

One of the most vexing problems in American education is the achievement gap. Schools and districts are tackling the problem in different ways and seeing results.

Closing the Achievement Gap: How Schools Are Making It Happen

Five years ago, Lanier Middle School in Houston, by many accounts, was doing well. More than 86 percent of students passed the state tests, earning the school an “acceptable” rating under the state’s accountability system. A magnet school for gifted-and-talented students, Lanier continued to attract students from all over the city.

But when the faculty looked more closely at the school’s achievement results, they realized that their overall performance masked wide differences. While the magnet students performed exceptionally well, students from the school’s attendance zone, who tended to be relatively poor and children of color, did less well. For example, although 98 percent of white students passed the state tests in 1995–96, only 82 percent of African American students and 70 percent of Hispanic students did so.

“If you looked at the big picture, we looked pretty good,” says the school’s principal, Tom Monaghan. “But we said, ‘That’s not good enough. We have to look at the zoned kids.’”

To address the needs of those students, the school tried a number of strategies to improve instruction

in mathematics and reading. For example, in mathematics, the school provided additional instruction for the seventh graders who needed “another shot” of the subject and added a second teacher for eighth graders who needed remediation. In English language arts, the school implemented new instructional strategies to develop students’ abilities to articulate the meaning of what they read and to build their “reading stamina.” Lanier also created after-school reading and writing groups for Latino students.

As a result of these efforts, the performance of the “zoned” students jumped dramatically, and the achievement gaps at Lanier have narrowed substantially. In 2000–2001, 89 percent of African American students and 86 percent of Hispanic students passed the state tests, and the school’s rating moved up a notch, to “recognized.” As a result of its efforts, Lanier also became a Beacon school, eligible for a development grant from the Houston Annenberg Challenge.

Lanier’s success in narrowing the achievement gap mirrors its district’s. In 1994, the passing rate in mathematics among white students in Houston was nearly dou-

ble that of children of color (80 percent for whites, compared with 41 percent for African Americans and 44 percent for Hispanics). In 2000, by contrast, the gaps were cut more than in half: 94 percent of whites passed the mathematics test, as did 75 percent of African Americans and 80 percent of Hispanics.

Houston is trying to address one of the most vexing problems in American education: closing the achievement gap that separates affluent and white students from poorer students and students of color. Although few districts have narrowed the gap as much as Houston, other districts are also tackling the problem in different ways and are also seeing results.

For example, Fort Wayne, Indiana, has adopted a number of initiatives to reduce gaps in school climate, discipline, and student achievement. The district’s superintendent, Thomas Fowler-Finn, founded the Network for Equity in Student Achievement with other urban districts, including Houston, to share information and possible solutions.

More than a dozen relatively affluent suburban districts have

by Robert Rothman

“You need to attack what you can control,” says Allan Allson, the superintendent in Evanston, Illinois. “We can’t control poverty, but we can reduce bias in schools.”

formed a separate network, called the Minority Student Achievement Network, through which they share information and data to help member districts understand the extent of the gaps and ways to deal with them.

In Milwaukee and other districts, researchers have analyzed the characteristics of successful schools with high proportions of poor children and children of color, to consider ways schools with similar demographics could raise achievement and narrow the gap.

Educators across the nation are looking to lessons from the Department of Defense schools, where reading and writing performance of African American and Hispanic students is among the highest in the nation.

Educators in these and other districts recognize that the achievement gap has multiple causes and that it needs to be tackled on multiple fronts, from changing instructional practices and increasing parent involvement to helping students of color feel more comfortable in school. At the same time, educators acknowledge that the gaps also reflect larger problems endemic to our society, and that while schools’ efforts can help solve the problem, they may not eliminate the gaps altogether.

“This is an incredibly multi-dimensional problem,” says Allan Alson, the superintendent of the Evanston Township (Illinois) High School District and a founder the Minority Student Achievement Network. “It is not limited to instruction alone, or early-childhood literacy, or peer pressure, or culturally relevant curriculum, or tracking. Each and every issue needs a strategy attached to it.

“But you need to attack what you can control,” Alson continues. “Racism and poverty are both variables. We can’t control poverty, but we can reduce bias in schools.”

