Rosa Parks Elementary Case Study

The Question of the Achievement Gap

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There is consistent and pervasive talk about closing the achievement gap through out the country. The achievement gap refers to the variance of test scores on standardized tests. It recognizes that some students are performing well on the tests while others are not. As standards-based curricula as well as high-stakes tests become the norms, people are beginning to see data that makes them uncomfortable, with good reason. When the data is disaggregated and assessed, the end result reveals the discouraging reality that "standardized test scores between African-American, Latino/a, and low-income students [are] far below their white, Asian, and economically advantaged peers" (Burkhardt, 2004).

The research insists that educators look at who is failing in order to identify why they are failing. The economically disadvantaged—which too often includes people of color—have been identified in numerous studies as the specific clientele not achieving at the same rate as others as evidenced by standardized tests. There exists a class of people not being served by the current education system. This issue is not disappearing as "the numbers of children in extreme poverty - living in families with a combined income below 50 percent of the federal poverty line ($16,036 for a family of four) - have dramatically increased over the last three decades. Of the 5.5 million poor young children, almost half (47 percent) lived in extreme poverty" ("Were You Poor or Regular," n.d.). The obvious truths of living in poverty reveal that it creates "many types of deprivation and increases the likelihood that numerous risk factors are present simultaneously: in parents, child, health care, housing, support systems, schools, child care, and neighborhoods. Due to the interaction of multiple risk factors, children from poor and minority families are disproportionately at-risk for school failure. Nationally,

poor children are three times more likely to drop out of school, and poor teen girls are five and a half times more likely to become teen mothers" ("Measuring Our Commitment," 1994).   Examining the various aspects of poverty reveals a situation where people are not only financially drained, but are also emotionally, mentally, and physically disadvantaged. This comes as no surprise. The information is important in the way it can be utilized to inform educational practice.

Knowing who falls in the achievement gap allows educators to look for causes and solutions. What are successful schools doing to serve the students of color and the economically disadvantaged in a way that promotes achievement? The inspiring revelation from the data is that not all students of color and not all economically disadvantaged students are failing. In the year 2000, more than 4,000 schools nation-wide who serve a large population of minorities or kids living in poverty performed in the top third in their states ("Taking on the Achievement Gap," 2004). The body of research available validates practices that are consistently found in successful schools. Specifically, research verifies that high expectations, academic rigor, teacher development, teacher collaboration, consistent and frequent assessments, school relationships, and parental involvement consistently promote achievement and negate the effects of poverty.

An essential ingredient to high achievement is expectation. Schools and teachers must set high standards and create curriculum that reflects academic rigor. Researchers at the Education Trust in Washington D.C. commented that "clear and public standards for what students should learn at benchmark grade levels are a crucial part of solving the problem [of the achievement gap]" (Haycock, 2001). Although many say, "all children

can learn," examination of some classrooms practices indicates that this belief is not reflected in the coursework assigned. Low standards have been consistently set in classrooms serving children of poverty. One research group surveyed students who said time and time again that they were not challenged in school and felt they were taught lower-level curriculum (Haycock, 2001). Aligning curriculum with state standards while providing frequent assessments to assure learning is occurring requires that high standards exist in every classroom. This prevents the perhaps well-meaning teacher from excusing any student from performing and allows for the identification of those who need remediation.

Having teachers align curriculum with state standards also creates opportunities for meaningful professional development as well as teacher collaboration. The dual benefit of this is the creation of stronger teachers as well as stronger curriculum. According to a University of Tennessee study, quality teachers are accurate indicators of student educational achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). An additional study supports this research stating that in " one academic year, the top third of teachers produce as much as six times the learning as the bottom third of teachers" (Haycock, 2001). Some districts, recognizing this research, give bonuses to teachers who work in hard-to-serve schools. Yet, this does not guarantee experienced teachers or teacher development which makes school-based professional development opportunities so necessary.

Parental involvement is another key factor in improving the success rate of children of poverty. Home culture and school culture can be at odds with each other, creating academic problems. Parents may be language minorities and not able to understand the language of instruction, have negative feelings toward school, or lack the

skills and time needed to support academics. Some successful schools have adopted

measures to encourage parental involvement that include providing babysitting or meals

if coming to a school-related activity, teaching school personnel about effective methods

of communication with represented culture groups, and maintaining open-door policies

(Schwartz, 2001).

Another obvious and needed component which facilitates achievement is feeling

connected to school. Relationships with teachers enhance learning; "one of the key

indicators of success [is] the 'sense of family' created in the school environment"

(Revilla & Sweeney, 1997).

Research Based Strategies

Several recent studies described above focused on closing the achievement gap in

economically and culturally diverse schools. Many schools have utilized innovative and

intensive interventions in order to tip the scales in the favor of minority and socio-

economically disadvantaged students. These studies have uncovered a number of critical

factors for their success. Some of these include:

- Extensive use of state and local *standards* to design curriculum and *assess student work*;
- *Increased instruction time* for reading and mathematics;
- Substantial investment in *professional development* for teachers;
- Comprehensive systems to *monitor individual student performance* that enable teachers to provide help before students fall behind;
- *Parental involvement*;
- State or district *accountability systems* with consequences for the adults in the school, and;
- *Use of assessments* to help guide instruction and resources.

These factors can be further refined into tasks or considerations for different spheres in

the public schools. Part of the role of a building principal is to consider which of these

features of success need attention at the administrator level, educational environment and

building wide norms level, classroom teacher level, and parent and community level. It is useful at this point to describe several 'best practices' strategies at each of these levels as a way to structure the discussion of our school's vision and plan:

Administrative Strategies. One of the primary roles of an administrator is to support and enforce directives from higher administration. They also fill the precarious roles of cheerleader, mediator, and drill sergeant at the building level. Principals have the ability to alleviate pressure on teachers by thoughtfully designing building schedules and relevant staff development.

