



A synopsis of L. Scott Miller's visit to the Twin Cities

Summary by Tim McDonald, reactions from Ted Kolderie and Bob Wedl

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On December 17 and 18, Education Evolving brought L. Scott Miller to the Twin Cities to engage in a series of conversations about minority achievement in K12 and at the university levels. Scott believes that there should be greater focus placed on African American and Hispanic students who are among the middle and professional classes, as defined by parent education level and family income. Some of the greatest disparities in performance come “within-class,” he argues, at these higher socio-economic levels.

Scott Miller is currently executive director of the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics at Arizona State University. Prior to this he was executive director for the Consortium for High Academic Performance at UC Berkeley, focused on increasing the number of high GPA undergraduates from underrepresented groups at selective institutions. He also has served as director of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement at the College Board, senior vice president at the Council for Aid to Education, and senior program officer at the Exxon Education Foundation. His views are spelled out in his 1997 book, *An American Imperative*.

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Introductory comments by Scott Miller at the Committee of the Achievement Gap

While there has been evidence of gains by racial subgroups in GPA and test scores as recently as the 1970's and 80's, gaps among the top achievers of all races/ethnicities are larger now than the 1990's. Achievement gaps are not isolated to students of low Socio-Economic Status (SES). In fact they are most pronounced within-class between African American/Hispanic and White students. This indicates the presence of factors suppressing achievement beyond SES.

What is going on with the achievement of African American and Hispanic students?

A “deal was cut” in the 1960's that, in effect, the United States would target focus on raising achievement along socio-economic lines broadly, instead of racial specifically. There was more white poverty at the time and it would not have been possible to get the same reforms should race have been the principal justification. As a partial consequence national focus has become fixated on racial disparities within the low SES stratum only.

High SES African American, Hispanic, and Native American students perform at the levels of low SES white students on key measurements: Grade Point Average (GPA) in college and

graduate school, the SAT test, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. As an example, African American students who have a parent with a graduate degree average GPA's in college that are equal to those of white students whose parents have at best a high school diploma.

The ramifications are many: top technology and engineering firms are having trouble recruiting African Americans and Hispanics because there are not enough graduates in these fields who meet their minimum GPA requirements for interviews. Top-tier colleges are required to quietly lower entrance requirements in order to maintain balance. Bill Gates has devoted money to scholarship programs because he cannot integrate Microsoft through affirmative action. One hundred 3.7 GPA's in computer science will "clean up over one hundred 3.2's, always."

Without openly addressing the disparities amongst the middle and professional classes, people are left to draw their own conclusions—often of racial inferiority. The racial prejudice that exists today is more subtle, backed by such observed evidence, and therefore very potent.

In order to make gains on these stereotypes society needs to break through the "doubt structure" that all people perpetuate. This is more personal than the commonly cited institutional racism, because it is personal—personal doubt in the ability of these two racial groups to achieve.

Much of your work seeks to increase the number of available 'proven' strategies in raising minority achievement?

There are currently very few programs that have been proven to work for middle and upper SES racial minority students based on large, multi-site samples and scientific analysis. This is because education in the United States is not structured for such research and development. Two or three year grant programs are common, but this is not real experimentation.

What can be done about this?

There needs to be pots of money that can fund sustained programs with thorough assessment. The federal government is not structured to do this sort of work. It would need to come through private initiative. The best solution appears to be the creation of new foundation think tanks that are staffed with non-educators—medical doctors, engineers, business executives, and other familiar with the processes of real R&D—who are used to performing trials and assessments.

Scott says that he cannot fill a closet with university education academics that have done serious work on raising performance of African Americans and Hispanics in the middle and professional classes. There is a fixation on low SES students only.

In a classroom teachers gravitate to the lowest performing students, as does curriculum. Teachers make a conscious decision to do so, in good faith, but end up leaving the higher performing students of color behind. Focus on the achievement gap has been directed to the lowest rung—bringing them up to the point of proficiency on/for standardized tests. This leaves the higher-achieving students behind, or perhaps more accurately put, it leaves them stagnant.

What is inhibiting the students' performance?

