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## Film Review

### ***Great Expectations: Raising Educational Achievement (2012)***

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#### Reference Resources: Websites

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In September 2012, the Sundance Channel (<http://www.sundancechannel.com/>) featured a three-part 70-minute documentary, *Great Expectations: Raising Educational Achievement*, about the PK-12 educational achievement gap in Connecticut public schools. The video was funded by the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER, <http://www.ctedreform.org>), a non-profit organization that supports a comprehensive educational transformation to close the

achievement gap and raise academic performance for all students. Established in 2011, the Council supports systemic changes to advance best practices and educational innovation in public schools.

The video ranks Connecticut's achievement gap in urban, suburban, and rural schools as the largest in the nation. The performance gap correlates with socioeconomic class and race. Approximately 86% of students from upper to middle income families in Connecticut complete high school while only 60% of low income students graduate. Most of the high school dropouts are Black, Hispanic, and other students of color who attend 135 schools that have under-performed for the last five years. Twenty percent of Connecticut's students attend these 135 schools which are referred to as "dropout factories." The achievement gap has disenfranchised more than one generation of students in Connecticut.

This educational disparity resulted in an initial lawsuit about unequal education in Connecticut, *Horton v. Meskill*, in 1977. The Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that public school students are entitled to equal enjoyment of the right to education. The state system of school financing was ruled unconstitutional because it



relied on local property tax revenues without regard to disparities in town wealth and the state failed to provide significant equalizing support. Two similar cases followed the initial lawsuit, *Sheff v. O'Neill* in 1996 and *CCJEF v. Rell* in 2005. After appeals and lengthy deliberation, the State Supreme Court held in March 2010 that the state constitution has a qualitative dimension that guarantees all students an adequate education.

Penetrating vignettes of teachers, students, and educational leaders in public school settings describe the elements of educational excellence and the plight of those low income students who arrive at school under-prepared with many personal and family issues. Current teachers, principals, and superintendents highlight and reiterate the premise that early childhood education begins in the home.



According to the educators and administrators, too many Connecticut families are in an “unstable” economic situation compounded by limited English language proficiency and other pre-conditions. These children from low income families arrive in preschool and kindergarten at ages 4 and 5 years without knowing colors, numbers or the alphabet. Their vocabularies are less than half as extensive as those of children whose socio-economic status is middle or upper class. Teachers state that they spend two years playing catch-up in their attempts to close the achievement gap. Although the statements of educators and administrators focus on deficiencies of students from underprivileged backgrounds, their concerns for the achievement gap appear to be genuine.

The film advocates quality pre-school, early childhood education and full-day kindergarten experiences for every child. The CCER objectives include accountability for all educators, high expectations for all students, the fostering of school leadership, the support of excellence in teaching, and intelligent investment of resources into turnaround school to redress the achievement gap.



The efforts and personal commitment of individual teachers and administrators in five turnaround schools in Hartford, New Haven, Stamford, Bloomfield, and Willimantic are effectively highlighted and documented. Case studies of magnet schools demonstrate that the achievement gap can be reduced if urban, suburban, and rural school districts are given adequate staff, resources, data, and time. These turnaround schools are succeeding because they are well funded, are grounded in the communities they serve, and emphasize skill-centered contextualized learning and educator accountability.

New Haven public schools adopted new classroom practitioner and principal evaluation procedures that required one year of negotiations with the teachers' union to develop. New Haven teachers and administrators moved from the established "satisfactory/unsatisfactory" rating generated by "drive-by observations" to a five-point scale that ranges from "needs improvement" to "exemplary." Each teacher receives two classroom observations by an administrator, the first at the beginning of the school year and the second at the end. All teachers must have a Professional Development Plan to chart their continuous growth.



The systematic high-quality evaluations of New Haven teachers resulted in 75, including 15 tenured, teachers leaving the district. In one failing school in Hartford, the entire teaching staff was required to reapply for their positions, and only 10% were rehired in the new environment. School principals are subject to the same scrutiny and evaluation. Professors of education are urged to spend more time in K-12 schools supervising teacher candidates who should begin clinical practice in their freshmen year of college.

One salient point is reiterated throughout the video. Tenure should not be considered a condition of continued employment. Every teacher and school administrator must design an approved professional development plan and show progress each year. For those who can't meet their annual goals, training and other forms of support is provided by their district. If improvement doesn't occur within two years, the educator may be asked to resign or will be dismissed. Everyone in public education is being held accountable.

*Great Expectations: Raising Educational Achievement* is a candid description of Connecticut's public education system, one which is beset with a long history of educational disparity in the form of a massive achievement gap between those economically advantaged and those disadvantaged. Connecticut, the wealthiest per capital income state in the nation, has too many examples of blighted schools and impoverished districts. Efforts are being made to turn around the 135 failing schools to minimize the achievement gap. The video concludes by describing a high quality education as the soul of society and educational equity as the civil rights issue of our time. Criticisms raised about the



documentary include the fact that it omits references to the legal history of educational disparity, No Child Left Behind assessments, the pivotal role of local school boards in educational reform, and comments from the Connecticut State Department of Education. Nevertheless, the video earns a 9 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in terms of expressing social conditions, engaging

dialogue, promoting self-reflection, transformational education, excellent cinematography, pacing, sound, music, and editing.

### Reference

Robinson, J. (2012, Producer). *Great expectations: Raising educational achievement* [Documentary]. New Haven, CT: Connecticut Council for Education Reform. Available from Build Pictures (<http://www.buildpictures.com>).

### Resources: Websites

Annie Fisher STEM Elementary Magnet School, Hartford  
<http://anniefisherstemmagnet.shutterfly.com/>

Brennan-Rogers Elementary Magnet School, New Haven  
<http://www.newhavenmagnetschools.com/index.php/all-magnet-schools/elementary/brennan-rogers>

Conncan Great Schools for All  
<http://www.conncan.org/>

Connecticut General Assembly Achievement Gap Task Force  
<http://www.cga.ct.gov/ed/AchGap/taskforce.asp>

Natchaug Elementary School, Willimantic  
<http://www.windham.k12.ct.us/schools/nat/about/index.htm>

The Connecticut Council for Education Reform  
<http://www.ctedreform.org/>  
<http://www.ctedreform.org/media-gallery>

The Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School, Bloomfield  
<http://www.bloomfieldschools.org/page.cfm?p=4385>

William Pitt Child Development Center, Stamford  
<http://clcstamford.org/contact/all-programs>