While most of these efforts have only begun to bear fruit, and educators in these and other districts believe that the effort is essential, others warn that closing the achievement gap may not be sufficient. Hugh B. Price, the president of the National Urban League, contends that a more urgent task is closing the “preparation gap” between the current levels of performance of children of color and the levels they will need to demonstrate to be successful adults.

“This is the proximate, real-world gap that must be closed as quickly as possible,” Price writes in *Education Week*. “If it isn’t, then poor and minority children won’t have the knowledge and skills they need to become self-reliant adults and informed citizens. They won’t be qualified for those skilled and professional positions that dominate the labor market today. They won’t be able to read ballots, much less ballot initiatives or candidates’ position statements, and thus cast informed votes.”

This new attention to closing the achievement gap addresses a problem that has persisted for decades. On almost every measure of student performance, white students have long outperformed children of color.

The gaps actually narrowed somewhat in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1971 and 1988, the white–African American gap in performance for 13-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test shrank by 22 points on a 500-point scale, or the equivalent of two grade levels. The gap in mathematics narrowed by a similar amount between 1973 and 1986. In both cases, this occurred because African American performance rose while white performance remained stable.

Beginning in the late 1980s, however, progress in closing the gaps stalled, and the remaining differentials are large. According



Challenge Journal

The Journal of the Annenberg Challenge, is published three times yearly at Brown University and made available at no charge as part of the Annenberg Challenge. Materials may be reprinted with proper credit to CJ. Address correspondence to Challenge Journal, c/o Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Box 1985, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. On the Web: www.annenbergchallenge.org

Writer

Robert Rothman

Editor

Susan Fisher

to NAEP, in reading, the average African American 17-year-old performs at the same level as white 13-year-olds. In writing, only 8 percent of African American fourth graders and 10 percent of Hispanic fourth graders wrote at the proficient level, compared with 27 percent of white fourth graders.

African American and Hispanic youths are also much more likely than white youths to drop out of school. In 2000, the dropout rate for Hispanic students between the ages of 16 and 24 was 28 percent, compared with a rate of 7 percent for white students. Among African Americans, the dropout rate was 13 percent.

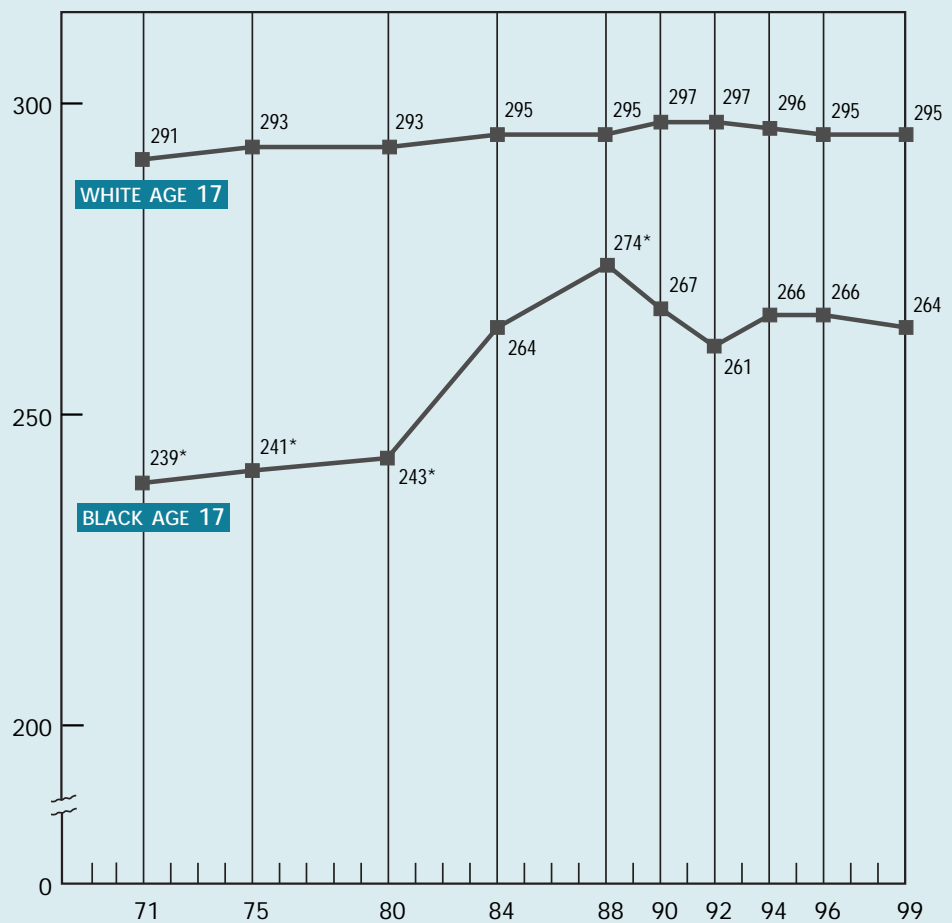
Because the gaps between racial groups are similar to those that separate affluent and poor students, some commentators suggest that the problem is one of poverty, not race. Since African American children are disproportionately likely to be poor, the differences in achievement reflect differences in family and school circumstances, not racial disparities, they maintain.

