

Policy Brief

McREL

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Raising the Achievement of Low-Performing Students

by Bryan Goodwin

In October 1999, the College Board released a report showing that African-American, Latino, and Native American students — regardless of socioeconomic status and parent education — are performing at lower academic levels than their White and Asian counterparts. Although the number of minorities obtaining college degrees has grown significantly since the mid-1960s, they are still much less likely to receive college diplomas than Whites and Asians — for reasons that can't all be traced to social and economic factors.

Sharp increases in minority student enrollment make finding ways to improve the achievement of these students all the more imperative. Between 1976 and 1996, the percentage of minority students in U.S. public and private schools increased from 24 to 36 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1999a). By the year 2010, that number could be as high as 42 percent based on U.S. Census Bureau (1999) projections and current enrollment rates (U.S. Department of Education, 1999b).

At the same time, state-level accountability measures are prompting educators to look for ways to ensure that all groups of students are able to meet standards. This is, after all, the goal of the standards movement — to ensure consistency across classrooms and raise the achievement of all students.

In an effort to respond to these converging trends, McREL is convening a series of Diversity Roundtables to find ways to help disenfranchised students meet standards. For these meetings, McREL has commissioned seven papers from nationally known experts on diversity issues. This brief

GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

- Provide all students with rigorous curricula.
- Help teachers improve instruction.
- Provide support to students.
- Create smaller classes and school units.
- Increase parent involvement.
- Identify and fix ways low performance is manufactured.
- Establish strong, yet fair, accountability.

synthesizes those papers, for which more than 300 research reports and related documents were examined. The purpose is to identify some causes of marginalized students' low performance, then offer research-based suggestions for what district and state policymakers can do to help teachers improve these students' academic achievement.

Why achievement gaps occur

Achievement gaps occur for numerous and complex reasons. Clearly, factors outside school control, such as parents' level of income and education, are strongly correlated with the academic success of students. But many factors well within school control also affect student achievement. In fact, research findings indicate that all too often, schools may be "actively manufacturing" the low performance of many students (MacIver and Balfanz, in press).

As Kati Haycock, executive director of the Education Trust, described it (1998): "The low academic achievement of low-income ... and minority students — and even the mediocre achievement of other

American students — is neither preordained nor intractable. This is, in other words, an achievement crisis of our own making.” The silver lining to this assertion is that we can also “unmake” the crisis by examining some of the reasons for disenfranchised students’ low performance.

This brief groups those reasons into six main areas of concern: weak or inappropriate curricula, ineffective instruction, disengaging classroom discourse, poor student self-concept, unsuccessful adjustment to school culture, and prejudice.

Weak or inappropriate curricula

According to Haycock (1998), schools create a self-fulfilling prophecy for marginalized students — they aren’t expected to learn as much, so they don’t. At the elementary level, students of color tend to be concentrated in low-performing schools where they are given less rigorous curricula. Calderón (1999) noted that this weak start is compounded at the secondary level where schools often relegate minority students to non-college bound tracks, leaving them with diminished opportunities for life success.

Immigrant students are especially apt to receive weak curricula, because according to Calderón, regardless of prior education, they tend to be placed in the same class, e.g., the “one sheltered math course.” In these classes, highly educated or capable students become bored, and less-capable students get overwhelmed. In short, immigrant students are put in no-win situations: “The typical immigrant track eliminates ... the opportunity to take college-track courses. Worse, [immigrant] students who plan to enter the world of work often receive outdated, ineffective vocational training that will do them little good on the job.”

Given that all students are more motivated to learn material they can relate to, Gay (in press) pointed out that it’s also important that curriculum be culturally relevant. This might mean, for example, making sure that a history unit on the American West includes the experiences of African Americans, American Indians, Asians, Anglos, and Latinos. “Yet there continues to be little high-quality content about

diverse ethnic groups in school curricula,” Gay wrote. “This absence is one of the major factors contributing to the low achievement of many students from these groups.”

