



## Collaborating to close the gap: Connecticut's story

A task force examines the root causes of decades of achievement disparities

By Miguel A. Cardona

Efforts to address the achievement gap have taken an innovative path in Connecticut. In response to the call from legislators disgusted with 25 years of NAEP data trends that showed little improvement in closing gaps, a task force was created to examine the disparities.

### Simple innovation

This is where the innovative path came in. The task force chose not to ride the wave of educational reform that was sweeping the state and most of the country in 2012. Instead, it divided the work into two buckets: It analyzed factors inside schools that contributed to achievement gaps, and also the external causes.

Over three years, the team heard from teachers, doctors, legislators, students, parents, lawyers, researchers, unions, charter school groups, housing officials, advocates, NAACP and business experts, among others. Each had a stake in addressing the outcomes of our students. Each was affected by the disparities that exist in the educational outcomes of our students.

Finally, the task force presented its Master Plan to Eliminate Achievement Gaps (<http://DAmag.me/216task>). Here, the innovation was the expectation that it is everyone's work to close the gaps. In essence, it was the admission that the gaps are symptoms of pervasive deficits and disparate opportunities, both inside and outside school.

### Structured collaboration

One of the task force's first recommendations was that state policy alone would not solve the problem. While the policy arm was needed to ensure equitable outcomes for students, so was the executive arm of government. The task force helped create the Interagency Council (IC). This council was formalized in statute (<http://DAmag.me/216gap>) as a strategy to bring educators and non-educators together to address causes of gaps. In essence, the work of this unit was to encourage collaboration between agencies serving the same children.

## Achievement gaps are symptoms of pervasive deficits and disparate opportunities, both inside and outside the schoolhouse.

Accessing public health and mental health resources, reducing chronic absenteeism, and identifying new data sources that inform school work are just some of the benefits of this interagency collaboration thus far. Perhaps, in the near future, we can see other creative collaboration between agencies. One example might be placing tutorial and summer enrichment programs in mixed-income housing centers. These would be staffed by teachers who choose to work in the urban communities in exchange for reduced rent and transportation vouchers.

While the tide of collaboration is washing away the convention of siloed

excellence, this work is still finding legs as leaders are being asked to do work differently. More of the same will not offer growth for our students or our state.

### Next steps

Despite efforts over numerous years to gather data from inside and outside the schoolhouse on factors that contribute to academic disparities, the task force might have missed an important piece of data that can be used to drive our work moving forward.

Perhaps, instead of looking at our strategies as competing interests in a state that is running a deficit, we should have reframed the argument as an analysis of how our spending in the state, and the country, reflects its values.

We spend roughly five times the amount on incarceration than we do on education, according to a CNN study (<http://DAmag.me/216cnn>). Perhaps we have it all wrong. Maybe the task force should focus on closing the gaps between education expenditure and incarceration expenditure.

Twenty-five years of NAEP data suggests very little change in closing the achievement gaps in Connecticut. Unless the funding gap between prisons and schools reverses, I fear very little will change in the next 25 years.

As Frederick Douglas said, "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men." DA

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