Yet while differences in income explain some of the differences in achievement between whites and African Americans, the income gaps do not explain all the achievement gaps. Even in affluent suburbs, African American students perform less well than white students.

“There are multiple variables that cause and exacerbate the gap,” says Alson of the Evanston high school district. “We do ourselves a disservice and get stalled if we get in public debates about whether the problem is [race or income or another factor]. We have to acknowledge that it is all of them.”

Trends in Average Reading Scale Scores by Race/Ethnicity for 17-year-olds

The achievement gap in reading narrowed substantially between 1971 and 1988, but the gap widened again and has yet to rebound, according to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The success in reducing the gap reflects the improvement in performance by African American 17-year-olds in the 1970s and 1980s; white performance remained virtually stable during that period. African Americans' performance on the NAEP reading tests declined between 1988 and 1992 and has since leveled off, although at scores significantly higher than 1971 levels.



*Significantly different from 1999.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (naep), 1999 Long-Term Trend Assessment

The first step in dealing with the achievement gap is acknowledging that the problem exists. Yet not all districts break down student performance data to show how various racial and ethnic groups perform. Some officials may be reluctant to do so to avoid fueling the pernicious view that differences are innate. Some may resist reporting racial data to avoid confronting the problem altogether.

Thomas Fowler-Finn, superintendent of the Fort Wayne Community Schools, says he encountered significant resistance when he proposed breaking out data on student discipline by race to see if there were differences in punishments for black and white students. “People were not willing to enter the data the first year,” he says. “It took us two and a half years before people entered all the data. By then, they knew we were serious, and that we would follow up on the information.”

Fowler-Finn notes that the district also pays a price in the community by exposing the racial gaps

In some cases, African American students have not succeeded because teachers do not expect them to succeed, which may convince some students not to try hard in school.

in achievement. “We are the only district in the county that collects this much information,” he says. “People say, ‘Look at how bad things are.’ Things are just as bad everywhere else, but people don’t

know it because they don’t collect the data.”

But, Fowler-Finn says, “There is no way to make progress on these things without dealing with the reality of where you are starting from.”

In Houston, schools are required by state law to report the performance of racial and ethnic groups. In fact, under the state’s accountability system, schools can only be rated successful if *all* groups—white, African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students—meet state standards.

At Lanier Middle School, the state reporting requirements helped cause the school to address the gaps in achievement, according to Monaghan, the principal. Although the school earned an acceptable rating on the strength of its “vanguard,” or magnet, population, the reporting system underscored the fact that the school was not educating all its students to high levels.

“We always could hide behind our vanguard population, if you looked at the school as a whole,” Monaghan says. But once the data were broken out, “we saw we were in trouble.”

Some of the districts that are tackling the achievement gap have focused on changing teacher attitudes. In some cases, educators recognize, African American students have not succeeded because teachers do not expect them to succeed. These low expectations, in turn, may convince some students not to try hard in school. They perform less well and may end up dropping out.

In Fort Wayne, the district tried to get a handle on teacher and student attitudes by conducting annual climate surveys. They found that African American students had more negative relationships with teachers than white students. In response, the district instituted diversity training for the staff, changed the curriculum to include more content on contributions of people of color, and changed discipline policies to reduce the perception that African American students were treated more harshly than their white counterparts.

