

New Center Aims To Close Achievement Gap In Schools

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By Gail Berkley

A new weapon in the fight to close the achievement gap in education was unveiled recently in Sacramento.

The California State University Center to Close the Achievement Gap, a partnership between the state's business community and the California State University system, will attack the problem of the achievement gap by focusing on preparation of administrators and teachers in the CSU system.

The Center's partners California Business for Education Excellence (CBEE) and the CSU system so far have raised \$600,000 in public and private commitments to fund the effort.

The gap in reading, writing, and math skills between white students and African American and Latino students in the state's and nation's public schools is well documented. Through improving the performance of administrators and teachers coming out of the CSU system, the futures of countless young students and the very economic health of the state will improve, according to Louis Meunier, a member of the board of California Business for Education Excellence Foundation and Executive Vice President of Macy's West.

Meunier cited a recent report released by McKinsey & Company titled "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools." The report found "the underutilization of human potential in the United States is extremely costly."

The brunt of the costs is born by both individuals the nation as a whole.

According to the report released last April by McKinsey's Social Sector Office, "On average, black and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age. This racial gap exists regardless of how it is measured, including both achievement (e.g., test score) and attainment (e.g., graduation rate) measures. Taking the average National Assessment of Educational

Progress(NAEP) scores for math and reading across the fourth and eighth grades, for example, 48 percent of blacks and 43 percent of Latinos are “below basic,” while only 17 percent of whites are, and this gap exists in every state. A more pronounced racial achievement gap exists in most large urban school districts.”

The report further found: “For individuals, our results show that:

Avoidable shortfalls in academic achievement impose heavy and often tragic consequences, via lower earnings, poorer health, and higher rates of incarceration.

For many students (but by no means all), lagging achievement evidenced as early as fourth grade appears to be a powerful predictor of rates of high school and college graduation, as well as lifetime earnings.

For the economy as a whole, our results show that:

If the United States had in recent years closed the gap between its educational achievement levels and those of better-performing nations such as Finland and Korea, GDP in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher.

This represents 9 to 16 percent of GDP.

If the gap between black and Latino student performance and white student performance had been similarly narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher, or 2 to 4 percent of GDP. The magnitude of this impact will rise in the years ahead as demographic shifts result in blacks and Latinos becoming a larger proportion of the population and workforce.” Since two thirds of the state’s teachers and about 15% of teachers nationwide are educated in the CSU system, Meunier said the Center’s efforts will have far reaching effects.

Meunier said while closing the achievement gap will have a positive impact on the state economically and increase productivity, he sees the issue from “the moral side.” “It’s basically institutional racism” he said, when teachers and administrators don’t expect African Americans and Latinos to do the same level of work “as those they’re going to compete with in the workplace.”

Charles Reed, Chancellor of the CSU system, has recognized this as an enormous issue, Meunier said. “He has joined with the UC system and President Mark Udoff and

as much as he can with the junior college system (which is managed community by community) to address the issue.”

Participating CSU campuses so far include: Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Northridge, Pomona, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco and the CSU TEACH program.

All of the presidents of the schools, all provosts, all deans of education have been fully briefed in meetings run by James Lanich, of CBEE, Meunier said.

“Really when kids graduate from High School and take entrance exams for college an enormous amount of these kids fail basic English and basic math tests.” With that skill level high school graduates cannot compete in today’s economy, he said.

The Center is jointly governed by CSU and the CBEE Foundation. The partnership between business and public higher education will allow the center to respond to both the economic and civil rights aspects of the achievement gap. The center will establish a governance structure that provides a direct role for business leaders in preparing teachers and principals and identifying the skills graduates need to become productive employees. The center will also help generate support from businesses through finances, expertise and direct input on the accountability of reaching stated outcomes.

The center will also align lessons learned at school sites with teacher and school administrator preparation efforts at CSU colleges of education. Specifically, the center’s approach will be to:

Adjust the curriculum and preparation of thousands of new teachers and administrators by integrating the best practices of high-performing, high-poverty schools across the state.

Place student teachers and principals in high-performing, high-poverty schools to learn first-hand what works to close the achievement gap.

Develop new data and best practice tools, including a longitudinal data system to track teacher graduates and their students’ academic achievement.

Inform public policy on education and help to rapidly scale up effective practices that prepare more students for college and the workplace.

Establish performance measures for new teachers based on student academic achievement outcomes— grade-level proficiency and college readiness based on the CSU Early Assessment Program.

Meunier said if the center is successful it will “save souls.” He said training teachers and administrators in best practices for closing the achievement gap will help formerly low performing students.

“So they don’t end up on the streets, selling drugs or using drugs that will destroy them.”

“It should help the moral fiber of the state and the productivity of the state,” he said.