

## Journal of Negro Education

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Source: *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Spring, 2008), pp. 90-103

Published by: [Journal of Negro Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608673>

Accessed: 10/12/2013 12:34

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## **The 2007 Charles H. Thompson Lecture- Colloquium Presentation**

### ***Creating Schools Where Race Does Not Predict Achievement: The Role and Significance of Race in the Racial Achievement Gap***

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*This article explores the ways in which race is implicated in efforts to address the achievement gap in U.S. schools. Through an analysis of the theoretical and historical issues that have framed the relationship between race and intellectual ability, the author explains why the effort to close the achievement gap is politically and socially significant. The efforts of two suburban school districts to address the achievement gap is presented to illustrate why some schools are making progress in closing the achievement gap while others are not. These cases are used to make a call for a new discourse about the role of race in student achievement and to clarify how and why race continues to be so controversial and confounding to educators who are working to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, receive a quality education and have the opportunity to experience academic success.*

The effort to find ways to close or at least reduce the achievement gap—the disparities in test scores and academic outcomes that tend to follow well-established race and class patterns—has become a national priority. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and its requirement that schools and students be held accountable for achievement through annual standardized tests, a sense of urgency has developed over the need to improve the educational outcomes of under-performing students. In many communities, this has placed greater focus and attention on the need for strategies to improve academic achievement among children who have traditionally not done well in school, namely, poor and disadvantaged children, students with learning disabilities, recent immigrants and English language learners, and in many communities African Americans, Latinos and other students of color, generally (Miller, 1995).

Those familiar with American history and the history of American education, in particular, will undoubtedly be struck by the irony and significance of the current national preoccupation with closing the racial achievement gap. Racial gaps in achievement, attainment and measures of intellectual ability are by no means new. In fact, throughout most of American history, racial disparities in educational achievement and performance were attributed to innate genetic differences between population groups, and as such, were regarded as acceptable and understandable “natural” phenomena (Fredrickson, 1981). Intelligence was regarded as an innate human property rooted in the particular genetic endowments of individuals and groups (Duster, 2003), and therefore altering patterns of academic achievement was not regarded as feasible or even desirable.

Given this history, the fact that federal educational policy has made the goal of closing the racial achievement gap a national priority is truly remarkable. Although policymakers have not called attention to the fact that the effort to eliminate racial disparities in student achievement represents a repudiation of America’s past views on race, educators at the center of this effort can

not help but engage attitudes and beliefs that are associated with the vestiges of racial attitudes from the not so distant past. The notion that children of color are not as intelligent and capable as White children continues to find adherents among educators and the general public. Furthermore, seven years after the adoption of NCLB, it is clear that eliminating racial disparities in academic outcomes will require more than an official renouncement of traditional views about the nature of race. Race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement in predictable and disturbing ways, and the persistence and pervasiveness of these patterns compels us to ask why? It also forces us to reconsider what it might take to alter the long-standing relationship between race and achievement since so many efforts to alter racial patterns have been unsuccessful.

This article explores these issues through an examination of the historical and theoretical factors that influence the role of race in educational performance. Additionally, through analysis of empirical research in school districts where efforts to close the racial achievement gap have been undertaken, this author will consider why greater progress has been achieved in some communities as compared to others, and will examine the factors that seem to obstruct further progress in other places. The goal of such an exercise is to clarify how and why race continues to be so controversial and confounding to educators who are working to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, receive a quality education and have the opportunity to experience academic success.

### WHAT'S RACE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

According to the view of intelligence that prevailed throughout most of the 19th and 20th century, non-Whites, particularly Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and even some Eastern Europeans, were believed to possess lower levels of intellectual capacity than Caucasians, particularly those that originated in the countries of northwestern Europe (Gould, 1981). Such views about the relationship between race and intelligence had considerable influence on social science research, psychology, and education (Lemann, 2000). Although less overtly pernicious, these views were consistent with beliefs about race held by previous generations; such as beliefs that rationalized slavery, genocide, imperial aggression, Manifest Destiny and later, Jim Crow segregation (Fredrickson, 1981; Takaki, 1989; Zinn, 1980). Early in the twentieth century, advocates of Eugenics—the “science genetic engineering”—propagated the notion that groups and individuals with superior intellect and physical ability, should be encouraged to procreate to strengthen the national gene pool, while inferior groups should be actively discouraged and even prevented from reproducing their progeny (Duster, 2003). Given their views, it is not surprising that many of the Eugenicists were leaders in the effort to devise tests for measuring intelligence (Lemann, 2000). They sought to ensure that intelligence tests and examinations such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) would be used to provide an “objective” measure of talent and ability. They also pushed for the results from these standardized tests to be used to determine who should be recruited for top occupations and for enrollment at elite universities (Fischer, 1996).

