



Research You Can Use

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August, 2005

Closing Achievement Gaps: What does it take? Part II

Introduction:

De La Cruz (2005) noted that “Over the years, many studies, both locally and nationally commissioned, have described in detail why the achievement gap exists. Yet, the question remains, why are things not changing? Why are we not taking strong and concerted action to correct this gap that we clearly know so much about?”

De La Cruz’s point is well taken, and this writer agrees that most of the studies have chosen to focus on causes for the gaps. Fewer studies have focused on places that have been successful in closing achievement gaps. In the year’s hiatus since the last publication of ***Research You Can Use***, the writer has plumbed the research looking for these success stories. Often there are references to schools and districts that have shown some results in tackling the gaps.

What was missing is the identification of strategies that schools and districts used to close achievement gaps. What is evident though, is that there is no singular approach to closing achievement gaps. The emerging notion is that multifaceted and systemic approaches are necessary. Carter (2004) affirmed this notion when he stated: “The achievement gap is a pervasive problem with deep roots in our society that will not be eliminated by any one measure.”

This issue of ***Research You Can Use*** delineates ways in which districts and schools are trying to resolve issues of the achievement gap. It identifies strategies in urban, suburban, and rural schools and districts.

The districts and schools referenced here are ones that publications have listed as having effective strategies for addressing achievement gaps. The list is in no way exhaustive. It underscores the necessity of identifying the lessons from high performing districts and schools so that others can learn from their successes.

According to Haycock (2005) high performing districts:

- Have clear and specific goals for what students should learn in every grade, including the order in which they should learn it;
- Provide teachers with common curriculum;
- Assess students every 4-8 weeks to measure progress; and
- Act immediately on the results of those assessments.

In addition, she noted that smart districts do two important things:

- **STOP** drive-by workshops; and
- Invest in intensive, focused professional development

These strategies and others listed in the anecdotes below can assist districts in closing achievement gaps.

Urban School Districts:

Authors at MDRC, (formerly known as Manpower Resource Development Center), a non- profit organization, published a paper on how some urban districts were reducing achievement gaps. The organization selected three urban districts for analysis. These districts had demonstrated a trend of improved overall student achievement for at least three years, and they had demonstrated a trend of narrowing differences between white and minority students. According to Snipes, Dolittle, and Herlihy(2002), these districts were attempting education reform on a district wide basis rather than a school-by- school approach.

There were several key findings from their study:

- First, create the preconditions for reform. Creating the preconditions includes such things as defining the role of school board members as that of focusing on policy level decisions that support improved student achievement rather than on the day to day operations; revamping district operations to serve and support schools; creating a shared vision between the chief executive officer and the school board; and matching resources to support a vision for reform.
- Use strategies such as:
 - Creating accountability systems beyond what states had established;
 - Focusing on the lowest performing schools;
 - Adopting or developing district wide curricula and instructional approaches;
 - Supporting district wide curricula and instructional strategies through professional development;
 - Redefining the role of central office staff to one that involves guiding, supporting, and improving instruction at the building level;
 - Starting reforms at the elementary level rather than trying to fix everything at once; and

- Providing intensive instruction in reading and math to middle and high school students.

Suburban Districts:

“As school districts continue to disaggregate and make public their achievement data, a complex picture of educational differences is emerging, wealthy well-resourced suburban communities have been shocked to discover that even in their comfortable middle and upper-middle class communities with a measure of economic equality and high achievement on average for their youth, goals of academic achievement for all have not been met.” (James, Jurich, and Estes, 2002 p.7).

The above quotation sets the stage for the examination of work in suburban districts in closing achievement gaps. Despite that fact that recognition of achievement gaps has been slower in suburban districts, there are places where the work is being done. The instance of Federal Way School district is a case in point.

At first examination, Federal Way School District in Washington State is a successful school district where 65 % of schools exceeded district reading goals; 74% of schools exceeded district math goals; 88% showed continuous improvement in reading; and 85% of schools showed continuous improvement in math.