“We saw a difference between the way minority students saw their environment and the way the majority students saw their environment,” says Fort Wayne’s superintendent, Fowler-Finn. “That gap has closed.”

Teachers at Department of Defense (DOD) schools hold extraordinarily high expectations for African American and Hispanic students, and that is one reason those schools exhibit such narrow achievement gaps, according to Claire Smrekar, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at Vanderbilt University and an author of a recent study on DOD schools. In a 1998 NAEP survey, 85 percent of black students and 93 percent of Hispanic students in DOD’s domestic schools rated teacher expectations for their performance “very positive,” compared with 52 percent of black students and 53 percent of Hispanic students nationwide.

As a DOD teacher who formerly taught at a predominantly African American school told Smrekar and her colleagues: “In

my old district, if a student didn't pass a test, one might say, 'Okay, you tried.' Here they push the kids and don't allow them to settle for less. When they don't succeed, the teacher works harder to get the students to want to excel. The curriculum is not dummed down."

Another aspect of the achievement gap problem is the attitudes of students themselves toward academic achievement. In a widely publicized study, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu concluded that African American students do not work hard in school because of the perception that academic achievement means "acting white."

However, a survey conducted for the Shaker Heights (Ohio) Public Schools, one of the members of the Minority Student Achievement Network, revealed little evidence that students were "holding back" academically. Ronald Ferguson of the Kennedy School of Public Affairs at Harvard University found that African Americans in that district spent at least as much time as white students on homework (although they completed homework less often) and that African Americans were less likely than whites to report that their friends think academic zeal is "not cool." Ferguson also found that, when controlling for differences in course-taking, African Americans were no more likely than whites to say that they did not try as hard in school as they could.

Nonetheless, districts have found that African American students are underrepresented in honors and Advanced Placement courses and that one reason for that

result is that students may be reluctant to take them. In part, this reluctance may stem from a fear of isolation: African American students may not want to be a conspicuously small minority in such classes.

In response to such concerns, districts have revamped their curricula to increase the representation of minorities in high-level classes. In Evanston, for example, the district "clustered" students in advanced classes to reduce isolation; some honors and advanced classes are nearly equally majority and minority, according to Superintendent Alson.

Fort Wayne, meanwhile, eliminated low-level classes, like consumer mathematics, to integrate all students into the academic curriculum. While such efforts have helped encourage African American students to take advanced courses, says Superintendent Fowler-Finn, many students are still reluctant to strive for high grades. They continue to believe that earning a C or D is acceptable, since they will graduate with such grades.

"We still have a difficult time convincing students that grades make a difference," he says.

While increasing enrollment in advanced coursework in high school will help reduce the achievement gap, educators recognize that eliminating the gap will require efforts long before students reach high school.

In his study of Shaker Heights, Ferguson found wide gaps in academic skills among students in sixth grade. On the state's proficiency test, he found, 91 percent

Educators recognize that eliminating the achievement gap will require efforts long before students reach high school; Research has shown that skills gaps begin early—even before children enter first grade.

of white males and 89 percent of white females passed the reading portion, compared with 51 percent of black males and 41 percent of black females. Mathematics results were similar.

Although the results are not available for individual students, "it is plausible that skill differences account for most of the black-white difference in honors and AP enrollment from seventh grade on," Ferguson concludes.

Other research shows that skills gaps begin even earlier—before children enter first grade. Examining a number of studies, Meredith Phillips of the University of California at Los Angeles and her colleagues found that the average African American child enters school with substantially lower mathematics, reading, and vocabulary skills than the average white child.

The researchers conclude that half or more of the black-white test score gap could be eliminated at the end of twelfth grade by eliminating the differences that exist before children enter school in the first place.

Toward that end, some districts have sought to narrow the achievement gap by raising the skills of children of color, beginning with young children. In Fort

The “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”

Although the achievement gap has many causes, one of the most significant—and difficult to solve—is the legacy of racism in the United States. Centuries of discrimination have left a residue of belief that African Americans and other children of color cannot succeed. Despite the rhetoric that “all children can learn,” the belief that some children cannot learn at high levels persists. And when young people believe that society does not expect them to succeed, or when they themselves believe they cannot succeed, they do poorly in school.