Ineffective instruction

In addition to being given less rigorous curricula, minority students are more likely to be given less experienced, and perhaps, less motivated teachers. This is because, as MacIver and Balfanz (in press) noted, teachers have more incentives to work in high-performing schools, namely better (or the perception of better) working conditions. Moreover, immigrant students, according to Walquí (1999), tend to be given teachers who are unable to advance student learning in both content and language.

But even effective, seasoned teachers need to be aware that the techniques that work well with nonminority students may not work as well with students of color (Nelson-Barber, 1999). Take, for example, teachers’ use of examples, vignettes, scenarios, and anecdotes to illustrate concepts. This is obviously a fundamental part of teaching — bridging new concepts to students’ experiences or existing knowledge. According to Gay (in press), teachers who are aware of students’ cultures and daily experiences are more likely to provide effective examples for their students. For example, they might draw upon aphorisms from students’ own cultures to introduce them to literary conventions like hyperbole and metaphor. Of course, to develop a repertoire of effective examples, teachers need to be sufficiently schooled in their students’ cultures and perspectives.

Disengaging classroom discourse

The way teachers manage their classrooms also has a profound impact on student achievement, Gay (in press) asserted. Most notably, researchers have found that teachers tend to engage minority children less in class discussions. This practice may be, in part, the result of teachers not understanding their students’ cultures. For example, eye aversion in deference to authority is common among some minority groups and teachers may wrongly construe this as a lack of

interest or academic ability. Likewise, they may wrongly assume that immigrant students are less capable when they don't volunteer answers to verbal questions. In reality, these students simply may need more time to process questions and formulate responses in a second language. The lesson for teachers is they may need to change their turn-taking rules or use methods other than eye contact to gauge student attentiveness.

Teachers need to help students believe they have the ability to succeed and can maximize their ability through effort.

Poor student self-concept

Gay (in press) noted that several research studies have linked self-confidence with academic success. Harvard researcher Janine Bempechat (1999) found that high-achievers, regardless of ethnicity, are less likely to attribute failure to lack of ability. Conversely, low achievers, regardless of ethnicity, tend to attribute failure to lack of ability and success to external factors. Simply put, low achievers fail to make the connection between effort and success. This creates a vicious cycle, in which failure begets lack of effort, and thus, more failure. Teachers need to help students believe they have the ability to succeed and can maximize their ability through effort. Recent McREL research (Marzano, 1998) supports this notion. Marzano examined 10 studies for the effect of teachers instilling a belief in students that “if they try, they can succeed.” He found that using such confidence-building techniques boosted student performance by as much as 29 percentile points.

Unsuccessful adjustment to school culture

Many students of color, especially recent immigrants, fail academically because of the culture shock they experience in American schools. Gay (in press) pointed to research showing that critical thinking, inquiring, analyzing, and expressing opposing points of

view are against the norm for students from certain cultural backgrounds, especially those who have grown up in totalitarian countries. Because these skills are vital to success in U.S. schools, immigrant students often must overcome deeply ingrained cultural values to succeed. Calderón (1999) pointed out that immigrant and other at-risk students may also under-perform because they (and their parents) fail to understand and appreciate the “culture of opportunity.” That is, they may not know about, know how, or feel entitled to take advantage of certain academic opportunities, like college-preparatory courses, college entrance exams, and extracurricular learning opportunities.

Prejudice

Subtle and sometimes inadvertent, yet nonetheless pernicious, forms of prejudice and racism hamper the success of some minority students. Researcher Claude Steele (1999) defined “stereotype threat” — the fear of being viewed through the lens of stereotype or inadvertently confirming a stereotype — as a significant hindrance to minority student achievement. In his study, Steele found that Black students displayed heightened concerns about stereotypes prior to being given what they believed was an aptitude test and did much worse on the test than statistically matched White counterparts. But when the same test was presented as a less-threatening inquiry into how students solve problems, Black students' scores rose to match those of Whites. Steele speculated that the cumulative effect of “stereotype threat” might be that some minority students adopt a sort of protective apathy, fending off the threat by disengaging from circumstances that bring it about, such as certain situations that occur in schooling.