The history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States is not irrelevant to current efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap. Although it is increasingly politically incorrect to attribute differences in achievement to genetic differences between racial groups, it is important to remember that, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) made precisely this point, and the book received a mix of condemnation and acclaim at the time of its release (Fischer, 1996). Such views have been prevalent in American society for many years even though they have never been supported by research on genetics or advanced by scientists engaged in research linking human biology to intelligence. For example, even though neither of the authors of *The Bell Curve* studied genetics (Herrnstein was a psychologist and Murray is a political scientist), their lack of knowledge about genetics did not stop them or others from making arguments about the genetic basis of intellectual ability or the inferiority of racial minorities. Not long ago, former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers suggested that one of the reasons why women were not well represented in mathematics and science-related

fields was due to innate differences in intellectual ability (Bombardieri, 2005). If the President of Harvard University, an economist by training, felt comfortable making remarks about the genetic basis of intelligence, it would not be a stretch of logic to conclude that similar views about the relationship among race, gender, and innate ability continue to be widely held throughout American society.

While it is increasingly less common for arguments about the genetic inferiority of minority groups to be made in public, it would be a mistake to suggest that these discussions have entirely disappeared. In their place, arguments that attribute differences in achievement to differences in broad and undefined notions of culture (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1987), parental influences (Epstein, 1994) and even rap music (Ferguson, 2002) have been used to serve a similar purpose: rationalizing the lower rates of achievement among Black and Latino students as the result of problems that are inherent to these groups. Unlike biology, culture has been embraced as a less politically distasteful explanation because it is assumed that cultures are not immutable but can be changed over time. Among those advocating this perspective are scholars such as anthropologist John Ogbu (1987; Ogbu & Davis, 2003) who argued that non-voluntary minorities—groups that were incorporated into the United States through conquest, slavery, or force (i.e. Native Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans) consistently do less well in school because they adopt an “oppositional culture” in relation to schooling (Ogbu, 1987). According to Ogbu, to the degree that non-voluntary minorities regard schooling as a form of forced assimilation, they are less likely to embrace the behaviors that contribute to school success (e.g., obeying school rules, studying for examinations, speaking standard English, etc.). Ogbu’s views have been embraced by many scholars as an effective way to explain why many “voluntary” immigrant minorities (especially Asians) do well in school while many domestic minorities do not.

Similarly, linguist John McWhorter has attributed the lower achievement of many African American students to a “culture of anti-intellectualism,” while former English professor Shelby Steele has attributed it to what he calls “victimology”: the tendency on the part of Blacks to blame “the White man” for their problems (McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1990). McWhorter contends that “victimology stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor” and he adds that it “condones weakness and failure” (p. 28). Others such as sociologist Orlando Patterson and journalist Juan Williams (Patterson, 2006; Williams, 2007) have cited the culture of “gangsta rap” with its emphasis on “bling” (flashy jewelry), violence and disdain for hard work, as producing a culture of failure. Finally, a number of others (such as Ruby Payne whose work has been embraced by a number of school districts) have cited a “culture of poverty,” as the reason why poor children of all races often fail to perform well in school (Payne, 2005). Such theories draw on the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis who argued that inter-generational poverty among Puerto Ricans was reproduced because the poor embraced norms that perpetuate poverty (Lewis, 1966).

Cultural explanations of the achievement gap such as those articulated by Ogbu, Payne, and McWhorter have been widely embraced by researchers, policymakers and educators (Noguera, 2001, 2003). Even though such explanations of academic performance fail to account for those who deviate from established patterns—poor Black students who excel, middle class White and Asian students who struggle—but who share a culture with others who conform to these patterns, such theories continue to be embraced by a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners. An article in the *New York Times* Sunday Magazine (Tough, 2006) put the cultural argument in this way:

Kids from poor families might be nicer, they might be happier, they might be more polite – but in countless ways, the manner in which they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in the measures that count in contemporary American society. (pp. 16-17)

Recognizing how difficult it will be to achieve the goals of NCLB if cultural differences are at the root of the achievement gap, the Tough goes on to ask, “Can the culture of child-rearing be

changed in poor neighborhoods, and if so, is that a project that government or community organizations have the ability, or the right, to take on" (pp. 22-23)?

When asked whether low achievement among African American students might be explained by a fear smart Black children have of being accused of "acting White," or if Asian students are culturally oriented to excel in mathematics, this author points out that such arguments are based on gross generalizations of culture and overlook the powerful role that schools can play in promoting or hindering academic achievement. It could be argued that the success or failure of students cannot be attributed to the amount of culture they do or do not possess. Rather, a close examination of achievement patterns at their schools may reveal conditions within them that play a major role in shaping the academic outcomes of its students.