Federal Way is a district of 22,000 students, 42.7 % of whom are minority, 36% live in poverty and 78 different languages are spoken by district families. Yet, despite district success overall, the district recognized that its African American students were not achieving commensurate with the rest of the student population.

The school district first acknowledged that it had problems and then undertook strategies to address them. The superintendent said: “We can look at our own situation, acknowledge we have a problem and make improvements. It’s about closing the gap and creating an environment where all students have the access and equity to achieve and succeed.” Some of the district’s actions were to:

- Create a task force to gather data from multiple sources about evidence of achievement gaps;
- Create an office of equity and achievement;
- Analyze curriculum, assessment, and programs;
- Work with individual schools to analyze their performance data and develop plans to close gaps; and
- Create and implement a district strategic plan that focused on student achievement, student support, home and community partnerships, staff excellence, and fiscal responsibility.

Pueblo School District 60 is a district that has received wide acclaim for its efforts in raising academic achievement of its student population. The Education Trust (2005) noted that “Pueblo has had tremendous success in reducing the Latino-White gap while simultaneously raising

achievement levels for all groups of children.” Pueblo’s district population is 17,500. It has a minority population of 62%, 58% of who are Hispanic, and 61% of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch programs. And 80% of the Hispanic students scored at or above proficient on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) in reading.

The picture of student progress in Pueblo was not always so rosy. Ten years ago Pueblo had some of the lowest performing schools in the state. Now, it has several schools that meet or exceed the state average on CSAP. The July 16, 2005 issue of the Rocky Mountain News reported that “In eight years, Pueblo’s poorest schools posted a 20-point gain in the percentage of fourth-graders passing the reading test in the CSAP. In 2004, the most recent year for which data were available, 61% of students in those schools scored proficient or advanced.”The Education Trust Dispersing the Myth Website lists several of these schools.

Pueblo’s School District’s achievement gains exist in mathematics as well. A recent publication by CDE’s Office of Learning and Results shows 16 elementary schools in the district that have made gains in 5th grade mathematics for three consecutive years. This in and of itself is notable since the district has only 22 elementary schools.

The math gains that Pueblo has made are by design rather than chance. According to John Brainard, Director of Assessment, Research, and Mathematics, the results are attributable to the implementation of several key principles: the curriculum principle, the learning principle, the technology principle, and the equity principle.

The curriculum principle involves the use of a curriculum that is coherent and articulated across grade levels. All district curriculum guides include the Colorado Model Content standards and the assessment frameworks. The item maps and assessment frameworks are analyzed following the release of CSAP results in order to adjust to significant academic gaps. Furthermore, teachers supplement the curriculum with materials based on the needs of students and the results of ongoing analysis of data.

The learning principle involves provision of sufficient time and support in math instruction. Schools have at least an hour of uninterrupted classroom instruction daily and class room instruction is supplemented with the opportunities for students to participate in a math lab.

Implementation of the technology principle occurs through the establishment of a computerized lab for all elementary schools. The system has programs for both math concepts and skills and math investigations. The implementation of technology is also supported with extensive professional development for staff.

Finally, the equity principle embraces the focus of high expectations for students, worthwhile learning opportunities, accommodations for learning differences and dedicated resources for school budgets to provide materials and on-going professional development.

The district’s success in reading and writing can be attributed to a strong focus on language and literacy, the use of a multi-sensory approach to teaching reading and the assignment of an ESL teacher to every school so that teachers are taught to make transitions from Spanish to English. Other strategies used are emphasizing attendance, using quarterly assessments, and training teachers based on weaknesses revealed on tests. Dr. Bales, the superintendent says: “No child

should get left behind, and no teacher should be left behind in teacher education programs. We spend a lot of money to teach our teachers how to teach reading.”

South Pasadena school district in California is a district of 3,800. Their student population is diverse with 41% white, 32% Asian, 18% Hispanic and 7% African American. Data showed that there was a widening gap for students who were English Language Learners, economically-disadvantaged, and in-coming kindergarten students. In addition, referrals for special education and identifications of students with attention deficit disorders were increasing. The Latino and African American students were scoring lower than the other groups.

