

POLICY BRIEF

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Establishing a Strong Foundation for School Improvement

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A New Challenge for a New Century

Three years ago, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act instituted a fundamental change in the emphasis and aims of federal education policy. The stated purpose of the decades-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act became “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.”¹ For the first time, states were required to hold schools and districts accountable not simply for making *some* progress, but rather for making *sufficient* progress so that all students can achieve proficiency on state assessments by an established date—the year 2014.

Of course, states have used the flexibility in the NCLB Act to set up different kinds of timelines with different rates of progress required in these early years. And the law includes a kind of safety net called “safe harbor,” which establishes a minimum benchmark under which schools and districts can be judged as making adequate progress if they

reduce the proportion of students not yet reaching proficiency by 10 percent a year.

But make no mistake: This shift in goals and accountability is a historic and unprecedented one. Even the minimum amount of progress demanded under the safe harbor provision is more than many states required before 2002.

Because of NCLB, schools and systems are under pressure to improve at much faster rates than ever before. And because assessment results must now be reported for separate groups of students, the achievement gaps that have long plagued American education can no longer be ignored. Low levels of achievement among poor, minority, and special education students can no longer be hidden behind average test scores, and all of those groups must be making adequate progress if a school or district is to be judged as doing so.

Such goals are unprecedented on a national scale, and the challenge facing America’s schools and districts is a considerable one. There has been very little progress in closing achievement gaps over the past 15 years. The reading gap between African-American and white 17-year-olds, for example, actually *increased* from 21 to 31 points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between 1988 and 1999.

Part of the challenge has to do with beliefs. While many educators have publicly supported NCLB and professionally pursued its goals, many others have proclaimed its ideals to be inspiring but impractical, and its concrete goals for student achievement to be unattainable. Six months after the law was signed, one Connecticut educator told *The Hartford Courant* that meeting the goal would be “like asking every kid to jump the Grand Canyon.”²

Such sentiments are not surprising. Think about how early and how often educators are given the message that achievement gaps are the result of forces “outside their control.” Many educators begin hearing it during their professional training, and its relentless repetition acts as a drumbeat in the background as they develop professionally. They are told about the Coleman report. They hear about the social correlates of student achievement. They learn the shape of the relationship between student poverty, race, and test scores until they can draw trend lines with their eyes closed.

In short, they are taught to believe that the achievement gap is as immutable a feature of our nation’s educational landscape as the Grand Canyon is of our physical landscape. Of course, many teachers refuse to succumb to the mantra of powerlessness, but, like a persistent undertow, it exerts a relentless pull on our collective educational will.

Yet consider a less-known fact about the black-white reading gap: Between 1971 and 1988, that gap *shrank by more than half*, from 51 points to 21.³ Similar progress occurred in math. Clearly the achievement gap is not an immutable fact of nature, and this nation and its public schools are capable of making great strides over relatively short time periods.

If we are to make any substantial progress toward achieving the new aims NCLB has established for American education, we must, to quote Irish poet Seamus Heaney, “Believe that a further shore is reachable from here.”⁴ But, more importantly, we will have to act as if it is reachable as well.

First and foremost, we need to build new ways of planning for and carrying out school reform and improvement to address the educational needs of all students. During the period in which achievement gaps were closing over the ’70s and ’80s, federal dollars were used to target gaps in the most basic educational needs of disadvantaged students, primarily by implementing remedial teaching outside the classroom and add-on programs to provide limited amounts of extra support. Those remedial programs served their purpose. The vast majority of all 17-year-olds now meet minimum levels of basic literacy and numeracy on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

But such approaches have clearly begun to offer only diminishing returns when it comes to meeting the new challenge of educating all students to the high academic goals established in state standards over the 1990s. At this point, the achievement gap is not defined by gaps in basic literacy and numeracy, but rather in the levels of proficiency that put students on track to successfully pursue education past high school.