Most essentially, reading comprehension and analytical ability. Already in elementary school it is apparent that African American and Hispanic students are falling behind. The inability to thoroughly understand not how to read, but what they are reading, leads directly to underperformance down the road.

High achievement is intergenerational, accelerated by the family's amassing of human capital, financial capital, health, and polity (inclusion). There are serious gaps on each of these fronts for both African American and Hispanic students.

What kind of effect does poor performance in K12 have on their college experience?

Here there is an “over subscription” that occurs: standardized testing (where the disparities are not as dramatic) over predicts how well African American and Hispanic students will do in college, as measured by GPA.

There is a virtual absence of highly credentialed—“competitively credentialed”—African American and Hispanic students graduating from top colleges. This is making it difficult for elite PhD programs to admit students who do not have the desired record of performance.

The language around affirmative action needs to be tightened. Instead, affirmative achievement is more relevant. The same goes for the term “the talented ten,” because there are so few high achieving students that to constitute ten percent the truly average would have to be included.

But what should be done about this?

In addition to the foundation-driven, acutely focused R&D performed by non-educators, early childhood intervention is essential. Some programs that have shown empirical gains include multi-year, full-time Pre-K. Undoubtedly other options such as Age 3-to-Grade 3 are viable as well. The important thing is to measure results. When it comes to teaching reading, there should be less attention around technical reading skills and more focus on literary competence.

Are you saying there is not enough conversation about the gaps? Are not these disparities you speak of something that we are already aware of?

Society speaks often and readily of the “achievement gap,” but this most always is in the context of low SES students—or, as it effects the middle and professional classes, the reason for it is racism or more specifically institutional racism.

By focusing on “racism” advocates have often missed the boat. A district with a majority of African American students can fill its schools with all African American teachers—but two realities remain. The first is that evidence shows students still are not learning reading comprehension or other skills necessary for success. The second is that African American professionals—including educators—on average are significantly lower credentialed than white adults, as measured by tools such as GPA in undergraduate and graduate schools. Certainly

there are non-quantifiable benefits educators can bring to the classroom and their relationships with students, but otherwise the educators are not “competitive credentialed.”

This is thoroughly backed by data from mid- and upper-tier colleges and universities. Behind closed doors, unpublished and unreleased data from top schools show that there are not enough African American and Hispanic students to fill their ranks. Attention must be shifted from a form of affirmative action to affirmative achievement.

What does Scott’s research mean for public education?

He concludes that early childhood and the elementary years are important. His work reinforces the notion that innovation and experimentation are increasingly needed to find new ways educating. Indeed as is readily apparent, conventional schooling has not worked for many young people—and a vast majority of African Americans and Hispanics. Scott’s work is especially troubling in that it demonstrates gaps are not due entirely to socio-economics.

Nor is the need to innovate limited to curriculum and pedagogy. The very structure of school may need to be reconsidered in lieu of its inability to effectively educate even those students who are supposed not to be “at risk.” What does the increased involvement of private foundations and non-profits mean for public education?

The mechanism of chartering has been used increasingly by minority groups—cultural, racial, linguistic—in Minnesota and throughout the country in response to a history of poor experiences in the district sector. As communities respond by creating their own independent public schools, others have begun to take notice.

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What did we learn from Scott Miller's presentation?

From Ted Kolderie:

1. Assertions from superintendents and others that they can close the achievement gap in a few years if just given (/fill in the blank/) should be taken as expressions of concern, of good intent, of worthy motives, of noble goals. Such statements should not be taken literally. they are not real. The gaps cannot be closed in a few years. The gaps visible today result from gaps created in earlier generations, over a very long period of time. Closing them will take decades rather than years.
2. A key question obviously is whether we're talking about a gap in basic skills. Miller is talking about the gap 'at the top'; about high achievement. He wants all racial/ethnic groups to show the same distribution of achievement; the same proportion in the "top ten" in each. It might be easier to close the gap in basic skills. It's very hard to close the gap in high achievement.

