

**COLORADO STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION'S COMMENTS REGARDING
THE 2004 INTERIM REPORT OF THE COLORADO COMMISSION ON
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

Introduction

The Colorado State Board of Education ("State Board") is charged by Colorado's Constitution with the general oversight of Colorado's system of public schools. In 2003, the General Assembly created Colorado's Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap ("Commission"). The Commission's charge was to identify strategies for closing the achievement gap in Colorado.

On November 1, 2004, the State Board received the Interim Report of the Commission ("Report"). Pursuant to statute, the State Board has reviewed the Report and herein provides its comment.

In sum, the Board wholeheartedly endorses the recommendations set forth in the Report. Further, the Board looks forward to the final report from the Commission due in the fall of 2005. Prior to offering its comment, the State Board must take a moment to define its understanding of the "achievement gap;" as the term has become somewhat in vogue and possibly overused.

The Achievement Gap

The State Board is concerned with providing ALL students with the resources and opportunity to have academic success. In Colorado, academic success is measured by a score of "Proficient" on the CSAP.

In recent years, the disaggregating of CSAP data has allowed us to review trends in student performance. In broadest terms, whenever there is a performance gap between students of identifiable groups (i.e. male vs. female, special needs vs. the standard student population or between ethnic categories) that distance can be categorized as an "achievement gap."

The State Board strives to elevate the performance of every student, thereby eliminating all gaps through consistent excellence by all. Each district has a responsibility to align its curriculum and instruction so that students can reach proficiency as measured against our state standards. The State Board however recognizes the need for particular concern and emphasis when any of the identified achievement gaps are: 1) persistent, and 2) result in unacceptable performance (not proficient on CSAP) of an identified group. Therefore, the State Board joins the Commission in focusing on the achievement gap as it relates to students of poverty and students identified as Latino, African-American and Native American. These subgroups are consistently identified as underperforming in comparison, not only to a level of proficiency on the CSAP but also in comparison to the performance of similarly situated students of different demographic categories.

The “achievement gap” as addressed by the Commission and the State Board has a particular meaning and addresses specific concerns. The State Board, therefore, cautions any reader of the Report or this commentary to avoid over application of the presented conclusions and recommendations.

Commentary

The Report contains a helpful summary of the Commission’s “Recommendations and Action Steps.” For ease of reference, the State Board directs its commentary to that section. While the document is interim, there are some matters raised by the Report that are in need of immediate attention. To do otherwise would be to accept the achievement gap.

Some of the issues raised by the Report are already in the process of being addressed by the work of the State Board and CDE under the State Board’s direction. Following the Report’s format, the State Board has set forth some matters in need of legislative address and other matters that are already being addressed by State Board action. The State Board’s comments are set forth below in **Bold**. An * marks areas where the State Board is recommending immediate action by the legislature.

The State Board has not tried to comment on every issue raised by the Report. As the Report is interim, and the time for review is limited, the State Board sought to provide a brief commentary which could give the General Assembly some insight to areas of immediate concern. Thus, this commentary should not be viewed as the State Board’s final or complete thoughts on the achievement gap. Rather, this commentary is merely a starting point.

DATA & ASSESSMENT

*Develop a comprehensive, centralized, user-friendly, easily-accessible **data and assessment system** that identifies gaps and deficiencies*

1. Gather available data and centralize in a consistent understandable format
2. Use data to identify gaps and deficiencies
3. Apply data on best practices to address gaps and deficiencies by informing instruction
4. Provide data in an accessible way to parents and the community to further understanding of achievement gaps
5. Link K-12 data with Higher Education data to promote partnerships between the two systems

Over the last several years, CDE has developed a set of student identifiers. The student identifiers will help the state consistently track the progress of individual students. As it pertains to the achievement gap, the student identifiers will be

particularly helpful in providing a uniform and honest assessment of graduation rates around the state.

Data from CSAP and the federal NCLB is already being used to identify gaps. The State Board is in the process of revising its Accreditation process so that districts are measured, in part, by their ability to address identified gaps.

***At present, parents receive a mixture of messages through the various state and federal accountability systems. The State Board believes that we can do a better job of conveying this important data to parents. At present, CDE is hampered by the overly prescriptive nature of the SAR reporting process. The General Assembly should revise that process to give the State Board and CDE more flexibility to communicate with the public.**

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Develop awareness, high expectations, solid ownership, and effective action in local and state affairs

1. Develop expectations of success and no excuses
2. Address cultural sensitivity and the impacts of school and external biases on expectations
3. Establish and maintain academic rigor, which is essential to ensuring high expectations
4. Ensure that the school community, including staff, policymakers, businesses, and the community at large have high expectations for student achievement

Pursuant to statute, the State Board is required to provide a report to the General Assembly in 2005 regarding the performance of our system of accountability. As part of that report, the State Board anticipates raising the issue of student investment in the CSAP process. The State Board is concerned about the validity of CSAP measurements given that the assessment provides no inherent reason for students to strive for excellence. In order to build a culture of high expectations, the State Board believes that the value of our assessment measures must be easily understood and considered reliable. Legislative action may be suggested at a later time.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Develop and infuse:

