

Rainier Scholars Program Luncheon  
April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010  
Bill Gates Sr.

Thank you, Joyce, for that kind introduction. It's a pleasure to be able to speak to you about the Rainier Scholars over lunch.

It was over lunch about 10 years ago that I first heard about the program. I was eating with a friend who had just moved here, and he kept raving about this amazing education program he'd been involved with back in New York. Then he told me he wanted to start one just like it in Seattle.

The word that popped into my head as my friend described how the program worked was: "Genius." It was genius not because it advanced a new idea; on the contrary, it represented a return to first principles. And that's the part that was so bold. The Rainier Scholars program is based on the idea that if you help students work harder than they ever imagined, they can overcome any obstacle that's been put in front of them.

At the time I was having this conversation with my friend, the Gates Foundation was just starting to work in education. Our focus was—and still is—helping all students get equal access to opportunity, so it was an easy decision to invest in Rainier Scholars. A decade later, it's a powerful example of how much low-income students can accomplish when they get a chance.

Rainier Scholars starts by finding bright and motivated fifth graders whose path to a college education is littered with barriers. About 80 percent of the applicants come from low-income families. That means that, even though they've impressed their teachers with a strong work ethic and tons of potential, their chances of getting a college degree are lower than they should be.

The selection process is extremely competitive. Last year, there were 1,200 applicants for just 60 slots. That's more selective than Harvard!

Once those 60 slots are filled, the real work begins.

The summer after 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the young scholars spend eight hours a day in class, five days a week, plus homework every night. This is while they're friends are playing outside, going to camp, and having fun. I'm not saying that going to class isn't fun, but I know my children wouldn't have volunteered to trade their summer vacation for extra schoolwork.

During 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the students take classes on Wednesday nights and Saturdays, on top of their normal schoolwork. These extra classes aren't in typical sixth grade subjects. These 12-year-olds are taking college-prep Algebra! I talked to one Rainier Scholar who is now a freshman in college, and he told me that he studied much harder in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade than he does now!

The folks I talked to down at Rainier Scholars describe this first phase of the program as “Boot Camp.” That seems like a pretty fitting title.

When they’re done with boot camp, it’s not just that the Rainier Scholars know more than their peers about lab science and history. And it’s not just that they’re ready to go to the best middle school programs in the area, at both public and private schools. What’s even more important is that they’ve proven they can work hard and get results. That’s a pretty powerful lesson for 11- and 12-year-olds. Very few kids their age apply themselves whole-heartedly to a goal that requires such rigorous study and rigid discipline.. The achievement of that goal is something of which they are incredibly proud—and justifiably so.

The program continues through college, for a total of 11 years. During that time, the students form strong bonds with each other. They refer to Rainier Scholars as a family, and they do so well because they have the kind of support only a family can provide.

In high school, the students go through a Leadership Development program, where they discuss serious topics, like ethics and accountability, as they start to explore their futures beyond academics. The Rainier Scholars program doesn’t just aim to get students through college; it grooms them to be responsible citizens, and true leaders in the community.

The first cohort of scholars in the Seattle program are now freshman in college, and the second is about to graduate from high school. One hundred percent were accepted for four year colleges or universities. Several of them are here today. I haven’t had the chance to ask if any of you are future Huskies, but I want to congratulate you all, even if you aren’t planning to attend my alma mater.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege to talk to a small group of scholars. One high school senior, Karen, has been accepted to a number of excellent universities. I asked if she was uncomfortable having so many options to choose from. She replied, simply, “It’s a good problem to have.”

That’s especially true when you consider the kinds of problems many of Karen’s peers are facing now—and the problems Karen herself might be facing if she hadn’t taken full advantage of the Rainier Scholars program.

How much less likely is it that she’d get into several great colleges? How much harder would it be for her to become a leader in her community? There are so many talented young people, and Rainier Scholars is one of the best ways I’ve seen to help low-income children convert their potential into a rewarding and productive future.

There are 350 Rainier scholars now. And sixty more are just about to start this incredible journey. I believe that these scholars will be part of the solution for the biggest problems that confront our society today. When I reflect on all that the Rainier Scholars will accomplish over the next 50 years, “Genius” is the word that pops into my head.

Thank you.