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## Citizens Project FreedomWatch

# Still Unequal; Race and Achievement in Public Schools

By Rosemary Harris

On a clear Arkansas morning last May, during the NAACP National Daisy Bates Education Summit, US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings paid a visit to historic Central High School where Bates guided the Little Rock Nine through hostility and death threats to help end segregated schools in the South. It was a Saturday and no classes were in session. But a group of student ambassadors were there, waiting for the 50th Anniversary Little Rock Nine forum to begin. So, of course, Spellings, and the TV cameras, went over to greet them.

"How many of you plan to go to college," the president's education secretary asked. And all the hands went up. "See that," she said, practically turning to the cameras. "That's great. It's a good sign that what we're doing is working." She told them that she was proud of each and every one. "I'll see you all at college graduation," she told them, shaking all the young hands as if they had already been presented with diplomas from the Ivy League.

Some of those Central High students were White; some Black. One was Asian. The others, you couldn't just look at them and be certain about race or ethnicity. But one thing was sure – not all of them would make it to the stage at a college graduation. And, if you read the statistics from the Education Secretary's own office, not all of them would even make it out of Central High School, nullifying the contributions of Daisy Bates, who sacrificed her newspaper business and her marriage to guide those nine beautiful, intelligent, little Negro children who had so terrified the State of Arkansas.

As we in Colorado Springs prepare for the election of directors for our county's largest school districts, it bears noting that race still seems to be what scares us. But if we don't talk honestly about race – and the race-based disparities in our own local schools – we will be no better than the Education Secretary, declaring that all is right with public education when nothing could be further

from the truth.

We know these things to be true about the relationship between race and achievement:

- Although there are significant numbers of high-achieving students of color, documented gaps in achievement remain between White students and students who are Black or Latino or for whom English is not a primary language.

- This gap is due to, not one's race, but to a complex cadre of factors, including classroom, community, home, self and society.

- Schools can have a powerful impact on achievement but ingrained prejudices and stereotypes that effect classroom management, curriculum, testing and school policy continue to present significant barriers to achievement and must be addressed.

- To close the achievement gap, students of color must improve at a faster rate than others and greater resources must be allocated to such efforts. (Source: National Minority Student Achievement Network)

When Spellings addressed attendees at the Daisy Bates Summit later that day, she told us that the achievement gap was well on its way to the dustbin of history. She looked us right in the eyes and promised that in six years, when the No Child Left Behind Act expires, the achievement of White students and students of color would be indistinguishable.

We all wanted to believe her, just as Daisy Bates wanted to believe that the inhumanities the Little Rock Nine endured would settle the question of school segregation for all time. But we know that didn't turn out to be true.

If we are to settle the minority achievement gap question in Colorado, teachers, administrators, parents, public officials, business leaders – and, yes, new school board members – must be willing to not only talk about the gap but to talk authentically about race and the role it plays in student achievement.

And, as fine as we think many of our elite school districts are, we must all remember, as Daisy Bates knew, that schools can only be considered excellent when students of all racial and ethnic groups are achieving at the same high level.

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**NAACP 2007 Freedom Fund Gala**  
**Saturday, October 20, 2007**  
**With Colorado Commissioner of**  
**Education Dwight Jones and State**  
**Representative Michael Merrifield**  
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