

Chancellor Emeritus Carl Hayden

Governor Cuomo's Blue Ribbon Commission on Education Reform

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen:

We spend a lot of time talking about the "Achievement Gap." That phrase is a euphemism for the uncomfortable fact that poor children struggle to succeed in school. The Achievement Gap is color-blind. It indiscriminately restrains the life prospects of black children, white children, brown children, all children.

The origin of the Gap is no mystery. It occurs in the first five years of life, the years in which the brain is growing dramatically and craves stimulation and nurturing. During those crucial first five years, too many poor children receive little of either.

The lives of the very poor can be terribly chaotic. Survival itself is often the all-consuming imperative. Disproportionately, the children of those homes will experience less stability, less stimulation, greater levels of transience, violence, poor nutrition, and inadequate medical, dental and mental health care. One measure of the deficit that inevitably emerges is that many poor children arrive at their first formal school encounter having been exposed to only 7,000 words; the norm is more nearly 20,000 words.

The children of the Gap start behind and stay behind. The disparity in their capacity to succeed in school is firmly fixed before they ever set foot in a classroom. And, worse, that disparity will only increase over time. This year, New York will spend more than \$100 million dollars on K-12 remediation and SUNY's community colleges will spend \$70 million more, all to nominal effect. Students of the Gap who do not drop out (more than 40% do) will exit 12th grade with 8th grade skills. That result cannot be defended.

But poverty need not be destiny. Every child can gain a fighting chance to succeed in school and in life. The Gap can be successfully attacked at its source. Everything we know about child development and brain science points the way. What is required is a relentless focus on the first five years of life and the strategic deployment of existing resources to nurture the intellectual, social and emotional skills of the child.

That is what we have done in Chemung County. The results are electrifying. To quote the analysis of Dr. Kenneth Robin of the Center for Human Services Research at UAlbany: "The percentage of students who were school ready at kindergarten rose from 47.5% in 2007 to 68.6% in 2011...". That is an increase of nearly 50% in just five years. Dr. Robin told Rochester's WXXI: "Coming at it strictly from a numbers perspective, it is a remarkable finding, one of the more remarkable that I've seen. It was seen all across the different domains in terms of language ability, science, behavior control, social skills, so it was a fairly robust finding."

The Chemung County School Readiness Project (SRP) began in 2006 as a collaboration between the Community Foundation of Elmira-Corning and Chemung County. All three county school districts agreed to participate and adopted a common screening protocol for kindergartners. Columbia University developed metrics for gauging readiness and

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designed a longitudinal study. The health community signed on, as did several social service and human service agencies. Services historically delivered in isolation were aligned in support of a coordinated strategy to assist the family of every newborn.

SRP's primary focus is on elevating parenting skills, ensuring the health and well-being of the child, promoting quality child-care and providing parents with a navigator to help them locate and access important community services. Literacy development is emphasized at every stage. You will find the detail in the appended report of Dr. Robin.

SRP is a strategy that works. It is replicable and allows for local variability. It is as adaptable to urban settings as it is to suburban, small city and rural settings. It is cost effective (\$400 per child in Chemung County), since it is funded principally by streams of revenue that already exist, but which, until now, have not been coordinated. It carries with it the promise of significant reductions in expenditures on remediation, Medicaid, and incarceration, among others. Most importantly, it gives every child a chance at success.

The way best calculated to defeat the Gap is to prevent the Gap.

Two final pieces of gratuitous advice, respectfully offered. A crucial aspect of this strategy is the availability of Universal Pre-K. Participation in Pre-K is a significant predictor of readiness. Results are demonstrably better for children starting at age 3 than those starting at age 4. New York does not fund two years of Pre-K. In my opinion, that is a huge mistake and a major impediment to banishing the Gap. Second, Pre-K is not mandated in New York. For obvious reasons, it should be.

Thank you for listening. It has been a privilege to testify before this august body.

Carl T. Hayden

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