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Achievement Gap Commission Hints At Upcoming Recommendations

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HARTFORD —

The governor's commission investigating ways to close Connecticut's education achievement gap, the nation's biggest, hinted Monday at some of the recommendations it might make in its final report due this fall.

Although no specifics were given, the commission suggested that it is considering ideas ranging from how to recruit the best teachers to changing the way the state pays for public schools.

At a conference scheduled on the first day of school in many towns, the Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement said it will release a report Oct. 20 with recommendations to address huge academic disparities between the state's low-income students and their more affluent peers.

The recommendations will be part of a 10-year plan that will focus on:

- Attracting the best teachers and school leaders to Connecticut
- Providing support to teachers to increase their effectiveness.
- Dealing with consistently low-performing schools.
- Examining how Connecticut finances its public education system.
- Suggesting a governance structure that emphasizes accountability.
- Expanding preschool education.

The commission began formulating the recommendations after holding six public hearings throughout the state to gather recommendations from teachers, parents and others concerned about the gap. The commission also consulted with more than 150 education experts and visited Delaware, Massachusetts and New York City to examine their school systems.

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Commission Chairman Steve Simmons said he realizes that Connecticut is facing a huge budget deficit, but believes that a lot of the money Connecticut spends on education could be reallocated and spent more effectively.

Commission members also acknowledged the progress the state has made in the past year to improve schools and address inequities. They noted that some schools, particularly in Hartford and Bridgeport, have made incremental gains in student performance, showing that the achievement gap can be closed. Simmons also acknowledged that state education leaders made strenuous efforts to try to win Race to the Top federal school reform funding.

"We are very disappointed that Connecticut didn't win," Simmons said, "but if you look around at our neighbors who did win, it does suggest we have a long way to go."

He complimented the legislature for passing a school reform legislation in May that calls for revamping the high school curriculum, requiring schools to offer Advanced Placement classes and empowering parents to force change in failing schools, among other measures, calling it "a beginning."

"We hope we will build on it. We still have a very long way to go," said Simmons, CEO of Simmons/Patriot Media and Communications.

Member Ramani Ayer, retired CEO of The Hartford, said the commission's visits to other states also revealed that the state has to have a collective will to change and improve, from the governor to school systems, teachers and parents.

During their research, commission members said they uncovered some startling statistics about the state's achievement gap. Although Connecticut is the richest state, per capita, in the nation, its lowest performing students fall within the lowest 20th percentile on national tests, results comparable with lower-performing states such as Alabama and Mississippi.

Connecticut spends more on education — \$14,610 per pupil — than 46 other states, yet low-income fourth- and eighth-graders are, on average, three grade levels behind their peers in reading and math.

The commission also found that wealthier communities, such as West Hartford and Greenwich, have even larger academic gaps between their low-income students and their wealthier peers than poorer cities such as Hartford and New Haven.

"In our wealthier districts there's a really stark contrast between how districts are serving their low-income students. There's something about Connecticut's education system where even in wealthier districts where children sit side-by-side with wealthier students, there is still a tremendous gap," said Pei Pei Ma, co-executive director of the commission.

State Department of Education spokesman Tom Murphy said he is concerned that the commission may be giving the impression that Connecticut is not as effective as other states in improving the performance of poor and minority students. He pointed out that the state has made a big investment in preschool and has focused intently on data-supported work to improve poor urban areas.

The commission, a volunteer group consisting mostly of business leaders, said the achievement gap is not only a tragedy for those children, but for the entire state. Forty percent of the state's low-income students — about 10,000 — drop out of high school each year. And each drop-out costs the state about a half million dollars over his lifetime.

"Connecticut is highly dependent on a skilled labor force and the state's businesses are finding it difficult to fill jobs with well-trained workers," said commission member Dudley N. Williams Jr. "We have a moral and economic imperative to educate our children in a way that leads that to good jobs and self-sufficiency."

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