

**in School Readiness and Achievement**

eliminating  
**gaps**



**Keynote Speaker**

Dr. Ronald Ferguson  
*Director of the Tripod Project for School Improvement (tripodproject.org) and the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, and author of Toward Excellence with Equity: An Emerging Vision for Closing the Achievement Gap*

**Panelists**

- Dr. Andres A. Alonso  
*CEO, Baltimore City Public School System*
- Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick,  
*Superintendent, Maryland Public Schools*
- Dr. William R. Hite, Jr.  
*Superintendent, Prince George’s County Public Schools*
- Dunbar Brooks  
*Manager, Data Development, Baltimore Metropolitan Council*
- Dr. Carole Brunson Day  
*President, National Black Child Development Institute*

**summary**

Racial and socio-economic gaps in school readiness and achievement are significant and persistent, and have lifelong consequences for children’s success. Dr. Ferguson’s work examines the causes of achievement gaps, the ways in which they manifest, and how these gaps can be closed. His keynote address was followed by a panel discussion. Welcoming remarks at the start of the event were made by Louise J. Corwin, Executive Director of Ready At Five; Dr. Sydney L. Cousin, Superintendent of Howard County Public Schools; Louis R. Cestello, Regional President of Greater Baltimore PNC Financial Services Group, Inc. and Chair of Ready At Five; and Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick, Superintendent of Maryland Public Schools.

**Summary of a Ready At Five Symposium**

**keynote address**

In his keynote address, Dr. Ronald Ferguson explained in depth the data and dynamics pertaining to achievement gaps, often using slides of important research findings and relating personal anecdotes. Highlights of his remarks:

- Achievement gaps do not exist at birth, but are created early in life. At age one, children of all racial groups display roughly the same achievement curve. But by age three, the curve has split apart by race. Evidence is accumulating that this is due to early childhood experience.
- Much of the work needed to close gaps has to do with influencing the adults who influence young children. We need to give adults easy-to-understand rules of thumb for interacting with children in ways that nurture learning.
- One such helpful device is thinking of the adult-child interaction as a “serve and volley.” A child’s attempt to communicate is a “serve,” an adult’s picking up on what that child is trying to express is a “volley,” and so on. In Dr. Ferguson’s words: “We could teach every parent that any time your child looks you in the eye, from the time they are the tiniest infant, that is an attempt to communicate, and you should respond in a supportive way.”
- Research shows that the most effective climate for raising achievement is what Dr. Ferguson calls “High Help/High Perfectionism,” which means adults setting high expectations for children but also providing a high degree of help and encouragement. This is a form of the “serve and volley” approach, and it contrasts sharply with three less fruitful practices, listed in declining order of effectiveness: “High Help/Low Perfectionism,” “Low Help/High Perfectionism,” and “Low Help/Low Perfectionism.”

## keynote address

- Data disprove some popular assumptions about how racial achievement gaps work. It turns out, for instance, that a key deterrent to student participation in lessons in heavily black and Hispanic classrooms is children teasing their peers for making mistakes – that is, children highly value achievement but fear being mocked for giving a wrong answer. Teachers often don't realize that this begins as early as first grade – and by fifth grade it happens twice as often in primarily black and Hispanic classrooms as it does in primarily white ones. Another revealing fact is that the achievement gap is widest between the most educated populations of different racial groups. For example, the achievement gap between the children of highly-educated whites and highly-educated blacks is larger than the gap between less-educated whites and less-educated blacks.
- What a teacher believes about a child's potential is less important than whether that teacher uses behaviors with the child that are known to nurture achievement. The key question for districts in enabling teachers to maximize children's potential then becomes, Dr. Ferguson said, "What are the measures we want people to take, and what are the incentives and supports we're going to provide in order to get people to take those measures?" The three-pointed teaching approach of Dr. Ferguson's Tripod Project at Harvard – creating deep teacher knowledge of content, using effective instructional techniques, and building supportive relationships with students – explores specific methods for doing this, such as a protocol called "Teaching the Hard Stuff" that looks closely at the reasons why a student is struggling.
- School districts need to address gaps by setting goals for all children – including high-achieving children – against a statewide benchmark (such as an average for high achievers) rather than pitting racial groups in the district against one another (e.g., "this group" needs to reach the level of "that group.") The true goal is to reach high achievement across the board.
- The need to close early childhood achievement gaps is so urgent because lost developmental time in a child's life cannot be reclaimed. Dr. Ferguson used the example of his own adopted son: "He didn't have a whole lot of stimulation in his foster homes before age three. He's made a lot of progress since age three. But we can't go back and recapture those first three years. If we could, he'd be a different person."
- Limitations can be taught. To use an unusual but striking example: Fleas placed in a jar with a closed lid will learn to leap just high enough to avoid hitting the lid. When the lid is removed, they will still never jump beyond that point – because they don't know that they can. Children's achievement gaps are insidious because they train young children to embrace limitations. We must reach children early enough in life to prevent this.
- The ultimate goal is "group proportional equality with equal excellence" by race, ethnicity, and nationality, said Dr. Ferguson. "We're always going to have a bell-shaped curve with regard to performance. But someone's race or ethnicity shouldn't give you any clue where on that curve they're likely to fall."
- Overall, in order to close gaps, we need:
  - Youth cultures that more consistently support behaviors conducive to academic learning and the pursuit of excellence
  - Parenting that nurtures intellectual growth and balances warmth and responsiveness with structure and demandingness
  - Teaching that engages and challenges students to achieve at higher levels
  - Community supports to supplement parents and teachers
  - Leadership to organize, guide and motivate others in a 21st Century Social Movement for Excellence with Equity

"This research presentation really gave us an idea of where we need to focus, especially in improving our parent education programs."