There is evidence to support the idea that low expectations have harmful effects. For example, in a series of studies conducted with students at Stanford University, psychologist Claude Steele found that the negative stereotypes about African Americans’ intellectual abilities impede Blacks’ performance on standardized tests—a condition he called “stereotype threat.”

In some of the studies, Steele told one group of students that the tests were measures of their abilities; he told another group that the tests were laboratory experiments to see how students solved problems. In each case, African American students did much worse when they were told that the tests measured

Students who experience “stereotype threat” work just as hard, says psychologist Claude Steele, but they are less efficient—they spend more time and produce less.

whites—when they were told the tests were laboratory studies. Steele concluded that the identification of a test as a measure of their abilities activates a racial stereotype and provokes self-doubt among the test takers.

their abilities, and much better—and at the same level as

Similarly, Steele found that African American students performed much worse when asked to identify their race in a preliminary questionnaire. When not asked to do so, African Americans outperformed whites. The question about race, Steele concluded, promoted stereotype threat.

Steele found that students who experience stereotype threat work just as hard, or harder, to complete tests. However, they are less efficient: they spend more time and produce less. Steele suggests that these students may be dividing their time between answering the questions and trying to understand the source of their frustration.

Students who experience “stereotype threat” work just as hard, but they are less efficient—they spend more time and produce less.

Since Steele’s subjects were high achieving to begin with, one question is whether the results would be the same with a different group of students. There is some evidence that they would. A study of sixth graders in Michigan found that teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities were based largely on past performance, not on race. But these perceptions appeared to affect African American and white children differently: teachers’ perceptions were three times more likely to affect African Americans’ test scores than whites’. As a result, African American students, whom teachers tended to perceive as lower performing because of past performance, did substantially worse on the test than low-performing white students.

Similarly, a study conducted in a suburb of Washington, D.C., found that the proportion of high-achieving African American students dropped substantially between fourth and sixth grade. In focus groups, students suggested that they faced lower expectations than their white peers; honors students, in particular, felt that they had to prove their honors status each year. Ronald F. Ferguson has concluded that Steele’s theory of stereotype threat could explain why such students did poorly on the sixth grade test.¹

The “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”

(continued from previous page)

A well-publicized classroom lesson also provides powerful evidence of the effects of low expectations. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, Jane Elliott, a teacher in Riceville, Iowa, divided her all white class into two groups, those with brown eyes and those with blue eyes. On the first day, she told the class that the brown-eyed group was superior; she reversed the roles on the second day.

Those in the “superior” group had every advantage: they could go to recess longer and to lunch first, they could use the water fountain and playground equipment that were off-limits to the inferior group, they could be class leaders. They received extra help from the teacher; the inferior group did not.

The results were striking and immediate. The “superior” group exuded confidence, while the “inferior” group appeared sullen and withdrawn. Most significantly, their academic work was affected markedly. Those in the “superior” group performed better than usual, while the work of the “inferior” group suffered, just like the African Americans in Steele’s study.

Elliott repeated the lesson each year, and each year attained the same result. The students received a lesson about the corrosive effects of discrimination that they might not have learned in any other way. And their academic performance improved.

Elliott’s lesson attracted a great deal of attention and was the subject of a 1970 ABC News documentary, “The Eye of the Storm,” and a 1985 PBS film.

In speeches on education, President Bush has cited the “soft bigotry of low expectations” as one of the most destructive barriers to high achievement. The achievement gap, as educators have found, is a complex problem that will require actions on a number of fronts to solve. Yet one of the most crucial is ensuring that everyone expects all children to achieve at high levels.

¹Ferguson, Ronald F. “Teachers’ Expectations and the Test-Score Gap,” in C. Jencks and M. Phillips, eds. *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998.

Wayne, for example, the district has instituted an extensive Reading Recovery program to accelerate the progress of first graders who enter school with low levels of reading skills. Under the program, which is used widely in a number of districts, students are provided intensive supplementary instruction in reading to enable them to catch up with their classmates. In Fort Wayne, 80 percent of children in the program are reading at grade level, according to Fowler-Finn.

In other districts, schools and private agencies have provided additional supports for young people to help them succeed. In some cases, these supports consist of extra learning opportunities beyond the school day. In Sacramento, for example, a partnership between a private organization and the city department of parks and recreation has created an after-school program for low-income youths known as START (Students Today Achieving Results for Tomorrow). The project provides homework assistance, literacy training, and enrichment activities at 36 school sites in the city and county of Sacramento.