Ironically, broad generalizations about culture are so widely embraced and deeply imbedded in popular thinking about race and school performance that they manage to exist even when there may be empirical evidence to undermine their validity. For example, Julian Ledesma, at the University of California, Berkeley, tested the strength of the Asian model minority stereotype in a paper (Ledesma, 1995). He surveyed students and teachers at Fremont High School in Oakland about which ethnic group they believed was most academically talented. The vast majority of those he surveyed identified Asian students as the highest performers. This was even true for the Asian students he interviewed who were not doing well in school. Given that Asian students were overrepresented in honors and advanced placement courses at the school, and given that several of the school's valedictorians had been Asian, their responses were hardly surprising. However, in his analysis of student performance data Ledesma showed that although many of the academic standouts at the school were Asian, these students were not representative of Asian students as a whole. In fact, the grade point average for Asian students at the school was a 1.9 on a scale of 4.0. He pointed out that because Asian students were perceived as academically successful; little effort had been expended to provide them with the kind of academic support or special services that had been made available to other students.

An example, such as the one of Ledesma, does not prove that cultural influences are irrelevant to student achievement. At an aggregate level, Asian American students do out-perform other groups in mathematics, White students do achieve at higher levels than Black and Latino students, and middle-class children generally out-perform poor children (Farkas, 2004). Individual exceptions exist, but the patterns cited are fairly consistent (Ferguson, 2007). To some degree these patterns may in fact be attributed at least in part to characteristics that may be loosely associated with culture. However, in order to be helpful in finding ways to ameliorate or at least reduce disparities in achievement, the specific aspects of culture that seem to be most influential must be identified. For example, certain child-rearing practices such as parents reading to children during infancy or posing questions rather than issuing demands when speaking to children are associated with the development of intellectual traits that contribute to school success (Rothstein, 2004). Similarly, parental expectations about grades, homework, and the use of recreational time have been shown to influence adolescent behavior and academic performance (Ferguson, 2007). In his research at the University of California, Uri Treisman found that many Asian American students studied in groups and helped one another to excel while reinforcing norms that contribute to the importance of academic success. In contrast, the African American students he studied were more likely to socialize together but study alone (Treisman, 1992). Whether or not such behaviors can be attributed to culture can be debated, but clearly identifying specific behaviors that seem to positively influence academic achievement is more helpful than making broad generalizations about "oppositional" and "anti-intellectual" cultures because this information can be used to teach others to emulate behaviors that lead to success.

Even when behaviors that appear rooted in culture are identified educators must be careful about relying on cultural explanations to guide their thinking about academic achievement. Such thinking often has the effect of reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes because they fail to account for the high degree of diversity within racial groups. Differences related to socioeconomic status and income, the educational background of parents, the kind of neighborhood a student lives in, and

most importantly the quality of school a student attends, significantly affect student achievement (Miller, 1995; Noguera, 2001, 2003). Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to over-emphasize the influence of culture on the performance of racial groups, they are often ignored. Consequently, although there are a number of White students who do poorly in school (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), there is substantially less attention paid to this problem than to the issues facing minority students. Academic failure among White students, like the existence of poverty among White people in the United States, are phenomena that are rendered invisible due to the high degree of emphasis placed on race in many aspects of American social policy. Moreover, it is rare to hear “experts” cite culture as an explanation for why some White students do poorly in school.

Given that it is hard to imagine how we might go about changing the culture of individuals who seem to embrace attitudes and norms that undermine possibilities for academic success, it is far more sensible to focus instead on factors that we actually can do something about. There is a lot that our nation could do to reduce poverty and racial segregation, to equalize funding between middle class and poor schools, to lower class size, and to insure that we are hiring teachers who are qualified and competent. These are all factors that research has shown can have a positive effect on student achievement (Noguera, 2001, 2003), and none of them involve trying to figure out how to change a person’s culture.

In light of this history, the fact that the effort to close the gap in academic achievement is now at the top of the nation’s educational agenda must be seen as a significant and historic departure from the past. It suggests that prevailing beliefs about race in the United States may have dramatically shifted away from the assumption that differences in intellectual ability are rooted in genes— one in which these differences are regarded as the product of social experiences. President Bush’ poignant call for educators to “end the soft bigotry of low expectations” goes even a step further for it has placed the onus on schools to devise ways to boost the achievement of all students regardless of their backgrounds (NCLB, 2002). It also serves as the clearest indication that at the highest levels of government there is a prevailing belief that the obstacle to higher achievement for children of color is rooted in educational practices and beliefs that limit student performance, rather than innate ability.

