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In this Issue

After decades of education reform, stubborn achievement gaps continue to divide low-income and minority students from their more affluent White and Asian peers. Increasingly, closing these gaps is not only a moral imperative but also an economic one: to maintain its international competitiveness, the United States needs the participation of all of its citizens. Rigorous, uniform academic standards can help ensure both equity and

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Addressing Achievement Gaps

Advancing Equity: Removing Roadblocks to Achieving High Academic Standards

Generations of American education reformers have struggled to close the achievement gaps separating low-income and minority students from their more affluent White and Asian peers. In the late 1980s, researchers and policymakers began to unite around a new approach: setting academic standards that spell out the skills and knowledge students are expected to acquire in 13 years of schooling, and then testing students to make sure they reach those standards. The new approach promised both equity and excellence, a way to make sure that all students, regardless of race or class, got a rigorous education. However, for the schools, communities, and political leaders charged with improving education for all, setting high

standards proved easier than meeting them. Over time, some achievement gaps have narrowed, but none have disappeared, and their persistence may now threaten the nation's future in an increasingly competitive world.

"It is not just that poor children are going to continue to suffer. Our entire country is going to suffer unless we get every single person to help us in our economic competition."

U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, Pennsylvania

"It is not just that poor children are going to continue to suffer," U.S. Rep. **Chaka Fattah** (PA) told an audience of 120 at a recent ETS conference. "Our entire country is going to suffer unless we get every single person to help us in our economic competition."

Setting high, uniform academic standards is only the first step to ensuring that all students achieve, said speakers at the conference, "Advancing Equity: Removing Roadblocks to Achieving High Academic Standards," which was held at ETS headquarters in Princeton, N.J., on November 5, 2011. The conference, co-convened by the Council for Opportunity in Education, the Education Law Center, and the National Urban League, was the second in ETS's "Saturdays at ETS" series and featured presentations by 11 researchers, advocates, and public officials.

The conference came on the heels of several days of private meetings at ETS, convened by the National Urban League, to marshal data and discuss strategy for a Gates Foundation-funded education reform effort, said ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles**, who opened and closed the conference. The Urban League initiative focuses on academic standards, rigorous

curriculum, effective teaching, out-of-school learning, and the scaling up of both equity and excellence, Nettles said, with the aim of accelerating progress on national education issues. "We were thinking about how to get the data right, how to get the politics right, and how to get community activism," Nettles said. "We were even talking about how to get people into the streets — our problem is that severe."

To enable all students to meet high academic standards, said speakers at the ETS conference, schools need to use an array of strategies: establishing high-quality preschool programs, offering innovative instruction, and forging closer connections to the communities they serve. But many of these initiatives cost money, and with government budgets shrinking and citizens increasingly skeptical about the capabilities of public institutions, reformers face an uphill fight to sustain such investments. When the imperative to education reform is couched in moral terms — as the right thing to do — not everyone will support it, Fattah warned.

But more will join the battle when the stakes are represented in economic terms, he said. "I believe that even the most hard-headed conservative in Washington, D.C., or in our states doesn't want to see the United States relinquish its world leadership," Fattah said. "We're not going to be a great country on the cheap."

Ultimately, however, school reform alone may not be enough to close achievement gaps, conference speakers warned; broader social change may be necessary. "I don't think schools are the problem," said conference speaker **Lauren Wells**, Research Director of the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education Newark at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. "I think the problem is structural and inherent in society."



U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, Pennsylvania

Inescapable data

Even in states with wealthy and successful school systems, achievement gaps linked to race and class are long-standing. In New Jersey, whose students outscore most other states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), gaps between low-income and affluent students are also among the nation's highest, said conference speaker **David Hespe**, Chief of Staff in the New Jersey Department of Education. "The data is inescapable," Hespe said. "There exist these profound achievement differentials when we disaggregate the student achievement data by race, ethnicity, and income." Despite years of standards-based education, students still graduate from the state's public high schools without the skills they need for college or careers, Hespe added. At two northern New Jersey community colleges, he said, 90 percent of the new students need remediation before they can do college-level work; employers see the high school

diploma as a meaningless credential that does not guarantee graduates will have a minimal set of skills.

