



## **School Improvement for All:** Reflections on the Achievement Gap\*

**Gary R. Howard**  
garyhoward@earthlink.net

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## INTRODUCTION

If we are to create effective schools that truly serve all children, then closing the achievement gap is certainly an essential priority for the 21st century. When school districts throughout the country disaggregate educational data related to student outcomes, a consistent pattern emerges. Race, culture, ethnicity, language, and economic status continue to be powerful predictors of school failure. Whether the measure is grades, test scores, attendance, discipline referrals, drop out or graduation rates, those students who differ most from mainstream White, middle/upper class, English speaking America, are also most vulnerable to being mis-served by our nation's schools. Teachers, administrators, school board members, scholars, policy leaders, students, and parents are aware of this gap in educational equity, and numerous programs, initiatives, and strategies are now in place to address it.

My purpose here is to delineate the deeper issues that have caused and continue to perpetuate the achievement gap. How do we understand this phenomenon in ways that will help us address it effectively? If our analysis is inadequate our responses will be as well. The stakes are high, both for the students we serve and for the nation we hope to fashion in freedom and justice. If race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status continue to be significant predictors of school failure, then we as a nation that is growing rapidly in these very dimensions of difference will certainly lose the productive engagement of increasingly larger portions of our young people.

## THE LENS OF SOCIAL DOMINANCE

The achievement gap cannot be understood without honestly confronting issues of social dominance. The process of schooling is neither power-neutral nor culture-neutral. Through periods of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, Blacks have for centuries been either legally forbidden an education or systematically relegated to inferior schools. For Native Americans, schooling in the 19th and early 20th centuries was used as a tool for cultural genocide, the official federal education policy being to "kill the Indian and save the man" (Harvey & Harjo, 1994). It is no mere coincidence that those racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic groups who have for centuries been marginalized by the force of Western domination are the same groups who are now failing or underachieving at disproportionate rates. Schooling, like all other social institutions, functions as a system of privilege and preference, reinforced by power, favoring certain groups over others. This is the same asymmetry of social dominance: the victors of history disproportionately thrive while the descendents of the vanquished inordinately struggle just to survive. Such inequities are perpetuated through three highly interrelated and mutually reinforcing dynamics of dominance: the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance, and the legacy of privilege (Howard, 1999).

**The assumption of rightness**, as related to the achievement gap, often leads teachers to assume that the problem of school failure lies in the students and their families and not in the structure of schooling. We make assumptions about who can and cannot learn; and the more uncomfortable we are with difference, the greater the likelihood that we will relegate certain children to lower levels of expectation and academic opportunity. For example, an African American chemist working for a Fortune 500 company told me recently that he and his wife had to advocate every year for their two sons not to be placed in special education classes. In their small rural

community, where their sons were among very few children of color, teachers would routinely refer these two boys to special classrooms. Strangely enough, this occurred in spite of the fact that both students performed well in regular and even advanced classes. Eventually, each of these young men went on to graduate from prestigious colleges and acquire lucrative positions, but one has to wonder what would have happened without the advantage of parents who could resist the assumptions of school personnel. For the 90% of educators who, like me, grew up in predominantly White suburban communities, it is natural to assume that school, as it is presently constituted, works well for all students. From our assumption of rightness, we can easily conclude that our professional judgements are correct and that those who don't achieve are either not sufficiently intelligent or inadequately supported by their home environment. The deficiency, therefore, lies in the child or the home and not in the system of schooling.

**The luxury of ignorance** allows many dominant culture educators to remain unaware of the intense "sociocultural misalignment between home and school" (Comer, 1988, p. 44) that is experienced by students from poor and racially diverse backgrounds. Even for those children of color who are successful, school is often experienced as a foreign environment. An African American athlete attending a predominantly White high school described his experience this way: "I can handle school, but it's just that every day seems like an away game." On the other hand, for me and most of my white, middle-class colleagues the neighborhood school in the suburbs was a direct reflection of our home environment. For us, every day was a home game. We enjoyed the easy comfort of a smooth transition between home and school and have assumed that ought to be true for the diverse children we now teach. One of the dilemmas of dominance is that we are often blind to the negative impact our imagined goodness and normalcy have on others who do not share the demographic advantages of dominance that have favored our group.

**The legacy of privilege** refers to those advantages that flow to some and not to others, based solely on our membership in the dominant group. Privilege is illustrated in a story told by an Hispanic high school student entering her first day in an honors AP English classroom. She was the only student of color in the class, and the teacher pulled her aside the end of the session to ask, "Are you sure you want to be in here? This is going to be a very challenging course." The privilege comes in the fact that none of the Anglo students were asked that same question. Privilege is also exercised in the many strategies employed by families and politicians who seek to escape or abandon public education in communities that are urban, poor, and predominantly populated by children of color. For decades we have witnessed White flight to the suburbs, and "good schools" have in many people's minds become synonymous with "White schools." Today we see a more complex phenomenon, wherein families from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, once they have achieved a level of economic success, will follow the money to the suburbs, thus creating a kind of "green flight" that continues to drain valuable human and economic resources from our core cities and most challenged environments (Wilson, 1987). Another manifestation of privilege is the movement toward voucher programs that may save some students but actually exacerbates the concentration of poverty and failure in certain schools by creating enclaves of elitism for a privileged few.