Educational Environment/Building-wide Norms Level Strategies. Approaching change in student achievement through the educational environment may involve scheduling block instructional time, school-wide expectations for literacy, learning behaviors, and the perception of teachers as professional educators. While this one strategy may not independently influence significant change in achievement, it is very important in supporting an overall building level approach to academic success.

Classroom Teacher Level Strategies. Classroom teachers have great latitude in effecting change in student achievement. They can implement routine and effective assessment to help them monitor student progress. This assessment data should also be used to help them guide and/or refine instructional delivery based on student need. Teachers also have enormous influence through the quality of the relationships they develop with their students. Girls and boys who feel connected to and supported by their teachers demonstrate a willingness to stretch themselves academically and to work hard even when material is difficult.

Parent/Community Level Strategies. Parents and other community supports are critical to the process of change in student achievement. Educators cannot afford to discount parent involvement just because it is difficult to get their commitment. Schools must make the effort to understand community resources, values, and styles of communication. When this bridge is built between the school and the surrounding neighborhoods, the children get the direct benefit.

Vision and Plan for Staff Development

Rosa Parks Elementary School must be prepared to implement drastic changes. The school has not demonstrated any significant positive change in narrowing the achievement gap over the past two years. If results are not achieved *this year*, the school is at risk for district mandated restructuring. This calls for both an immediate and long-term vision for our staff, students, and community.

Our immediate goal is to demonstrate a positive change in student performance on standardized state testing as shown by scores on the upcoming administration of the California equivalent of the Colorado Student Assessment Program. (Move five percent of the *unsatisfactory* scores to Partially Proficient on the California version of the CSAP.)

Our longer-term vision is to progressively narrow the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and students from economically stable neighborhoods attending Rosa Parks. We would like to demonstrate a positive trend in the scores of our minority, low-achieving students by three percent per year over the next four years, totaling 12 percent.

Based on the needs assessment completed by our building leadership team, our staff has concluded that the following strategies will best support our accomplishment of our year one goal as well as establishing a strong foundation for our successive goals:

1. increased academic rigor as shown by a dedicated literacy instructional block *(building norm/educational environment)*
2. quality routine student assessment *(building norm/educational environment; teacher level)*
3. congruence between assessment data and curriculum and instruction *(administrative)*
4. relationship quality *(Parent-teacher, teacher-student) (building norm; teacher level; administrative level; parent/community)*
5. instructional continuity - House Concept – could resemble looping concept *(educational environment; administrative; teacher level)*

These strategies translate directly to our staff development plans. Items 1 and 5 will be addressed through routine design of the instructional day. They do not require specialized training. Items 2, 3, and 4 are more process-based skills. The instructional staff will need initial training as well as regularly scheduled devoted time to review their learning, enhance their skills, and consider adjustments for their teaching. The Rosa Parks Elementary Building Leadership Team determined that the order of training should be prioritized according to its potential for impacting change in student achievement.

Relevant and quality assessment of student progress will give teachers the ability to alter their instructional content and pace, allowing for reteaching when needed. Building staff will focus specifically on learning and practicing the administration and interpretation of individual reading inventories, guided reading instruction, and differentiated instruction. One expectation of the building administrator will be to structure and support a building schedule that allows for communication regarding the congruence between testing and instruction. Additional Title funds allocated to the school will be used to purchase supplemental Full Time Employee positions to reduce the

size of instructional groups, thereby increasing academic rigor. These funds will also augment the material resources needed to provide appropriate instructional match for students.

After the initial training phase in assessment and data driven instructional planning, teachers will receive specialized guided practice in enhancing relationship quality in their classrooms as well as with parents. Connecting with students and families through positive relationships is critical to the success shared by teachers and their students. Some of the funds allocated to the school will go towards purchasing books that provide background information in attachment, relationship processes, classroom ecology, and school-community partnerships in order to help them establish a common understanding of the importance these issues to their success as educators. It will be extremely important for the building administrator to meet regularly with grade level teams to monitor their progress with these materials and concepts. Once the staff shows a knowledge base in critical concepts, the applied practice can begin.

The building staff must be able to genuinely communicate a desire and expectation for families to join in the educational process, regardless of their personal achievement. Regularly scheduled community connection events will be offered to encourage parents to learn along with their children and to support the goals of the school. Local businesses and private donors will provide food and merchandise vouchers as incentives for parent participation. Teachers will be required to develop a professional goal around enhancing the quality of their relationships with their students. Pianta (1999) describes a number of effective interpersonal strategies as well as structure and ecological strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. A positive byproduct expected of

this type of intervention is improved student behavior and reduced numbers of discipline referrals.

Intervention without evaluation is not purposeful. Our primary measures of change and success include:

- student performance on the state standardized tests and,
- clear demonstration of progress towards narrowing the gap between minority and non-minority student achievement

Shorter-term progress will be monitored using the following methods:

- Teacher proficiency in administration and interpretation of assessment tools
- Teacher proficiency in translating assessment data into instructional practice
- Student performance on quarterly administration of practice standardized tests
- Documented parent participation in support of classroom instruction (e.g. reading with students, guiding language development groups, etc.)

Our interventions are based on current proven best practices in the literature on combating the effects of poverty on achievement. We are optimistic that our approach will support positive change in student achievement. The staff at Rosa Parks Elementary School is committed to working towards closing the gap and enhancing the learning of all our students!

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