However, despite the significance of the beliefs that buttress the *No Child Left Behind Act*, there is ample evidence that it will take more than exhortations from the President to make these disparities or the beliefs that accompanied them disappear. The persistence of the so-called racial achievement gap and its accompanying predictable patterns—White and Asian students consistently out-performing Black and Latino students on most measures of academic performance—suggests that regardless of how they are explained, the relationship between race and student achievement remains largely intact. Moreover, the persistence of the achievement gap has the effect of reinforcing traditional views about the link between race and intelligence.

## **TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF RACE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

As a result of the amorphous nature of racial categories, scholars have rejected the notion that race should be regarded as a biological concept, or that differences between racial groups can be attributed to essential genetic differences. Instead, scholars have advanced the idea that race should be considered a socially constructed political category (Omi & Winant, 1986). To justify this approach to the study of race these scholars pointed out that throughout U.S. history racial categories have changed over time and even been defined differently by states and regions (Roedigger, 1991). For example, while the so-called “one drop rule” has been used to determine who is Black in America (i.e., one drop of Black blood makes you Black, Omi & Winant, 1986), several states historically used conflicting criteria for how to define Blackness. Whereas in Virginia an individual with one-eighth or more of Black blood was defined as Black, in South Dakota anyone one-sixteenth Black or more was placed in that category. Courts in Louisiana ruled that a person was Black if their genealogical make-up exceeded one-thirty-second (Takaki, 1989).

That a person could literally change their race simply by moving from one state to another is often cited by contemporary race scholars as further evidence of its arbitrariness. Similar points have been made in relation to other groups—Latinos, Asians—because of the high degree of diversity in phenotype and other physical characteristics associated individuals who have been assigned to these groups.

In concurrence with the abovementioned view, this author takes the position that if racial categories are social and not, primarily, biological in nature, then it should be possible to fundamentally alter the predictability of racial patterns related to academic ability and performance, which does not imply that the physical differences associated with race—skin color, hair texture, physical features—are irrelevant, rather that the social significance associated with these differences varies over time. (For a discussion on how phenotype and the physical characteristics associated with race relate to the idea that race can be regarded as a social construct, see Fergus, 2005.) This does not mean that the racial patterns manifest in most academic outcome data can be dismissed as a figment of the collective imagination. Rather, it suggests that while it may be possible to disregard the idea that achievement patterns cannot be changed due to the genetic endowments of children, one can not avoid addressing the social conditions that produce and give meaning to these disparities for they, too, can have a powerful effect on beliefs and behavior. Therefore, in order for schools to produce academic outcomes that demonstrate that race is irrelevant to academic achievement they must address the many ways in which racial identity and racial stereotypes are reinforced and even reproduced within academic settings. The notion that African American, Latino, and Native American children are not as smart or capable as White students, is not only deeply rooted in American history, it is also propagated in the media and popular culture (Massey, 1998). Because schools generally reflect the larger values and beliefs of society, stereotypes about the relationship between race and intelligence are invariably reinforced within the structure and culture of schools, and unless educators make a deliberate and concerted effort to challenge them, these forces can have the same impact as older views about the relationship between race and intellectual ability (Steele, 1997).

Unfortunately, the number of schools where race is not a strong predictor of academic performance and no longer “matters” with respect to its ability to predict academic outcomes are relatively few (Noguera, 2001, 2003). While there are a small number of schools where it is common to find Black students among the highest achievers (Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003) and even a number of high-performing high poverty schools (Education Trust, 2002), in most schools in the U.S. the racial achievement gap remains, despite the President’s exhortations to eliminate it. (For the purpose of this article the term Black will be used rather than African American to identify students of African descent because Black is meant to include students of African and Caribbean heritage. In many school districts data on student performance do not draw distinctions within racial groups based on immigration status or national origin.)

In order to understand how schools can address the ways in which race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement, the remainder of this article presents an analysis of two suburban school districts that have gone to great lengths to address the achievement gap. It has been shown that one district has made significant progress in its efforts to reduce the achievement gap, while the other has not. In presenting these two cases, it is this author’s objective that by understanding the factors that contribute to success in one setting and paralysis in another might provide a clearer sense of what it would take to create schools where the race of children have no bearing on their performance in school.