The school district applied for and received a grant from the Annenberg foundation. They used the grant funding to provide training on data collection and analysis, and shared decision making processes. There was also a focus on creating K-12 content standards to drive teaching and learning.

The school district adopted the concept of power standards, the most crucial standards in each subject that were aligned to the state assessments. The district also created standards-based report cards for the elementary grades. These report cards helped parents to understand the importance of the standards.

Other strategies that were used involved high quality professional development on student equity, peer coaching, support for teachers with less than 5 years of teaching, critical friends groups, class size reduction, new course options, open enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, and block scheduling. The district also reached out to engage more parents of color in school activities and at the same time, it offered educational programs in technology and algebra for parents with limited English proficiency.

Forest Grove School District in Oregon implemented district wide strategies to close achievement gaps. It is a district of 5800 students, a large proportion of who are English Language Learners. Nearly one fourth of the district’s 570 staff members are bilingual. This figure includes full-time, part-time, substitute, and temporary staff. Some of their approaches include:

- Teaching academic basics in Spanish followed by a transition to English;
- Using the Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD), an instructional model that uses visuals to teach English skills;
- Providing a dual language immersion program where students are taught in both English and Spanish;
- Using migrant grant funds to provide an after-school math program to help migrant students meet state benchmarks;
- Using the 40 developmental assets to encourage, and increase adult support for youth;
- Hiring a school community liaison to call and visit the homes of at-risk Hispanic students; and
- Collaborating with Portland State University to implement a program for bilingual instructional assistants to work as teachers while earning their teaching credentials.

Last year, the Iowa Department of Education recognized several districts for improving achievement among African American, Hispanic, or low-income students. According to the Department's press release in November, 2004, these groups experience the most severe achievement gaps.

Davenport Community School District, a district of 16,544 improved reading among 8th graders by 20%. The district implemented a number of programs to improve students' reading ability. The strategies included focus lessons, setting aside time for uninterrupted reading, and professional development for teachers. The district also provides programs to support students who are learning English.

Rural Districts:

Some of the districts recognized by the Iowa State Department of Education were rural districts. Creston, a district of 1,458 improved reading achievement among low-income 4th graders by 20.4%. The district implemented stronger staff development that focused on reading instruction strategies, particularly with reading comprehension among elementary students. The district also provided elementary teachers with a stronger articulated curriculum that defined established times to introduce, instruct, assess, and maintain reading skills. The district's superintendent also noted that the focus on gathering achievement data and continuously monitoring student progress was a key strategy.

Another rural district in Iowa also received the state award. Saydel, a district of 1,459, improved math achievement among low-income 4th graders by 21%. The district chose to implement a new integrated, standards-based math curriculum that is showing results. The curriculum focuses on problem solving. In addition, teachers received professional development that showed them how to differentiate instruction.

The Learning First Alliance studied five high poverty districts that were making strides in raising academic achievement. Kent County School District in Maryland, a rural district of 2,795 students, was one of the five. All of the districts in the study had to meet the following criteria of: (1) success in increasing student achievement in math and /or reading over three or more years; (2) improvement in student achievement across grade levels, races, and ethnicities; (3) a poverty rate of at least 25% as defined by students eligible for free or reduced lunch; and (4) a reputation of effective professional development practices, based on recommendations from education leaders.

Though Kent County's school district is in a rural area of Maryland, it has a population that is 30% African American. Its enrollment is stable with very little movement in or out of the district. Kent County's story is an interesting one in that at one time the district was one of the lowest scoring districts in the state. Only 32% of its students scored in the satisfactory category on the state's assessment test.

