

11.09.11 Education Summit 2011: Closing the Achievement Gap

Governor Deval L. Patrick

Education Summit 2011: Closing the Achievement Gap

UMass Boston

Wednesday, November 9, 2011

I stand before you today, the incredibly proud governor of the nation's leading education state and I want to thank you for that. No other state in America comes close to the bragging rights we have in public education. We achieved this enviable status because of our hard-working students and teachers, our dedicated parents, school leaders, and policy makers at all levels of our system – from school committees, to our various boards of education gathered here together for the first time today, to our partners in the Legislature. Humbly and from the heart, I want to begin with a simple and heartfelt “thank you” for all that you have done to make Massachusetts the Education State. Our record of achievement is second to none and a model for the nation. And that's not by accident.

In Cambridge, there is a group of people working on a project called “Opportunity Nation.” Concerned about the stagnation in mobility in our country, they originally started with a goal of uniting all of the anti-poverty organizations in the country. But they quickly realized that if they wanted to focus on solutions, they had to focus on opportunity. They realized, in other words, that the antidote to poverty is opportunity. I know this from my own life. It was opportunity that lifted me and my family out of poverty.

Opportunity is the great American hope: the idea that in this country, in our lives, we will all have a fair chance to do a little better than our parents. To leave things a little better for our children. To realize our full potential.

But “chance,” to paraphrase Louis Pasteur, “favors the well prepared.” Today more than ever, opportunity depends on education. If opportunity is our nation's hallmark, we have a patriotic, indeed a moral obligation to provide a superlative education.

In Massachusetts schools today, we have a lot to be proud of.

We lead the nation in student performance. Last week, for the fourth time in a row, Massachusetts

students finished first in the National Assessment of Education Progress – the so-called “nation’s report card.” Our students are among the top three in the world on international math assessments and tied for first in science on the international science and math assessment, TIMMS.

We lead the nation in standards and accountability. From the Education Reform Act of 1993 to our recent leadership on and adoption of the Common Core Standards, we have declared our intention to educate all students to high standards. We have brought that commitment to early education and care with our recent launch of the Quality Rating and Improvement System, a framework of high standards designed to elevate the quality of care for our pre-K children. Today, our system of standards and accountability is stronger than ever and we are firmly committed to maintaining our leadership and advantages in this area.

In higher education, we have undertaken the Vision Project, setting a course for national leadership in post-secondary education by putting college and career success in sharp focus and tracking our results.

In Massachusetts, where brainpower is our calling card, we need the best educated citizenry and workforce in the nation, and it is the job of public higher education – every campus working together -- to achieve that result.

Passage of the Achievement Gap Act of 2010 was another national milestone. It was a bold mid-course correction. We studied the data and owned up to the fact that we are not educating all students to proficiency. That bill gave us a number of policy and practical tools to reach the young people whom, despite our overall successes, we have been leaving behind. Too often those students are poor, or they are black or brown, or they are disabled or have special needs, or they speak English as a second language. The Achievement Gap Act is a values statement: it proclaims the simple truth that the kids we are leaving behind are our kids, too, and that we will not accept subpar results for any of our kids.

Thanks to our partners in the legislature and many in this room, and informed by what we learned from the countless teachers, principals and students across the state, we passed a bill that moved beyond the stale debate of district schools versus charter schools, management versus unions. We decided to reaffirm the notion that education is first and foremost about the students in the classroom. And it’s working.

There are now 18 Innovation Schools open in Massachusetts and another 8 are in the planning process to open next year. These in-district laboratories are using a whole range of creative and inventive

strategies, increasing student achievement and reducing achievement gaps within district structures. You only have to look at the Springfield Renaissance Innovation School or the five new innovation schools in Worcester, which has more of these experiments underway than any other city in the Commonwealth, to see marvelous results.

The Turnaround Schools – what used to be our lowest performing, non-improving schools – are turning around, through the most aggressive interventions. This year, two-thirds of our turnaround schools made combined gains of 5 percentage points or higher in proficiency in English and Math on the MCAS. One school I visited in Boston, the Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School, is using virtually every tool available in the Act and saw a significant improvement in student achievement and MCAS scores in the first year, demonstrating dramatic gains in 8th grade English, 5th grade English and Math and 3rd grade Math. The pride that whole school community has in itself is palpable.

We also lifted the cap on charter schools, encouraging the highest performing charters to grow in regions of the state that serve our neediest students. No “creaming” or “skimming” or whatever. Just show us what the autonomies for which charters are so famous can produce when you are willing to take all comers, like the district schools do. And then share those lessons with the rest of the system. That’s all.

MATCH Community Day is an example of the type of new-era charter school brought online by the Achievement Gap Act, using innovative ways to target English Language learners. In a school where 85% of students speak another language other than English at home, students are tutored by an elite group of recent college graduates called MATCH Corps. With a focus on reaching students at a young age and growing partnerships with other charter schools, MATCH Community Day is a grand experiment for us to learn from.