3. The gaps are rooted in experience early in life. Once developed they persist through the grade-school years, through the college years, through life. Nobody really knows how to "close the gaps" once these have been created.
4. The only real chance to deal with the gap is with very aggressive efforts in the early years.
5. In the early years the key is reading. And, with reading, vocabulary. And, with vocabulary, context and meaning. It does not work for young children just to know the 'mechanics' of reading; to be able to recognize words; to sound-out words. The tests they will soon be taking will ask them to interpret what they have read. For this they must know and understand words: lots of words; lots of concepts. It's one thing to know 'car' or 'house'. To understand 'previous' or 'ambitious' or 'sensible' or 'historic' -- or any other such abstraction -- is quite a different matter; much more difficult and challenging.
6. Young kids must be with people who have these verbal skills; who know meanings and context. This means that child care alone cannot be enough. The salary levels in this field simply do not, can not, bring in people with the required skills.
7. Ways might be found to close the gaps in the later years. But that would require new efforts at research-and-development. No such efforts are now under way. In medicine there are: To address problems like cancer or heart disease, large and well-financed programs of R&D are organized and work for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years until they come up with answers. Neither the government nor private (foundation) community is organizing and financing efforts like this on the problem of improving-learning.

Bob Wedl responding to Ted's comments:

1. A significant contribution made by Scott was in better defining the "achievement gap." Most think of the gap in terms of minimum basic academic skills because those are the test scores published most frequently. "If we can get everyone to pass the reading test the gap will be closed" mentality. Scott's work emphasizes that the gap is all across the normal curve but is actually larger at the far right-tail of the curve...the high performing end. In terms of making long term improvement where families provide the incentive, the "far right...tail" is where the gap must be closed.

Although Scott did not say this in public, if an individual is at either the 15th percentile...or the 10th percentile, it isn't going to matter very much even though logarithmically, the 10th percentile is 50% lower than the 15th percentile. However, the difference between the 50th percentile and the 75th percentile (50% higher) will make a significant difference in the performance of the student....or from the 60th percentile to the 90th percentile will make an even greater difference. The point is that Scott's data shows the absence of kids of color at the higher ends of the curve...the "far right." This is where the gap really makes a huge difference in terms of the future.

2. We do not have an R&D system in education. We have short-term projects being worked on but nothing that can be called "research and development." The government financed R&D efforts are usually up to 36 months... maybe 60 months for a very few. In the health system, research is decades long. Also, education research is not well done because no one wants to be in the control group.
3. The MN MCA reading test at 3rd grade has a low definition of "proficiency"...about the 35th percentile. Most think "proficiency" and "grade level" mean the same thing. Far from it. Grade-level is the 50th percentile. The MCA 5th grade reading approaches the 50th percentile and the 11th grade reading MCA is at the 75th percentile. We do not have a linear definition of "proficiency" in Minnesota reading. When we say that a district like Minneapolis has about half of the 3rd graders proficient in reading as measured by the MCA...that is an awful report of success!
4. Improving reading comprehension is key according to Scott...and of course that is true. Directly related is improving vocabulary. Kids from affluent families are exposed to a rich vocabulary consisting of tens of thousands of words more than the poor families (usually) of color. Scott suggests that our pre-k programs that focus primarily on teaching the mechanics of reading are missing the mark. At an early age, a focus on establishing a rich vocabulary is key. (Note: he and I differed a bit on this point. I argue that pre-k must focus on vocabulary certainly but also on the mechanics of early literacy. Middle class kids come to kindergarten knowing these basic mechanics...and usually are reading. Kindergarten is not the time to start teaching a child the basic mechanics of reading...sounds of letters, rhyming, alliteration, etc.)
5. The point was made by Alyce Dillon that she has any number of persons employed at PICA Head Start that did not have a high GPA or SAT scores and they are doing good work. Scott and I had discussed that scenerio on the way from the airport. Alyce is right in that if good training and development is provided along with a livable wage, many individuals will perform just fine without college degrees or high test scores. Other factors are important. Miller would agree but would quickly add that while high test scores may not be a factor for many jobs, they are for the fields where he is seeing the "acheivement gap." This "achievement gap" is a key issue that must be addressed in the long term.

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