Creating Conditions to Close the Achievement Gap:
What it Takes to Leave No Child Behind

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What it Takes

- **Expectations:** We must have the confidence and knowledge to insure that all of the children we serve learn and achieve at their highest potential.

- **Conditions:** We must make sure that we have created an environment that promotes effective teaching and support for learning.

- **Skills, Strategies and Resources:** We must make sure the educators and schools have the capacity and access to the “best practices” to serve all children.
Failure of Policy

- NCLB moved school forward by requiring schools to produce evidence of learning, but:
  - Developed no strategy for insuring that the conditions required for learning were in place
  - Focused too narrowly on using tests to measure learning
    - overlooked importance of instruction
  - Narrowed focus of curriculum to test preparation
  - Relied on pressure as strategy to improve schools without strategies to intervene and provide support
  - Ignored non-academic needs of children
I. What we know about the achievement gap

- It mirrors other disparities (health, income, employment)
- Tends to follow consistent patterns with respect to the race and class of students
- External conditions affect academic performance (e.g. health, housing stability, poverty)
- Influenced by a history of perceiving race and intelligence as linked
- We have historically seen the pursuit of excellence and equity as conflicting goals
What’s Race Got to do With it?

- Historic assumptions about link between race and intelligence contribute to complacency about the lower performance of children of color and the normalization of failure.
- Pervasive racial stereotypes undermine achievement.
  - Middle class children of color are often affected by the same stereotypes.
  - Immigrant children may be temporarily buffered.
- Tracking often has the effect of re-segregating schools from within and reinforces notion that a child’s race determines their academic ability.
Confronting the Achievement Gap

- Manifest on most indicators of achievement (grades, test scores, graduation rates, discipline patterns), key areas:

  - Discipline - punishing the neediest students
  - Special education - removing students due to our inability to meet their needs
  - English as a second language - perceiving non-English speakers as deficient
Discussion:

- Which students in your school are least likely to achieve at high levels?
- What has your school done to support these children? How effective are the interventions?
- Who are the advocates for the children who are least well served? Who are the guardians for equity?
Normalization of Failure

- Tendency for staff to treat patterns of achievement as “normal”

- You know normalization of failure is a problem if:
  - Complacency - Staff has grown accustomed to the predictability of academic outcomes
  - Rationalizations - Teachers and administrators explain low achievement by blaming parents and students
  - Beliefs - Staff believes that culture and biology determine intelligence rather than access to resources and educational opportunity
We know we are succeeding in closing the gap when the backgrounds of students (race and class) cease to be predictors of achievement.
II. Dimensions of the Gap

- Preparation Gap - Poor children arrive at school less prepared
  - Limited literacy/vocabulary for poor children
  - Limited access to high quality early childhood education and support at home
  - Gaps in preparation often show up at every transition in a child’s education
Close the Opportunity Gap

- Students with lower achievement often have limited access to rigorous courses, highly skilled teachers and often receive less support outside of school
  - Tracking, labeling and low expectations limit opportunities
  - Middle class students often have more access to help at home
    - Homework is an equity issue
    - Schools that want to increase college attendance must improve college advising, SAT support and financial aid counseling
Other Aspects of the Gap

- Teacher-student gap
  - When relationships between students and adults are strained or weak performance is often lower
  - Lowest achievers are often alienated and estranged from school
- School - Parent gap
  - Parents of lowest achievers tend to be less involved with school
  - Many teachers do not know how to build partnerships with parents
Close the Gap Between Ability and Performance

- Too many students are **bored** in school and not working at their potential.
- Many students perceive what they learn in school as **irrelevant and meaningless**.
- Many schools lack a strategy for **motivating** students or getting them to become **invested** in their education.
- Students who are faced with **distractions and challenges** outside of school often don’t do very well.
- Many schools have an **anti-intellectual culture** - it is not cool to be smart.
Discussion

- What is your school doing to confront each dimension of the achievement gap?
  - Preparation
  - Opportunity (lack of support at home)
  - Relationships (alienation from adults in school)
  - Parent vs. school
  - Ability vs. performance
III. Closing the Gap Requires a Paradigm Shift

