; Tom Prichard, President of the Minnesota Family Council; Becky Roloff, President of the YWCA of Minneapolis; R.T. Rybak, former Mayor of Minneapolis; and Don Samuels, former Minneapolis City Councilmember.

Chair, facilitator and rapporteur: Steve Young, Global Executive Director, Caux Round Table

Participants: Grant Abbott; Chris Barden; Barb Bergseth; Crystal Brakke; John Buettner; Mary Clifford; Sarah Dixon; Hector Garcia; Maggie George; Lowell Haagenon; Dan Hall; Bruce Jackson; Natalie Johnson; Steve Kelley; Michael LaBrosse; Deb Montgomery; Mark Ritchie; Rob Scarlett; Fred Senn; Joyce Swenson; Richard Thomson; Al Zdrazil

Staff: Jessica Fiala; Jed Ipsen

Welcome & Introduction

The achievement gap facing our cities, communities and country is of urgent importance. The achievement gap could be considered the last element of evil that came to our shores in the 1600s. We’ve seen slavery. We saw Jim Crow rise to take its place and some argue that we saw a welfare state take over where Jim Crow left off. It is very hard, particularly for whites, to talk about this. When we talk about behaviors, we talk about values and we can fall into the risk of racial profiling, of racism. But, if we are so afraid of bringing up these things, we can’t solve the problem.

Government might not be the answer. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent, but where are the outcomes? How can we get to the heart of this and end it once and for all? It is, perhaps, character development that will do more to end the achievement gap than anything else. This is, however, a challenging proposition. Behaviors come from

values and values come from culture and it is very hard to talk about culture.¹ We need to find a vocabulary to talk about assets, character and skills, to find a way to focus people on the skills that will make for happy, successful people and societies.

Today, we bring together individuals with perspectives from law enforcement, philanthropy, early childhood education, non-profit organizations, neuroscience and religion to pool knowledge bases and ask what might be done to address this persistent and dire problem?

Comments from Participants

Recommendations & Action Areas

A committee on the achievement gap began meeting in the Twin Cities in 2007 and toward the end of 2011. They voted on remedies they thought would reduce the achievement gap. They noted that children arriving at school from a home culture supportive of education or who had access to pre-school had a stronger skill set for future success. In-school factors included: schools with strong leadership that are more able to choose their teachers; longer school hours; pursuing connections with parents; teachers who work as a close-knit team; school uniforms; and the close and continuous monitoring of progress with prompt action if someone falls behind. In terms of school culture, there is a need for consistent, rigorous commitment to all students and teachers and a desire to hold the institution and staff to higher standards. In-school factors feed one another and teachers are more likely to be effective on the ground if schools are organized with care at the school board level.

One of the major differences between schools serving low-income as opposed to middle class students is that middle class parents have more ability to compensate for school shortcomings, whereas low-income parents may not have the same resources or capabilities.

Executive function is another route for potential action. Executive function is that part of the brain that gives us mastery over our emotions, etc. Executive function, as a concept, has been around for many years. However, it has tended to be identified with children experiencing severe problems. It may hold some potential as an avenue to develop in young children as a means of countering educational challenges. However, looking at Executive function for more normally functioning children seems to be newer and how far it can take us is not yet fully understood.

Consequences

Those who don't learn in school will fall behind socially and economically. A higher prison population is one consequence of a failing educational system.

¹ Recommended reading: *Jews, Confucians, and Protestants: Cultural Capital and the End of Multiculturalism* by Lawrence E. Harrison (2012)

Ujamaa Place² is a St. Paul-based non-profit dedicated to serving African American men struggling with repeated cycles of failure. On average, men come in with a 2nd grade reading level and many are functionally illiterate. They have been unable to find employment, which also leads to emotional and social issues. To have no job is often to have no meaning or place in our society.

As Frederick Douglass stated, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men,” and it is also more cost-effective when one considers the return on investment of schools as opposed to the costs of incarceration. Intertwined with effective education is good character. Without character, without building someone up as a person, it is difficult for education to stick.

