
**The
Jacqueline P. Danzberger
Memorial Lecture**

Eighth Annual

**TOUGH QUESTIONS
(and Answers)
ABOUT LEARNING GAPS**

Presented by

*JOHN MERROW,
President, Learning Matters, and
Education Correspondent, The
Newshour With Jim Lehrer*

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Foreword

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) is pleased to provide this excerpted version of the 2008 Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture (Lecture). Delivered by former IEL staff member John Merrow, the Lecture was given at the Washington Policy Seminar, the annual gathering of IEL's Education Policy Fellowship Program (EPFP™), a year-long leadership development program in which Jackie was a participant; she also was the founding director of the Connecticut site of EPFP.

The Lecturer, John Merrow, Executive Producer and Host, Learning Matters, Inc. is well known for his work on The Merrow Report, as well as The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour on PBS. Merrow began his broadcasting career at IEL in 1974 when he created an educational radio program, Options in Public Education, that was broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR).

"Through NPR I could explore the issues," Merrow says, noting that his work at IEL (and his teachers at The Harvard Graduate School of Education) helped him get the important information out to the public. At the time Merrow started his career, the education beat seemed trivial to many reporters and was not the biggest page turner. However, Merrow says he has never viewed education reporting as a way station, and his passion for education reporting has never slowed down. Merrow has received two George Foster Peabody awards, 11 consecutive awards from the Education Writers Association, several Emmy nominations, and in 2006 he was awarded the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Alumni Council Award for Contributions to Education.

The 2008 Danzberger Lecture was a creative example of Merrow's reporting. He has spent over 30 years creating interesting and lively radio and television broadcasts and, more recently podcasts and blogs that dig deep into the vital issues resting below education's surface. For the Lecture,

Merrow “interviewed himself.” He asked the same hard questions that he puts before professional educators, policy makers, politicians, and other education stakeholders. You will be surprised, provoked—and touched—by Merrow’s trenchant observations about our nation’s learning gaps, especially the “affection gap” that he brings to light for the consideration of those in leadership and decision making positions in schools and districts.

We would like to express our thanks to SchoolNet, Inc., for their support of the 2008 JPD Lecture. Previous Lectures were supported by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the organization that helped establish this tribute to Jackie Danzberger. IEL remains grateful to NSBA for that partnership, as well as to the many donors who helped make the Danzberger Lecture a reality—a non-partisan platform to channel sound advice and encouragement to school board members and other decision makers responsible and accountable for leadership for learning.

Elizabeth L. Hale
President, IEL

Excerpted and edited “self-interview” by John Merrow—he asked and answered the following questions....

What has been the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)?

No Child Left Behind has proved one thing: Washington simply cannot and should not run public education. NCLB is a marvelous concept. “The soft bigotry of low expectations” is a phrase that should resonate for a long, long time. But NCLB has been a bipartisan disaster, at least from what I have found out by talking to teachers and with kids.

Do you think the failure of NCLB can be attributed to any single cause?

Well, yes. In a way, there are two causes. It is a travesty, a superficial travesty, called the achievement gap, which I would like to explain. But it is also cheap tests. This combination is doing a huge amount of harm to the kids NCLB is actually supposed to help.

You said “travesty of the achievement gap.” Most people are in favor of closing the achievement gap. Why are you calling it a travesty?

There are actually four gaps:

There is a gap in **opportunity**. Anybody who spends time in public schools knows how great this gap is. There is a gap in terms of resources that are available, whether highly qualified, terrific teachers, or facilities, or books.

There is an **expectations** gap. I have interviewed Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools in Washington, D.C., for The NewsHour. A number of the people in that school district say that maybe as many as half the teachers do not expect that the kids can learn.

That is the soft bigotry of low expectations.

There is a **leadership** gap. You can look at school boards and you can look at the unions, focusing almost, not exclusively, but far too much, on adult issues instead of having conversations about such issues as: the purpose of schooling, what do we want our kids to be able to do, or what outcomes do we seek? We don't have those conversations. It would be wonderful if one of the Presidential candidates could make a speech about education like Barack Obama's speech about race; to have that kind of conversation about the purposes of schooling—to push the envelope and raise the conversation to a much higher level. We need more leadership.