- **Old Paradigm**
  - Intelligence is innate
  - Job of schools is to measure intelligence and sort accordingly
  - Inequity in resource allocation: best resources to highest achievers
  - Focus on achievement as measured by test performance
  - Teachers expect students to learn the way they teach
  - Discipline used to weed out the “bad” kids

- **New Paradigm**
  - Intelligence and ability are influenced by opportunity
  - Job of school is to cultivate talent and ability among students
  - Resources allocated based on student need
  - Focus on “whole child”
  - Teachers teach the way students learn
  - Discipline used to reinforce school values and norms
## Conditions Needed to Raise Student Achievement:

- **Systems to facilitate school effectiveness**
  - Diagnostic assessment
  - Early intervention procedures
  - Evaluation to insure quality control
  - On-site, ongoing professional development
  - Extended learning opportunities

- **Cultural Changes:**
  - Supportive relationships between teachers and students
  - Willingness among teachers to share ideas, curricula, materials
  - Practices that reinforce core values
  - Peer culture where it is “cool to be smart”
  - Partnerships between school, community and parents
IV. Steps that can be taken to close the gap:

- External partnerships with service providers to address unmet non-academic needs
  - Health, nutrition, counseling, etc.

- Using evaluation to insure quality control in interventions and supports for students
  - Title I and Special Education

- Key principles:
  - Kids who are behind must work harder and longer under better conditions
  - Improving the quality of teaching is the most effective way to raise student achievement
Close the Preparation Gap

- Increase access to quality early childhood programs
  - Provide professional development for providers
- Use summer school and after-school programs to address needs of kids who are falling behind
  - Build safety net - use data to identify kids who are falling behind early, intervene early
  - Transition - design strategies to identify and provide support to students moving from elementary to middle school, middle to high school.
Close the Opportunity Gap

- Increase access to rigorous courses and increase support
  - AVID, MESA
  - Increase enrollment in higher level math
- Insure equitable access to effective teachers
- Address inequities in parental resources by providing greater support to disadvantaged students in college advising, SAT prep, tutoring
Close the Relationship Gap:

- Move toward a new advising model in which every teacher serves as an advisor
- Increase student connectedness to the school through extracurricular activities
- Hire personnel from diverse backgrounds and make sure students have access to adults who can relate to them and provide direction
  - moral authority
- Focus on improving teaching by:
  - Bring teachers together to analyze student work
  - Provide on-site professional development for teachers in content, pedagogy and relationship building with students
  - Model effective teaching at PD
Close the Gap Between Parents and School

- Engage parents in partnerships based on respect and shared interests
- Initiate contact before problems arise
- Design a variety of activities throughout school year for parents
- Train all personnel to be effective at working with parents
Discussion:

- Who should lead the effort to close the gaps?
- How should those in leadership go about obtaining “buy-in” from others on staff?
- What steps can you take to obtain buy-in from students and parents?
V. What we Know About Teaching and Learning

- Good teaching matters - the only way to raise achievement is to improve instruction
- We must teach the way students learn rather than expecting students to learn the way we teach
- Teaching and learning must be regarded as connected activities
  - Teachers must take responsibility for student learning and achievement
- We must find ways to reduce teacher isolation
Effective Teaching Strategies for Reducing Academic Disparities

- Active learning, interactive classroom, on-task learning
  - Moving away from the cemetery model
- Group and individual research projects
- Constructivist, inquiry-based pedagogical strategies
- Simulations and debate
- Socratic seminars
- Project based learning
- Experiential learning
- Student leadership in the classroom
- Public presentations of student work
Interventions that work

- AVID, MESA - peer support groups
- Project SEED - early exposure to higher level math
- Popular culture in the classroom - Algebra Project
- Accelerated summer school
  - Provides advanced preparation for students
- After-school and community-based enrichment
- Extra curricular activities - sports, music, clubs
- Transition classes - smaller classes for students who are behind
- Bringing teachers together to analyze student work
Help students to succeed: Demystify school success

- Teach study skills, form study groups
- Show students what excellent work looks like and how to produce it
- Develop performance-based assessments to focus on evidence of competence and mastery
- Teach and explain code switching behaviors
- Create an advisory system
- Discuss future plans early and expose students to options
Discussion:

- What are you doing to cultivate effective teaching in your school?
- What are you doing to reduce teacher isolation and to make it possible for teachers to learn from each other?
- What are you doing to solicit input from students to make learning meaningful and to make school relevant?
VI. Teaching Across Race, Class and Cultural Differences

- Is it a problem?
  - Met Life Survey: 40% low income students, 45% minority students report that they do not identify with their teachers
  - Most teachers claim to be “color blind” yet many report having greater difficulty working with minority and low income students
  - Disparities in achievement and discipline suggest that there is a problem
  - Good news - Students are less prejudiced than adults. They are generally willing to learn from anyone who cares and takes an interest in them.
Indications that cross cultural teaching is a problem:

- Normalization of failure
- Differential expectations - lower standards for minority students
- Conflict in the classroom, lack of respect and fear among teachers
- Students perceive racial identity and achievement as linked
- Strained relations between teachers and students, teachers and parents - distrust, hostility, suspicion
- Tendency to blame students and/or their parents rather than accepting responsibility for their role in raising achievement
What does it take to teach across cultures effectively?

- Skills and cultural competence - you can’t teach what you don’t know
- Awareness of and willingness to unlearn personal bias
- Ability to affirm the cultural identities of students
- My research shows students respond well to teacher that demonstrate:
  - Firmness, organization and structure
  - Compassion - students need to know you care
  - Challenge - students are expected to learn
  - Understanding - identify and empathize with students
Discussion:

- What are the barriers that keep you or your colleagues from being effective in teaching across racial and cultural differences?
- How has your background helped or hindered you in this work?
- What skills, knowledge or information do you think you need to increase your effectiveness as a teacher?
Things to be aware of when teaching cross culturally:

- Avoid tendency to take a “color blind” posture toward students
- Avoid tendency to stereotype your students based on race or culture
- Be aware of how unconscious bias may influence your interactions
- Strive to know yourself and your students so that your relationships are not affected by race/cultural differences
VII. What We Know About Safe Schools

- Safety is a by-product of social relationships, not advanced security
- Cannot separate safety from academic mission
- Schools tend to have a shortage of adults with “moral authority”
- Social contract - students are expected to obey in exchange for an education
Use Data to Monitor Effectiveness of Discipline Strategies

- Examine patterns
  - Who is being disciplined? (race, gender, academic profile, year in school)
  - What is behind the misbehavior of students who are frequently in trouble?
  - Do disciplinary practices serve as an effective deterrent?
  - Which teachers/administrators give most referrals? For what reasons?
Alternative Strategies

- Base discipline on school values
  - Focus on changing behavior not getting rid of students
- Respond early and often to minor infractions
  - What are the values behind school rules
- Create school environments where all students are known (size matters)
  - Decrease alienation, increase personalization
- Engage students more actively in school
  - Utilize extra curricular activities
Alternative Discipline Strategies

- Effective deterrence
  - Figure out what is causing persistent behavior problems
  - Extra work - in-school suspension
  - Retribution to victims
  - Community service
  - Counseling
  - Parental involvement
  - Interaction with community agencies
VII. Basic Requirements for Improving Relationships Between Parents and Schools

- Must be based on a recognition of mutual need, responsibility and respect
- Must be based on the recognition that all parents can help their children
- Must be based upon understanding and empathy for the situation confronting parents and families
- Schools need personnel who can communicate effectively with parents
Possible Areas of Cooperation Between Parents and Schools

- Parent-School Contracts - Formal agreements laying out expectations for all parties, including children
- Site-based leadership - Comer model, Chicago site councils, provide parents with decision making roles at schools
  - Mutual accountability
- Academic enrichment - math and literacy nights, diagnostic testing
- Parent education - discipline, raising teenagers, talking to kids about sex, helping kids get ready for college
Developing the Partnership

- Effective use of the Parent-Teacher Conference
  - Diagnostic assessment
  - Concrete information on how they can help their children
- Back-to-School Night
  - Creative strategies for explaining the goals and mission of the school
- In-take interviews with parent and student
  - Rights, responsibilities and opportunities
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New book - City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education (Teachers College Press, 2003)