

# NETWORK NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MINORITY STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK

Number 21

Fall 2005

Finding the Answers in Research:

## An Interview With Kiley Walsh

In her groundbreaking study, titled *After the Test: How Schools Are Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap*, researcher Kiley Walsh shows clear evidence of specific work being done to close achievement gaps. Walsh selected 32 schools across six counties in the San Francisco Bay Area and compared those making progress in closing achievement gaps with those not making progress. Her findings speak with clarity about issues of race, leadership, school focus, support for teachers, and the critical role of using data to improve achievement for all students.

MSAN recently spoke with Walsh about the research she has conducted and practical ways of applying that research in schools.

**MSAN:** *What made the schools you studied special? Why were they able to do things so many others haven't? What were some of the key elements that made these schools succeed? What are the implications of this work for other schools and other grade levels?*

**Walsh:** I think there were three important elements. First, high-quality data and quick access to results. Teachers need news they can use: quick oral fluency exams, diagnostic assessments given every six weeks with a fast turn-around reporting loop. This is ideally supported by the district.

Second, support for changes in instruction. These were schools—in some cases led by district reforms—that

invested heavily in peer collaboration, coaching, and professional development so teachers could act on data.

Third, leaders who aren't afraid to talk about race, have courageous conversations about achievement gaps, and have a sense of cultural proficiency. Frequently, the most vocal and active parents in a community represent the children who are the most empowered and who are doing well, comparatively. For a leader to champion the needs of

*(continued on page 2)*



### FROM THE executive director

To meet the goals set by our districts, the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) is attempting to discover through research what works to eliminate the achievement gaps. With the assistance of funding from the George Gund Foundation, MSAN has developed and is testing a validation procedure to identify those promising practices at work in our districts and to validate these practices as proven. Through the generous contribution of a grant from the Spencer Foundation, in partnership with Uri Triesman, Ph.D., and researchers at the Charles A. Dana Center of the University of Texas at Austin, we are developing strategies to increase algebra course taking and success. Funds from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation helped support the annual conference in June 2005, where we continued to disseminate what districts are learning. And funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation

and a generous benefactor helped fund our 6th annual student conference, where we were able to listen to students and hear firsthand their suggestions for closing the gaps.

In addition to learning from what is successful within MSAN districts, we also are learning from research conducted in school districts nationwide. In 2002–03, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory provided funding for the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) to conduct a study of schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that are closing the achievement gaps and those that are not. The study, conducted by Kiley Walsh, found several distinguishing features of gap-closing schools: the frequent use of data for classroom decision making, teachers who visit the classrooms of peers to observe practice, school and district leadership that

*(continued on page 3)*

## Finding the Answers in Research

(continued from page 1)

the bottom part of the gaps—they're doing so at the risk of alienating a vocal political support base. It takes courage and moral vision to do this. Some leaders in schools I studied, while frustrated by the difficulty of meeting all adequate yearly progress requirements, candidly revealed that NCLB [No Child Left Behind] gave them momentum to do what they'd always wanted to do. Now they could push for equity and use "the Feds" as a reason with parents who pushed back.

**MSAN:** *In your study After the Test, you suggest that data can be used as a catalyst for effective work leading to change and improvement in school culture. What does this process look like, and what are the steps to making it happen?*

**Walsh:** Change happens when data are useful to teachers. Data from an annual assessment can meet the needs of the public or policymakers—and these are important accountability needs—but big-picture data, which teachers don't see until the following fall after students have moved on to other classrooms, don't inform daily instruction. In contrast, benchmark or diagnostic assessments linked to curriculum and given throughout the

school year can provide useful information about student skill gaps that inform daily practice and give teachers an effective tool to work with students who are performing below grade level.

In a lot of schools, looking at data is something imposed from external forces and used in a punitive way. Teachers are beaten over the head with it but not given any resources or new strategies to change what they're doing. The result is frustration and burnout. In schools where data are a catalyst for change, teachers are given time to look at data and support to learn new strategies through coaching, modeling, and demonstration lessons so they can meet identified needs. This makes the data a catalyst for change: Teachers are given the means to be efficacious.

One school I studied had each teacher conduct a "classroom-level cycle of inquiry," selecting one or two students from within the lowest performing subgroup for the whole school. In this case, it was Hispanic/Latino boys. Teachers talked about initially resisting this task; intentionally reflecting just on a couple of students seemed to go against the charge to teach all kids. Many then realized, however, that they hadn't been meet-

ing these kids' needs. They felt that data-based reflection made them better teachers—not just for the focal students but for all.