But if achievement gaps are not new, the task of closing them has never been more urgent, conference speakers said. The United States' economic superiority, once unchallenged, is now under siege from a host of developing nations rapidly producing their own bumper crops of scientists, engineers, and innovators. As other nations race to catch up, the educational failure of millions of American citizens puts a recessionary brake on the U.S. economy, said Fattah, the Pennsylvania congressman. "The implications of that gap are even greater now than they once were," warned conference keynote speaker **Warren Simmons**, Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. "We live in a world where the cognitive and cultural demands for success are far greater than the world that I grew up in."

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*Warren Simmons, Executive Director,
Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

For more than 40 years, school reformers have looked for ways to break the links among race, class, and educational achievement. Beginning in the 1960s, federal legislation targeted particular subgroups of students to receive supportive services, but in the decades that followed, the emphasis shifted to schoolwide reforms. The reform efforts of the 1970s and 1980s built on Harvard University scholar Ronald Edmonds' "effective schools" research, which identified the characteristics of schools that successfully educated low-income children — among those characteristics, an insistence on holding all students to high expectations. Reformers'

efforts to extend Edmonds' work often fell short, however, because "the high expectations were not necessarily anchored to a vision of what we wanted students to know and be able to do," Simmons said.



David Hespe, Chief of Staff, New Jersey Department of Education

The standards and testing movement of the 1990s, eventually embodied in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, was a response to that shortcoming. But the cornerstone of NCLB, a testing regimen based on state, rather than federal, achievement standards, gave rise to new inequities, as different states defined academic proficiency differently. In response, reformers have renewed a push for national standards, and nearly every state has signed on to recent efforts to craft a voluntary set of uniform standards, the Common Core State Standards. Too often, said Pennsylvania congressman Fattah, students arrive at college needing remediation not because they failed to learn a subject well enough in high school, but rather because they were taught only a watered-down version in the first place. "That's why the Common Core is so important," Fattah said. "There really shouldn't be any difference between Algebra I in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Algebra I in Philadelphia, Mississippi."

"If you don't have the data, you can't plot an initiative, you can't track progress. You can't do anything without data."

*David Hespe, Chief of Staff,
New Jersey Department of Education*

Since 2009, the Obama administration has committed more than \$4.5 billion in federal funds to its four-point framework for school improvement, which aims to graduate students who are college- and career-ready. The framework — implemented through both the creation of new competitive grant programs and the realignment of existing federal funds — focuses on developing rigorous standards and assessments, improving the effectiveness of teachers and principals, using data to improve performance, and turning around low-performing schools, Simmons said. According to Hespe, the New Jersey education official, the state Department of Education has structured its work around a similar set of goals — perhaps not surprising, since the Obama administration has offered regulatory flexibility to states that adhere to its reform framework. New Jersey's education department plans to base curriculum and assessments on the Common Core standards, work to recruit and retain good teachers, and foster innovation through everything from charter schools to the use of technology in the classroom. A crucial element of the state's plans is an improvement in New Jersey's longitudinal database, Hespe said: "If you don't have the data, you can't plot an initiative, you can't track progress. You can't do anything without data."

In the Obama administration's vision, competition, innovation, and accountability drive change, and effective teachers and principals carry it out, Simmons said. Although the administration's approach echoes some of the themes of earlier reforms based on

Edmonds' effective schools research, the initiative remains problematic, he said, because the administration has not yet defined what teachers and principals must do differently in order to produce better results. Despite the states' rush to adopt the Common Core, that initiative, too, remains fledgling, Simmons said. "It's not very real to people in the schools," he said. "People are held accountable to changing their practice to a set of standards and a set of assessments that aren't here yet."

Investing to reduce failure

Yet programs with track records of success are not hard to find, conference speakers said. Decades of research have shown that high-quality preschool programs can eliminate as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap, said conference speaker **Ellen Frede**, a developmental psychologist who spent three years running New Jersey's state-funded preschool program and is now a senior vice president at Acelero Learning, which operates Head Start programs in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Nevada. Low-income children typically start kindergarten far behind their middle-class peers, who themselves start out behind higher-income children, Frede said. Exposing children to the books, toys and rich learning experiences that come with high-quality preschool can level the playing field, making it more likely that children will stay in school and eventually graduate.

"By investing in early education, we can reduce failure in later grades."

*Ellen Frede, Senior Vice President,
Acelero Learning*

"By investing in early education, we can reduce failure in later grades," Frede said. New Jersey's preschool program cut grade retention in half by the end of first grade, she said, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, research

shows that the positive effects of high-quality preschool endure into adulthood, showing up in everything from better health to reduced criminal activity. "Don't let anybody tell you that the effects of preschool fade," Frede said. "High-quality preschool does not fade."