Instead of add-on programs, what are needed now are whole-school reforms that greatly build the instructional capacity of schools to educate all students to much higher levels, focusing primarily on teachers and their ability to deliver high-quality, effective instruction inside the classroom. Yet planning along those lines is difficult. Just as ideas about achievement have evolved to place blame—and responsibility—on factors outside of the classroom, traditions have evolved that protect classroom instruction from scrutiny and interference. Teachers innovate and improve instruction in isolation, while schoolwide planning is seen as an unconnected administrative process, and efforts to diagnose schoolwide or district-wide outcomes focus on the hundreds of social factors that schools do not control and on which they can have little effect.⁵

Anyone who doubts this description needs to look no further than the nearest school planning meeting. Few phrases in the education lexicon are as generally recognized, yet commonly loathed,

as “needs assessment,” “comprehensive plan,” and “school improvement plan.” To many educators, those terms represent onerous bureaucratic requirements rather than useful tools, activities, and products that exist in a parallel track related to the “real work” of daily classroom teaching. The same teacher who proudly shows off a school’s new fourth-grade math program or after-school tutoring center will most likely roll her eyes and issue a private groan when asked how her school’s needs assessment and comprehensive planning process led to the efforts in question.

Of course, there are exceptions. Many schools engage in thoughtful and considered planning, often aided by the plethora of tools and assistance providers (commercial or otherwise) that have multiplied in the wake of federal requirements for program planning. Yet how, at a time when demands for improvement have risen dramatically, can many educators still view the *institutional* activities related to improvement as perfunctory bureaucratic exercises?

Unless educators can find ways to make “official” improvement efforts attend to classroom instruction, student achievement will not improve substantially. And unless the “real” efforts to improve classroom instruction move beyond isolated and random volunteerism and become much more integrated, systemic, and sustained—in other words, *centralized*—many schools will be unable to fully meet the important new goals advanced by NCLB. The challenge is not simply technical, but cultural and political as well. Educators and administrators will need help and encouragement to work in ways that seem fundamentally—and uncomfortably—different from what they are used to doing.

To begin with, we must begin to view improvement as a continuous institutional process rather than as a sporadic set of activities or isolated projects. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement believes that effective reform is a collaborative schoolwide process that involves four distinct stages: (1) organizing for improvement; (2) planning for improvement; (3) implementing improvement plans; and (4) sustaining improvement efforts.

Unfortunately, many schools and school systems simply skip the first stage, leading to wasted time and resources, failure to improve, and staff exhaustion and cynicism about reform. If improvement is to mean more than simply writing a plan, the improvement process must begin earlier, more thoughtfully, and more vigorously. The rest of this brief focuses exclusively on the organization stage by offering suggestions for getting the process off to a strong start.

Organizing for Effective Reform

Step 1: Commit to basing school improvement efforts on a full, honest, and transparent accounting of the current state of affairs.

Because the core function of education traditionally takes place behind closed classroom doors and the actions of teachers remain hidden and mysterious, educators have long been free to ascribe responsibility for student achievement to any number of factors “outside the control of schools.” After all, why work hard to make difficult changes in classroom instruction if schools do not contribute all that much to learning compared with all the other things in children’s lives?

Such notions have long provided a kind of perverse disincentive to examine instruction-related practices in any comprehensive way: “If we are relatively powerless to affect student learning, how can we reasonably be held responsible for improving it?” But recent research suggests that these assumptions are profoundly wrong.

For example, we now know that good teaching matters tremendously. One influential study in Tennessee found that two groups of students who start out with the same level of achievement can end up 50 points apart on a 100-point scale if one group is assigned three ineffective teachers in a row and the other is assigned three effective teachers in a row.⁶ A more recent study in Texas found that the impact of classroom teaching is so great that “having five years of good teachers in a row could overcome the average seventh-grade mathematics achievement gap between lower-income kids and those from higher-income families.”⁷

The right curriculum can be powerful as well. A 1999 study by Clifford Adelman at the U.S. Department of Education found that the quality and rigor of high school courses had a greater impact than any other factors on whether students who go to college succeed in earning a degree. The average college completion gap between white and African-American freshmen shrinks by two thirds among students who complete a rigorous set of academic courses before enrolling in college.⁸

This is not to say that “outside factors” have no impact on teaching and learning, or that they do not make teaching harder in high-poverty communities beset with more social problems. Of course, poverty matters. Family problems matter. Community ills matter. Watching television instead of completing homework will have a negative impact on most any child’s learning.