Nonetheless, in 1999 and 2000 it was the highest scoring district in the state. How did these improvements occur? As with most of the districts mentioned so far, Kent County employed a multifaceted approach to achieve its gains. These included:

- Hiring a superintendent who could serve as an instructional leader;

- Developing an essential district wide curriculum, one that was aligned to state standards;
- Fostering a district wide learning community through the implementation of the Baldrige framework that provided a uniform process for setting goals and monitoring process;
- Seeking external resources and aligning these to strategic goals;
- Expanding and strengthening professional development at both the school and the district level, using such approaches as building networks of teacher leaders, supporting new teachers, and creating new structures for professional development like multi-week summer institutes;
- Distributing leadership across all stakeholders (board members, central office, principals, and teachers); and
- Continually learning, assessing, and readjusting practice.

Schools that are closing achievement gaps:

Kati Haycock (1999) said:

“Somewhere along the line somebody decided that poor kids couldn’t learn, or at least, not at a very high level and everyone fell in line. But the truth is actually quite different. Some poor children have always learned to high levels and some whole schools get **all** of their children to levels reached by only a few students in other schools.”

We do know that there are places all across the nation where poor and minority students are achieving at high levels. The Education Trust has collected information on these schools and posted it on their website “**Dispelling the Myth.**” The website address is listed in the references at the end of this article.

The mini case studies of schools described below have shown success in raising the achievement of two groups that lag behind their white peers, Hispanics and African Americans. These anecdotes are offered as a way to let staffs know what is possible. As George McKenna, former superintendent of Compton, School District in California, once said, “ If excellence is possible anywhere, it is possible everywhere.”

North Star Elementary School in Thornton, Colorado is one of the schools that are producing results with students who live in poverty. “More than 80% of North Star’s student population is living in poverty. Many of them are one to three grades behind and nearly 70% of the school’s population is Hispanic, and of those students, 34% are primarily Spanish Speaking.” (Dalkemper, Winter, 2005).

Despite these challenges, North Star Elementary School was the only school in the district to make AYP for two years in a row. Hispanic students at North Star scored 63% partially proficient or above in 2002-2003. In 2003-2004, that number increased to 83%.

Their success is the result of an extremely dedicated principal and staff who hold high expectations and push students to excel. The high expectations are summed up in the school’s motto, “Think you can. Work hard. Get Smart.” Students are reminded of this motto every day.

North Star has a dual language program but staff uses other programmatic strategies to raise achievement including a 21st Century Learning Center model, a strong literacy program, explicit

instruction, additional instructional support through small groups for students who need it, and a powerful discipline program.

Dayton's Bluff Elementary School in St. Paul Minnesota has successfully raised the academic achievement of African American and Hmong students. Its demographics show a population of 88% low income, 46% African American, 26% Asian/Pacific Islander, 13% Latino, and 36% Limited English Proficient. Despite these statistics, Dayton's Bluff made AYP in 2003-04.

The school's story is an intriguing one in that "Five years ago, Dayton's Bluff was known as the worst school in St. Paul and one of the worst in Minnesota." Their neighborhood hosted an occasional crack house, two murders occurred in two weeks, and nine out of ten children could not read on grade level.

Today the story is quite different. "In 2004 more than 8 of the 10 students at Dayton's Bluff met or exceeded the state reading standards and the school is poised to post even higher gains for 2005. What is even more inspiring is that the third graders, African American and Hmong, slightly outperformed White Minnesotan third graders who lead the rest of the nation in math.

According to the Achievement Alliance (2004), "Dayton Bluff's dramatic turnaround can be attributed to many factors, among them a new principal, an overhaul of the teaching staff, a new instructional design, a district program for high-poverty schools that provides community services, and an almost single-minded focus on instruction and data."

The district superintendent, recently a finalist for the superintendency of Denver Public Schools, chose an unconventional principal for the school. Since Dayton's Bluff is a site based decision making school, the principal and teachers made the decision to reallocate the money from reassigned or laid-off para-educators to more teaching staff. Hiring more teachers and reducing class size to 15 or 16 was a building-based decision.

