2004 - 2005

Focus On Blacks

We must do more to close the achievement gap. We must ensure that every child is learning and succeeding in school, regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation.—Reg Weaver, President, National Education Association

The National Education Association's commitment to creating great public schools for every child requires working to ensure that all students are learning and succeeding in schools. This task is challenging. From its beginnings, our nation's school system has treated students differently, depending on their race, social class, and gender, and even today, a significant gap in academic achievement persists among groups.

The 2004 - 2005 Focus On *series examines and enriches our understanding of this achievement gap for six groups: American Indian and Alaska Native students; Asian and Pacific Islander students; Black students; Hispanic students; women and girls; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. Each publication highlights some of the barriers to learning and success faced by one of these groups of students, concrete strategies to address these barriers, and additional resources for school personnel.*

Perhaps the most daunting challenge facing American public education today is the one posed by the racial student achievement gap. Exactly why do an inordinately high percentage and number of Black students lag behind their White counterparts on every standardized test—ranging from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to the Standardized Achievement Test (SAT)?

Indeed, the average scores of Black 17-year-olds in high school on the nation's report card (science, math, and reading) are comparable to those of White 13-year-olds in middle school.[1] In the year 2000, for example, 20 percent of White fourth graders scored "below basic" on the national math test, while 61 percent of Black fourth graders scored "below basic." These data are particularly disturbing when one realizes that these gaps in achievement exist across class and gender lines as well as in rural, urban, and suburban school districts.

Although the challenge appears daunting, the nationwide achievement gap between Black and Hispanic students and their Asian-American and White counterparts *was* closing steadily through the 1970s and the 1980s. Suddenly, however, the gaps began widening again in the late 1980s, a time when the courts began dismantling desegregation programs and America's public schools began resegregating. Simultaneously, many inner city school districts—which educate a large portion of poor, Black students—began having financial crises and, to make matters worse, states failed to equalize funding among districts.

For years, it was assumed that the first signs of gaps in achievement between Black and White students showed up by the fourth grade, around the same time that students take the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). But according to recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, that view is wrong.

In the first, large-scale, longitudinal, federal study of its kind, a sample of 22,000 nationally representative kindergarten students (Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian) was given a reading assessment that involved several types of tests. In one-on-one assessments, for example, children were asked to identify letters and sounds. Researchers also read short passages to children, and then asked them questions about the passages. The preliminary results indicate that gaps in achievements existed even before children start school.[2]

Although this study, which will be completed in 2005, points to gaps in achievement before Black children enter school, the findings should not become a vehicle for blaming parents or allowing educators to abdicate their responsibility to educate all children. Rather, this study's preliminary results should be seen as a wake-up call, telling us that in addition to reforming our schools, educators also need to take steps to assist families and communities in stemming the gaps in achievement before they start.

INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES

Too often, educators attempt to tackle the gaps in achievement between Black and White students by sticking to past instructional practices and policies. And the results are predictable: no improvement in the achievement indices for Black students, increased frustration for teachers and Black students, and a widening of the gaps in achievement.

Instructional practices that offer little benefit or intervention can lead to increased learning anxiety for Black students, which in turn can lead to wider gaps in achievement, culminating in Black students turning off to learning, disciplinary problems, and/or Black students dropping out. In this scenario, the school becomes the

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focal point for situational anxiety, rather than the safe haven for intervention. To reduce learning anxiety and enhance instruction, teachers, administrators, and school personnel can do many things, among them:[3]

1. Maintain the same teaching standards and learning expectations for all students.
2. Reduce class size and maximize the time spent on learning to give Black students more attention.
3. Establish peer and support networks, matching students with other students to learn cooperatively.
4. Use the strengths of the Black community, such as churches, recreational facilities, and social organizations to promote a greater concern for learning.
5. Hold ongoing teacher discussions on strategies to improve instruction, as well as share data on eliminating the gaps in achievement.
6. Encourage administrators to give teachers the instructional training and resources that they perceive they need to increase achievement levels.
7. Recognize that culture shock, as a result of racial differences or class differences, may be a barrier with which both teachers and students are grappling; seek further professional development, such as "cultural competency," to better relate to Black students and their culture.
8. Develop outreach mechanisms to foster collaborations among parents and community members.
9. Address the gaps in achievement in the school improvement plan.
10. Provide Black students with challenging and meaningful instructional tasks that develop their problem-solving skills.

For the majority of the Twentieth Century, the curricula to which Black children in public schools were exposed made no positive mention of Black people whatsoever. Neither the textbook writers nor teachers seemed to know anything about the contributions of Blacks to world civilization, which reflected what they had been taught.