Another form of support is attending to the needs of each individual student. In Boston, with support from the Boston Annenberg Challenge, the district has been creating small learning communities within comprehensive high schools to provide more individualized attention and support. Ellen Guiney, director of the Boston Annenberg Challenge, says such efforts have contributed to the district’s success in keeping African American and Latino youths in school.

The most important educational resource may be the quality of the teaching force, yet students in high-poverty schools are more than twice as likely as those in more affluent schools to have teachers who lack full credentials.

A recent study by the Manhattan Institute found that Boston had

the highest graduation rate for African American youths in the nation, 85 percent, and the fourth highest for Latinos, 68 percent. “In some high schools, it is striking: they are hanging on to virtually every kid,” Guiney says.

Other schools are reaching out to parents and the community to provide support for low-income children and children of color. Project GRAD, a private effort based in Houston to provide academic assistance to students, also sponsors Parent Universities to improve

literacy among parents and encourages families to participate in school decision-making councils at Project GRAD schools.

The project, which has received funding from the Houston Annenberg Challenge, has shown enormous success. At Davis High School, the number of students graduating increased by 75 percent, and the number of referrals for disciplinary action declined by 74 percent, after the program went into effect. The project has since expanded to other schools in Houston and to other cities, including Atlanta, Columbus, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Newark.

The “Preparation Gap”

While educators and policy makers have begun to focus closely on ways to close the gap in achievement that separates white children and children of color, at least one prominent official argues that the most significant gap is the “preparation gap”: the divide between the current performance of children of color and the level of performance they need to succeed in the twenty-first century.

In a recent commentary in *Education Week*, Hugh B. Price, the president of the Urban League, notes that roughly two-thirds of African American fourth graders, and about as many Latino and Native American children in that grade, perform below the basic level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This gap between students’ current level of performance and what they are expected to know and be able to do persists through middle school and high school and results in large numbers of young people of color being unable to enter college or secure high-paying jobs. The gap, subsequently, produces the “economic apartheid” that divides adult income levels and employment rates along racial and ethnic lines, Price states.

“This is the proximate, real-world gap that must be closed as quickly as possible,” Price argues. “If it isn’t, then poor and minority children won’t have the knowledge and skills they need to become self-reliant adults and informed citizens. They won’t be qualified for those skilled and professional positions that dominate the labor market today. They won’t be able to read ballots, much less ballot initiatives or candidates’ position statements, and thus cast informed votes.”

In addition to attacking the skills gaps that separate white and African American students, educators note that at least some of the achievement gaps reflect disparities in resources available to such students. Although there is some dispute about the precise nature of the relationship between spending and achievement, there is ample evidence that, on many dimensions, schools that serve large numbers of poor children and children of color lack many of the resources available to schools serving more advantaged populations. And some districts that have made headway in narrowing the achievement gap have addressed disparities in resource allocation.

Perhaps the most important resource is the quality of the teaching force. There is widespread agreement that the knowledge and skills of teachers make a huge difference in student achievement. Yet despite the importance of teacher quality, high school students in high-poverty schools are more than

twice as likely as those in more affluent schools to be taught by a teacher lacking certification in his or her field. And a study in California found that poor students are five times more likely than others to be taught by teachers who lack full credentials.

In Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina, the district has made a concerted effort to end these kinds of imbalances. District officials studied the attributes of high- and low-performing schools and found that teachers in low-performing schools were much more likely to have less experience, fewer advanced degrees, and higher rates of absenteeism than those in more successful schools. In response, the district created financial incentives and improved working conditions to attract well-qualified teachers to the low-performing schools and offered programs—such as subsidizing master’s degree programs—to improve the skills of those teaching in such schools.

The district has also created curricula and instructional assistance to help ensure that all teachers—and particularly those with little experience—are able to step into classrooms and be successful.

Eric Smith, superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenberg schools, credits the efforts to enhance teacher quality in high-need schools for the huge increase in performance among African American students the district has shown in the past five years. In 1995–96, 35 percent of African American fifth graders read at grade level; in 2000–01, the proportion had doubled, to 70 percent.

