Research Brief

Closing the Gaps

Questions: **Question: What gaps exist in the educational experiences of different groups of kids in high school? What is being done about it?**

In A Nutshell

Achievement gaps between groups of students (minority and white, rich and poor, English speakers and English language learners) are complex and intractable. Increasingly, they are being seen as a result of disparities between opportunities for learning available to different groups. By changing the opportunity structures of schools and communities, many of these gaps can be reduced or eliminated.

Summary of Findings:

Achievement Gap

The U.S. Department of Education describes the achievement gap as the difference in academic performance between different ethnic groups. In practical terms, the gap is defined as the achievement disparity between white students and other ethnic groups and between English learners and native English speakers, socioeconomically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged, and students with disabilities as compared to students without disabilities.

The achievement gap is one of the most pernicious and intractable problems in education: the damage it does is almost incalculable and it has resisted the best efforts of some of our most dedicated and creative educators. It drives many of the systemic problems in education – including a grossly inflated dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students – and it is the foundation of some of the most demanding policies in education, such as No Child Left Behind and specific state accountability initiatives.

Despite its long history in educational research, the achievement gap is not an entirely stable phenomenon. After closing substantially in the 1970s and 80s, particularly at the basic skills level, largely as a result of school desegregation, it began to widen again (especially at the advanced skill level) in the late 1980s and through the 90s. This trend continued into the new century, once again as a result of increasing segregation in the public school system. (Lee, 2002).

According to Lee (2002), some of this variation may also be due to the fact that researchers have studied the achievement gap as a function of discrete variables: academic, legal-political and socio-economic. He argues that it is the interaction of these variables that not only makes the

problem difficult to understand completely, but nearly impossible to address in a comprehensive manner.

Classic studies of the Black-White achievement gap published within a year of each other by Ferguson (2002) and Ogbu (2003) support Lee's claim about the complexity of the issue, although they differ in their approach to intervention.

> In their conclusions about their research findings, Ferguson and Ogbu do not differ in their views on how schools can help minority students to be more academically engaged and better achievers, only in emphasis. For Ferguson, the role of the teacher and the school is to encourage the individual student to meet the demands of academic work by changing classroom practices. For Ogbu, students will perform better and be more engaged in school if they are helped to modify parts of their collective identity that reject school success, through caring individual and institutional practices. This difference of perspective is noteworthy, however. Ogbu maintains that minority students do not participate in the opportunity structure of the United States because they have identified with their oppressed and marginal position in American society. For him, schools must actively alter these students' identity as outsiders, through caring. Ferguson, on the other hand, argues that schools need to develop interventions that improve minority students' capacity to master the learning tasks of the classroom
> through academic encouragement, implying that their success will change their self-concept and identity. (Flaxman, 2003).

Fortunately, many policy-makers and practitioners have been able to translate this research into action. One of the most comprehensive guides is provided by the NEA through its C.A.R.E. program that focuses on key elements in closing the gap – Culture, Abilities, Resilience and Effort. They argue that by cultivating strengths in these areas, disparities between and among student groups can be reduced dramatically.

Pedro Noguera (July, 2007) concurs with the NEA's overall strategies, and adds this from his own research and observations of schools effective in closing the gap: "Their striking deviation from norms of failure and mediocrity, cannot be explained by their possession of a secret curriculum or extra resources, rather what sets them apart and makes them unique is the dedication, commitment of the educators who work there and deliberateness of the approach they take in meeting the needs of the students they serve."

"Of course, there is more to it than that. In the best schools where all children are achieving regardless of race or class, there are typically several strategies in place, including: 1) a commitment to engage parents as partners in education with explicit roles and responsibilities for parents and educators laid out; 2) strong instructional leadership focused on a coherent program for curriculum and instruction that teachers support and follow; 3) a willingness to evaluate

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interventions and reforms to insure quality control; 4) a recognition that discipline practices must be linked to educational goals and must always aim at re-connecting troubled students to learning; 5) a commitment to finding ways to meet the non-academic needs of poor students."

