
**The
Jacqueline P. Danzberger
Memorial Lecture**

Third Annual

**SCHOOL BOARDS:
PART OF THE
PROBLEM
OR
PART OF THE
SOLUTION?**

Presented by

*Eli Broad
Chairman of
AIG SunAmerica Inc.
&
Founder, The Broad
Foundation*

*April 6, 2003
San Francisco, California*

**Co-Sponsored by
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October 2003

Dear Colleague:

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) and its partner, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), are pleased to send you a copy of the third annual Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture, presented at NSBA's Conference (April 2003). The speaker, Eli Broad, Founder of The Broad Foundation and Chairman of AIG SunAmerica Inc., challenged school board members to use their important leadership role to advance student achievement for all children and to resist the temptation to micromanage. Mr. Broad admitted that he did not have all of the answers and offered strong suggestions about the duties school boards must undertake to get serious about improving student achievement and putting children first.

Continuing a tradition that began two years ago, this lecture was given in honor and memory of Jacqueline P. Danzberger, the director of governance programs at IEL from 1983 until her death in April 2000. Jackie, as she was known to friends and colleagues, left an indelible mark on the world of school governance. During her 17-year tenure at IEL, Jackie's work included initiating, developing, and managing programs and activities related to education governance, management, and evaluation. The American School Board Journal referred to Jackie as one of a handful of people composing the "intellectual core" driving school governance reform.

We are indebted to the partnership between the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) that established the annual lecture and to the many donors whose financial support make it possible to continue to remember and commemorate Jackie's work.

Anne Bryant
Executive Director, NSBA

Elizabeth L. Hale
President, IEL

Remarks from Eli Broad...

When I started to plan for this speech, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I have never served as a school board member. I am not a cabinet secretary, a teacher, a principal or a university professor.

So, why am I here?

I am here because I received my education in public schools, because I believe in the public education system in our country and because I am committed to making America's public schools the best in the world.

I am a product of the public schools in Detroit, Michigan, and a great public university, Michigan State. I was the first in my family to earn a college degree. My parents were immigrants from Lithuania. They came to America for a better life for themselves and our family. And they – along with the opportunity that our great country provides – gave me the gift of a strong public education.

With this gift – and a bit of hard work – I was able to build two Fortune 500 companies. Kaufman & Broad, now known as KB Home, made it possible for many young families to own their own homes. SunAmerica made it easier for working men and women to save for retirement. I have been fortunate to be able to “do well” by “doing good.”

So, I am here because in America you don't need to be from the right race, right religion, right class, right background or right schools to reach the highest levels of business, civic or cultural leadership.

I am here because I believe the path that my public education opened for me is now too steep – or even closed off entirely – for far too many young people in America.

How many of the children from my old neighborhood – or inner-city neighborhoods like it – are able to embark on the same journey I was fortunate to undertake?

How many of the children from my alma mater (Central High School in Detroit) – or big urban high schools like it – are able to go on to college and a better life?

The answer to both of these questions is: not many, not many at all.

I have no doubt that the children sitting in our classrooms possess the intellect and drive to go as far and to soar as high as they want. But our public school systems are struggling mightily to provide every student with the education he or she needs to get there.

That is why four years ago our family established The Broad Foundation with a commitment of 400 million dollars. We created this new foundation because we believe there is no more important contribution to our nation's future than a determined, long-term commitment to improve public education.

The Broad Foundation's mission is to dramatically improve K-12 urban education through better governance, management and labor relations. I believe that a strong and competent governing body, combined with a talented CEO and senior management team, can make a profound difference in turning our school systems from lackluster bureaucracies into high-performing enterprises.

And that is why I am here today: because school boards – urban, suburban and rural – must be part of the solution, not part of the problem, when it comes to improving education in our country.

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I want to lay out in sharp, no-nonsense terms the challenges facing school boards and how we should fundamentally rethink how boards go about their work. I intend to be blunt, and I hope you will see me as an independent voice – not constrained by polls, election results or special interests. Plus, I am almost 70 years old, and after seven decades, I feel there is little time to be polite when it comes to the future of our country. Now, I'm not going to be as biting as Mark Twain, who so infamously said: "In the first place, God made idiots. This was for practice. Then, he made school boards."

