

Schools chief seeks end to learning gap

Jack O'Connell earns praise for his candor on a sensitive subject.

By Mitchell Landsberg and Howard Blume

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Jack O'Connell, the state superintendent of public instruction, turned heads in education circles last week with the message that race, not poverty, helped explain why African American and Latino students lagged behind their white and Asian counterparts.

It wasn't what he said that was remarkable. It was the fact that he said it at all.

"These are not just economic achievement gaps, they are racial achievement gaps," O'Connell said after his annual release of California's standardized test scores. "We cannot afford to excuse them; they simply must be addressed."

That message was old news to many educational researchers, who have been writing about the issue with increasing urgency for years. But policymakers, particularly white policymakers like O'Connell, have generally been reluctant to discuss race as a factor in student achievement for fear of inflaming racial passions and being seen as racially insensitive.

O'Connell's comments were generally applauded by leading educators, who said it was about time that someone in public life took on a crucial, and hitherto muffled, part of the educational debate.

But some cautioned that there were dangers in beginning such a conversation -- and that, in any case, talk about race was useless without carefully calibrated action to encourage higher achievement by black and Latino students.

"It's tricky to figure out how to introduce it in public," said Ron Ferguson, director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University and author of a forthcoming book on the subject. He said he worried that such discussions could lead not to constructive changes but to "blame and responsibility and maybe even genetics."

Jeannie Oakes, a professor in the graduate school of education at UCLA

who has sometimes been critical of O'Connell, praised him for raising the issue. "It's a new level of candor, I think, about the combination of factors that seem to relate to low achievement," she said.

But Oakes added: "When you go down this path, then we have to be very careful about what we choose to talk about and examine, because it's very easy to fall into stereotypical views, and historical views, of people with darker skin being less intelligent . . . or people from immigrant families and African Americans not valuing education."

O'Connell drew his conclusions from the latest round of standardized test results for California schools. They showed, once again, the stubborn persistence of an achievement gap -- the difference in academic performance separating African American and Latino students from their white and Asian American counterparts. All groups have been making dogged upward progress, but at such similar rates that the gap has not budged.

In the past, the differences between groups have sometimes been "explained away," O'Connell said, by the fact that black and Latino students are more likely to be poor.

"The results show this explanation not to be true," he said.

The test results reveal that, in math, poor white and Asian students outperform black and Latino students whose families are not poor. In English, non-poor Latino students barely outperform poor whites, and non-poor African Americans lag further.

The findings are based on fairly crude measures of poverty. "Poor" students are those who have applied for free or reduced-price meals at school. "Non-poor" students are those who haven't applied, even though some of them might, in fact, come from low-income families.

Nevertheless, the data are in line with various studies over the last decade showing that African American students in particular fare worse than whites or Asians on various measures of achievement, even when they come from middle-class families.

Simply raising the issue brings up several uncomfortable questions: Are there cultural reasons why African Americans and Latinos lag? Do they

come from families, or communities, that don't value education highly enough? Do they learn differently from white and Asian students? Are they more likely to go to bad schools with less-experienced teachers? Do teachers hold them to lower standards?

"If you don't acknowledge a problem, there's no way to address it," said Abigail Thernstrom, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute in New York and coauthor, with her husband, Stephen, of "No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning."

But, she said, "Once you say that and once you mean it, then you have to ask yourself what is going on with these kids and you've got to address not only the problems of reading, writing and arithmetic, but all the habits that make for an absence of internalized discipline when it comes to schoolwork, and . . . all the habits of life that make for the possibility of social mobility."

Thernstrom, who is white, has long been willing to suggest that educators and minority families need to confront their own attitudes and habits that, she concludes, are undermining academic achievement.

Kimberly Bush, the white mother of six biracial children, said she witnessed parent attitudes transform as Bunche Elementary, a nearly all-minority, all-low-income school in Compton, became a high-achieving school under Principal Mikara Solomon Davis.

Initially, Bush said, some parents complained about having to sign their child's homework every day. They also objected to mandatory suspensions when a student was rude to a teacher, part of the school's efforts to ensure that classroom time was not wasted on discipline. Teachers also worked after school to provide tutoring to students, among other strategies.

Solomon Davis, the former Bunche principal, put blame for the achievement gap squarely on poverty, combined with the subtle racism of low expectations. She acknowledged that multigenerational poverty, among African Americans, for example, might lead to counterproductive attitudes about education. But this should not be misread as a fundamental characteristic of black culture, she said.

As to needed remedies, she put responsibility squarely with educators.

"It is what we are doing as adults incorrectly that is resulting in these

students not learning," she said. "The parents want the best for their children. What we brought to Bunche is showing them the picture of what the best can look like, providing college as the goal. Everybody jumped on the bandwagon, but it was a first for a lot of people in our community."

In raising race, O'Connell spotlighted his own inability to narrow the achievement gap during nearly five years as the state's top education official and raised expectations that he will propose a plan of action. He has called a summit on the issue in November.

O'Connell said he had tried to tighten the gap with policies that included a high school exit exam, an emphasis on "rigor" and "relevance" in education and increased funding for impoverished schools. However, his spokesman, Rick Miller, said of last week's shift in emphasis to race: "Part of this is an acknowledgment that what we've been doing at the state level isn't working."

In an interview, O'Connell added that part of the problem is "institutional bias or racism" in the public school system. "The system does treat some people differently, and race does have a role to play," he said.

O'Connell added he will wait to hear from an advisory body he created before deciding what changes in policy are needed. Asked if he will advocate differentiated instruction and learning materials for different racial groups, he said, "I think so." He also said he intended to "look at strategies that go beyond just education" and involve businesses, churches and the community.

David L. Brewer, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, said he welcomed O'Connell's heightened attention to the issue, and said that he, too, has been looking for ways to raise the performance of African American and Latino students.

There are strategies that are known to be effective, and schools, some in his district, can be used as case studies of what works, he said.

"The key is personalized instruction and teachers who don't allow students to fail," he said. "And then you get the results you expect to get. We know what works; it's making everybody do what works."

In that respect, he said, he'll talk to employee unions about modifying work rules to allow for longer school days and more flexible schedules within the school day.

Brewer said that although L.A. Unified had made strides in academic achievement at elementary schools, "after the fourth grade, something is happening with African American and Latino students."

And the solution does not entirely lie in the schools, Brewer said. Responsibility also lies with the family: "We're going to have to make sure parents understand this is a problem," he said. "Our black and brown children can do math and science: We want that message loud and clear in your homes. We want parents to make sure they're holding their children accountable."

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