## **A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS**

Suburban school districts with a disproportionate number of low-performing Black and Latino students are faced with both top-down and bottom-up pressure to find ways to address the achievement gap. NCLB and state level accountability measures force district and school leaders to show evidence of adequate yearly progress (AYP) in the achievement of their historically

underachieving students. Simultaneously, district leaders are faced with pressure from parents' groups and community organizations who seek to hold them accountable for the low performance of these students. In the face of such pressures, the leadership in suburban districts can not offer superficial solutions to the challenges facing their low-performing minority students because the parents they serve are generally too savvy and well organized to be easily put off. Instead, suburban districts are compelled to develop new approaches to addressing the achievement gap and to demonstrate real evidence that the strategies they implement are working.

While the factors that contribute to the achievement gap, both those external and internal to schools, are similar across most districts, there are clear differences in the policies and practices that districts have used and in the commitment they have shown to address disparities. Not surprisingly, some have made more progress and shown greater resolve in closing the achievement gap than others. In 2006 and 2007, this author conducted research in two school districts in suburban communities in the New York City metropolitan area. Prior to the research both districts had undertaken a variety of measures to reduce disparities in student achievement. Despite their efforts neither had experienced the level of improvement necessary to meet the demands of NCLB or to assuage the demands of the local community. In an effort to understand why past efforts had failed and concerned that public frustration with their inability to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population were growing, the two districts approached me for assistance. Over the course of two years, one year in each district, extensive research was carried out to uncover the factors that contributed to the persistence of racial disparities in student achievement. The findings suggested that while both districts continued to exhibit substantial racial disparities in student achievement, there were clear differences in both the districts' dedication to closing the gap and in the institutionalization of policies and practices that would reduce the disparities.

### *Gardenville*

Gardenville (pseudonym) placed the need to address the achievement gap as a high priority due to political pressure. Long recognized for its cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, Gardenville was one of the first communities in the United States to voluntarily integrate its public schools. However, in recent years the district's schools experienced considerable White flight. Despite a steady decline in White student enrollment since the 1980s, the district retained a diverse student population from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. During the 2005-2006 school year the district had 5,500 students. Black students constituted almost half of the student population (48.7%) followed by Latinos (21.2%), Whites (18.8%), and Asians (10.9%). Although the community was relatively affluent, with an average home value exceeding \$350,000 and a median family income of \$74,903, nearly one in five (19%) students qualified for free and reduced lunch. The presence of such a large number of low-income students was a source of controversy among the district's educators, several of whom suggested that a sizable percentage of these students were illegally attending school in the district by using local addresses of extended family members. Several remarks were made to the researchers that this issue was one of the key causes of the achievement gap in the district.

In addition to controversies related to low student achievement there was considerable pressure in the community over local property taxation. In 2006, per pupil spending in Gardenville was \$14,320; one of the highest rates of expenditure in their state. However, approximately 40% of families in the town did not enroll their children in the district's public schools. This was particularly the case for Orthodox Jewish residents who constitute a large and growing presence in the community and on the school board. With a large percentage of voters, particularly those without children enrolled in the public schools and resentful because of the heavy tax burden created by the cost of public education, while still others dissatisfied by low levels of student achievement among Black and Latino students, Gardenville district leaders found themselves in an untenable situation.

## ***Riverview***

Riverview (pseudonym) is a small town with a rich history and a racially and ethnically diverse population. Like many suburban communities nationwide, Riverview is experiencing dramatic demographic change. While there was, historically, a significant Black presence in the area, during the past decade there has been a steady increase in the number of Black and Latino families moving into the community. Latinos moving into Riverview came from a variety of national backgrounds, and there is evidence that the population is comprised of both documented and undocumented persons. Finding ways to respond to the needs of its changing student population was the primary reason for the district's interest in examining the factors behind its persistent gaps in student achievement.

Comparable to Gardenville, the Riverview school district has benefited from a high tax base (per pupil spending in 2007 was \$19,054). Riverview, however, is far from a monolithic community and median household incomes ranged from \$53,549 to \$127,274 based on the highly segregated areas within the community. Similar to Gardenville, Riverview voluntarily integrated its schools. The district adopted an integration plan in which children in the district move through each grade together from elementary through high school. The plan was fully implemented in 1981, and the graduating class of 1993 was the first group to complete their entire K-12 schooling experience in integrated classrooms. The district has received national recognition for its academic accomplishments, and its high school has been ranked as one of the top one hundred high schools in the nation. Despite these accolades district leaders were fully aware that not enough of their Black and Latino students were meeting educational standards. Having fully acknowledged the disparities that existed, Riverview made closing the achievement gap a top district priority.

While the data collected from Riverview did not identify it as an unqualified success story, many of the strategies that were used there show promise and are worthy of emulation by other districts interested in addressing the achievement gap. Most importantly, the lessons learned from the relative success of Riverview, especially when juxtaposed to the reform paralysis experienced by Gardenville, may prove instructive to researchers, policymakers, and educational leaders who seek to understand what it takes to begin to narrow gaps in student achievement.