But schools *can* and *do* matter more than these things.

A big part of organizing for more effective improvement, then, entails tearing down the wall of tradition that shields instructional factors from scrutiny and intervention. As Kati Haycock, director of The Education Trust, has written, we must “find a way to set aside all the old bargains, the old politeness, and do what it takes to make needed changes.”⁹

Those concerned with improving schools must learn to *dig deeper* than ever before by seeking evidence *first and foremost* in the following three areas:

I. Performance Gaps

Examining achievement data is nothing new; it forms the heart of a traditional “needs assessment.” And the data requirements of NCLB mean that more data, and more meaningful data, are available than ever before. However, such efforts are often still too cursory and fail to consider data from enough angles to help educators kick free of tired myths about student achievement. Groups such as the National Center for Educational Accountability and The

Education Trust, for example, recommend comparing results—overall, by group, and over time—to top performing schools that educate similar populations of students. Many Web sites have cropped up to aid such efforts. (See “Resources for Digging Deeper Into School Performance.”)

II. Opportunity Gaps

If, as research suggests, such in-school factors as qualified, effective teachers and rigorous curriculum have a large impact on student learning, we need to come clean about the extent to which students receive these things, and especially which students receive these things. Over the past decade, The Education Trust and other organizations have provided overwhelming documentation that, nationally and in most states, low-income and minority students are far less likely than their peers to be assigned qualified and effective teachers, to receive grade-level instruction in the classroom, and to be enrolled in rigorous courses.

To offer a few examples: The Dallas Public Schools recently began collecting data and crunching numbers on how effective the system’s teachers are at raising student achievement. Last year, the district’s research department found that, year in and year out, low-achieving students in Dallas are far more likely to be assigned to ineffective teachers than effective teachers, even though the data clearly show that students who start out behind are quick to make up lost ground when assigned to highly effective teachers.¹⁰ Such gaps are not simply the result of forces outside the schoolhouse door, either. Another recent study in North Carolina found that one quarter to one third of the state’s black-white gap in exposure to novice teachers is the result of assignment patterns *across classrooms within schools*.¹¹

There are important measurable gaps in curriculum as well. Specialists at a California-based company called DataWorks have worked with states and local school systems to identify the gap between what is expected in state standards and the level of instruction in classrooms, as

measured by the assignments teachers give students. In one California elementary school, they found that only 2 percent of fifth-grade assignments were on grade level. Analyzing assignments in 14 South Carolina high schools revealed that the average 12th-grade assignment was just below 10th-grade level.¹²

Classroom grades offer a second way of measuring curriculum gaps. A massive study of the Title I program found that students who average “C” grades in low-poverty schools have higher test scores than students who average “A” grades in high-poverty schools.¹³

Clearly such findings are significant, since students cannot learn what they are not taught, nor achieve higher than the level of challenge set for them by their teachers. Yet all too often such opportunity gaps¹⁴ remain either unidentified or unacknowledged within local communities and schools.

III. Practice Gaps

According to Jean Rutherford, director of educational initiatives for the National Center for Educational Accountability, “If you have a performance gap, you have a practice gap.” Her certainty is based on the center’s in-depth interviews, observations, and document analyses in more than 300 school systems over four years to study differences in practices between high- and average-performing schools and systems.

The center offers schools and school systems a self-audit tool that allows educators to compare their practices with those commonly found in places that achieve sustained high performance for students from all backgrounds. The questions are built around the following areas that together seem to explain the most about differences in outcomes:

- Curriculum and academic goals.
- Staff selection, leadership, and capacity building.
- Instructional programs, practices, and arrangements.

- Monitoring progress: compilation, analysis, and use of data.
- Recognition, intervention, and adjustments.