If you have those three gaps, inevitably you have an outcomes or achievement gap. When the focus is largely on outcomes, the results are disastrous. You get into drilling. You get into stopping everything in order to test, and/or in order to prepare for the tests.

A word about tests. The Hartz Company makes birdseed, kitty litter, and cat food, and spends ten times more money testing those products than we spend testing our children. Tom Toch, Co-Founder and Co-Director, Education Sector, did a study of NCLB testing. He concluded that for every \$100 spent in public education, 15 cents is spent on the tests. But, the tests drive everything else. I fear that in addition to driving out some of our best teachers, which we carefully documented on The NewsHour recently, we are also going to produce a whole lot of kids who are going to hate school. And, in turn, they are going to have children.

But, there is an achievement—an outcomes—gap. Maybe the way to address the folly of this is to talk about the gap between Asian-American kids and white kids. It is a huge gap: 15 points in reading and more than 15 points in math. Why don't we do for these white kids what we are doing for poor kids whether they are black, brown, and/or white? That is, why don't we get rid of recess, get rid of art, get rid of music, and

get rid of physical education? Can you imagine the rebellion that would take place if we said, “Well, we've got to close the achievement gap between the Asian-American kids and the white kids?” It is a foolish construct.

Tonight, however, I would prefer to talk about a different gap, what I call the **affection gap—ADD—**“affection deficit disorder.” I would like to show you and then discuss a documentary we did for The NewsHour about a school on a military base. I went to the school with a set of expectations about what a Department of Defense School for children whose parents were going off to Iraq or Afghanistan for the second or third time—sort of the children of the surge—would be like. I was expecting a “suck it up, kid,” environment; instead, I was blown away. The documentary captures what we could do for all our children if we had the will.

(Narrative continues on page 8.)

“I love you, buddy.”
McNair Elementary School
Fort Bragg, North Carolina

For the three children (ages 10, 8, and 5) of the Keeling family, life is about to change. Their father leaves in the morning for the frontlines in Afghanistan; it will be his third tour of duty. Their mother says, “It’s really hard on all of us. I don’t want them to hurt. You don’t want your child to be sad. But they have to be strong, because I need them to be strong.”

A few hours after his father had gone, the 5-year-old insisted on going to school. McNair Elementary, located in the middle of Fort Bragg, is one of 219 schools run by the Department of Defense with a total enrollment of nearly 100,000 students. Roughly half the students at McNair, 178 children, have a parent overseas in a war zone. The principal says that his job is to take care of the kids, take care of the families, and take care of the teachers. “We are the consistency in the lives of these kids.”

When the 5-year old arrives at his kindergarten class, his teacher watches him closely. He is pretty agitated. His emotions bother him. He’s also tired. He tells the teacher he is sad; his dad is in Afghanistan. The teacher responds that she gets sad sometimes, too. But, right away, she gives him a fun assignment: create a happy dream. The 5-year old says, “I’m going to draw this picture of my dad bouncing.”

The teacher says that the school is the students’ security zone. “This is where they can be a kid. I let them be sad, and I even say it’s okay to be sad. But I also say, ‘Let’s try to feel better now.’ Fourteen of the 17 students in my class have a parent serving overseas. At any moment, any one of them might need some extra care. I try to do for every single child what they need, and they don’t always need the same thing. All of the students are progressing academically. My position is to teach the children, to love the children. I’m not a politician and I’m not someone who expresses opinions about whether we should be in Afghanistan or Iraq or Korea or any other place for that matter.”

Another teacher at McNair has a different approach with his third-graders. He was in the military for 30 years, was wounded in Vietnam, and was awarded a Silver

Star and a Bronze Star. I was in the classroom for maybe 90 minutes, and I think there were at least three times when he made reference to the policy. He said, "Here's the definition of Iraq. It's a desert country in the Middle East where Americans go to bring freedom." When he asked the students, "Why is your mom or dad there? What are they bringing? The students responded, "freedom."