In what has become a classic study from the Education Trust, Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground describes what "high impact" schools do to reduce the achievement gap and promote success for all students:

- *Teacher Placement* Principals are more likely to consider student achievement data to determine which classes teachers will be assigned, to ensure struggling students get the teachers who can best accelerate learning.
- *Support for New Teachers* Support for new teachers is structured and focuses on curriculum and instruction. New teachers are given model lesson plans, are paired with veteran teachers who teach the same class, and given opportunities to observe master teachers.
- *Hiring Practices* Principals work within the district system, but aggressively and proactively identify and recruit highly qualified teachers. They may conduct informal interviews and urge good candidates to apply through the district. They may even raid other school faculties, looking for good teachers.
- *Support for Students* Student support programs tend to be mandatory and are triggered by assessments that signal the student is struggling – participation in the programs is not an option.
- *Early Warning System* Schools have "early warning" systems to catch students before they fail. Counselors analyze seventh- and eighth grade student test scores for entering ninth-graders to identify students who are struggling.
- *Grade-level Support* If possible, academic support programs for students are not remedial, but support concurrent grade-level courses, which allows students sufficient time over four years to complete the college preparatory sequence of courses.
- *Use of Time* Students who arrive behind in ninth grade spend more time in courses with substantial reading than do students who are proficient. Administrators also act vigorously to protect time by limiting announcements over the PA system to emergencies, prohibiting students from being pulled from class except for emergencies, and requiring instruction to be "bell to bell."
- *Use of Data* Principals tend to be hands-on when it comes to analyzing data. They use data to actively supervise and oversee teacher and student performance.
- *Class Sizes* Administrators tend to make class sizes smaller for struggling students, even if this means larger class sizes for honors and AP classes.
- *Consistency* Teachers collaborate to ensure that course content is consistent no matter who is teaching.

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- ***Standards*** Teachers use standards and assessments to monitor their teaching.

Opportunity Gaps

More recently, focus on the achievement gap has shifted somewhat to give more attention to the "opportunity" gap – the gap between groups on the availability of experiences that contribute to success in school.

'New federal statistics about thousands of schools and districts show that students across the country don't have equal access to a rigorous education, experienced teachers, early education, and school counselors. Using information amassed from about 72,000 schools in the 7,000 American districts each with more than 3,000 students, the U.S. Department of Education's office of civil rights sought a picture of how equitable—or inequitable—schools are within a district and across states. "These data are incredible and revelatory," said Russlynn Ali, the department's assistant secretary for civil rights. "They paint a portrait of a sad truth in American schools: Fundamental fairness hasn't reached whole groups of students."' (Shah, 2011). Among the key findings in this federal report are these:

- Some 3,000 schools serving about 500,000 high school students weren't offering Algebra 2 classes that school year, and more than 2 million students in 7,300 schools were not offered calculus.
- At schools where the majority of students were African-American, teachers were twice as likely to have only one or two years of experience compared with schools within the same district that had a majority-white student body.
- Less than one-fourth of school districts reported that they ran prekindergarten programs for children from poor families;
- Girls were underrepresented in physics, while boys were underrepresented in Algebra 2;
- Just 2 percent of the students with disabilities were taking at least one Advanced Placement class; and
- While students learning English comprised 6 percent of the total high school population, they accounted for 15 percent of the students for whom algebra was the highest-level math course taken by the end of high school.

Moss-Lee (June, 2010) strengthens the argument as follows: 'The so-called "achievement gap" is not about the pervasive failure of young people. It is a result of institutional, systemic, and collective community failure; it's about declining community engagement; it's about our looking for new things and not looking to what is already working. The educational disparities facing so many of our young people today are the result of an *opportunity* gap.

Professor Theresa Perry of Simmons College tells the story of a rural grandmother who sums up the so-called "achievement gap" this way: "If the corn doesn't grow, nobody asks what's wrong with the corn." If the corn does not grow, we wonder about the weather conditions. If the corn

does not grow, we wonder about the soil. If the corn does not grow, we wonder if the pesticides we sprayed inhibited crops' growth. If the corn does not grow, we look at the farmer. However, if we subscribe to the existence of an ''achievement gap'', we are saying that our children do not achieve because there is something fundamentally wrong with them. The language we choose needs to reflect the heart of the disparity — a disparity that has everything to do with access, opportunity, and the lack of public and community will to transform outcomes for all our children.'