I present this discussion of social dominance not for the purpose of casting blame, but for the hope of increasing our clarity and consciousness regarding the deeper dynamics underlying the achievement gap. If we understand how our assumptions about schooling have been shaped by

the forces of social dominance, we are less likely to impose our narrow cultural lens on the experience of those who have not benefited from these dynamics of privilege favored position. By acknowledging that race and class inequities in academic outcomes is a logical consequence of our system of education, and not an aberration, we are more likely to look for systematic changes rather than casting aspersion on the idiosyncratic failures of students, parents, resistant to change, and it is that system that must be transformed.

## A COLLAGE OF CAUSATION AND RESPONSE

The achievement gap has many faces and many voices. It is the Black high school junior in Indiana who asks her teachers, "Why am I the only Black student in the gifted program?" It is the Haitian student in an impoverished rural community in Washington state who says, "None of my brothers and sisters have finished school, so why should I?" Educators who are passionate about closing the achievement gap are myriad: generational poverty and families in pain, political cynicism that leads to the abandonment of urban public education, lowered expectations, stereotypes about race and poverty, teachers not prepared to deal with diversity, inadequate funding, outright racism, the unfortunate identification of school success with "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and all the many other "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) that flow from dominance.

Consciously or unconsciously, all students are asking themselves several critical questions related to identity, inclusion, and success: Who am I? What is my worth? Do I belong? Am I safe? Is school my place? Am I smart? Can I be successful? Who cares about me and who decides whether I succeed? These questions form the implicit curriculum that functions beneath the surface of schooling. How we as educators, parents, and policy leaders engage these questions and how we support young people in their journey to adulthood, will ultimately determine our success in closing the achievement gap.

**Multiple Causes.** The good news in this effort is that scholars, educators, and communities throughout the country have recognized many of the elements that comprise the complex collage of causation and are working toward curative strategies. James Banks and several colleagues working through the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington and the Common Destiny Alliance at the University of Maryland (200) provided one of the most comprehensive and useful summaries of variables relevant to the achievement gap. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation, a consensus panel of interdisciplinary scholars worked four years to identify the most salient factors affecting education and diversity. Their findings are organized into five categories, 12 principles, and 62 variables, evidence in itself that any attempt to address the achievement gap must be as multidimensional and varied as the causes of social dominance.

The five broad categories in the Banks study include teacher learning, student learning, intergroup relations, school governance, and assessment. Key selected principles and variables are: teachers understanding of diverse ethnic groups, student access to equitable opportunities to learn creation of super-ordinate groups that engage students in significant experiences with cultures other than their own, reduction of fear and anxiety in the school experience, administrative processes that emphasize shared decision making and collaboration, and the use

of multiple culturally sensitive measurement and assessment techniques. I recommend that universities and school districts order the full report, which include a checklist for assessing school improvement related to the 62 variables.

**School District Initiatives.** In addition to the Banks study, school districts throughout the country are developing their own comprehensive understanding of causal factors and possible strategies for addressing the achievement gap. Minneapolis Public Schools, for example, has a "Twelve Point Plan for Improving the Academic Performance and Graduation Rates of Students of Color" (2001). Selected elements of the MPS plan include: using student data to direct action, creating a more diverse workforce in the school district, targeting resources to needy schools, reducing over-referral to special education, investing in school readiness through pre-school programs, and increasing support for students with behavior related issues.

Minneapolis is also engaged in an inter-district process that brings the city together with nine suburban districts to share resources and students in an effort to improve the educational experience for all. The West Metro Education Program (WMEP) offers cooperative inservice opportunities for teachers and administrators in its 10 member districts. Working extensively with the WMEP district over the past two years, I have been heartened to learn that the issue of closing the achievement gap is perceived there as not only the responsibility of urban educators with high poverty and diversity among their student population, but is actually beginning to be embraced as the larger responsibility of all surrounding communities and school districts. Not everyone in the metro area believes this, of course, but there does exist a critical mass of committed people who share the vision and that is sufficient to initiate change.