When I asked him about the definition, he said, "I didn't make that definition up, the students gave me that definition. I don't ask the students their politics. I really don't care about their politics. As long as you love the kids and you do the right thing by the kids, that's more important. It's not all about ABC's. You know, it's about when the kid leaves here. What does he look like as opposed to when he walked in the door? Can he think independently? Can he solve problems? My kids blew the doors off of the standardized tests that we took last year. The entire class was in the 95th percentile for reading and 99.3 percentile for math."

For this teacher, it's not just about his students' academic success. They know that he is a safe haven for them. When something is wrong, they know that they can come to their "old man" and talk to him about it. Of the 17 children in his class, seven have a parent away from home. The teacher acknowledges that he has become their surrogate dad. "They really know that I've got a relationship with them and that I'm going to stand in the gap."

When a kid asks this teacher the tough question, "Is my dad going to die, or is mom going to get killed," he responds by saying that dad or mom is the best-trained soldier in the world, and the folks around him/her are as good as he/she is. So, what's to worry about? I can't tell the students that their mom is going to be here tomorrow. But I'm going to tell them that no matter what, there's always going to be somebody here that's going to take care of them. These kids are resilient. They come in this building every day, smiling, doing what they have to do, learning, and just going on with life. They feel safe; they feel secure; and they feel like somebody cares.

To listen to the full Podcast of this documentary, plus extended interviews with the four people featured in this piece, visit: http://www.pbs.org/merrow/tv/newshour/lessons_of_war.html.

My point in showing part of the McNair Elementary School documentary was to show that the way we treat kids in this country is, too often, the flipside of how children are treated at McNair. The teachers have made it a point to be personally involved with all the kids. They know what caring and nurturing can do in education; they see it every day. I asked, "Is there a danger that all this nurturing is going to get in the way of learning?" One teacher responded by saying, "You can't separate education and relationships. If you want to have a great educational environment, you've got to have a personal relationship with the kids." Another said, "If we just comforted children all day, we would never get to the standards that we have to teach. And that wouldn't help the parents to have a child who is not learning what they need to learn. So no, we don't lose sight of the academics at all."

It is not like it is brain surgery to create schools that are built on affection. You may have to get rid of some of the people who are in schools now, people who have forgotten that they care for kids and probably went into teaching for that reason. McNair Elementary School is a bit of a blueprint for what we could do for our kids in all of our schools. This takes us back to the conversations I think we need to have in this country. What kind of kids do we want? Not just our own children, but all children. What kind of opportunities do we want to provide?

What do you think is going to happen with No Child Left Behind? Will it go away?

NCLB will not go away. It will reemerge but not until after we have a new President. NCLB is a continuation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. There will be legislation, and one would hope that you could have a bipartisan consensus that we did not do it right the first time, and that we need to pull back and perhaps even go in a different direction.

I remember when the state of Connecticut broke the act of reading into like 17 or 19 or 21 discrete

steps many years ago. And by golly, the kids mastered all 21 steps. But, they couldn't read. They hated reading, but they could pass those tests. So it's adult issues.

Do you think we'll have national standards? Do we need national standards?

Yes and yes. We will have them. They are evolving now. In New England, some states are working together. In the Midwest, nine states are working together to create common tests for Algebra II. They won't be called national standards because the American public doesn't understand the distinction between national and federal, so they could be called "common standards." They could have been called American standards if they weren't accompanied by that name already, but I hope they will be better. But they will emerge; they have to emerge.

Who should develop these common standards, and what should Washington do?

I think Washington should enable. Washington should provide funds, putting some money out there with groups like Achieve and/or with the Governors to help standards emerge. But Washington should not try to dictate. And, as I say, it's already happening in lots of places.

Well, can we have common standards without common tests?

No, we cannot. But, it seems to me there are ways to develop common tests. You could have a common test in physics. We don't have enough psychometricians to develop good tests now because we use the tests and throw them away. But, if you got the very best psychometricians to develop, let's say 3,000 items, covering the gamut of physics, and then you release it and said that the physics test would be taken from the 3,000 items—now, go ahead and teach to the test. We may change the numbers, you can't memorize anything, and then a state can take its 50 questions

from the 3000 items, but the test is out there. You could maybe make the test better by refining items, but first have a giant pool of test items that test the knowledge of kids, and were developed by the very best psychometricians. This could be done in other fields as well.