The school also implemented the comprehensive reform model, America's Choice School Design, as the instructional model for the school. This model influenced collaboration across grade levels, examination of student work and the implementation of the Reader's workshop, the Writer's workshop, and eventually the Math Workshop using the Everyday math curriculum. Perhaps the changes at the school can best be summed up by one of the principal's statements: "Excuses are dream killers."

Oakland Heights Elementary School in Russellville, Arkansas is a school that at one time had students whose proficiency rates on the state test were the lowest in the district. The school's population is 66% white, 17% Latino, 15% African American, and 72% low income. The school made AYP for 2004. One of the cardinal rules for Oakland Heights is that "all data are transparent." So at Oakland Heights, every teacher knows not only his/her data but that of their colleagues. Through the analysis of data, staff at the school realized that while they were teaching the content, they were not teaching it to enough depth. Staff used that information to revise their instructional practices.

The school implemented vertical teams, an hour and a half literacy block, Accelerated Reader, Step-Up-to-Writing, and running records as additional strategies to boost academic achievement. School staff also designed individual programs for students who did not meet the

state standards in reading. The focus of all instruction is “systematic, explicit, and intentional.” Through increased attention to achievement data, discipline, and school climate issues and a requirement that teachers and instructional aides work closely together to ensure that staff understands what they are teaching, Oakland Heights has made steady progress. The school’s notion of possibility and efficacy is best summarized in the principal’s motto “It’s not a matter of can we? It’s a matter of how can we?”

Summary

There is no simple answer to the question of what does it take to close achievement gaps. In this article the writer has outlined the many faceted approaches that districts and schools have used to address the problem of disparity in achievement. While schools and districts alone are not solely responsible for closing achievement gaps, they can do much within the areas for which they are responsible.

For the areas for which schools are not responsible, (i.e. poverty, community disorganization, family mobility, etc.) schools can work with outside organizations and collaboratives to address the out of school factors that contribute to achievement gaps. Each of us must ask ourselves what we are willing to do in service to those students whose time is now and who can not wait for educational systems to get it right. We have a moral imperative, an economic imperative, and a civic imperative to close achievement gaps. Our future as a nation depends on it.

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Useful Websites for Information and Materials on Closing Achievement Gaps

All Students Reaching the Top: Strategies for Closing Academic Achievement Gaps
<http://www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/thetop.htm>

American Educational Research Association Research Points Fall Volume 2, Issue 3
www.aera.net/publications

Breaking Barriers to Close the Gap
<http://www.osba.org/hotopics/gap/resource.htm>

Center for At Risk Education
www.cde.state.co.us/cdecare/index.htm

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement
<http://www.csrclearinghouse.org>
See archives of NCCSR CSR Connections Fall 2003, Spring 2003, and Summer 2003

Closing the Achievement Gap through Shared Leadership, Part Two: Making Sure it Really Happens!
<http://www-wasa-oly.org/ctag.htm>

Colorado Department of Education: Commission on Closing Achievement Gaps. Available:
www.cde.state.co.us/index_ctag.htm

CRS Connection
www.goodschools.gwu.edu

Education Commission of the States
www.ecs.org

Education Trust
<http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust>

The Minority Student Achievement Network
www.msanetwork.org

National Urban League
<http://www.nul.org/pdf/sobaexec.pdf>

Lessons Learned about the Achievement Gap
American Association of School Administrators
http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2005_01/ray-taylor.htm

National Education Association: Culture, Abilities, Resilience, Effort (CARE) Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps

<http://www.nea.org/teachexperience/careguide.html>

North Central Regional Education Laboratory:
Closing the Achievement Gaps Web Site

www.ncrel.org/gap/

Pathways to School Improvement

www.ncrel.org/pathways

Northwest Regional Education Laboratory
How Northwest Schools Are Closing the Achievement Gap

<http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/2002f/rainbow.html>

Smart Library on Closing the Achievement Gap

www.ncrel.gap.smartlibrary.info

Strategies for School System Leaders on District-Level Change
American Association of School Administrators

<http://www.aasa.org/publications/strategies/index.htm>