Similarly, one factor in the success of DOD schools is the high

The Minority Student Achievement Network

The purpose of the Minority Student Achievement Network is to discover, develop, and implement the means to insure high academic achievement of minority students.

The suburban districts in the MSA Network have made a commitment to:

1. Share procedures for gathering and reporting disaggregated data;
2. Conduct inventories and evaluations of programs intended to raise the academic achievement of minority students;
3. Participate in meetings of the following type:
 - a. An annual Network meeting for district teams
 - b. Two to three meetings per year for district superintendents (superintendents, not their delegates, are expected to attend)
 - c. Periodic job-alike meetings
 - d. Periodic gatherings for students from network districts;
4. Publicly endorse network purpose and commitment through formal Board action;
5. Engage in collaborative research in which practitioners and researchers are equal partners in designing, conducting, and publishing research;
6. Conduct training and professional development activities for district teachers and administrators intended to improve academic achievement of minority students;
7. Disseminate results of network activities among network districts and the larger educational community.

Network membership is currently limited to:

- Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools, Amherst, MA
- Ann Arbor Public Schools, Ann Arbor, MI
- Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA
- Berkeley Unified School District, Berkeley, CA
- Cambridge Public Schools, Cambridge, MA
- Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools, Chapel Hill, NC
- Cleveland Heights–University Heights School District, Cleveland Heights, OH
- Evanston/Skokie School District 65, Evanston, IL
- Evanston Township High School District 202, Evanston, IL
- Madison Metropolitan School District, Madison, WI
- Montclair Schools, Montclair, NJ
- Oak Park Elementary School District 97, Oak Park, IL
- Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200, Oak Park, IL
- Shaker Heights City School District, Shaker Heights, OH
- White Plains Public Schools, White Plains, NY

For information on the MSA Network and its activities, visit www.eths.k12.il.us/MSA/

The cumulative effect of the preparation gap is the economic apartheid that produces unemployment rates and household incomes for blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans that are far worse than the national averages.

Hugh B. Price, "The Preparation Gap," *Education Week*, November 28, 2001.

rate of qualified teachers in their classrooms. The Vanderbilt study found that a licensed teacher fills nearly every position, and many teachers have considerable experience and advanced degrees. And,

as Smrekar points out, "They will not hire someone outside of her field." (One recent exception to that principle is in middle schools; because of a reduction in high-school aged students, the DOD has a surplus of high school teachers, and some of these are placed in middle schools.)

Beyond addressing specific practices, districts have also sought to reduce achievement gaps by determining the characteristics of entire schools that have been successful and trying to spread them more widely. In Milwaukee, for example, researchers from the Center for Performance Assessment, a private group in Denver, identified schools in which 90 percent of the students are poor, 90

percent are members of ethnic minority groups, and 90 percent meet high academic standards. At first, they identified seven such schools. The number has tripled since then.

Douglas Reeves and his colleagues from the Center for Performance Assessment found that such schools share many common characteristics, including:

- a focus on academic achievement;
- clear curriculum choices; specifically, an emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics;
- frequent assessment of student progress with multiple opportunities for improvement;
- written responses in performance assessments;
- external scoring of assessments.

"The good news is how replicable these practices were," says Reeves. "These are not whiz-bang curriculum programs."

The researchers have found examples of similarly successful schools in other districts as well, including Riverside and Orange counties in California. But Reeves notes that most of the schools they have studied are elementary schools, in part because high schools may not be able to implement the instructional changes the elementary schools have put in place. "There is less control over the curriculum at the high school level," he points out.

To accelerate progress in closing the achievement gap, some 15 affluent suburban districts have banded together to pool resources and share information. The Minority Student Achievement Network,

The Network for Equity in Student Achievement

The Network for Equity in Student Achievement is a group of urban school systems that formed in 1999 to share data, resources, and ideas with the ultimate goal of closing the racial gap and raising achievement for all students.