## ***Race and Achievement in School***

Not surprisingly, disparities in student achievement are reflected in graduation rates. In 2005, one third of all Gardenville high school graduates received alternate diplomas since they were not able to pass the state's mandatory exit examination. Disproportionately, these students were Black and Latino males. In Riverview, there was a significant difference in the percentage of students among demographic groups graduating within four years. White students had a four-year graduation rate of 97%, while Black students only had a four-year graduation rate of 50% and Latinos fared only slightly better at 60%.

During the 2005-2006 school year, White and Asian students in Gardenville were overrepresented in the 4th grade gifted and talented courses, while Black and Latino students were underrepresented. Nearly twenty percent (17.2%) of White students and 16.7% of Asian students in the 4th grade were placed in gifted and talented compared to 5.7% of Black students and 3.9% of Latino students. Students who were enrolled in advanced or honors courses attained higher achievement and SAT scores, and not surprisingly, these students were also more likely to be admitted to Tier I postsecondary institutions (Owings, Madigan, & Daniel, 1998). Black parents expressed dissatisfaction with the inequitable access to the district's top courses for their children and several parents complained that their students were discouraged from enrolling in the rigorous courses. Although Gardenville offers open enrollment to advanced classes, students of color reported that they felt discouraged from enrolling in honors courses.

The lack of minority students in advanced courses was confirmed by classroom observations and other data on student performance collected during the research. Most students of color were enrolled in general education classes that drew much criticism from parents. One high school parent said "classes [were] rigorous if you're in honors; but if not, the kids [were] not being challenged." This belief combined with the limited access to gifted and talented honors and advanced placement (AP) courses for students of color, added significance to the over-representation of White students in rigorous and accelerated courses.

In Riverview, the students who enrolled in advanced courses also had higher academic outcomes than students who did not take advanced-level courses. The study revealed clear patterns of an achievement gap between students enrolled in AP and non-AP courses. During the 2006-2007 school year, Black and Latino students were the most underrepresented in the advanced mathematics sequence. Black students were nearly 10% and Latino students 13% less likely than White and Asian students to take and pass the mathematics state examination in the 8th or 9th grades after controlling for achievement. While approximately 50% of Black and Latino students reported that they would be attending two- or four-year colleges after graduation, more than 82% of White students and 100% of Asian students made similar assertions. For the high school state mathematics examination, Black and Latino students had mean scores below 70 (out of a maximum 100) while White and Asian students had mean scores in the 80s.

Students in advanced academics tracks made up the largest portion of Riverview's highest-performing high school students. These students were estimated to perform 6% to 16% better on the study's selected achievement measures. They were also estimated to be 48% more likely to pass the examinations required for a diploma with Advanced Designation and 38% more likely to report that they would attend a four-year college upon graduation. In Riverview, the effect of being on the advanced academic track was positive, relatively large, and strongly significant, even after controlling for a student's prior achievement. An examination of all students who were in the 11th grade during 2005-2006, revealed that more than 70% of White students in the grade and all of the Asian students took at least one AP or college course, while only 45% of Latino students and 28% of Black students took one of these courses. Less than half the Black and Latino students passed the examinations required for the Regents diploma compared with 84% of White students. In regards to the Advanced Designation diplomas, 23% of Black students and 11% of Latino students qualified, when compared to 63% of the White students. The finding does not suggest that the students who did not pass at the Regents diploma level were not eligible to graduate because the Local diploma option was available for those students who did not pass the Regents examinations. Students who earned a Regents diploma, however, were more competitive applicants for college admission than students earning Local diplomas.

As a way to address the lack of diversity in the AP courses at the high school, the Riverview district worked with a local college to offer a variety of college credit-earning courses to attract Black and Latino students. Some of the courses focused on African American and Latino history and culture, which were aimed at recruiting Black and Latino students. Additionally, this initiative offered other courses in mathematics, science, foreign language, and history, and consistently, there were more minority students enrolled in these classes than in the high school's AP courses.

### ***Efforts to Close the Achievement Gap***

The investigation of the two districts revealed strong connections between the social conditions, academic placement procedures, and the widening of the racial achievement gap. Interestingly, while in Gardenville, there was a distinct tendency to blame students and parents for low minority student achievement among teachers and administrators, in Riverview there was greater willingness to accept responsibility for changing student outcomes. Prior to carrying out research there, the Riverview district had established mentoring programs specifically for Black and Latino students at the middle and high school levels to address some of the social marginalization felt by the students. It had also introduced other reforms, including block scheduling and advisory groups

at the high school that were intended to change the context for teaching and learning, and provide students with a greater degree of personal support. These efforts appeared to have had a positive impact on the achievement of minority students. The measures also contributed to considerable support for the district among minority students and parents. In contrast, data from surveys and focus groups revealed that while Gardenville was mired in a debate over who was to blame for low student achievement, stakeholders in Riverview were working together to find solutions to a problem they believed could be solved.

