



Commissioner's

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Comments

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Time to flip the script on our thinking about achievement gaps

I was attracted to Kentucky by its groundbreaking history of education reform and the tremendous gains it has made in graduation rates and college and career readiness over the past decade. I want to build on those accomplishments and take our Commonwealth even higher, providing each and every child with a world class education that puts them and our state on solid economic footing for the future.

But for all its academic gains, our Commonwealth has fallen short when it comes to addressing disparities in learning among different groups of students. Far too many children are not getting the education they need and deserve to be successful in life. This disparity is called the achievement gap and, despite decades of well-meaning efforts aimed at closing these academic divides, it has not closed in Kentucky or nationally.

We have a moral and ethical obligation to rectify this situation for the well-being of our children, our Commonwealth and our society. A problem this large, this long standing, this entrenched, this so seemingly unsolvable, is understandably overwhelming. Where do we start? What solutions do we employ? Before we can even begin asking and answering these questions, however, I want to suggest that we all – as a state, as parents, as teachers and as community members – undertake what may be the most difficult, but undoubtedly in my mind the most critical step: We must shift how we think about the achievement gap and we must do it in two very specific ways.

First, we need to recognize it is all of our problem, and all of our responsibility to remedy this disparity in student achievement. In this age of accountability, the blame for the achievement gap has often been laid at the school house and classroom door. In turn, educators and others have pointed to out-of-school factors that contribute to gaps and are out of their control. It is time we stop the blaming and finger pointing and acknowledge we all have a dog in this fight. We all contribute to it, and to solve it, we must all share in it and take ownership. I take my part in that ownership and I invite all of you to join me in doing the same.

Secondly, if we are to close gaps, we must own the fact that in the past, we did not offer opportunity or a vision of success to all students. To me, the achievement gap is really an issue of expectations and opportunities. We have to admit that while our standards our good, individual district and school curriculum may be lacking. We're not holding students to the same level of accountability.

We also have not given our students the same opportunities. For example, a very small percentage of African-American students took an Advanced Placement course last year. We're not giving equal access to challenging classes for all of our students in the Commonwealth. That is quite simply shameful. Whether that's because we're trying to shelter students from the possibility of failure or because educators are trying to shelter their schools from lower passing rates, it isn't acceptable.

If students are not given a chance to test their limits, then they will never be able to reach their full potential. In this case, it is not the children who are failing; it is the adults who are failing our children by sending the message to some students that, "This is not for you." It is that kind of thinking and messaging, be it direct or indirect, conscious or not, that creates inequity and disparity in our schools, and until we begin to challenge it and replace it with new thinking and a message of high expectations and equal opportunities, we will never find solutions to the achievement gap.

There is no one size fits all to the achievement gap. Different approaches will work for different students. Before we can begin to try these solutions or create new ones, we need to change our culture and thinking around this issue. As shareholders engaged in Kentucky's public schools, you are in a perfect position to assist in shifting Kentucky's thinking about the achievement gap. You can begin sharing the message of shared responsibility and high expectations and equal opportunities for all students at your schools and in your communities. Please join me in helping to spread this message. Together I know we can begin to address these longstanding disparities and inequities, and make a difference for the children of our Commonwealth.