Consequently, many teachers assumed that Blacks had made no contributions to world civilization, and they taught that to their Black students, either directly or by implication. As a result, the pride and self-esteem of many Black students was not enhanced. Many came to regard education as something totally irrelevant to their lives and culture.

Today's libraries and bookstores are filled with resources documenting the achievements of Blacks the world over. And opportunities for making the curriculum more inclusive have never been greater. By giving Black students examples of Blacks who have overcome adversity and achieved, teachers can inspire Black students and help them to become more interested in learning. Indeed, examples of Blacks who have achieved can be woven into the fabric of every subject in the curriculum. Becoming acquainted with the contributions of Black achievers in every subject area and integrating aspects of their contributions into the curriculum is one example of how to make curriculum materials relevant to the lives of Black students in order to promote greater interest and motivation for learning.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

American families and communities are challenged today as they have never been before. Financial uncertainty; divorce and separation; lack of child supervision services, teenage pregnancy, and family instability play major roles in altering the quality of life children enjoy.

These factors are even more acute in the Black community where, in many cases, systemic poverty, poor learning facilities and resources, limited access to pre-school, and the low expectations of some teachers for Black students exacerbate the education challenges Black families and communities face.

Indeed, if the Black family is headed by a single mother, the problem can be further aggravated because single-parent families, mostly headed by women, experience high rates of poverty and, all too frequently, single parents do not have the time, energy or training to help with their children's school readiness.

Consequently, at the very age when many Black children should be assisted in developing vocabularies and communication skills that will enable them to become ready to learn, several developmentally important years can be lost. Prior to starting school, many Black children are left in unchallenging environments that do not prepare them for the formal training they will experience in their elementary school years.

Nonetheless, parents are their children's first teachers, and educators need their assistance in preparing children to learn. Research has shown that reading to a child on a regular basis from infancy can go a long way in helping that child to develop communication and literacy skills.

Research also has proven that early education programs of high quality can improve the lives of all children, especially low-income, Black children. Disadvantaged children who have had the advantage of quality early childhood education programs have demonstrated marked improvement in their communication skills, school placement and achievement levels, and grade point averages. They also tend to have lower dropout rates.

But too often in Black communities across the country, early childhood education programs have long waiting lists, are unaffordable for many Black families, or are non-existent. Nonetheless, there are many actions that communities and Black families can take. Among them are the following:

1. Encourage parents to read to children as early and as often as possible—even before a child is able to speak.
2. Help to take the battle for early childhood education in your community into the political arena.
3. Initiate community-wide forums and discussions on child-rearing and early education strategies.
4. Invite parents to get involved in the education of their children.
5. Collaborate with the staff of child-related organizations in your community.
6. Visit the homes of Black students who are at-risk.
7. Involve representatives of Black churches and community organizations in efforts to improve student achievement.
8. Support local and state legislation that aims to improve student achievement.
9. Publicly honor students who achieve, working with community organizations and groups.

The Tripod Project

Harvard researcher, Ronald F. Ferguson, initiated the Tripod Project as a reform initiative that seeks to increase communication and build knowledge among educators. According to Ferguson, teachers need to work together to create communities of learning in which they share with each other ideas for improving academic achievement.[4]

The Tripod Project uses three pillars for learning: **Content**, the relevance or interest of the students for the materials being taught; **Pedagogy**, the approach a teachers uses to build student interest and relevance in the materials being taught; and **Relationships**, the human connection between a teacher and student through which encouragement to achieve can flow.

Through teacher surveys and research, Ferguson examined the role of teacher expectations as pertains to student achievement. Some literature said teachers were biased toward Black students, others said they were neutral. Ferguson, however, found truth to lie somewhere in the middle. He developed a classification system for three different kinds of neutrality in the area of teacher expectations for Black students.

1. *Unconditional neutrality*: Does a teacher expect the same level of performance from both Black and White students?;
2. *Neutrality conditioned in past performance*: Does the teacher expect less of a Black student than a White student when the students have the same past pattern of performance, achievement history, grades, test scores, and attitudes toward school?; and,
3. *Neutrality conditioned on potential*: Do teachers have lower expectations of Black students than White students when they exhibit the same educational potential?

Ferguson found that the differences among these three categories for neutrality can allow for hidden, and possibly unconscious, biases, which could affect teacher expectations and Black student achievement.

Explaining that Black students often need more encouragement to achieve than White students (because of the way they are socialized), Ferguson also offers four classroom goal structures with the potential to either inhibit or encourage Black students to achieve.