**MSAN:** *In the schools that you studied, what was the response of teachers to an emphasis on using data? Did schools engage in specific activities and strategies to ensure all teachers were on the same page in terms of using data?*

**Walsh:** Most gap-closing schools I looked at had initial resistance, followed by acceptance, and then an embrace of data. I don't want to overstate the "embracing"—in general, teachers still felt they had to do too much with too little—but they came to see the tremendous value of data in helping them become better teachers and helping all students learn.

To get teachers "on the same page" in terms of data use, a lot of the gap-closing schools invested in teacher collaboration, setting aside time during the weekly school schedule for teachers to meet in grade- or content-alike groups to discuss data-related strategies. One common activity was calibration around grading, or agreeing upon and codifying what "A" work looks like, what "B" work looks like, etc. That way, not only do the teachers get into alignment, but outcomes also can be explicitly communicated to the students.

**MSAN:** *You say in your study that "race matters" and that structured conversations about race need to occur as part of the work to close achievement gaps. What do these conversations look like? Who's involved, and how do they work? How do these conversations link to improved student achievement?*

**Walsh:** That recommendation stems directly from both the survey and case-study findings: that race is a central aspect of the achievement gaps, with African-American and Hispanic/Latino children consistently perform-



ing at lower levels than their white or Asian-American peers. Over 90 percent of teachers in gap-closing schools reported that they had opportunities for structured conversations about race/ethnicity; the majority in non-gap-closing schools did not, with over 40 percent strongly disagreeing that they had opportunities.

*“Gap-closing schools invested in teacher collaboration, setting aside time during the weekly school schedule for teachers to meet...to discuss data-related strategies.”*

I think there are two key points here. The first is the word “structured.” These are not free-form conversations, gathering staff together and just asking them to talk about race. Rather, these are facilitated conversations around specific, data-based issues in their school. In one case-study school, the principal did focus groups with parents, students, staff, and community members and found widespread unhappiness with the discipline system. The suspension rate was high. When the principal disaggregated the data, she found that the majority of kids getting suspended were African American and three of every five African-American children had a suspension record. With structured, data-based conversation on this topic, coupled with coaching from a veteran teacher around classroom-based discipline and the firing of two school security guards, not only was the overall school suspension rate reduced, the African-American suspension rate was radically reduced to under a third of the former rate, or 18 percent.

The second aspect to this, which I touch on above, is that gap-closing schools grounded their conversations in data. It wasn't about finger point-

ing and generalizations; it was about teachers having their classroom-level data in front of them and being given structured time to talk about it, reflect on why it was happening, and then being given professional development, coaching, and collaboration time to change instruction and patterns of teaching and learning.

—Kiley Walsh

**MSAN:** *The recommendations of your study include that schools need to determine their focus. How do schools arrive at the item or items they need to focus on? The schools you looked at focused on literacy. Does literacy appear to be the first step in terms of focus? If so, how do you see this playing out with teachers who teach the subjects of math, science, and social studies?*

**Walsh:** Many schools are trying to do too many things all at once. Schools that were successful in closing gaps narrowed the list to the areas of greatest need or areas of greatest impact. For most, this meant an intensive focus on literacy. Many schools made room for at least two hours of literacy instruction every day. The data in my study were not conclusive about what type of literacy approach works best. But it was clear that linking resources and support for improved instruction directly to areas of greatest need—which is frequently literacy—can have a tremendous impact on student learning

Teachers whose background is not in reading/language arts frequently feel resistant to this focus. In my research, I've seen one of three things happen: They leave that school and find one where they're not being asked to

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 1)

communicates constantly the importance of closing the gaps, and a thorough focus on a few initiatives.

The report of this study, titled *After the Test*, demonstrates how schools and school systems can productively learn from their common experiences and strengthen their capacity to grow and learn as organizations. It also informs public policymakers, as well as educators and their supporters, about practice-informed applications of policy and innovations to improve educational outcomes. Such information is important because schools across the nation are experiencing increases in their populations of African-American and Latino students. Districts that had little or no ethnic diversity a decade ago are experiencing changes in their student populations. No Child Left Behind requirements to disaggregate data and measure results based on effectiveness to improve achievement for all students are pressuring districts to look for ways to effectively close the gaps in achievement for students of color.

This issue of *Network News* features an interview with *After the Test* researcher Kiley Walsh. Her study is an outstanding example of contemporary educational research that has practical implication for schools. The findings have been widely quoted and shared. MSAN has closely followed the BASRC work, and the Research Practitioner Council made the report the focal topic of its February 2005 meeting.