Implications for policy

Certainly, what occurs in our classrooms and schools has a profound impact on student achievement. The following policy considerations are focused, in large part, at creating positive changes where they matter most — in the classroom.

The best way to improve curricula in low-performing schools is for districts to encourage school leaders to adopt proven curriculum programs.

Provide all students with rigorous curricula

MacIver and Balfanz (in press) assert that the best way to improve curricula in low-performing schools is for districts to encourage school leaders to adopt proven curriculum programs. Indeed, a research-based literacy component appears to be an essential element to improving student performance, based upon a recent study of nine high-poverty, high-performing schools (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999). Adopting these programs, however, requires a tremendous amount of district support in the form of sustained, focused professional development and ongoing classroom implementation assistance, according to MacIver and Balfanz (in press).

At the secondary level, Calderón (1999) and others (Slavin, 1995; Wheelock, 1992) have recommended that schools dismantle their tracking systems to ensure that all students benefit from rigorous curricula. Research, in fact, has shown that low-achieving students learn more when they are placed in more rigorous, heterogeneously grouped courses (Brewer, Rees, and Argys, 1995). The flip side, however, is that high-achieving students seem to perform less well in such courses (Gallagher, 1995). Thus, some schools have opted to keep their tracks, yet make a concerted effort to place more at-risk students in college-bound courses. For example, in more than 100 San Diego-area high schools, at-risk students are placed into college-bound classes, then provided with extra support through study, note-taking, and test-taking courses. Results have been encouraging; 95 percent of Black students and 90 percent of Hispanic students in the program enrolled in college — well above respective district averages of 36 and 39 percent for those groups (Mehan et al., 1992).

Help teachers improve instruction

As Gay (in press) pointed out, no single solution will work for all teachers and all students. Thus, it would be unwise for policymakers to dictate that teachers use any particular instructional strategy. Research, in fact, makes a strong case for allowing individual schools and teachers to develop their own solutions and methods for addressing cultural diversity in their classrooms. One study of schools with documented success in teaching diverse student populations found that a common feature among these schools was that teachers worked together to identify and adapt their own strategies for improving student achievement (August and Pease-Alvarez, 1996). This does not mean, however, that schools and teachers should be left to “go it alone.” On the contrary, most research-based reform models recognize that teachers need classroom-based assistance from experienced trainers before they will embrace and adopt new strategies (Talley, 1999).

To make these instructional changes, teachers need sufficient planning time to collaborate with colleagues (McCollum, in press). According to MacIver and Balfanz (in press), they also need strong incentives to use professional development to improve their instruction, such as linking professional advancement (and thus, salary increases) to demonstrated professional growth. To make good decisions about staff development and give teachers continuous feedback on their efforts, districts and schools should collect and analyze several kinds of student performance data. Disaggregating these data according to groups of at-risk students can provide insights into whether reforms are working, and for which students.

Provide support to students

Even with improved instruction, some students may still fall behind. Thus, another common element among high-poverty, high-performing schools is that they offer extra help to students who need it. They regularly assess students' academic progress and identify which students need help, then employ creative scheduling, such as after-school and summer school sessions, to give students the additional instructional time

they need (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999). Such programs, however, cannot simply offer more of the same thing that has failed low-performing students during the first 180 days of the year; they need to provide different and, more importantly, better instruction (Pipho, 1999).

Research shows that without proper training, guidance counselors tend to underestimate minority students' abilities and place them in lower-track courses.

Research shows that without proper training, guidance counselors tend to underestimate minority students' abilities and place them in lower-track courses, thus jeopardizing their chances for success, according to McCollum (in press). Student responses to a nationwide survey also have demonstrated a disparity between minority students' aspirations and their high school course-taking patterns. For example, 55 percent of Hispanic students reported they planned to go to college, but only 25 percent planned to enroll in college-preparatory courses. Similarly, 64 percent of African-American students said they planned to get college degrees, but only 25 percent planned to take college-bound courses (Smith-Maddox and Wheelock, 1995). In light of these findings, counselors need to be trained to make appropriate decisions about student placement and help minority students achieve their aspirations.