Four Classroom Goal Structures

1. *Low Help/Low Perfectionism*: students get little help from teachers and no demands for submitting quality work.
2. *Low Help/High Perfectionism*: students get little help from teachers but are sledge hammered by a demand for quality work.
3. *High Help/Low Perfectionism*: teachers provide students with plenty of help, but make few demands that they produce quality work.
4. *High Help/High Perfectionism*: teachers provide students with a great deal of help, accompanied by a strong demand and expectation that the students turn in quality work.

Taken together, Ferguson's three pillars for learning, his three classes of neutrality in teacher expectations, and his four classroom goal structures offer educators an excellent framework for self-examination in working with underachieving Black students.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Few can doubt the connection between student achievement and a highly qualified teacher workforce. Yet, the necessity for teacher diversity is often overlooked rather than accepted as central to school reform. High-stakes tests impede efforts to expand the pool of prospective teachers of color, and the logistics of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) continue to create significant barriers to recruiting teachers of color.

The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force—a group composed of six leading education groups, including NEA—examined the relationship between student achievement and teacher diversity, and found that increasing the percentage of teachers of color in classrooms is connected directly to closing the achievement gaps of students.

The analysis, *Assessment of Diversity in America's Teaching Force: A Call to Action*, reported these key trends, which have significance for African-American students as well as other students of color: [5]

- Nationally, about 17 percent of public school students are African American, and 6 percent of teachers are African American.
- In more than one-third (38 percent) of America's public schools, there is not a single teacher of color on staff.
- Students of color tend to perform better—academically, personally, and socially—when taught by teachers from their own ethnic groups.

- In most instances, fewer than 50 percent of African Americans pass teacher entrance exams. This pattern prevails across time, location and types of tests.

The Collaborative is proposing solutions that include revising NCLB measures to clearly spell out diversity as a critical element of a "highly qualified" teacher workforce, identifying and eliminating the obstacles faced by minority teachers in passing entry tests, and developing programs that support teachers of color both in the pipeline and in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The work of education researchers, such as Ronald F. Ferguson, will go a long way in helping our nation's communities close the achievement gaps between White and Black students. But researchers can only offer possible solutions. It takes teachers, families, and communities working in collaboration to convert possible solutions into sure-fire remedies. When parents, communities, and education employees work together, students learn more, schools improve, and communities benefit.

Moreover, the gaps in achievement can be closed if parents, teachers, students, and community members realize what's at stake for our nation and alter their attitudes toward educating all of our children. When the collective will of our nation is brought to bear, gaps in achievement, like earlier education challenges, will become confined to the dustbin of the past.

Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, *National Assessment of Educational Progress*, 2003, *Mathematics and Reading Scale Scores*, www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

2. Valerie E. Lee and David Burkam, "Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School," *Economic Policy Institute*, September 2002.

3. Michael Sadowsk, "Closing the Achievement Gap One School at a Time," *Harvard Education Letter*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, edited by David T. Gordon, 2002.

4. "Necessary Policies and Practices To Close the Student Achievement Gap," a presentation by Ronald F. Ferguson at an NEA symposium on Critical Issues for Educators, June 2003.

5. *Assessment of Diversity in America's Teaching Force: A Call to Action*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004), www.nea.org/teacherquality/images/diversityreport.pdf

Cites to these Web sites are provided for informational purposes only, and their listing here does not constitute NEA endorsement of the resources offered, activities promoted, or other content included on these Web sites.

NEA Resources

- C.A.R.E.: *Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps* will be released both in print and online at NEA.org in January 2005. For more information, contact NEA Human and Civil Rights, (202) 822-7700, hcrinfo@nea.org.
- *Identifying Achievement Gaps in Your School, District, and Community* is a forthcoming publication from NEA Research. For more information on this series of discussion guides, contact Glen Cutlip, (202) 822-7369.
- NEA's Read Across America publishes 50 *Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know* and other resources to foster reading achievement and instill a love of reading year-round. www.nea.org/readacross/classrooms.html#multi

Additional Resources

- Andreae Downs, "Successful Urban School Reform Efforts Share Common Features," *Harvard Education Letter*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, May/June 2002.
- Robert P. Moses, "Quality Education is a Civil Rights Issue, *Harvard Education Letter*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, May/June 2001.
- R. F. Ferguson, "A Diagnostic Analysis of Black and White GPA Disparities in Shaker Heights, Ohio," *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 2001, (Washington, D.C.; Brookings Institution, 2001).
- S.T. Gregory, ed., *The Academic Achievement of Minority Students: Perspectives, Practices, and Prescriptions*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).
- J. Jurich and S. Estes, *Raising Academic Achievement: A Study of 20 Successful Programs*, (Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum, 2001), www.aypf.org/pubs.html
- Minority Student Achievement Network, Evanston Township High School, 1600 Dodge Ave., Evanston, IL 60204; (847) 424-7000, www.eths.k12.il.us/MSA/msanetwork.html