Also included in this issue is an overview of the Learning Point Associates report *Perspectives on the Gaps: Fostering the Academic Success of Minority and Low-Income Students*. This report, also funded by NCREL, offers summaries of four research studies about strategies to eliminate the gaps in school achievement. After you read Ray Legler's overview, I hope you will want to read the full report. ■

—Rossi Ray-Taylor

# Recent Research on Closing the Achievement Gaps

By Ray Legler, Ph.D.

In 2003, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) funded four studies on strategies for closing the achievement gaps. Our goals were to examine the issue from a variety of perspectives and to identify promising practices for closing the gaps. The resulting publication, *Perspectives on the Gaps: Fostering the Academic Success of Minority and Low-Income Students*, presents summaries of the studies—including the study conducted by Kiley Walsh, which compared gap-closing schools to schools that were not closing the gaps in the San Francisco Bay Area. The other three studies discussed in *Perspectives on the Gaps* are as follows:

*Research studies examine the issue from variety of perspectives and identify promising practices for closing the gaps.*

## A Study on Improving Students' Literacy Skills

This study investigated the impact of a program designed to improve the literacy skills of students of color and low income in an MSAN high school in suburban Chicago. The goal was to determine the effectiveness of the program and, if found to be effective, provide a model for literacy interventions in other settings. This study employed a quasi-experimental longitudinal design, with measures of student reading ability at several time points.



The program involved identifying students who were performing poorly on tests of reading ability and providing them with an opportunity to participate in a literacy course at the high school level. Students participated as a cohort and took other classes together in order to increase peer support. The program also emphasized teacher support and encouragement for students,

as well as instructional strategies and materials designed to be relevant to students and increase their interest in the material. Results of the study were mixed, but some were promising and suggest that the program warrants replication and further research.

## A Study of Student Supports to Improve Academic and Personal Success

This study looked at the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, a program that supports students of color and low

income at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. The goal of this study was to understand what worked in this particularly successful higher education program that may be relevant to K-12 schools.

The findings indicated that several key components of this program contribute to its effectiveness. First, the program emphasizes the academic and social integration of students into the student population, through the support of program staff. Second, the program emphasizes knowledge and skill development through participation in faculty research and study groups. Support and motivation are provided through peer and staff mentoring. Finally, intensive monitoring and advising contribute to student success. The program has been extremely successful in producing minority graduates in mathematics and science.

## A Study on Closing Achievement Gaps in Rural Communities

This study focused on efforts to reduce or eliminate achievement gaps in rural Michigan. The goal was to learn about effective strategies that school districts in rural areas can use to improve the

*(continued on page 5)*

## Recent Research on Closing the Achievement Gaps

*(continued from page 4)*

academic achievement of low-income students and students of color. The study was exploratory and employed qualitative methods to gain an understanding of current programs and policies in a group of rural schools and districts. It was funded largely because research in rural areas is limited, because the gaps are typically discussed in terms of urban and suburban schools, and because a substantial portion of the NCREL region is rural.

The study explored the issues of low achievement in rural districts, which largely reflect the low-income status of rural students (as opposed to the issues faced by students of color). Results suggest that funding for rural schools and districts is far below what is needed to provide a quality education for rural students; often this is due to the low property-tax base in these areas. Results also suggest that administrators at the district level could do a better job of improving education in their districts, and that professional development for these administrators may be helpful. ■

—*Ray Legler, Ph.D., is a senior program associate in NCREL's Center for Educational Decision Support Systems at Learning Point Associates. His work focuses on issues related to K–12 achievement gaps.*

*The full report, Perspectives on the Gaps: Fostering the Academic Success of Minority and Low-Income Students, edited by Ray Legler, is available online at [www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/perspectives.pdf](http://www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/perspectives.pdf).*

## Finding the Answers in Research

*(continued from page 3)*

teach reading; they find a way to keep doing business as usual but make it appear as if changes are being made; or, in schools that invest in classroom-based support (such as literacy coaches who can link instructional changes to individual content), I've seen science, social studies, and math teachers empowered, excited, and enlivened by new strategies to help their students comprehend subject-specific material.

Again, it's about ownership: Once teachers feel they're really connecting with students more effectively and that students are acquiring more knowledge, they'll buy in. But if they feel that it's just one more fad, or one more thing they're being asked to do without support—a start-of-school-year seminar on teaching reading and nothing else, for example—they'll understandably resist.