A lot of people talk about vouchers. What do you think, what do you see, what do you think is going to happen with vouchers?

Not much. Public education is a public service, not a private good. And public education, a good public education, is the glue that holds this country together. We need to make it stronger. A “one-size-fits-all” public education system is an abomination that probably does much more harm than good.

Does that mean you believe in choice in education?

Yes, choice and variety. Not much point to having choice if you don't have variety.

Who has the best education platform of the remaining candidates?

Well, the best one was Chris Dodd's, but he dropped out. He's supporting Obama, for what that might mean, I don't know. I don't think any of the candidates have done enough talking about education. Gaston Caperton (former Governor of West Virginia and now President of The College Board) told me that he'd seen a statistic confirming that, in all the debates, only four percent of the time was spent discussing education. If that trend continues, it does not augur well for the future.

What's this McKinsey report that people are talking about?

The McKinsey Report, “How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top,” should be required reading for every school board in the country. The McKinsey group looked at 25 school systems, not individual schools but school

systems, and asked, “Where are they successful and what do they have in common?” The issues that we talk about didn't show up. Small classes, that's not in the report; that is not a common trait. Even paying higher teacher salaries is not a common trait. All of the things that we are buying into are the “flavor of the month.” The McKinsey group found three common characteristics.

#1. Hire the best people you can and train them well.

You can dismiss this by saying, “Oh, well, we'll just hire the top 5 percent.”

That's not what the report is saying. It is saying make it tough to be a teacher, make it tougher. In a sense, it's like Teach for America (TFA) or at least the first half of TFA: get the very best people you can, and train them. Sometimes this means hiring the teacher a year before she or he starts teaching. He/she would actually be in the school and would be given on-the-job training.

#2. Have clear expectations and provide the support to achieve the goals.

You have to know where you're going, and the very best school systems know where they are going. This doesn't mean let's get high test scores or let's close the achievement gap. It means there is some sense of purpose in schooling beyond grades on an examination. Tell teachers what you expect, then support the teachers. It's a two-part thing: expectations stated very clearly and the support to get there.

#3. Provide immediate help when a kid starts falling through the cracks.

The implications of immediate help are that the teacher is trusted to say, “Johnny has not mastered estimating.” The teacher knows this because he/she gave his/her own test. He/she didn't give a test and then wait six weeks for a machine to spit the results out.

Do we spend too much money on education?

Spending is up. In 1980, we spent about \$50 billion on public education and now we spend about \$500 billion. Do we spend too much? No, not even close. The gross domestic product (the GDP) is declining. In 1980, education spending was about nine percent of GDP. Today, it is less than five percent. The dollar figures have gone up, but the economy of the country has boomed, and we have cut back on our spending.

As a percentage of total government expenditures, spending on education has declined from 1980 to today. In 1980, it was 28 percent. Today, it is about 15 percent. The dollars that we are willing to invest in education, even though the actual number has gone way up, have gone down. The average teacher's salary today is 85 percent of the salary of a typical college graduate; 15 years ago it was about equal. So, even though teacher salaries have gone up, relative to the earnings of other college graduates, their salaries have declined.

I appreciate your coming to the 8th annual Jacqueline P. Danzberger Lecture. IEL has been a huge part of my professional life, and I owe so much to the organization. I knew and admired Jackie Danzberger greatly, as did my mom. They knew each other as elected officials. My mom was on the planning and zoning board in Darien, Connecticut when Jackie served on the school board there. The goal of my work has been to spotlight problems and celebrate their solutions. Thank you for listening, and for your strong interest in, and support for, public education. You've been a wonderful audience.



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, 2001-2004
- 2003 Eli Broad, Chairman, AIG Sun America Inc. & Founder, The Broad Foundation
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For more information, please contact:



Institute for Educational Leadership

4455 Connecticut Avenue, NW

Suite 310

Washington, DC 20008

(202) 822-8405

Fax: (202) 872-4050

E-mail: iel@iel.org

Web site: www.iel.org