The truth is, I don't think that name-calling or finger-pointing will get us anywhere, and unfortunately, the debate about public education too often descends into just that. Let's face it. When it comes to the results we are seeing in many public school systems, there is enough blame for everyone. But I have to say that far too often I have witnessed school boards whose actions run counter to improving our schools.

I believe that serving on a school board – elected or appointed – is a high calling. It is more important than serving on a local planning commission, a police board, an airport commission or the board of a Fortune 500 company. As school board members, you are working for the most important asset our communities have – our children.

But my respect for the importance of school board service will not cloud the urgency I feel about the state of our schools. So, I will describe the challenges as I see them and offer some recommendations.

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You and I know that our schools are not making the grade.

When it comes to math and science, we rank at the back of the pack of industrialized nations. In some of our fastest-growing communities, dropout rates are sky-high. And in many of our urban areas, seven out of ten children are not proficient in reading or math. According to the Education Trust, of every 100 African-American students who begin kindergarten, only 16 obtain a Bachelor's degree by the time they are 24. Among Latinos, the number drops to six.

These facts, unfortunately, are not new. I know many parents, educators and politicians were shocked in 1983 after reading *A Nation at Risk*. And their frustration with public education continued as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (or NAEP) exam revealed little or no improvement in reading, math and science scores. In 1998, the dismal performance of American students led to the publication of *A Nation Still At Risk*, and too many citizens gave up on our public schools.

Many are promoting vouchers as the only way to save children from our failing schools. I do not share the views of these critics. I do not support the widespread use of vouchers.

Like everyone in this room and thousands of teachers, parents and policymakers, I believe

in public education. The question is: why? Why should so many of us care about improving our schools and reversing these dismal statistics? Why should we stick with this tough work when so many others look away?

The truth is, the very fate of our nation rests on our public education system. Our children are the greatest assets in our society, and they must be our number one investment. Securing a strong return on this investment affects us all.

Globalization and free trade have pushed our country from a manufacturing economy to an information economy. Middle-class manufacturing jobs have left – or are leaving – our shores. As a result, we now have two types of workers: “service workers,” who earn 6 to 15 dollars an hour, and “knowledge workers,” who make significantly more and have longer, more fulfilling, more marketable careers.

Our 21st Century information economy requires larger and larger numbers of “knowledge workers” – employees who possess strong analytical, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Unfortunately, our public education system is not providing our young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to become these future knowledge workers. This creates an ever-growing gap between the poor and the middle class.

There are 15,000 school districts across America. The largest 100 of these serve almost one-quarter of our nation’s public school children. About 40 percent of the students in these 100 districts are children of color. And, as many of you in suburban, rural and smaller urban communities can attest, the face of America is changing well beyond the borders of our central cities.

When we consider our changing economy in conjunction with demographic changes and our persistent achievement gap, an even more alarming picture starts to emerge.

Demographers tell us that by the year 2060, it is likely that people of color in America will be our majority population. In California, this demographic parity has already been reached. In Los Angeles, students of color currently make up over 90 percent of the district’s total enrollment.

If we plot the current achievement gap between white students and students of color against our expected national demographic shift, we are setting ourselves up for a failed society. If we continue on our current course, there is the real chance that we will become like many third-world countries, where a bimodal distribution of wealth between the very rich and the very poor – with no middle class – creates political and societal strife. Our prosperity and economic health as a nation rests on a highly skilled, highly educated workforce. We need knowledge workers to make our information economy run. The health of our democracy relies on bridging the gap between the skills of the middle class and the poor. And public education is that bridge.

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Last year, when Rod Paige gave this lecture, he said something that I believe deeply: “Where there is a good school district, there is a good school board; the reverse is true as well.”

Indeed, competent governance is critically important to the ability of our school districts to succeed.

We could debate for hours the definition of a competent school board, but let me outline four tenets that I believe each board must adopt:

You must believe that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity or income, can learn.

You must acknowledge that achievement gaps exist between high- and low-income students and between white and nonwhite children.