So as our students learn, so do we. Bolstered by the state’s successful Race to the Top application (and here leading again – we were the highest scoring application in the country), there is more innovation happening in Massachusetts’s classrooms than ever before. Why? To enable teachers to reach each and every one of their students. Because each and every one of them is ours.

This is all good news. And I want again to thank the teachers, principals, parents, policymakers, civic and business leaders who have brought their creativity and hardheadedness to bear on getting these results.

But there is more we can do and more we must do. As important as these early steps have been, and as confident as I am that we will build on them in the coming years, the Achievement Gap Act, in word and spirit, beckons us forward. And faster.

This for me is personal. I have told you before about growing up on the South Side of Chicago. Everything was broken: broken sidewalks, broken playgrounds, broken lives. The schools were overcrowded, under resourced, sometimes violent. And yes, thanks to great teachers and other adults, and a scholarship to Milton Academy in 1970, I got my break. I have told you before about all of that.

But what I rarely talk about, and what you also all know, is that there were lots of other kids on the South Side of Chicago just like me: just as wide-eyed and hopeful, just as eager to learn, just as curious and ambitious, but who got no break. And you know that still today for every one of me there are thousands of others in Massachusetts's neighborhoods hoping for a break, entitled to one, in fact. To repeat, they are ours, too.

I have made closing the Achievement Gap a priority for my second term. Today, I am asking all of you here to make it your priority as well. Whether you're on the board of Early Ed and Care or the board of the University of Massachusetts; whether you are a teacher or a principal or a parent; whether you agree with everything my administration has proposed or you don't: the Achievement Gap must be closed. Opportunity must have meaning in America.

That means we need to deal with some hard truths. In spite of all of our successes, many students are not enjoying the benefits of a high-quality education. There is still an inescapable correlation between socio-economic status and education achievement, between your childhood zip code and your future achievement. And hardest of all, some of what we have done in the past isn't working well enough now and won't work at all in the future. Eighteen years of experience and data tell us that our current system, enviable as it may be due to your hard work, is still not broad or strong enough to successfully educate children stuck in these gaps.

At our current pace, we won't close the Achievement Gap until the start of the next century. Today, we need to complement the tools and strategies of the Achievement Gap Act with additional measures to accelerate our efforts to reach all students. And we must have a sense of urgency about it. A third grader doesn't get to sit out the third grade until the recession is over or until we get perfect consensus on all the things that have to be made just right in the education system. Her chance is now.

We know what the problem is and we know where the problem is.

The problem is poverty. It's not unions, people; we are leading the nation in student achievement in one of the most highly-unionized environments in American education. It's not money; in K-12 we are spending at record levels and have sustained that spending, thanks to the Legislature and the Obama

administration, through the worst economy in living memory. It's poverty. A recent comparison of the 2009 graduating classes of ten affluent, suburban districts versus ten urban school districts lays it out for us. On-time graduation rates were 97 percent in the suburbs, 59 percent in the cities. 97 percent of suburban kids went on to enroll in four-year colleges; 49 percent of city kids. According to a separate survey, fewer than 10 percent of young men of color in Boston are graduating from four-year colleges. I'm not saying that we don't need more flexibility in the classroom and more money. I'm saying when it comes to patterns of educational achievement nothing is as significant as poverty.

And if the problem is poverty, where do we find it? The answer, as you all know, is in Gateway Cities. Our two dozen Gateway Cities are home to much of our immigrant population, most of our low-income students, and English Language Learners, as well as families for whom navigating the educational system through college is unfamiliar. The challenges faced by students, their families, and their educators in the Gateway Cities are monumental. We cannot be truly successful as a state in closing achievement gaps unless we succeed in Brockton, Fall River, Lawrence, Holyoke, Fitchburg and Pittsfield. We must focus on achievement gaps where they are most persistent.

So, the problem is poverty and it lies mainly in Gateway Cities. Here are four things I want us to do right now.

First, every child must read well by the 3rd grade. Three-quarters of children who struggle with reading by third grade will continue to struggle academically, greatly reducing their chances of graduating high school, going to college, or successfully participating in our high skill economy. I want you to go to work now on developing the best ways to address this early in a child's academic career, in children entering kindergarten. In my next budget, I will propose a pilot program for Kindergarten Literacy Readiness.

Second, all children need a healthy start – and when they can't get it at home, we must find a way to provide it for them. Poverty begets a whole host of out-of-school problems that affect the readiness of a child to learn in the classroom. Mental health issues, family violence, housing instability and inadequate nutrition – all are real and present obstacles to student attendance, attentiveness and success. Teachers know it and they, along with school nurses, do their very best to help; but they can't be expected single-handedly to solve such complex problems in the lives of their students.

So, we propose establishing Student Support Councils and deploying Student Support Counselors to predominantly low-income schools. Possibly even early education centers or colleges. These Councils will consist of local human and social service providers focusing their efforts on connecting with students

and families through the schools to help meet their needs outside of school.

Third, the student-first education must trump the system of adult convenience. A one-size fits all, batch-processing model never was intended to work for all of our children, does not meet our goal of proficiency for all, and falls far short of what will be necessary to maintain our top economic advantage: a highly-educated workforce. The most profound examples are our dropouts. No statistical achievement gap is as great as the singular one separating those children in from those who dropped out.