"We do have the ability to actually move the needle in student achievement in writing."

*Sharon Washington, Executive Director,
National Writing Project*

Preschool is not the only program that produces results. Instructional reforms also can translate into achievement gains, conference speakers said. Each summer, the 38-year-old National Writing Project trains 3,000 teachers who then return to their schools to train colleagues; last year, the program reached 120,000 teachers and 1.4 million students in 7,000 schools, said speaker **Sharon Washington**, the NWP's Executive Director. Eighteen research studies have found bigger improvements in the writing of students whose teachers were NWP trained than in the writing of students whose teachers had no such training, she said. Yet the intense focus on reading in the NCLB era has led to a neglect of writing, she said, with writing instruction focused more on mechanics and fill-in-the-blank exercises than on the more complicated work of building paragraphs. Powerful writing instruction harnesses the technology that is already part of students' lives — encouraging, for instance, digital storytelling that mixes the written word with pictures, sound, and video.

In one Philadelphia classroom, Washington said, creating podcasts that were going to be available online galvanized fourth-grade English-language learners into revising their writing. "We do have the ability to actually move the needle in student achievement in writing," Washington said. "It's possible to have writing instruction that really does engage students."

Like high-quality preschool and innovative instruction, engaging communities in the work of school reform is a crucial tool for closing achievement gaps, conference speakers said. In Newark, the NYU Broader, Bolder Approach to Education project is working with seven schools on a program of change that includes not only reforming curriculum and instruction but also bringing together political stakeholders, forging links to local businesses, and connecting schools to health and social services. “Our premise is that schools, children, and families do not exist in isolation,” said NYU’s Wells.

“Our premise is that schools, children, and families do not exist in isolation.”

Lauren Wells, Research Director of the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education Newark at Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development of New York University

“How you actually get people in buildings and communities to come together around a vision that is going to push changes in a place like Newark, where there’s also been a lot of despair and hopelessness and complacency that has settled at the school level — that was the first year of our work.” It’s work that is rife with complexity, she said — far easier to describe than to do. In Newark, the team works in a high school whose principal is a frequent political opponent of the city’s mayor; some students have been moved along to ninth grade without ever passing a class in the lower grades. “It’s easy to sit here and to rattle off a list of things that you’re doing and make it sound as if it’s happening in an ideal world,” Wells said. “But every element of this from a day-to-day level presents another challenge and another roadblock to get around.”

“Schools can’t do this work alone. They need a network of partners.”

Warren Simmons, Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Forging school-community connections is essential, conference speakers said. “Schools can’t do this work alone,” said Simmons of the Annenberg Institute. “They need a network of partners.” Even students need to play a role, said conference speaker **Tina Dove**, Director of the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign at the Schott Foundation for Public Education: “If we don’t engage them in the fight for their own education — if we don’t engage them in this fight to close the opportunity gap that is smothering them — then we lose, no matter what we do,” she said.

Although Obama administration officials have paid lip service to the importance of community engagement in the work of reform, their vision of such engagement remains superficial, Simmons said. They have paid too little attention to the lack of capacity in school districts, although districts are the medium through which reforms flow to individual schools; their reform strategy emphasizes governance and staffing over instructional improvement; and although their school turnaround models pay little attention to either local contexts or broader social issues, he said, schools and districts are forced to rush into change dictated from above. “After having decades of failure, they’re being asked in three or four weeks to analyze their problem and select a model,” Simmons said. “And if you don’t, the state will intervene.”

The multibillion-dollar question

Achievement gaps do not occur in a vacuum; they follow from the gaps in opportunity that many low-income

and minority children face, conference speakers said. As a high school teacher in Washington, D.C., Dove, now of the Schott Foundation, once took her students to the Corcoran Gallery of Art to see an exhibit by the African-American photographer Gordon Parks. Although the museum was just a mile from their school, “my babies had no idea they were still in Washington, D.C.,” Dove said. “That’s a huge opportunity gap.” Children come to school from violent neighborhoods; they lack adequate health care; their school buildings are crumbling. To call their subsequent struggles an “achievement gap” suggests that the children themselves are to blame — as if “there’s an achievement gap because you are not achieving,” Dove said. The National Opportunity to Learn campaign focuses on the other side of the story, arguing that all children deserve access to high-quality preschool; well-trained, effective teachers; a high school curriculum that gives graduates the choice of attending college, even if they ultimately decide not to go; and adequate, equitable funding. “You cannot tell me that resources don’t matter if you have children going to schools who have those resources,” Dove said. “Opportunity gaps exist, and we need to be doing more to make sure we close those gaps for children of color and for our poorest children.”