**MSAN:** *What is the role of school districts in supporting this work? What can the district do to support the type of classroom-level change you saw in schools that closed gaps in student achievement?*

**Walsh:** Districts have a critical role to play in supporting the changes necessary to close achievement gaps. First, the district can make sure teachers have easy-to-use benchmarks and diagnostic assessments and then do a quick turnaround of the data these tools provide.

Second, the district needs to fund the infrastructure to support teachers' understanding and use of data to inform their instruction. This includes funding professional development around best practices and, most importantly, peer-to-peer learning. Teachers need structured time to meet in subject- and grade-alike teams and talk about what the data mean and what strategies to use to address the needs of their students. Districts need to tap into the "gems" within their schools—highly effective teachers who should be freed up to coach and mentor other teachers.

Finally, the district must focus on equity. Developing and coalescing around an equity vision provides clarity in terms of mission and priorities that ensure continued support for necessary work. Several of the schools in the study had supportive people within the district office but not a districtwide vision and commitment. While some schools in these districts were able to make gains, future school-level success is always in jeopardy without a deep, systemwide commitment.

**MSAN:** *In the current NCLB climate, what could policymakers learn from your study? What could they do differently—based on your research—to get the kind of results achieved by the schools you studied and that the law states as its intended goals?*

**Walsh:** Policymakers should recognize both the value and the needs posed by NCLB. The value is that the achievement gaps are now on everyone's radar. Subgroups—such as English language learners—that have long been allowed to languish are now in the spotlight. What's desperately needed, however, are increased supports to help teachers reach more students more effectively. Teachers need high-quality diagnostic data to inform instruction; they need access to best practices through professional development; and they need systems and structures to improve, such as classroom-based coaching, peer collaboration time, and mentoring. Laws and policies are effective only if they change the technical core of teaching and learning. Both incentives and support are necessary for teacher to improve their daily classroom practice. ■

—*Kiley Walsh is currently the Knowledge, Learning, and Results Manager at the Stupski Foundation in Mill Valley, California. She continues to research how schools and districts are closing the achievement gaps while raising student achievement for all. Contact her at 415-384-2462 or [kileyw@stupski.org](mailto:kileyw@stupski.org).*

*A PDF version of After the Test is available on the Learning Point Associates website at [www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/basrc.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/basrc.htm). A softcover print version can be purchased from Springboard Schools website at [www.springboardschools.org/prof\\_dev/research\\_studies.html](http://www.springboardschools.org/prof_dev/research_studies.html).*

## Welcome Columbia Public Schools!

MSAN would like to welcome Columbia (Missouri) Public Schools to our network of now 24 districts. We look forward to sharing, learning, and collaborating with our colleagues in Columbia as we work together to eliminate race as a predictor of achievement.

### Minority Student Achievement Network Districts

Supt. Allan Alson, Evanston (IL) Township High School District 202 (President)  
Supt. Hardy Murphy, Evanston/Skokie (IL) Elementary School District 65 (Vice President)  
Supt. Susan Bridge, Oak Park and River Forest (IL) High School District 200 (Treasurer)  
Supt. Frank Alvarez, Montclair (NJ) Public Schools  
Supt. Alida Begina, Hamden (CT) Public Schools  
Supt. Phyllis A. Chase, Columbia (MO) Public Schools  
Supt. Constance Collins, Oak Park (IL) Elementary School District 97  
Supt. Arthur R. Culver, Champaign (IL) Unit 4 School District  
Supt. Deborah S. Delisle, Cleveland Heights-University Heights (OH) City School District  
Supt. Elizabeth E. Feser, Windsor (CT) Public Schools  
Supt. George Fornero, Ann Arbor (MI) Public Schools  
Supt. Thomas Fowler-Finn, Cambridge (MA) Public Schools  
Supt. Mark Freeman, Shaker Heights (OH) City School District  
Supt. Jere Hochman, Amherst-Pelham (MA) Regional School District  
Supt. Debra Jackson, Bedford (NY) Central School District  
Supt. William H. Lupini, The Public Schools of Brookline (MA)  
Supt. Daniel A. Nerad, Green Bay (WI) Area Public Schools  
Supt. Neil Pedersen, Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC) City Schools  
Supt. Art Rainwater, Madison (WI) Metropolitan School District  
Supt. George Russell, Eugene (OR) School District  
Supt. Morton Sherman, Cherry Hill (NJ) Public Schools  
Supt. Robert G. Smith, Arlington (VA) Public Schools  
Supt. Judy Wilson, Princeton (NJ) Regional Schools  
Supt. Susan Zurvalec, Farmington (MI) Public Schools

### Minority Student Achievement Network

1600 Dodge Avenue, Evanston, IL 60204  
Phone 847-424-7185 • Fax 847-424-7192 • [www.msanetwork.org](http://www.msanetwork.org)  
Ann Hunwick, Administrative Assistant  
Gerald Leibforth, Business Manager  
Rossi Ray-Taylor, Executive Director  
Editor, Patricia Maunsell  
Copy Editor, Jan Gahala, Learning Point Associates  
Designed by Melissa Chapko

*Network News* is edited and published with assistance from Learning Point Associates.