As another example, I look at the continuing achievement gaps afflicting our students who are English Language Learners. We are more and more a majority minority Commonwealth and recent immigrants, the overwhelming number of whom are fully documented, make up more and more of our student population, especially in poorer communities. I welcome the many rich contributions that these new students and their families bring to the Commonwealth and I thank the schools and communities who show them the same sense of welcome I was shown when I first came to the Commonwealth 40 years ago. But it is a special challenge to learn the lessons in an unfamiliar language, and we need to help. We are trying to teach these students English while keeping them up to speed in their academic subjects all in the same amount of time that other students need for core subjects alone. It doesn't make sense. Therefore, I will propose the establishment of Summer English Learning Camps specifically designed to give English Language Learners more time, in an active, engaged "camp" atmosphere, to become fluent in English.

And finally, we must prepare students for lifelong success. Success means the capacity to land and hold a 21st Century job in a high skills/high knowledge economy like ours. It means being an informed citizen and a leader in our democracy. It means being prepared to be the head of a family with all the characteristics we associate with family leadership. And it means being a lifelong learner, capable of solving problems that today's educators can't even imagine. We are working hard to prepare our students to be admitted to college and to complete college once there, and our efforts in this area are intensifying. But we do not do enough to prepare students for whom college is not their best or preferred path. We need to prepare our young people to think about and succeed in middle-skill careers, too, careers just as valuable to them and their families, and just as important to our economic future. We are stepping up our support of vocational and technical schools, and looking at ways to better align the community colleges to meet the regional workforce needs of area businesses. I also propose that we pilot career academies to offer high school students the opportunity for early career exploration, more applied and experiential learning, and similar educational experiences that motivate students who do not see themselves as college bound.

A 21st century education system will require us to work in unprecedented ways to meet all the educational and developmental needs of our students to prepare them for success in a rapidly changing world. This system will need to serve society as well as the individual. It will need to prepare our students for meaningful work, active citizenship, family leadership and lifelong learning. It will require reinventing our approaches to child development, utilizing time and space differently, drawing on the expertise of a wider variety of people who can serve as co-educators, and harnessing technology in ways that are unprecedented to meet students where they are and give them a tailored program of what they need in order to become successful.

We need a renaissance of innovation in education, a period of intense experimentation, an urgent quest for the design features of an education system as diverse and vital as are our students. We, in government and policy, need to seed and incentivize new ways of working both within and outside of our mainstream system. We need to focus on results by nurturing innovative approaches.

I know you are all asking how we pay for these initiatives. I will ask the Legislature's support in the budget I file in January. But just as we seek new approaches in the classroom, we will need new ways to support our experiments. So I want you to develop an innovation fund, a public private means by which we can approach businesses, individuals, unions, foundations and others to leverage public money to invest in new experiments in the classroom, experiments that reach the children we are leaving behind. The Commonwealth Education Innovation Fund was a recommendation from the Readiness Project. Such a fund might offer incentives to school districts to encourage them to utilize "social impact bonds" to support solutions to the drop-out crisis, or pre-K programs to ensure that children enter kindergarten with the momentum necessary to succeed, or our higher ed campuses to enhance their work with high-risk drop-out populations, or other achievement gap issues. Perhaps it could seed innovations that promote a more seamless education continuum, from pre-K through higher education. The point is to bring new resources of time and money and attention to this renaissance of innovation and reform in our schools – because we all have a stake in it.

Today, I ask you to focus on these four initiatives. We won't close this achievement gap unless we work together, across boards and disciplines, across ideology and background. I know you're going to spend some time this morning talking in small groups about some of these strategies. Don't end the conversation here. Keep it going. Challenge us with new ideas. Engage with us and hold us – and each other -- accountable. And above all, act

This matters to all of us, no matter where we live or in what capacity we serve. Not as a question of

abstract policy, but as a question about what kind of country we want to live in.

America is the only nation in human history not organized around a common language or religion or even culture, but instead around a handful of civic ideals. Among them is the ideal of opportunity. It defines who we are. It shapes what we expect of ourselves and inspires others all over the world. It is central to the American Dream.

I walked around Occupy Boston one day several Saturdays ago and heard how much anxiety there is about the future of the American Dream. It might surprise you to know that at a town hall meeting I had at Goldman Sachs a couple of weeks later I heard much the same sentiment. In a sense the Tea Party and the Occupy movements, and lots of the rest of us in between, are united by that common anxiety. People are asking themselves, for their own sake and their children's, if the American Dream is at risk.

The people in this room, all of us, are in a position to do something about that. We have the power we need to make a change. We have the chance here to provide an opportunity to every child in Massachusetts, a chance to show them that in the face of an uncertain future we were willing to act and to lead, to preserve for them what our parents and grandparents gave to us. I want history to record that we in our time stood up for the American Dream, and made it real in Massachusetts for a generation to come.

Let's get to work. Thank you for all that you do.