

Erikson Institute
Task Force on Reducing Achievement Gaps

First Task Force Meeting

Date: October 10, 2013

Time: 8:30AM-11:30AM

Opening Remarks

Ms. Erica Okezie-Phillips from the McCormick Foundation provided opening remarks and highlighted that one of the foundation's top priorities is to invest in people and ideas that provide children in vulnerable families a fair chance to succeed in life.

Presentations

The project's principal investigators, Dr. Aisha Ray and Dr. Jana Fleming, made presentations in which they described the achievement and opportunity gaps that impact African-American students in Illinois and outlined key considerations in reducing those gaps and improving school performance.

Dr. Ray began her presentation with an appeal for attendees to commit to changing the status quo by working with the Task Force to create strategies aimed at ensuring that high quality educational experiences are provided to the state's most vulnerable populations, including African-American children and children living in poverty. The project aims to identify strategies for improving educational outcomes beginning in the early years of school. Key points addressed in Dr. Ray's presentation include the following:

- The goal of the Task Force is to enlist members and their networks in developing a plan to mobilize leaders in Illinois to work toward reducing African-American achievement gaps.
- The Task Force will work towards identifying solutions by looking at examples of effective interventions from across the country, including practices and policies that have worked in improving academic performance. It will also be critical to change the negative rhetoric that characterizes the problems African-American students face as being intractable.
- African-American children face a significant number of developmental risks compared to other children. It is therefore crucial to have programs and policies in place to ameliorate the effects of these risks.

Dr. Fleming's presentation emphasized that the school system has been identified as the nexus of activity for this project because schools are a core component of every child and family's life. She asserted that a coordinated set of activities and interventions offered under the auspice of schools can be effective in reducing academic achievement disparities between African-American children and their White counterparts. She provided an overview of research to support the following:

- Within school system factors that contribute to achievement gaps include excessively punitive school practices (especially as related to discipline, expulsion, and retention), teacher attitudes and low expectations for African-American children, inadequately prepared teachers, and school funding disparities.
- Factors outside of the school system that hinder learning include, but are not limited to, poverty, inadequate access to health care, insufficient mental health services, and unsafe neighborhoods.
- A child's social and emotional well-being plays a fundamental role in academic achievement, yet is largely ignored in school-based interventions. Children's early life experiences have significant implications for their developing the social skills required to adapt to and succeed in school.
- While high quality early childhood education is expensive, not providing high quality programs has far reaching implications as large numbers of children continue to be deprived of an opportunity to flourish and succeed in life.

Key points from the breakout sessions and whole group discussion

- We need to start earlier than preschool! Achievement gaps emerge in infancy, so we need to ensure that the work of this Task Force addresses interventions for children beginning at birth, if not prenatally.
- We can't effectively change child outcomes without looking at community- and family-level factors such as unemployment, lack of neighborhood resources, crime and safety, inadequate health and mental health resources, poverty, and parenting, all of which are critical factors affecting a child's well-being.
- Institutional racism continues to perpetuate and sustain inequality within our school system(s). We need to counteract the belief that certain groups of people are inherently inferior due to their race, ethnicity, or cultural background.
- There's an appalling dearth of adult male role models in schools, especially in the primary grades. In Illinois, we have very few African-American male teachers overall, and the few males working in schools are often coaches or gym teachers, which means they are not responsible for engaging with students around the core academic topics.
- We need to take a careful look at teacher certification requirements (and related policies) and remove all obstacles that unjustifiably impact the recruitment of African-American and Latino teachers.
- A more diverse teaching staff is essential in that it helps alleviate the mistrust and myths held about different communities. Teacher perception can have a profound impact on how she or he engages with children in a classroom setting.
- We need to explore deeply what poverty means, its impact on children and families, and its implications for teaching and learning.
- We need to enhance teachers' cultural competence and eradicate institutional racism.
- The Chicago Urban League has a law suit in the Circuit Court of Cook County challenging the constitutionality of school funding in Illinois (which has a disproportionately negative impact on children of color and who live in poverty).

- There is inertia and a lack of public and political will in Illinois to seriously address reducing achievement and opportunity gaps
- While the picture we've painted here today is extremely grim, there is hope. One role of the Task Force is to expose us to examples of existing programs and policies that are making a difference in reducing achievement disparities, and to facilitate further discussion about promising practices.
- The work of this Task Force is timely and desperately needed! Together we can make a difference by ensuring our collective Call to Action is relevant, meaningful, and truly achievable.

Second Task Force Meeting—

Date: December 5, 2013

Time: 8:30AM – 11:30AM

Location: Erikson Institute