This work was produced in whole or in part with funds from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number ED-01-CO-0011. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of IES or the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government, Learning Point Associates, or the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, (NCREL).

NCREL remains one of the 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education and its work is conducted by Learning Point Associates.

MSAN is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, and it welcomes contributions. To make a donation, please call 847-424-7185; write to us at 1600 Dodge Avenue, Evanston, IL 60204; or visit our Web site at [msanetwork.org](http://msanetwork.org).

### Minority Student Achievement Network Research Practitioner Council

Governing Board Liaison:

Jere Hochman

Conveners:

Laura Cooper and Bernice Stokes

Jere Hochman

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District  
Amberst, MA

Jane Landefeld

Ann Arbor Public Schools  
Ann Arbor, MI

Nancy Shiffler

Ann Arbor Public Schools  
Ann Arbor, MI

Kathy Wills

Arlington Public Schools  
Arlington, VA

Emma Violand-Sanchez

Arlington Public Schools  
Arlington, VA

Patricia Wheelhouse

Bedford Central School District  
Mount Kisco, NY

Sarah Crane

The Public Schools of Brookline  
Brookline, MA

Jennifer Fischer-Mueller

The Public Schools of Brookline  
Brookline, MA

Maryann MacDonald

Cambridge Public Schools  
Cambridge, MA

Carolyn Turk

Cambridge Public Schools  
Cambridge, MA

Fred Clarke

Champaign Unit 4 School District  
Champaign, IL

Dorland Norris

Champaign Unit 4 School District  
Champaign, IL

Diane Villwock

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools  
Chapel Hill, NC

Ashaki Coleman

Cherry Hill Public Schools  
Cherry Hill, NJ

Caroline Kaczala

Cleveland Heights-University Heights  
City School District  
University Heights, OH

Christine Fowler-Mack

Cleveland Heights-University Heights  
City School District  
University Heights, OH

Sally Lyon

Columbia Public Schools  
Columbia, MO

Yvonne Curtis

Eugene School District  
Eugene, OR

Tom Henry

Eugene School District  
Eugene, OR

### Research Advisory Board

A. Wade Boykin

Howard University

Jomills Braddock

University of Miami

Anthony Bryk

Stanford University

John Diamond

Harvard University

Ronald Ferguson

Harvard University

Virginia Gonzalez

University of Cincinnati

Paul Brinson

Evanston/Skokie School District 65  
Evanston, IL

Judith Levinson

Evanston Township High School  
District 202  
Evanston, IL

Laura A. Cooper

Evanston Township High School  
District 202  
Evanston, IL

Kristen Gekiere

Farmington Public Schools  
Farmington, MI

David Zadnik

Green Bay Area Public Schools  
Green Bay, WI

Portia Bonner

Hamden Public Schools  
Hamden, CT

Diane Crear

Madison Metropolitan School District  
Madison, WI

Kurt Kiefer

Madison Metropolitan School District  
Madison, WI

Deborah Hoffman

Madison Metropolitan School District  
Madison, WI

Jeanne P. Pryor

Montclair Public Schools  
Montclair, NJ

Lynne Allen

Oak Park Elementary School  
District 97

Oak Park, IL

Mark Pickus

Oak Park Elementary School  
District 97

Oak Park, IL

Amy Hill

Oak Park and River Forest  
High School District 200

Oak Park, IL

Philip Prale

Oak Park and River Forest  
High School District 200

Oak Park, IL

Jeffrey Graber

Princeton Regional Schools  
Princeton, NJ

Edward Ward

Princeton Regional Schools  
Princeton, NJ

Bernice Stokes

Shaker Heights City Schools  
Shaker Heights, OH

Dale Whittington

Shaker Heights City Schools  
Shaker Heights, OH

Robin Sorensen

Windsor Public Schools  
Windsor, CT

Gloria Ladson-Billings

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Pedro Noguera

New York University

Meredith Phillips

University of California-Los Angeles

Claude Steele

Stanford University

Sam Stringfield

Johns Hopkins University

Ronald Taylor

Temple University