- Atlanta Public Schools (Georgia)
- Buffalo City School District (New York)
- Fort Wayne Community Schools (Indiana)
- Hillsboro County School District (Tampa, Florida)
- Houston Independent District (Texas)
- Indianapolis Public School District (Indiana)
- Jackson Public School District (Mississippi)
- Jefferson County Public Schools (Louisville, Kentucky)
- Norfolk Public Schools (Virginia)
- Oklahoma City Public Schools (Oklahoma)
- Richland County School District One (Columbia, South Carolina)
- Sacramento City Unified School District (California)

which includes Evanston and Shaker Heights, was formed to conduct research and work together to find solutions to the achievement gap problem. The group first met in Evanston in June 1999 and has since received a planning grant from the National Science Foundation to attack barriers to high achievement in mathematics among children of color.

Inspired by their efforts, Fowler-Finn of Fort Wayne organized the Network for Equity in Student Achievement, whose members are urban districts interested in addressing the achievement gaps. He says that the two networks are trying to organize a joint meeting.

Such collective efforts help district officials deal with the issue by showing that there are others with similar challenges that are looking for solutions, network organizers say. Without that support, educators might find it more difficult to deal with resistance from the community. "Some members of the community may want to avoid the messiness of dealing with race," says Alson, the Evanston superintendent.

Alson also notes that the two national networks have also raised the profile of the issue. And that, in turn, may help bring about solutions. "People feel that a collective effort puts this issue on a national map," he says. "Everybody is paying attention." **CJ**

RESOURCES

Publications

- College Entrance Examination Board. (1999). *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. New York, NY: CEEB.
- Education Trust. (1999). *Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations*. Washington, DC: Education Trust, in cooperation with the Council of Chief State School Officers and partially funded by the US Department of Education.
- Education Week. (2000). "The Achievement Gap: Education Week Special Report," *Education Week*. Four-part series (March 15, 22, 29, April 5).
- Ferguson, Ronald F. (2001). "A Diagnostic Analysis of Black and White GPA Disparities in Shaker Heights, Ohio." *Brookings Papers on Education Policy: 2001*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Fordham, Signithia, and John Ogbu. (1986). "Black Students' School Success: Coping With the Burden of 'Acting White.'" *The Urban Review* 18 (3):176-206.
- Jencks, Christopher, and Meredith Phillips (Eds.). (1998). *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Minority Student Achievement Network. *Network News: Newsletter of the Minority Student Achievement Network* (published quarterly since Fall 2000).
- Olson, Lynne, and Caroline Hendrie. (1998). "The Solutions." In *Education Week Quality Counts 1998: The Urban Challenge: Public Education in the 50 States*. Washington, DC: Editorial Projects in Education.
- Phillips, Meredith, James Crouse, and John Ralph. (1998). "Does the Black-White Test Score Gap Widen after Children Enter School?" In C. Jencks and M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Reeves, Douglas. (June 2000). "The 90/90/90 Schools: A Case Study." In *Accountability in Action*. Denver, CO: Advanced Learning Press.
- Louis, Karen Seashore, and BetsAnn Smith. (1996). "Teacher Engagement and Real Reform in Urban Schools." In Belinda Williams (Ed.), *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Singham, Mano. (1998). "The Canary in the Mine: The Achievement Gap between Black and White Students." *Phi Delta Kappan* (September), pp. 9-15.
- Smrekar, Claire, James Guthrie, Debra Owens, and Pearl Sims. (2001). *March Toward Excellence: School Success and Minority Achievement in Department of Defense Schools*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, Peabody Center for Education Policy.

(continues on next page)

Challenge Journal

THE JOURNAL OF THE ANNEBERG CHALLENGE



Box 1985

Brown University

Providence, RI 02912

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
P A I D
Providence, RI
Permit No. 202

RESOURCES

(continued from previous page)

Organizations

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District
700 East Stonewall Street, Charlotte, NC 28202
704-343-6220
www.cms.k12.nc.us/index.htm
- Education Trust
1725 K St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20006
202-293-1217
www.edtrust.org
- Lanier Middle School
2600 Woodhead, Houston, TX 77098
713-942-1900
www.rice.edu/armadillo/Schools/Lanier
- Minority Student Achievement Network
Evanston Township High School
1600 Dodge Avenue, Evanston, IL 60204
847-424-7000
www.eths.k12.il.us/MSA/msanetwork.html
- Network for Equity in Student Achievement
Fort Wayne Community Schools
1200 S. Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, IN 46802
219-425-7200
www.fwcs.k12.in.us/superint.htm