Closing opportunity gaps costs money, speakers said, and the nation’s existing system of school funding is riddled with inequities. Because the American education funding system relies heavily on local property taxes to pay for schools, it shortchanges low-income students who live in property-poor neighborhoods, said Fattah, the Pennsylvania congressman, who helped champion the creation of a 27-member federal commission that is currently examining school finance nationwide. In Alabama’s school finance lawsuit, a gym teacher assigned to teach math testified that he had three working calculators and 20 textbooks

for a school of 400 students, Fattah said, and schools across the country are in similarly desperate straits.

“You cannot tell me that resources don’t matter if you have children going to schools who have those resources.”

Tina Dove, Director, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, Schott Foundation for Public Education

But at a moment marked by anemic economic growth and straitened budgets, repairing such long-term failures comes up against painful short-term realities, conference speakers said. Rather than proposing new investments in education, reformers find themselves fighting to avert devastating cuts in existing programs. In New York City, an eleventh-hour deal between the mayor and the teachers’ union prevented the threatened elimination of 6,000 teaching jobs, but “what’s going to happen next year is the multibillion-dollar question,” said conference speaker **Robert Jackson**, a Democrat who chairs the education committee of the New York City Council. Pennsylvania’s Republican governor took office vowing to cut taxes, and the latest state budget reduces spending on education from preschool to college, said conference speaker **James Roebuck Jr.**, a Democrat representing Philadelphia in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. A school finance formula designed to phase in equalized spending over six years has been abandoned, and “many of the things that were going well in the state are now in jeopardy, if not entirely disappeared,” Roebuck said.

A perfect storm?

To education advocates, it seems clear that such cuts are shortsighted — that, in the words of Pennsylvania congressman Fattah, “no matter what the cost in terms

of education, ignorance will cost us more.” High-quality preschool is expensive, but research shows that it ultimately saves public money by reducing the need for special-education services, decreasing the incidence of teenage pregnancy and cutting welfare dependency.



Imani Perry, Professor, Center for African American Studies, Princeton University

“The problem is those savings aren’t realized today,” said Frede, Senior Vice President at Acelero Learning. “They’re realized down the line.” Instead of red ink, reformers see opportunity: With the U.S. Congress poised to reauthorize the main federal education law just as the return of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan frees up billions of federal dollars, “I wonder if we’re approaching a period when there’s a perfect storm for change,” said conference participant **Damon Hewitt**, Director of the Education Practice Group for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Some of the elected officials on the conference program sounded far less optimistic about the chances for

new investments in education initiatives. Conference speaker **Robert Moses**, founder and President of the Algebra Project, which promotes school reform through mathematical literacy, wondered aloud if the country is ready to discuss a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to an education.

“Programs that are universal, that everyone benefits from, are programs that are harder to cut.”

Ellen Frede, Senior Vice President, Acelero Learning

“I think the education advocates are ready,” answered Jackson, the New York City councilman. “The country is not ready.” In a time of economic stress, the public remains ambivalent about public institutions and reluctant to fund them, said Roebuck, the Pennsylvania state representative. “There’s a perception that it costs too much money and that the results are not particularly good,” he said.

With education spending so contested, political considerations are bound to affect how the work of reform gets done — which constituencies programs are designed to serve and how reformers set their priorities. Advocates want a universal preschool program, rather than a program targeted at low-income children, in part because “programs that are universal, that everyone benefits from, are programs that are harder to cut,” said Frede of Acelero Learning.

Although the Broader, Bolder Approach initiative in Newark aims to create sustainable long-term change, its initial focus was determinedly short-term: raising the low test scores at its participating high school. “There’s a short window of opportunity to demonstrate success, and the measure of success right now is test scores,” said NYU’s Wells. Therefore, as they planned more systemic

initiatives, the Newark reformers arranged to pull struggling students out of class for extra help in language arts and math; the effort paid off with big jumps in the percentage of students deemed proficient on state tests. Students “were having targeted interventions so that they would be able to improve their performance on the test,” Wells said. “That’s not the long-term goal, but it is the short-term strategy to sustain the work.”

