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Home, health tied to closing student achievement gap

By Karen Rouse

Denver Post Staff Writer

A nation that relies on school reform policies to close the achievement gap while ignoring the health and housing needs or family culture of disadvantaged students is engaged in "hypocrisy," a nationally known author said Tuesday.

It's unreasonable to expect that a child with untreated dental problems and a 600-word vocabulary who is read to by his parents just once a week can perform as well as a middle-class peer who knows 2,000 words and is read to daily, said Richard Rothstein, author of "Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap."

"No matter how good the instruction of the school is ... you're going to have a difference in achievement," said Rothstein, who spoke at a forum put on by the Bell Policy Center, a Denver nonprofit research and advocacy agency.

In Colorado and across the nation, a persistent gap exists between the average test scores of black and Latino students and their white peers, and between poor and wealthier students.

On the Colorado Student Assessment Program test, the state test for reading, writing, math and science, there is on average a 30 percentage-point difference between the average scores of minority and poor students and white and middle-class students.

Lawrence Hernandez, a co-founder of Cesar Chavez Academy in Pueblo, one of the state's most successful schools, also spoke at Tuesday's forum at the Westin Tabor Center Denver downtown.

Hernandez said educators have used poor health care, poverty and other factors as "excuses" to explain the low academic performance of black, Latino and poor students for years.

Despite a student body at Chavez that is more than 80 percent Latino and 65 percent poor, Hernandez said a no-excuses policy and relentless staff have fueled high performance.

He countered that public schools may be the only tool disadvantaged students have to achieve educational parity.

Cesar Chavez, he said, is closing the achievement gap by hiring a strong staff that expects students to perform well, placing students in aggressive tutoring programs, building partnerships with parents, and giving students opportunities to travel to places such as New York and Europe.

Rothstein, who is also a visiting professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, said he believes a dedicated staff and strong curriculum can improve performance.

However, he said laws such as President Bush's No Child Left Behind act place the burden of all the social agencies in the country on schools.

"The achievement gap cannot be closed by better schools and better teaching," said Rothstein.

The nation needs to hold other agencies, such as those that oversee health care and affordable housing, accountable, Rothstein said.

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To hear why No Child fails, just listen to its supporters

By Diane Carman
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It wasn't meant to be this way. Lawrence Hernandez was supposed to be the counterpoint to Richard Rothstein, who calls No Child Left Behind and its philosophical underpinnings "fraudulent."

Instead, at a forum sponsored this week by the Bell Policy Center, Hernandez proved Rothstein's point again and again.

Rothstein insists that the data are in and the evidence is clear: Great schools alone cannot reduce the achievement gap. Expecting that is irresponsible.

The education researcher, author and visiting professor at Columbia University Teachers College points to the vast disparities in child-rearing practices, health care, nutrition, early childhood educational opportunities and access to decent housing as the real factors affecting student achievement. Hernandez calls those "excuses."

The founder and principal of Cesar Chavez Academy charter school in Pueblo said he believes that schools can have a tremendous impact on a child's life. In fact, he said, "the public school system is the only system that can make a difference in a child's life."

Just look at Cesar Chavez, he said. It's 80 percent Latino, with 65 percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunches, 13 percent learning English as a second language and 10 percent receiving special education

services. Still, despite those challenges, third-graders achieved 100 percent proficiency on state standardized reading tests in 2004.

While Hernandez attributes that success to high expectations, academic rigor, talented teachers and strong leadership, other factors also contributed to the students' exceptional performance.

"The parents have to buy into what we're doing," he said, and that starts when they demonstrate their commitment to education by enrolling their children in the charter school.

The school also operates a preschool program, provides on-site health clinics with free immunizations and flu shots for children, and brings in physicians to give free physical examinations to children interested in joining athletic teams.

No student transportation is provided, so public and private money can be used to reduce class sizes, enhance teachers' salaries and provide tutors for children who fall behind. But inevitably, this creates a barrier for children whose parents are not willing or able to deliver them to school every day. In other words, not just any kid can go to Cesar Chavez.

Rothstein said there are plenty of examples across the country where the children of disadvantaged-but-highly-motivated parents are concentrated in intense, rigorous schools and do better than the mountains of statistics predict. "That doesn't mean the average is not meaningful," he said.

In Colorado, the averages show that since the state began mandatory testing to measure achievement, the gap between rich and poor students has widened. With rare exceptions, despite intense pressure and threats to dismantle low-performing schools, children from poor families still are not achieving proficiency at rates better than when the frenzy over educational accountability began.

This is the case across the country, Rothstein said. We're engaging in a "national orgy of hypocrisy."

"We say we want to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children, and we're simultaneously withdrawing support from the social and economic institutions that could enhance equality.

"Holding out the goal of closing the achievement gap through school reform alone is dangerous," Rothstein said. "Holding schools responsible for a goal they can't meet will doom public education."

For those who reject the Jeffersonian ideal of free public education for all, the destruction of the public school system is something to celebrate cynically along with the growing achievement gap.

For everybody else, Rothstein's work offers an ominous warning: If the orgy of hypocrisy continues, the global economy will leave us behind – all of us.