Conclusions

Some of the solutions to closing the gaps are revolutionary, some are incremental. All are necessary if the public schools are to achieve a legacy of fairness and opportunity for all children. The resources that follow will help practicing school leaders prepare their own schools to succeed with this nation's diverse student population.

References

Ferguson, R. F. (2002). *What doesn't meet the eye: Understanding and addressing racial disparities in high-achieving suburban schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Flaxman, E. (December, 2003). Closing the Achievement Gap: Two Views from Current Research. *ERIC Digest.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, ED482919. Retrieved July 8, 2011 from http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-3/gap.html.

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Moss-Lee, D. (June 29, 2010). Closing the Opportunity Gap. *Education Update Online*. Retrieved July 13, 2011 from http://www.heaf.org/press/Education_update_2010.06.29.pdf.

National Education Association (2007). Culture, Abilities, Resilience, Effort: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved July 11, 2011 from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_CAREbook0804.pdf.

Noguera, P. (July 29, 2007). Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: The Best Strategies of the Schools We Send Them To. *Inmotion Magazine*. Retrieved July 13, 2011 from http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pn_strat.html.

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Shah, N. (July 13, 2011). Federal Data Shed Light on Education Disparities. *Education Week*. Retrieved July 13, 2011 from
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/07/01/36data.h30.html?qs=opportunity+gap

Online Resources:

Research Brief: Closing the Achievement Gap by Mike Muir
Principals' Partnership, October, 2003.
http://oemanagement.com/data/_files/achievegap.pdf
A brief summary of the findings from research as of the publication date.

The Power to Change: High Schools That Help All Students Achieve
The Education Trust
http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/ThePowerToChange.pdf
This report chronicles the stories of three very different high schools that are getting strong results for minority students and students from low-income families. The report demonstrates clearly that some high schools are succeeding, even under challenging circumstances.

How It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools by Karin Chenoweth
http://www.edtrust.org/dc/publication/what-does-it-take-to-close-achievement-gaps-and-help-all-students-learn-at-high-level
Find answers in this excellent book that takes you on a coast-to-coast tour of classrooms that work. These schools turn high expectations into academic success, whether they serve low-income white kids in rural Arkansas, Latino teens in Southern California, or black middle schoolers in Boston.

Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground
The Education Trust
http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/GainingTractionGainingGround.pdf
This report is the result of a careful, on-the-ground study into the practices of public high schools that serve high concentrations of either low-income or minority children and have a strong track record accelerating learning for students who enter high school below grade level. This study compares and contrasts the practices of these high-impact schools with similar high schools that have only an average impact on student performance.

Handbook: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap
Urban Education Network of Iowa
http://www.uen-ia.org/strategies.pdf
These strategies are shared as a means for teachers and staff to help all students reach their academic potential. Some may be more applicable than others, but they all have value. The

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strategies should serve as a strong support system to all school districts, buildings, teachers, students and community alike as they work together to help all students achieve success.

Signature Practices
Closing the Achievement Gap, California Department of Education
http://www.closingtheachievementgap.org/cs/ctag/print/htdocs/success_sig_search.htm
In this Web-based tool, you will find "Signature" Practices submitted by the 136 middle schools and 125 high schools selected as 2009 California Distinguished Schools, and 484 elementary schools selected as 2010 Distinguished schools. The schools believe these practices contributed to the success of their students.

Closing Opportunity gaps in Washington's Schools
http://www.k12.wa.us/Cisl/pubdocs/AgapLegReport2010.pdf
A Report by the Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee about policies and practices in the State of Washington.

<u>The Digital Divide</u>
One of the fastest-moving gaps is the "digital divide," the gap between affluent and poor students' access to technology and all of the education resources of the Internet. These articles help to put it in perspective.

Digital Divide 2.0 by Andrew Trotter
Education Week, September 12, 2007.
http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2007/09/12/02divide.h01.html

Mind the Gap: It's a High-speed, High-def, Wi-Fi World. But not for everybody by Cindy Long
http://www.nea.org/home/15468.htm

Pew Internet Research
http://www.pewinternet.org/About-Us/Our-Mission.aspx

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