In Federal Way School District, a large suburban community outside of Seattle, the student of color population has grown rapidly in recent years and is now 40%. Speaking with a long-time African American community activist, I was inspired to hear that their White male superintendent has become a trusted champion of effective schools for all students and has initiated creative ways to approach the achievement gap. He has funded a new position, Director of Equity and Achievement, to assure that the school district is continually attending to the issue of closing the gap. He has also personally interviewed students of color in each of the district high schools to gather first-hand data on their perceptions of their school experience. In one powerful aspect of these interviews, he asks bright and talented students of color why they are not participating in Advanced Placement classes. A consistent pattern has emerged from these interviews, with the following three responses being given, in order of frequency: (1) I didn't know I could, (2) I don't want to be alone, and (3) I don't want to fail. Clearly, the assumptions and self-perceptions underlying these responses are sad evidence of the lingering and debilitating power of social dominance in the lives of young people today.

In the East Ramapo Central School District, outside of New York City, students of color represent close to 80% of the school population. With diverse and enlightened leadership from the school board in a direct administrative team, and teachers, this district has taken on the achievement gap in a direct and encouraging way. When I first began my work with them, I was surprised and delighted to learn that one of their primary activities would be to focus on increasing the cultural competence of all school district employees. They had worked with the complex issues of the achievement gap long enough to realize that the problems lie not so much

in the deficiencies of students as in the inadequacy of school culture to effectively serve all students. They are now working together in central office and building level leadership teams, including district administrators, principals, teachers, support staff, and parents, to find ways to help all employees grow in their ability to relate effectively with people who experience the world through different cultural frames. Their goal statement is: The East Ramapo School District offers an educational program that is open, inclusive, and welcoming of all students and families in our community. Working together to strengthen our cultural competence and benefit all students, each year we achieve a significant reduction in the achievement gap." Through dedicated leadership, committed teachers, and constant attention to the issue, they are documenting those reductions each year.

**Leadership.** One of the most influential factors in closing the achievement gap is the presence of enlightened leadership at the building level. Principals cannot do this work alone, but it is extremely difficult to do without them. If students and teachers are not empowered and inspired by their principal, they often languish under the pressures of the achievement gap. In Seattle, John Morefield (1996) exemplifies those principals throughout the country who are creating schools that work for all children. When Morefield became principal of Hawthorne Elementary School, located in one of Seattle's most racially diverse and lowest income communities, he promised that all entering kindergartners would graduate from fifth grade with skills at or above grade level competency. Over the years he and his dedicated staff delivered on their promise. Morefield summarized his approach in a report, "Recreating Schools for All Children," another resource I would recommend for all educators and policy leaders.

Some of the elements included in Morefield's vision of effective schools for all students are: strong leadership, unity of purpose, a caring and nurturing school environment, consistent and positive discipline, a multicultural curriculum, a belief in the importance and empowerment of parents, and a staff that believes that teaching is a calling and a vocation, not just a job. Morefield (1996) recognizes the necessity to shift schooling away from its Western dominant assumptions of competition and rugged individualism and toward a more egalitarian ethic based on cooperation and relationship. He states, "I have come to believe that a school designed to work for children of color, works for White children. The reverse, however is not true. Consequently, if we design schools to work for children of color, they will work for all children."

**Research Findings.** The research literature also has much to teach us about the salient factors related to closing the achievement gap. Comer (1988) has spent years documenting significant gains in student success through the work of strengthening the ties between schools and communities and actively engaging parents in every aspect of schooling. Gay (2000), in her inspiring new book, brings together extensive research and practical experience to demonstrate the power of classroom teaching strategies that are culturally responsive to the reality of students' lives. Steel (1999) has studied the impact of "stereotype threat" on the performance of Black students. He defines stereotype threat as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (p. 46). Through the impact of stereotype threat, even the most talented students of color continue to experience the deleterious effects of past and present social dominance. The sad lesson of this work is that even if no one in the school is being overtly racist toward students of color, the strong presence of the threat is still internalized and often destructive.



Because the achievement gap has resulted from a process as deep and pervasive as social dominance, it is important that we also view both the causes and our curative responses from an equally complex and multi-dimensional perspective. Meaningful progress toward effective and equitable schools will require all of the compassion, commitment, vision, and will that educators, parents, and policy leaders can direct toward this issue.

## TESTING IS NOT TEACHING

Accountability and assessment strategies are certainly part of the complex collage of responses that must be applied to the achievement gap. Given the multidimensionality of the above discussion, however, it is perplexing that some politicians and educational leaders appear to believe that testing in itself will somehow lead us to the promised land of educational equity. In the 2000 Presidential debates, for example, it was unsettling to witness two privileged candidates playing political one-ups-man-ship with the issue of how often they would test our nation's students. Before any politician attempts to speak with authority on the efficacy of testing as a solution to educational inequities, he or she ought to be required to teach at least one year in a public school classroom.