### *The Role of District Leadership in Closing the Achievement Gap*

The experience of these two suburban school districts should serve as a sobering reminder of why it is difficult to bring about genuine, concrete progress in efforts to close the achievement gap. Despite their stated commitments to educate all students and despite the considerable resources at their disposal, neither Riverview nor Gardenville can be viewed as examples of school districts that are closing the achievement gap. In both districts, wide disparities corresponding to race and class persist, and neither district has shown any clear evidence that these disparities will close in the near future. The lack of success in these school districts that have had success in educating White middle-class students, and where conditions for change are not hampered by a lack of funds or overt racial bias should be seen as a clear indication that changes at a national level will be slow and arduous.

However, while the lack of progress in the two districts is discouraging, there are signs that in Riverview, at least, steps are being taken to reduce disparities in student achievement that may produce change over the long term. Through concrete measures such as increasing access of minority students to rigorous courses, improving the mentoring and counseling for students regarded as “at risk” of failure, and increasing stakeholder involvement in school-related reforms, the district appears to be serious about closing the gap. While these initiatives are unlikely to result in short term changes in academic outcomes, these strategies may result in incremental change and higher rates of achievement for students of color in the future.

In contrast, there is less optimism for change in Gardenville where there has been little effort to make change in the structure or culture of schools. While educators in Riverview have embraced the challenge of closing the achievement gap and they continue to search for ways to improve learning conditions in its schools, in Gardenville there is no such commitment. This is because educational leaders in Gardenville have mostly addressed this issue as a response to political pressure from a community that is increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of its public schools. While Gardenville’s leaders may like to reduce the pressure they are under, they lack a clear commitment to address the more complex educational issues that stand in the way of change. The mere fact that so many teachers and administrators continue to blame students and parents of color for low achievement is the clearest sign that they have not yet begun to accept responsibility for addressing their obstacles to achievement. The first step in such a process would be a willingness to ask what they might do differently with respect to the ways in which they are sorting and labeling students, the way they are teaching them, and the way they have organized their schools. Unlike Riverview where this type of introspection and critical analysis is widely embraced, in Gardenville the community appears to remain paralyzed in a debate over who should be blamed. In the face of empirical evidence, which showed how racial disparities are maintained, the leaders in Gardenville were not able to escape this paralysis that characterized their reform efforts.

These two cases suggest that educational efforts to reform schools and raise student achievement cannot be viewed separately from political issues related to race and achievement, and questions of leadership. Several researchers have found that political attitudes toward the presence of minority students and their families influence how these students are treated in school (Lipman, 1998; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). In communities where White educators lament demographic change due to “White flight,” and complain about the growing presence of students

of color, the commitment to serving their educational needs is usually lacking. In contrast, in schools and communities where students of color are embraced and where educational leaders willingly accept the challenge of making sure that all students receive a good education, possibilities for change in student outcomes benefit from broader openness to change.

The experiences of these two school districts also demonstrate why it is important for educational leaders to openly address the highly politicized nature of the relationship between race and student achievement. District leaders must convince their teachers, students, and other community stakeholders that increasing the achievement of Black and Latino students is not only possible, but also necessary. In order to accomplish this, district leaders must move beyond the all too common tendency to perceive efforts to promote educational equity as a situation in which efforts to address the needs of struggling students are perceived as coming at the expense of high-achieving White students. When this occurs, racial polarization and incrimination often stymie efforts to promote change (Noguera & Wing, 2006). In contrast, districts and communities that confront the challenge of racial disparities directly, with a clearly articulated and fully funded strategy, are more likely to experience tangible gains for their students. The ability of educators to promote change will ultimately determine whether or not progress is made in closing the nation's racial achievement gap.

### **CHANGING THE DISCOURSE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE AND ACHIEVEMENT**

In an unusual break from past practice, NCLB has significantly expanded the role of the federal government in the operation of the nation's public schools. With its requirement that states adopt clear academic standards and accountability measures for schools and students, the federal government has extended its influence over public education in ways that break significantly from the tradition of state and local control. Even among his fiercest critics, few have argued that the President's desire to improve public education has not been an important and even laudable goal.