Research findings also suggest that “newcomer centers” — programs that offer intensive instruction in English, academic content, and orientation to U.S. culture and schooling — can help immigrant students make successful transitions into English-only classes, wrote McCollum (in press). Similarly, a Black student-orientation program at the University of Michigan has shown promise in raising achievement among African Americans by addressing some problems caused by “stereotype

threat” (Steele, 1999). The program appears to reduce this threat, in part, by allowing Black students to hear White students talking about similar academic concerns, which helps them see that their own struggles are not all necessarily related to race, preparation, or ability. A similar program might be adapted for younger students.

Create smaller classes and school units

According to a recent report by the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (Talley, 1999), a common element among successful school reform models is a “smaller is better” approach to both class size and school organization. In practice, this means finding ways to reduce class sizes and create smaller units within large schools. Researchers have found that smaller sub-schools strengthen bonds between teachers and students and ease students' transitions between grade levels (Talley, 1999). One California middle school identified as an exemplary program for immigrant students was organized into five “houses,” named after University of California campuses, each staffed by six to nine teachers and a team leader. Teachers reported that students strongly identify with their houses' namesake college campuses, which they visit once a year (Minicucci et al., 1995).

Increase parent involvement

Researchers have found, probably to few teachers' surprise, that a strong link exists between parents' emphasis on education and student achievement (Balster-Liontos, 1992). Recognizing this fact, many schools with successful programs for minority students have found ways to get parents more involved in their children's education. These schools recognize that traditional venues for parent involvement (e.g., the PTA, school volunteering) often are impractical for parents who may speak little English, work multiple jobs, or be intimidated by going to their children's schools. Thus, these schools have found new ways to reach out to parents by creating activities to address the needs of at-risk parents (Balster-Liontos, 1992). Some have even gone so far as to bring health care, counseling, and other social

services to their campuses (Minicucci et al., 1995).

All too often, low-performing schools serve as minor league training grounds for teachers who then get “promoted” to higher-performing schools.

Identify and fix ways low performance is manufactured

All too often, low-performing schools serve as minor league training grounds for teachers who then get “promoted” to higher-performing schools, according to MacIver and Balfanz (in press). This leads to a high level of staff turnover in low-performing schools, which in turn, makes it nearly impossible for improvement efforts to take root. Thus, districts need to change the policies and incentives that make low-performing schools less attractive and develop ways to keep effective teachers in them. One such change might be to reward teachers for improving student performance in order to encourage highly skilled teachers to take on the challenges of working at low-performing schools.

MacIver and Balfanz also noted that low student performance is usually the result of school leaders and teachers lacking the know-how to raise student performance. Thus, struggling schools need more than a reform plan. They need sustained support and assistance, such as coaching from master teachers who have proven track records of success in working with minority populations, and adequate time set aside to work together to bring about needed instructional and building improvements.

Establish strong, yet fair, accountability

Another common trait of high-poverty, high-performing schools is they tend to operate under strong district accountability measures accompanied by district support and some degree of flexibility (Charles A. Dana Center,

1999). MacIver and Balfanz (in press) cautioned that while strong accountability is important, these systems must also be fair. In particular, student performance assessments should be value-added. That is, districts should report student learning gains over the course of the year, rather than how many students have attained arbitrary levels of proficiency.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are a number of things that both schools and teachers can do to improve the achievement of low-performing students. As Nelson-Barber (1999) noted, low minority student performance is not simply the result of society or culture; it’s also the result of what happens in our schools:

Students who are members of certain demographic groups are, of course, at some disadvantage when they go to school, but disadvantage is not something inherent; it is transactional. Students are disadvantaged ... because of the way in which education is provided.

It is important to note, though, that improving the performance of disenfranchised students does not mean ignoring other students. Indeed, many of the changes advocated in this brief — such as making curricula more rigorous and creating smaller school units — will benefit all students.

Finally, as stated by the College Board (1999), when more Americans become full participants in our economy, we all benefit from increased economic productivity and decreased social tensions. Nevertheless, providing students with equal educational opportunities will require more than good intentions — it will require making some fundamental changes to our current approaches to educating students.

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