Given these real-world constraints, education advocates must engage with the political process, conference speakers said, and that means developing varied strategies for influencing decision makers. The sometimes-fragmented education lobby should take a leaf from the book of the far more unified and focused defense lobby, said Fattah, the Pennsylvania congressman. “We have to get organized,” he said. “It’s easy to mobilize people; it’s very difficult to organize them.”

“When you look at funding for education, you better talk politics, because if you don’t, you’re not going to get anything.”

Robert Jackson, New York City Councilman

Sustaining programs sometimes means getting their beneficiaries to lobby for them, said Dove, of the Schott Foundation. The federal TRIO programs, which give funding and support to disadvantaged students, are perennial targets of budget-cutters, she said, but when TRIO recipients lobby against those cuts, they are often effective. “A member of Congress is not as apt to cut that program, because they’re looking at the physical embodiment of that program,” Dove said.

Education advocates also should not shy away from confrontation, said Jackson, the New York City councilman. Last winter, Jackson helped organize a

march to the New York Governor’s Mansion to protest education budget cuts, annoying leaders in his own Democratic party who did not want a highly visible challenge to the state’s Democratic governor. “Elected officials, especially in executive positions, do not like negative publicity,” Jackson said. “When you look at funding for education, you better talk politics, because if you don’t, you’re not going to get anything.”

Telling new stories

But for some conference speakers, mastering the give-and-take of the appropriations process is only part of the work necessary to create lasting change. The broader task, they argued, requires everything from community organizing to cultural, even psychological, development — an evolution in family life, cultural assumptions, and the habits of mind that shape educational achievement.

Parents of preschoolers often do not realize that their children are lagging behind as they get ready to start kindergarten, said Frede of Acelero Learning. “Families can do a lot,” she said. “They can read more to their children, they can talk more to their children, they can have more routines that help children get ready for school.”

In Mississippi, the Algebra Project’s youth-oriented offshoot, the Young People’s Project, trained teenagers to teach math to younger students. The teenagers had grown up with sometimes harsh discipline: “We had some parents that used to walk around with a switch,” remembered Maisha Moses, a co-director of the Young People’s Project, who attended the ETS conference with her father, speaker Robert Moses. Ten years later, many of those teenagers had become parents themselves, but they treated their own children very differently, Maisha Moses said, drawing on what they had learned about how to teach the young.

“Engaging adolescents in this type of literacy work is a really powerful model of naturally developing this culture of how you educate each other,” she said.

“One of the things we underestimate is the power of grassroots organizing to create a new narrative that even gives pause to people in power.”

*Warren Simmons, Executive Director,
Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

The Algebra Project itself shows how one family’s educational endeavor can blossom into a larger cultural change. Maisha Moses’ inadequate school math education helped spur her father to launch the Algebra Project, years before her 1987 graduation from Harvard. Attending the ETS conference along with her were fellow leaders of the Young People’s Project, out of college as recently as the year before. As Maisha Moses and her colleagues watched from the audience, Robert Moses, a legendary civil rights leader before he was an education reformer, called on them all to stand in their places. “You’re looking at 29 years’ worth of organizing,” he told conference attendees. “This is not organizing that’s community-based; it’s organizing that’s youth-based. It’s a youth network.”

The Occupy Wall Street movement, whose New York City encampment was still in place when the ETS conference was held, points to the importance of such work, conference speakers suggested. “One of the things we underestimate is the power of grassroots organizing to create a new narrative that even gives pause to people in power,” said the Annenberg Institute’s Simmons.

Indeed, cultural narratives can shape what seems possible, speakers said. “We have to tell different stories to work our way out of racial inequality,” said **Imani Perry**, a Princeton University professor of African American

Studies, who spoke at a dinner the night before the ETS conference. As a child, Perry said, she benefited from the help of highly educated parents who spent the summer after her third-grade year tutoring her in the math she had struggled to learn in school. But equally important, said Perry, who is African-American, she could draw on a family tradition of academic success passed down by her grandmother, who kept a newspaper clipping documenting Perry’s mother’s teenage victory in a state math competition. “I had access, yes, to an excellent education and I had supplementary support,” Perry said. “But I also had a story to hold onto.”

Today, Perry said, minority students too often have been told only stories of failure, not stories of success — stories about high dropout rates, low test scores, and racial oppression, rather than stories about accomplished scholars, courageous activists, and social progress. Political conservatives attribute the achievement gap to the laziness and irresponsibility of low-income minority students and their parents, she said; liberals attribute the achievement gap to oppression.