You must accept your role as an agent of change – not as a defender of the status quo.

You must accept responsibility that all children will learn at high levels under your leadership.

Your first responsibility as a school board member and education reformer is to believe that every child, regardless of ethnic background, skin color or economic circumstance, deserves an education that prepares him or her for college or success as a worker and citizen of America. If you don't hold this as a core belief, you shouldn't be serving on a school board.

You must then take responsibility for each student in your district. You must not only have the core belief that all children can learn, but that all children will learn at high levels, and that your job as a school board member is to make sure this is happening in your school system, no matter what.

School board members tell me all the time that they serve on a great school board. But when I ask them about student achievement in their district, they say things like, "It is not very good" or "We're just beginning to see some positive results in some areas."

I ask you: how can you have a great school board when your student achievement results are not very good? This is like a corporate board patting itself on the back while the company is headed toward bankruptcy.

When the "average" achievement numbers look pretty good, but the gap between low-income and high-income students is widening, the school board is failing.

When year after year the children of color in your schools are not performing at the same levels of excellence as white students, the school board is failing.

There are many who say that schools are not the only influence in a child's life. They say that poverty and abusive or uninterested parents and drugs all impact how a school goes about its work. This is true.

There are many who say that poor children, children of color and children with limited English language skills often pose unique challenges to schools. This, too, is true.

But, all too often we use poverty or skin color or "societal influences" as excuses. And this must stop.

Children of color are every bit as smart and have every bit as much potential as the white children in our country. Low-income children have the same right to an excellent public education as their higher-income peers.

As board members, your role is neither easy nor painless. Yet it is critical for you to take responsibility for the academic success of the children in your schools. If students are failing, then the school board must also be viewed as a failure. Together, we must push

past the traditional worn-out excuses of why children are not getting the education they deserve and get to the details of how we are going to give all of the children in America a world-class education.

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Though I don't pretend to have all the answers, I have four strong suggestions about the duties I think school boards must undertake if they want to get serious about improving student achievement and putting children first:

First, school board members must develop a set of bold goals focused on student achievement for their school district. These goals must be clear and measurable, and they must address head-on the gaps in academic performance among ethnic and income groups.

Second, board members must hire a strong CEO or superintendent who believes in the vision and goals, and then let him or her manage the district.

Third, board members must work with their superintendent to develop action plans and policies to transform the district, and provide him or her with political cover when tough decisions have to be made.

Fourth, board members must measure their results and reward or fire their superintendent based on performance.

These steps are simple, but simple and easy are not synonymous. The challenge you face in fulfilling these duties is resisting the temptation to micromanage. As Jackie Danzberger said, "Boards spend too little time on major concerns and too much time dealing with administrative trivia."

The business of a school board must be – in no uncertain terms – student achievement, student achievement and student achievement. Unfortunately, there is a huge temptation for boards to deviate from this focus and meddle in day-to-day operations.

Too often, school board members are budding politicians, well-intentioned parents determined to help just one school or one neighborhood, leaders of one ethnic or racial group with an adult-centered agenda or representatives of the district's employees the board is supposed to oversee.

As a result, everyone has an oar in the water. Everyone is rowing in a different direction, and the schools go every which way but forward.

In districts across the country, school board members take time to select the paint colors for new buildings, fix the lighting at the local football field, get special buses for field trips, or pepper staff with questions as a substitute for real accountability. Board members need to move away from individual special interests – adult interests – and focus collectively on the children's interests.

I know that districts are complicated enterprises with large budgets, numerous facilities, complex personnel issues and the like. I also know that many of our urban school business practices are outdated and imperfect. But too many school board members use these circumstances as excuses to act as managers. In doing so, they undermine the authority of the superintendent and end up micromanaging the district into paralysis.

In Tucson, during one year, the school board met 172 times. In West Virginia, a five-year

study of board minutes found that boards spent only three percent of their time on policy development, compared to 54 percent on administrative matters.

I have here a stack of school board agendas from several cities. Not one page deals with student achievement. Unfortunately, while boards spend endless hours on administrative details, too many students are left behind.

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At the same time, we all know a number of school boards that are successfully focusing on the main event: student achievement.