-Joint 16-Prek responsibilities

- Shared 16-Prek success indicators

- *Shared rigorous and connected 16-Prek curriculum which begins with the end in mind [life preparation, college preparation, life success, etc.]*
- *A systemic, proactive support system that encourages and enables all students (especially under-represented groups) to access and succeed in college.*

1. Establish a rigorous and connected 16-Prek curriculum which begins with the end in mind – “life preparation” is the default for all students
2. Provide continuous support that enables all students (especially under-represented groups) to access and succeed in college (provide early counseling, “can do” values, and clear financial options)
3. Create joint responsibilities between 16-Prek and college systems
4. Develop shared indicators for 16-Prek
5. Ensure that elementary and middle schools are part of the solution
6. Increase funding of the 16-Prek system to ensure better access and affordability to higher education

***While we need to close the achievement gap, the State Board believes that the State needs to focus more energy on avoiding the achievement gap. By increasing resources to early childhood and kindergarten education, the state can avoid the greater costs of remediation. In particular, the state needs to emphasize “school readiness” and literacy.**

***Districts and students need incentives to focus on the CCHE admissions requirements. The State Board, however, does not recommend new mandates on curriculum. Instead, the State Board believes that CDE, CCHE and the legislature can devise programs to encourage districts to provide the identified courses and for students to take the courses.**

***To the extent not already addressed by CCHE, funding should be provided for a guide to post-secondary opportunities and resources in Colorado. CCHE and CDE should be involved in promoting resources such as the Colorado Mentor Program.**

As part of its revisions to Accreditation and its ongoing review of professional development, the State Board envisions encouraging districts to: 1) develop stronger programs for college preparation; 2) review their staffing and use of counselors; and 3) develop stronger ties with “non-traditional” community partners (e.g. community groups that can help navigate cultural issues).

ADMINISTRATOR/TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Develop administrator/teacher cultural competencies

- Embed cultural competencies in local and state leadership
- Identify and mentor future leaders of color
- Achieve support of major education associations for the establishment of teacher incentives to work in challenged schools

1. Develop administrator/teacher cultural competencies and sensitivity
2. Require that administrator/teacher preparation be data-driven
3. Increase minority teachers and administrators
4. Involve teachers in choice of professional development
5. Establish incentives for the most capable administrator/teacher to work in the most challenged/impacted schools

The State Board has recently completed a process of revising state teacher standards to comply with NCLB. The State Board believes that this process will address some qualification concerns as the changes filter down through the system.

***The State Board strongly supports efforts to incentivize teachers to work in high needs areas and schools. Efforts to review the system for professional development would also be welcome by the State Board.**

PARENT & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

*Develop a local and state **constituent engagement strategy** to make “closing the achievement gap”/ “success for all Colorado kids” the work of all Coloradoans.*

1. Build connections with parents, guardians, family, business people, and non-traditional leaders which will require more culturally sensitive behavior. Identify and address “the challenge is for all” – “Greater Colorado Community”
2. Ensure that schools learn to have high expectations with an understanding about what each student brings
3. Articulate needs to understand that the conditions we have created affects students’ abilities to learn

The State Board believes that the involvement of local communities is key for closing the achievement gap. Recently, the State Board has increased its efforts to communicate with parents and local communities. The Colorado Public Schools Report is in its second year of printing (see www.colorado-edreport.org). Further, as mentioned above, the State Board believes that parents can be provided with clearer information if CDE is given more flexibility in the creation and dissemination of the SARs.

As supporters of local control, the State Board also believes that much of these efforts need to be initiated by local school boards and carried out by grassroots organizations. Therefore, the State Board intends to have the Report and this commentary widely disseminated and will continue to convene its advisory group on closing the achievement gap for the purpose of informing further state policy.

BEST PRACTICES

*Develop a **best practices strategy** with a leadership group, association ownership, online “warehouse,” and a system of rewards/recognition.*

1. Fund, collect, store and share “what works”
2. Develop a system that rewards best practices by linking them to funding and incentives

The State Board is looking at ways to leverage its oversight of federal funding in the state. The State Board hopes to encourage reliance on best practices and build upon models of success seen around the state and nation. For example, schools identified as having “significant achievement gaps” pursuant to Rule of the State Board may be required to attend seminars or trainings (e.g., The Colorado Reading Summit) as part of their Accreditation contracts or as a condition of eligibility for some federal funding.

***The State Board recognizes challenges which emanate from Colorado’s geography and demographics in rural districts. The General Assembly needs to maintain, if not increase, its support of regional services provided by CDE. The sharing of best practices will not be successful unless the state supports implementation.**

Conclusion

The State Board is grateful to the Commission for its hard work and dedication to Colorado’s children. The State Board wishes to also thank the members of the Coalition for Closing the Achievement Gap. The Coalition’s work provided a vital foundation to this Report.

This brief commentary represents the State Board’s initial response to the Commission’s Report. The State Board looks forward to working with the Commission to help develop its work plan for the final report. Also, the State Board looks forward to serving as a resource for the General Assembly in the development or alteration of any policy affecting public education in Colorado.