While character is vital, there are at least a few things education could contribute: creating a sense of how to engage in a dialogue and establishing core values. The challenge remains as to whose core values to teach. In having conversations about inequalities and rifts within our society, there must be a process for how to incorporate these experiences into personal narratives. Many men don’t believe that they have any place in our community. The self is in a continual process of formation through choices of action and these are a function of character, as much as intellect. The goal is to prepare young men for good choices of action.

From another perspective, religion and intact families play a significant role in achievement, as does school choice.

Minnesota currently spends \$38 billion on education, but many children entering the system are not prepared. We are already paying for education; we need to fund early childhood education to make the rest effective. Early childhood education providers, like the YMCA, that seek state funding face the hurdle that these funds do not cover the cost of providing services for young children. Twenty five percent of four year-olds nationwide participate in state-run programs; in Minnesota, only 2% do — the lowest rate out of the 38 states that offer programs. You can’t get a different result on the back end if you haven’t changed the front end.

The language is part of the problem. There isn’t an achievement gap at the YWCA between children from different backgrounds. The children succeed at the same rate; the problem is an access gap. The necessary step is to support public policy that helps close the access gap. Only 9% of children in Minnesota are covered by state support and only 2% ultimately get access. Closing this gap is how we’ll ultimately fix achievement gaps that become apparent later on.

² Ujamaa means extended family in Swahili. Organization website: ujamaaplace.org

The generation we're raising is not going into the world we were raised in or the world we're currently in. The single most important skill kids will need is to be able to cross cultures. We need to go further than fixing the education gap. We need to train a global workforce. Generation Next is dedicated to closing the achievement gap along a series of benchmarks that cover the cradle to career continuum: kindergarten readiness; 3rd grade reading; 8th grade math; high school graduation; and a post-secondary degree. In addition to these measurable benchmarks, there is on-going research into social and emotional factors needed for success, such as resilience and global fluency.

When the effort is on early childhood, there is perhaps a greater potential to engage people across partisan divides. Young children are a priority for all of us.

The poor have been analyzed and condemned as what is wrong with America. But, the leaders come from the upper classes. One question with this problem therefore becomes — how do the rich raise their children? In response to the question of inequality, there is a tendency to raise children to believe that the rich are morally or ethically superior — a lie that allows continued comfort with one's own wealth in the context of social inequality. If upper income children are raised to be narcissistic, selfish and superior, they are going to lead the nation into the expansion of the achievement gap.

Every child has a contribution to make and if children believe this, they will perform. The many layers of persistent stereotypes, classifications and hierarchies read to children. If we don't communicate to kids that they can succeed, that they are trusted, we won't have an impact. Education reform is focused on structural change and not enough on persons. In order for character to be meaningful, it needs to fit into a worldview. If it is merely surface work, it will not create real change.

There needs to be honesty about culture. There are strong cultural values from Dakota peoples, from Confucianism. The dominant culture deprives all children if they are not given access to information about the diversity of wisdom traditions from around the world. We need to look at character in a global way.

Part of the challenge is that schools are not oriented toward knowledge — toward how to learn and think critically, toward history that provides context and meaning for current events. The focus is on graduation rates, but not on the quality of education leading up to the diploma. How do we gauge excellence in education?

There is an anxiety around speaking about the role of home life in character development. What impact are one-parent households having on the issue of the achievement gap? This is a difficult issue to talk about and therefore, it is generally avoided, but if problems aren't discussed, they cannot be solved.

Character and leadership are abstract concepts, while impacts of religion, family, the ability to learn from mistakes and attitude are difficult to measure. Perhaps a more effective approach would be to look at the people who beat the odds. What has worked? How can we study success in new ways? What are core skills and competencies that kids need? We also need actual scientists involved, not just passionate people pushing for reform for ideological reasons.

There are also structural components to racism to contend with. Character is important, but character alone cannot fundamentally change society if structures are broken. There is a perspective issue at hand. Achievement gaps are often treated as the problem of people of color without enough discussion of racism in our nation's history and on-going structural racism. Racism is not merely about prejudice; it is about access. Repairing our system is about honestly addressing white privilege. Access isn't going to happen by improving character alone.