Minding the Achievement Gap
One Classroom at a Time

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Minding the Achievement Gap

"CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IS MORE URGENT TODAY THAN EVER before, and dramatic success is possible. Academic excellence is difficult to achieve, but is not a controversial goal," writes economist Ronald Ferguson in *Toward Excellence with Equity* (2008, p. 284). Countless agencies produce vast amounts of literature focused on the notable disparity that exists between the educational achievement of white and minority students (primarily black and Hispanic). Much of this literature shares Ferguson's sentiment that closing the achievement gap is an urgent national imperative. We think it is, too.

We agree with Ferguson that group-proportional racial equality in achievement is an important goal for the nation, but we are mindful that significant learning gaps exist for other populations of students, too, including those who are living in situational or generational poverty, those who are not proficient in English, and those who have disabilities and receive special education services. We further agree that making it possible for every student in the United States to achieve academic success is an uncontroversial goal—and a compelling one for every educator in every classroom, every day.

Centuries of Schools in Crisis

As urgent a priority as closing achievement gaps seems today, the penchant to propose broad educational reform to close the educational achievement gap has been around for a very long time. The Massachusetts Education Law of

1642, for example, required that parents or guardians see to it that their children could read and write (in order to follow the laws and know the principles of their religion). This was less a reflection of the value that colonists placed on schooling than it was recognition that surviving in the New World required certain sets of skills and knowledge. The Law of 1647 later required towns with 50 families or more to build a school and hire a schoolmaster to teach children to read and write. In just five years, the colonists realized that there was an achievement gap and that the solution was to create schools for all children in the town to attend.

Another example, 200 years later, reveals another achievement gap. In 1845, the results of the first standardized test administered to 500 students in Boston distressed Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, who concluded, "What little students knew came from memorizing the textbook without having to think about the meaning of what they had learned" (Rothstein, 1998, p. 17). Mann proposed a way to close the learning gap he saw: improve teacher preparation so that all students had access to schools with highly qualified instructors.

In *The Way We Were? The Myths and Realities of America's Student Achievement,* Richard Rothstein (1998) covers 100 years of U.S. school reform efforts aimed at tackling "educational crises" like the one Mann noted. Many of these crises seem strikingly contemporary to a modern reader—from poor literacy in New York during the Great Depression, to inadequate knowledge of world geography in the 1940s, deficient understanding of mathematics in the 1960s, subpar critical thinking skills in the 1970s, and a lack of workplace skills in the 1980s, all the way up the present-day perception that students do not have the 21st century skills they will need in a global, knowledge-based economy.

Some of the recent explorations of key gaps in the educational attainment of U.S. students include *Democracy at Risk* (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008) and *A Stagnant Nation: Why American Students Are Still at Risk* (Strong American Schools, 2008). We suspect if Rothstein were asked to comment on the urgency insinuated by new reports describing achievement gaps, he might quote Will Rogers, as he did in his 1998 book, saying, "The schools ain't what they used to be and probably never were" (p. 17).

Time to Reflect

How does knowing that rhetoric about "educational crises" dates back to the colonial era affect your perspective on the current achievement gap?

Unnecessarily Ambitious Reforms

Rothstein's research touches on two particularly noteworthy issues. First, he affirms that evidence repeatedly shows achievement levels in the United States to be better than they have been in years past, but he adds that good news does not necessarily make for good news stories. Second, Rothstein expresses apprehension about what he refers to as political "hyperventilated rhetoric." He contends that repeated speech making about the dire state of U.S. education leads to the crafting of unnecessarily ambitious education reforms rather than to the implementation of thoughtful, effective plans. Because the populace believes schools are performing so unsatisfactorily—so much more poorly than "they used to"—educators and politicians are designing broad reforms that look very different from targeted reform aimed at making generally satisfactory schools better and helping those students who really are at risk of academic failure. Rothstein goes on to quip, almost apologetically, that people who pay to fund schools might need to perceive a situation as a crisis before they are willing to act.

Empiricist Gene Glass, best known for originating the concept of meta-analysis in the fields of psychology and education, is careful to point out that *schools in crisis* is a not a new concept: "Criticism and reform of the education of young people was old when Quintilian (35–95 A.D.) was young" (2008, p. 4). Glass argues that inflated impressions of a crisis in education can have detrimental consequences, influencing choices for reform initiatives at the national level that trickle down to guide local decisions and budget expenditures.

When we read commentary about schools today not performing "well enough," there is often an implication and sometimes even a direct assertion that subpar schools put national prosperity at risk. Both Glass and Rothstein argue that the relationship between education and the economy is far more complicated than the simple picture painted by school critics. More critically, they point out that myths about school failure can lead to ill-conceived reform measures that set up the public to conclude that the public school system is irretrievably broken and cannot be fixed.

From Rhetoric to Targeted Change

It is important for educators to reaffirm that closing the achievement gap is not a recent effort in the United States; it is more accurately seen as an ongoing challenge—one that is now our turn to tackle, with both the wisdom of historical perspective and the scientific insight of research informing our approach. As we seize this opportunity, we must remember that exaggerated rhetoric leads to wide political or radical reform action that tends to burn out before the next political reform. When it comes to achieving significant, long-term learning improvement for students, smaller, more targeted changes are what work best, and teachers can play a vital part in those changes every day (Marzano et al., 2001).