Maria Virginia Navarro, Ed. D., Special Assistant to the CAO, Baltimore City Public Schools.



“I can take the information I gained today back to my other staff members so we can work with the schools and others to help bridge the gaps. I now understand that all of our programs need to work together.”

Harriett Bell, Judy Center, Queen Anne’s County Public Schools

## panel discussion

Each of the five panel members made an individual presentation of his or her main ideas about addressing achievement gaps. Highlights of their observations:

### **Dr. Andres A. Alonso** **CEO, Baltimore City Public School System**

Dr. Alonso praised Dr. Ferguson’s suggested pursuit of “proportional equality” among all races. He added that socio-economic class is also a central issue; he said there are, for example, in effect “two populations of white students” in the Baltimore City Public Schools: lower-income and higher income, and so issues of poverty and race must be addressed in tandem. He said that investments in early childhood education have brought clear gains in school readiness in Baltimore schools, but that the lack of state aid to cover mandated pre-kindergarten for low-income children means that such pre-K programs come at a cost to other district efforts, requiring a difficult choice among crucial priorities. Finally, he observed that the city’s remarkable recent 40% gains in school readiness have elevated the approach to achievement gaps from a “remediation game” focused on deficiencies to an “acceleration game that floats all boats.”

### **Dr. Carole Brunson Day** **President, National Black Child Development Institute**

Dr. Day, leader of an organization that works to improve the quality of life for black children and their families, said it is important to see early childhood learning and school readiness not as a condition that simply exists within children, but as an interaction among children/families, schools, and communities. She briefly described the NBCDI’s “SPARK” initiative (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids), a

program in seven states and the District of Columbia that employs this collaborative approach to supporting early learning in children aged three to six who come from low-income families. Among the keys to success in such an effort, she said, are health screening, parent education, strengthening teachers’ cultural competency and developmental assessment skills, and bringing together business leaders, public officials, and early childhood advocates. One of the outcomes of this partnership in the District of Columbia has been passage of legislation that created universal pre-K for all three- and four-year-old children in D.C.

### **Dr. William R. Hite, Jr.,** **Superintendent, Prince George’s County Public Schools**

Dr. Hite alluded to the achievement gap between his primarily African-American district and the state as a whole, but he also reiterated the importance of class as an intra-county issue of “the haves versus the have-nots: what is expected from some but not all.” He also cited statistics that show the urgency of achievement gaps: there are more African Americans in prison than in higher education; Hispanic and black students are three times likelier than whites to drop out of high school; in the past decade, corrections spending has increased by 104% while higher education spending has decreased by 21%. He identified three core elements for raising achievement: 1.) Increasing children’s skills by giving them access to more challenging material instead of waiting for them to “prove” they have these skills; 2.) Working with adults to change their assumptions about children’s abilities; and 3.) Determining where to assign accountability for children’s progress in school.

“The symposium reinforced for me that the work our organization and others do in the home with children aged 0 to 5 does have an effect on school readiness and children’s achievements later in life.”

Colleen Wilburn, Program Coordinator, Center for Children, Charles County

## panel discussion

### **Dunbar Brooks** **Manager, Data Development, Baltimore** **Metropolitan Council**

Mr. Brooks co-chaired the 2007 Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland’s African-American Males, which studied and suggested remedies for the systemic under-valuing and under-achievement of African-American boys and young men. He highlighted several of the report’s recommendations as being essential for closing achievement gaps: 1.) Fund a Judy Center for every elementary school where there is a documented gap between African-American and white achievement. 2.) In areas of high need, provide the physical, dental, and mental health services needed to support greater academic achievement. 3.) Provide educational materials to young African-American fathers and their children. 4.) Encourage certain ex-offenders convicted of non-violent felonies to volunteer in their communities. Mr. Brooks also stressed the need to provide access to quality early care and education, and to have mentoring programs that begin early in a child’s life instead of waiting until the teenage years when it may be too late to reach a young person.

### **Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick** **Superintendent, Maryland Public Schools**

Dr. Grasmick stated that early care and education (ECE) is so pivotal in children’s lives that, “If I were queen for a day, which I’m not, I would eliminate the senior year of high school and place those resources in the zero-to-five population. The yield on that would be much greater.” She favors reconfiguring high school so that some students complete it in three years, some in four, and some in five, depending upon their needs. Many young people, she said, are truly ready to graduate in three years, and she favors their doing so. She also feels strongly that even in this time of economic hardship, Maryland’s allocations to early care and education must not be cut. There needs to be, she said, more public awareness of the neuroscience that makes a child’s early years such an irreplaceable period of learning, and there must be a stronger sense of the importance of ECE to counteract what she called the frequent “lack of respect” for the work of fostering early childhood learning and school readiness. Moreover, she said, Maryland’s ECE initiatives involve not only schools, but a broad swath of people working with children, including providers at family day care programs, child care centers, Judy Centers, Head Start, and elsewhere. Communities, she said, must come together to declare that ECE is an indispensable need.

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Visit [www.readyatfive.org](http://www.readyatfive.org) for video clips and other information from this symposium, and for insight and data on this and other issues involving children and education.