Part of the reason for the controversy surrounding compliance with NCLB can be explained by the fact that for the first time in U.S. history, schools are required to produce evidence that all students are learning. Ironically, even as the Bush administration has opposed affirmative action and rejected the use of race in college admissions, it has required school districts to report student achievement on the basis of race and other so-called subgroups. Many schools and districts are struggling under the new law simply because they have never been expected to educate all children before, and they have experienced difficulty in fulfilling this basic requirement. This appears to be in the case in large urban school districts where the majority of students are poor, Black, and Latino, and achievement has historically been low, and it is also the case in affluent suburban communities where the under-performance of a few poor and non-White children who were previously overlooked or simply unrevealed because the majority of White students were relatively successful (Noguera & Wing, 2006). Not surprisingly, much of the opposition to NCLB emerged first in these more affluent communities as a result of NCLB's heavy emphasis on standardized testing and the resentment caused by having some of their schools labeled "failing" because of the performance of children of color.

### **MOVING BEYOND RATIONALIZATIONS OF THE GAP**

As previously mentioned, cultural explanations of the achievement gap are often associated with a tendency to rationalize the failure of certain students as a "normal" phenomenon simply because it has been manifest for so long. In schools where race and class are strong predictors of achievement; where few Black or Latino students are enrolled in gifted or honors courses but they are overrepresented in special education and remedial courses; and where the link between race and achievement has been firmly established in the minds of educators, students, parents and even the broader community, a sense of complacency about student achievement can develop. In such

communities, the under-achievement of students of color can become normalized when educators and others accept low performance as the by-product of factors that they cannot control.

Too often, educators can grow comfortable with seeing their minority students under-perform and fail in large numbers. In such schools, students of color may also grow accustomed to receiving failing grades while avoiding academic pursuits or taking challenging courses. Additionally, parents and the broader community can become so conditioned by pervasive and persistent failure among certain groups of students that low test scores, discipline problems, and high drop-out rates generate little outrage or concern.

When failure is normalized and no one is disturbed by low student achievement, it can be nearly impossible for student outcomes or schools to change. Reforms may be implemented—new textbooks and new curricula may be adopted, schools may be reorganized and restructured, principals may be replaced—but unless there is a strategy for countering the normalization of failure, it is unlikely that disparities in achievement will be reduced or that schools will ever change.

The factors that contribute to normalization are often quite real, and should not be dismissed. Student motivation and the attitudes that students display toward learning profoundly affect patterns of achievement. Schools that do not have a strategy for convincing students to become more invested in their education by coming to school on time and prepared, working harder, studying, and generally, caring about learning, are likely to fail to reduce disparities in academic outcomes or raise student achievement. Similarly, parents who are negligent about reinforcing the value of education, who fail to encourage their children to apply themselves, or who do not regard education as an effective means to improve the lives of their children because it did not work that way for them, may engage in behaviors that contribute to the failure of their children. All of these factors can contribute to the normalization of failure and complacency related to racial patterns in achievement. What is needed is a strategy that makes it possible to change the discourse about the relationship between race and achievement from one focused on who's to blame to one in which all of the key stakeholders accept responsibility for their role in raising achievement.

## CONCLUSIONS

President Bush has called for the nation to “end the soft bigotry of low expectations,” as his way of describing what this author calls the normalization of failure. Similar to other slogans used by the President to further his policy objectives, such phraseology is not useful in helping educators figure out how to approach the challenge of raising achievement for all students.

Our attitudes invariably influence our actions and whenever educators blame low student achievement on some factor they cannot control, there is a strong tendency for them to refuse to accept responsibility for those factors they do control. For this reason, countering the normalization of failure must be seen as the first step in any effort to close or at least reduce the achievement gap.

Closing the racial achievement gap and pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be a long term, uphill struggle that is fraught with difficulty because historically the education of Whites and non-Whites remains profoundly unequal. Educators must continue to recognize that the sources of inequity typically lie outside of schools—in disparities in income and wealth, in inequity in parent education and access to healthcare, and in access to good paying jobs and vital social services. At this time, there is very little political interest in closing these gaps in the quality of life, but there is at least some discussion about the need to close the achievement gap. Even if many of those who have embraced this call do not truly believe that it can be done, the mere fact that the call has been made provides an opportunity to call for a broader agenda for equity within and among schools. The effort to promote educational equity and close the achievement gap is consistent with the basic promise of American public education that schools should function as the equalizers of opportunity (Jencks, 1972; Sizer, 1984). No matter how difficult and elusive such an effort may be, closing the achievement gap remains a goal that schools must pursue if they are to

remain viable as public institutions, and that our society must embrace if we are to avoid greater racial polarization and conflict.

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