Time to Reflect

In what ways does the current narrative about the achievement gap at the national level affect local school decisions about the steps to take to improve student learning?

Mind the Gap to Close the Gap

The pithy phrase “mind the gap” has been popularized by the London Underground railway to help passengers heed the uneven space between the subway door and the station platform. Although engineers tested various solutions (such as rebuilding and adding bridges), they decided the best course of action was to teach passengers to automatically step across the breach. So

Educator Voice

Kathy Gwidt, District Adminstrator

Part of Kathy Gwidt's job as Director of Teaching and Learning in the School District of New London in Wisconsin is to guide administrative teams through the classroom observation process. During that process, she and others listened to students describe their successes and how they fell short of achieving academically. Kathy and her colleagues now realize the power and value of common language and effective feedback. It has led them to effectively mind the gap by classroom, not by school.

"How Could This Happen?"

"Being the student I am, I never thought I would make it into advanced math."

When asked what he meant by this comment, Corey, a high school junior, explained that he was "not one of the smart kids." We knew that Corey had a 1.0 grade point average (GPA), but from the time of our introduction, I was struck by how little that label seemed to fit this articulate young man. He confidently shook my hand, eloquently conversed about his middle school years, and defined "the smart kids" as those who had their agenda books signed and who regularly participated in class. Corey also told me that back in his elementary days he had been extremely successful in advanced-level math, a class in which homework was not graded, but quizzes and tests were. Corey explained that he never did the homework for this class but had maintained an *A* anyway. "Dream come true, right?" he snickered.

Corey's voice is representative of academic underachievers whom we interviewed in an effort to increase overall achievement in our district by better understanding student perception of grades and report cards. I talked with Corey and high school juniors who were identified by their GPAs as either *academic achievers* (those with GPAs ranging from 3.5 to 4.0) or *academic underachievers* (those with GPAs below 1.0). Although much research exists about grading and reporting, literature addressing student perception on the topic of achievement was limited, and I was committed to adding student voices to the plethora of research already published.

What our efforts to understand student perspective on achievement taught us was that we educators have a tremendous opportunity to mitigate achievement differences, regardless of genetic or environmental factors—and the way to do that is by shifting our focus from "closing" achievement gaps to "minding" them at the classroom level, with each individual student.

Corey was what I would describe as an introspective underachiever. He was thoughtful, independent, and confident, but achievement in school was not his primary concern. He was not a disruptive student; in fact, he was reserved and rarely spoke during class. Teachers generally were frustrated with Corey, seeing his unwillingness to participate in class or complete homework as a puzzling lack of responsibility on his part.

During our interview, Corey became a voice and a solution instead of a cipher. He continued to tell the story of his school experience, returning back to his unlikely presence in elementary school advanced math. His teacher had explained to him that his assessment scores were the highest in the class. When I asked how he had felt when his teacher told him this, Corey replied, "I sort of felt like . . . see, I knew [that] I knew that stuff, and I sort of had hope that school would make sense to me. Other years, teachers would just give me bad grades, and that was it. I look back and know I tried a lot harder [in the advanced math class]."

Continuing, Corey shared that by midyear, other students and even other teachers did not think it was fair that he could pass the class without completing homework, which, although not graded, was still "required." In response to complaints, the decision was made to move Corey to a regular math class—one in which homework was both required and graded. This class involved Corey repeating a lot of content he had already mastered, but it added the responsibility of homework. Corey did his homework in this class, and the department eventually moved him back to his original advanced course. Upon his return to the class, however, Corey once again stopped doing homework, and within a short period, he found himself back in a regular math class.

Corey's take on this? "While I bounced back and forth [between classes], I failed to learn, or missed bits [and pieces of instruction] that went on in both classes. I feel that missing that has had a big impact on my life."

I was left wondering how much of the entire scenario of underachievement was a function of our school policies inadvertently contributing to Corey "falling through the cracks." By not doing his math assignments, he was deemed to be "not performing well," but at the same time, he *could* perform the math. The actions taken to "help" Corey didn't motivate him the way the school had intended, didn't support his knowledge or performance, and may have led, as he believes, to further detrimental consequences. How many other academically at-risk students were our habitual practices hurting more than helping?

"That's the Way We Have Always Done It"

I work with exceptional educators who are dedicated to improving student achievement. Most have spent their careers attempting to balance shifts in the educational pendulum. We embrace a philosophy of continuous improvement and can clearly point to data that indicate learning gaps exist. We have worked diligently to comply with state and federal mandates, and according to all reports, we have done so successfully. Yet we know there are academic underachievers who have been alienated from a system that, even though unintentionally, does not embrace them.

We understand the history of grading and reporting, as well as current practices in these areas, but little appears to have changed to accommodate student needs. Despite research that encourages change, we have continued to teach, grade, and report in much the same way that we were taught, graded, and reported on as high school students. As we look at Corey, and at other