We've seen it in Norfolk, Virginia, where the school board adapted improving learning for all as its overriding goal. The board laid out a vision, set policy and developed an accountability model for all those involved in education – including the board itself.

The results were startling: 100 percent of their schools met state benchmarks in writing in all grades tested, and the gap between white and black students was reduced. Norfolk now has a number of “90/90/90 schools” – schools in which more than 90 percent of the student body is eligible for the free school lunch program, more than 90 percent are students of color and more than 90 percent meet high academic standards on the state’s Standards of Learning tests. This is truly remarkable.

Houston is another example of a rapidly improving district, and was named last year as the inaugural winner of The Broad Prize in Urban Education for demonstrating the greatest overall gains in student achievement, while at the same time reducing the gaps between ethnic and income groups.

We all know that Rod Paige was selected as U.S. Secretary of Education primarily because of his leadership in Houston. But what you may not know about Houston’s success is that Paige did not do it alone. In fact, he is the first to acknowledge that the school board provided the initial demand for reform, crafted a vision statement, developed a clear theory of action for change and even bought out a superintendent’s contract.

Secretary Paige, as most of you know, was on the Houston board for four years and served one year as president. His contribution to improving Houston’s schools was not just as a superintendent, it was also as a board member, and he will tell you that his success as superintendent would not have been possible without a strong, reform-minded board of education.

School boards make the difference. School boards govern. I believe in the power of school boards. I believe they have the potential to raise student achievement by holding themselves accountable for good board practices.

It is this belief that drove our Foundation to start The Broad Institute for School Boards, which we believe is an exciting complement to the many professional development opportunities provided by the NSBA and state school board associations.

The Institute is a five-day residential training program for newly elected and appointed board members modeled after Harvard’s induction programs for new mayors, college presidents and members of Congress. Last summer, 23 new board members from 10 large urban districts joined Anne Bryant, U.S. Secretary Rod Paige and other presenters at the Broadmoor Resort in Colorado Springs for

the inaugural Institute. We look forward to holding the second annual Institute this summer, and to deepening the Foundation's investment in training and supporting school boards.

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Before I conclude, I want to offer one more potential solution that, like some of my other statements this morning, may not be welcomed with open arms.

After studying this issue, it is clear to me that in some of our largest urban districts, mayoral control may be necessary to turn a failing system around. We have seen many children benefit from this type of crisis intervention in Chicago and Boston. Cleveland and Detroit have also benefited from stable leadership under mayoral control. New York City, which recently moved to mayoral control, is quickly showing promising early signs of success.

And while The Broad Foundation is investing heavily in improving the capacity of elected boards, I believe that meaningful progress in urban education in many places will have to come from governors and big-city mayors taking responsibility for underperforming school systems, and operating above the local fray.

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Let me end by saying that the responsibility we have – to make sure all of our children learn at high levels – is a task as daunting as it is important. I know many of you face budget cuts, teacher and principal shortages and union contracts that can make it difficult to get the best teachers into the most needy classrooms. I do not underestimate the difficulty of these challenges. As a CEO, I respect them greatly. But I also know that with a strong will

and a commitment to bold action, anything can be done.

What is needed is strong leadership – and good governance.

What is needed are school board members who will:

Face the truth about the current situation in our schools, particularly the growing gap between children achieving at high levels and those who are not;

Establish a vision, goals and policies that clearly set a course for dramatic improvement in student achievement districtwide;

Hire a superintendent who is courageous enough to do whatever it takes to meet those high expectations, and then let him or her manage the district; and finally,

Measure results and demand accountability, reward or fire the superintendent based on performance, and regularly share the district's successes and shortcomings with your community.

Have that courage. Set forth that vision. Be that type of leader. And not only will you be a more effective school board member, but you will begin to do the important work of giving all our children the world-class education they deserve.



The Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture presentation, printing, and distribution are made possible in part by a memorial fund established at the Institute for Educational Leadership in 2000 to honor her memory. The following persons have delivered the lecture:

- 2001 Richard W. Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education, 1992-2000
- 2002 Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2001-
- 2003 Eli Broad, Chairman of
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