“We have to tell different stories to work our way out of racial inequality.”

*Imani Perry, Professor of African American Studies,
Princeton University*

The conservative explanation disregards the extensive infrastructure that supports the achievements of affluent students, she said, but the liberal explanation discounts the possibility that poor people of color can influence the direction of their own lives.

As long as alternative narratives do not wish away the struggles of the past, telling these new stories allows children to see themselves not as inevitably mired in disadvantage but as capable of transcendence, Perry

said. She put that insight into practice in her own family, she said, after her son came home one day despondent after a kindergarten lesson on the civil rights movement. “They didn’t let Black people do anything back then,” the little boy said. Perry and his father countered that depressing story with a narrative about civil rights activism, unity in the face of adversity, and the importance of strategizing and studying. “He learned in school that he was part of the group to whom bad things were done at the whim of the powers that be,” Perry said. In her college teaching, she said, she has found that “even the most elite students are woefully ignorant when it comes to the history of racial inequality” and are thrilled to learn “that the history is not one of failure but one of incredible achievement once opportunity is granted and struggle has been engaged in.”

Building a collective vision

In the struggle to close race- and class-based achievement gaps, more than the work of the schools is in question, conference speakers said; rightly understood, the debate encompasses power relations, income inequality, and social welfare programs as well. Achievement gaps shrank more during the civil rights era, when the country focused on expanding social supports for the poor, than during the education reform era, when the focus narrowed to schools alone, noted Simmons of the Annenberg Institute. And today’s education reforms will fail, he said, unless they include efforts to build neighborhoods’ capacity to support schooling. “I’m beginning to think that, while we don’t want to give up on the improvement of schools, if we really want to improve academic achievement or move to close the achievement gap, we’ve got to change the income gap,” said conference speaker **Edmund Gordon**, John M. Musser Professor of Psychology, Emeritus at Yale University and Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education,

Emeritus – Teachers College, Columbia University. “Where families have resources, they find a way to educate their children, and where they don’t have resources, they do a poor job of educating their kids.”

“Where families have resources, they find a way to educate their children, and where they don’t have resources, they do a poor job of educating their kids.”

Edmund Gordon, Professor Emeritus

But even as some conference speakers urged attention to larger social issues, others cautioned that too much insistence on the breadth of the problem could distract from the immediate task of reforming schools. From reasonable class sizes to rigorous curricula, much is known about the elements of successful schooling, said Fattah, the Pennsylvania congressman; the imperative is to replicate those strategies in every school. “There’s a role for families, but I’m really speaking about the role for government,” Fattah said. “We can’t create a perfect situation for every family. The one thing we can do is that, if we require a child to attend a school and to take a course in science, [we can ensure] that they have a science teacher who knows what they’re talking about.”

Ultimately, however, the work of closing achievement gaps requires both a school-centered agenda and a broader vision, conference speakers said — not only programmatic and instructional reforms, but also the forging of far-reaching alliances. “This isn’t simply a technical endeavor. This is deeply cultural and social,” said Simmons of the Annenberg Institute. “We deeply need allies, we need to mobilize communities, we need to build a collective vision together, and we need to act both inside of schools and outside of schools.”





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excellence, but setting such standards is not the same as meeting them. Researchers have identified paths to success, including high-quality preschool programs, innovative instruction, and school-community links. These initiatives take money, however, and the current political and economic climate is inhospitable to such investments. And ultimately school reform alone, unaccompanied by broader social change, may not be enough to close achievement gaps.

The challenges facing standards-based education reform were the subject of “Advancing Equity: Removing Roadblocks to Achieving High Academic Standards,” the second in ETS’s series of “Saturdays at ETS” conferences. The conference was held November 5, 2011, at ETS headquarters in

Princeton, N.J., and featured presentations by 11 researchers, advocates and public officials. Conference co-conveners included the Council for Opportunity in Education, the Education Law Center, and the National Urban League. **Warren Simmons**, Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, gave the keynote address, and U.S. Rep. **Chaka Fattah** delivered the luncheon address. Sessions were introduced by **Damon Hewitt**, Director of the Education Practice Group at the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund; **Maureen Hoyler**, Executive Vice President of the Council for Opportunity in Education; ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles**; and **David Sciarra**, Executive Director of the Education Law Center.

More information about the conference, including PowerPoint slides, is available at www.ets.org/s/achievement_gap/conferences/advancing_equity/overview.html.