More relevant to the actual realities of schooling, the father of a fourth grader in Texas recently told me about asking his daughter the perennial parent question: "What did you learn in school today?" Her response was, "We learned the TASS test (The Texas state-wide assessment). In sharing this story, the father was concerned that testing might be taking over the learning process in his daughter's school. In a different part of the country, a sixth grade teacher told me of verbally administering a portion of his state's test that asked his highly diverse and mostly low income inner city children to interpret the meaning of the western folksong, "Home on the Range." While giving the test, the teacher thought to himself. "How will any of my students know what is going on in this song? The cultural context is totally foreign to them." Indeed, an intelligent urban child might well wonder why anyone would have their home on the stove anyway, and why are all those animal in the kitchen? The teacher wisely concluded that this section of the test was not measuring his kids' ability to read and interpret but rather their familiarity with white rural culture.

In a middle school in Washington State, I was in the principal's office planning future workshops when the state test results for her school were brought in. Her faculty had worked tirelessly the year before to raise the achievement level of their high poverty urban population, but the scores had actually gone down. Watching her review the numbers, there was much sadness in the principal's expression. We talked about how and how and when she would share this information with her dedicated team of teachers, who were just that day coming back from summer to ready their classrooms for a new year. We wondered together what these scores meant. Had teachers truly failed to improve the educational outcomes for their students? Or had the statewide test failed to measure what the children had actually learned?

Each of these stories raises serious questions about the current fixation on standardized testing as the *sine qua non* of educational reform. Issues like these cause many of us to wonder whether the politics of accountability are actually running counter to the best interests of our most at-risk students. In fact, the thing our students are most "at risk" from may be precisely the narrow

politics that now frame so much of the accountability discussion.

Assessment and accountability are critical to the educational process. But the methods of assessment must be multi-dimensional, culturally and situationally appropriate, consistent with instructional goals, attuned to different learning styles, and balanced with other indicators and measures of student success. Testing is not teaching. It is one measure of educational outcomes, but not the only one. Just as the causal factors which have fueled the achievement gap are numerous and complex, so must our measure and assessment procedures be equally broad, multi-dimensional, and flexible. High stakes testing alone is a tragically inadequate response to the complexities underlying the achievement gap.

Certainly we as educators and policy leaders must hold ourselves accountable, but we have to ask, "To whom are we accountable?" Clearly, we are accountable to the children in our schools, to their families, and ultimately to the future of our nation. However, if we continue to trivialize our understanding of accountability to the point where it becomes synonymous with testing, then we will have failed our students and may discover 10 years from now that educational inequities have actually been exacerbated rather than reduced.

#### THE MEASURE OF OUR NATION

We have seen in the discussion above that a clear understanding of social dominance is the essential backdrop for our efforts to create effective schools that serve all students. As long time civil rights activist Bob Moses (2001) points out in his campaign for mathematical literacy for poor and minority students, the issue of academic achievement is for us today what the issue of voting rights was for our nation 40 years ago. He says, "if we don't get it, we are headed for a new form of serfdom" (p. 72).

Whereas the 20th century was an era of winning access for people who had theretofore been excluded from the full benefits of citizenship, so the 21st century must be dedicated to assuring success for the children of these same groups of people. Success begins with equitable educational outcomes, so the task of closing the achievement gap is essentially the task of unraveling the crippling effects of past and present social dominance.

If we are to move from social dominance to simple decency as a pluralistic nation, then public education must offer a broad and inclusive doorway to success. It is the responsibility of all Americans to champion our youth, especially those who have been most debilitated by the forces of unfairness, which for far too long have separated far too many from the full fruits of citizenship. The achievement gap is a crisis as great as any we have faced as a nation. It calls us to compassionate action and the generous outpouring of our personal and political will.

Speaking for my own position as a White educator, we cannot as a nation close the achievement gap until a critical mass of conscious White Americans begin to accept poor children, urban children, and children of color as our own children. High stakes testing is the easy strategy. It has the political advantage of "get tough on education" rhetorical ring, but it is neither compassionate nor adequate. When White teachers, policy leaders, parents, and scholars join with families and communities of color and claim with a united voice that "all the children



are our children," perhaps then we shall see the type of investment in quality education that our children deserve -- the type of investment middle and upper class Americans presently demand for their children.

In less than nine months during 2001 our nation dedicated over a trillion dollars to tax relief and another trillion to aid for the victims of September 11. Would it be fair to say that the survival and success of our nation's youth require an equal investment? Politicians and bureaucrats often tell us we should not merely throw money at the problems of educational equity, but perhaps we should try it once. Perhaps we should actually fund the things we know will bring positive change: smaller class size, smaller schools, excellent well paid teachers, and inspired leaders with the resources to bring their vision into reality. The issue of educational equity is not about testing; it is about teaching, learning, funding, and creating relationships that work. The achievement gap is an unhealed wound on the heart of America. We are losing the lifeblood of future generations at a rate that is unsustainable and culturally depleting. How we respond, and the depth of our commitment to heal this wound, will in the decades to come be a critical measure of our worth as a democratic community.

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