The message is clear: What teachers and administrators do in their day-to-day jobs can have a large impact on student learning. Honestly investigating practices and benchmarking them against what we know about teaching and learning in the nation’s most successful schools and districts must become an essential part of school improvement efforts.

None of this should imply that schools and districts can *never* profitably examine family and community factors as they organize and plan for school reform and improvement. But higher achieving, higher performing schools have learned to understand the instructional factors behind student achievement and plan for reform by *working from the inside out*. They first attend to performance, opportunity, and practice gaps, and then analyze the concrete family and community factors that can act as obstacles—or enablers—to building a stronger core instructional program. Because an “inside-out” approach can feel uncomfortable at first, and because of our atavistic tendency to look first to family and community factors to explain low achievement, this orientation is one that must be firmly established from the outset, before a needs assessment or data collection ever take place.

Step 2: Build support to ensure that knowledge can be translated into decisive action.

Making the commitment to digging more deeply into core instructional functions of schools will do little good if the resulting knowledge is not translated into action. Of course all such information, as well as the results of traditional “needs assessments,” should inform the formal written planning process required under federal and state laws. But what we are recommending is a commitment to action that goes deeper than that.

In an article about veteran school superintendent Eric Smith, *The Washington Post* relates a story from his days in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, that is as remarkable as it is revealing: Finding that SAT scores of African-American students had dipped, he asked for data on middle school course-taking, which revealed that such students were severely underrepresented in advanced math classes.

“Promptly, he tore up the schedules of 8,000 middle schoolers and started reassigning them. *He can’t really be ripping up a summer’s worth of scheduling and starting over*, teachers gasped when they heard. *This can’t be happening*, parents wailed when they called his office. [...] ‘We aren’t waiting another year,’ he told the dissenters. ‘These kids’ educations start now.’”¹⁵

Acting decisively and aggressively on the basis of important knowledge, not just in writing plans but in making all major administrative and instructional decisions, requires a great deal of support from important constituencies and adequate reserves of political capital. And that requires foresight and planning to build support for improvement from the very beginning of the process.

Schools and systems must work hard to ensure that reform efforts are not only technically well crafted, but enjoy the kind of broad commitment that can help overcome cultural and political barriers to change. Taking the following actions can help:

1. Free up adequate amounts of “official” time for teachers to share responsibility for schoolwide or systemwide improvement efforts. To the maximum extent possible, teachers should not be forced into false choices between “real” classroom work and participation in “extracurricular” or “administrative” improvement activities. Both must be viewed as legitimate and important activities related to teaching and learning. Of course, actually

finding ways to carve out such time can be difficult. But if school reform and improvement are meant to be *teaching work*, rather than simply administrative work or “committee work,” it is an effort all principals will have to make.

2. Reassure teachers that openly airing evidence on performance, opportunity, and practice gaps is not a form of “gotcha,” but rather a genuinely essential step in helping them do their jobs better so they, in turn, can help more students reach higher levels of achievement. A commitment to transparency in an atmosphere of trust is the result of careful work that takes place *before* any plans are ever written.

3. Involve a wide range of other stakeholders from the outset, including parents, representatives of community groups, and business leaders. Of course, “involvement” can take many forms. Too often, participants from outside the school or district are included simply to meet a requirement and are not full participants who share authority in decision making. But some amount of authority must be broadly shared to ensure collective responsibility and outside support. As one principal in a recent study of high-improving middle schools told researchers from the University of Texas, “When you have authority, you have responsibility. When you share authority, you share responsibility.”¹⁶

4. Share the knowledge essential to full participation in a serious improvement process. That includes evidence related to performance gaps, opportunity gaps, and practice gaps, no matter how embarrassing or uncomfortable such data can be. Including individuals from outside of a school or system is an empty gesture if crucial information is buried or otherwise kept confidential. Sharing information on performance, opportunity, and practice gaps with community members might seem just

this side of crazy to educators and administrators who have long survived in an American educational system that rewards exactly the opposite. But it is one of the only guarantees that reforms can be sustained at those inevitable points later on when cultural and political barriers within systems present tough choices between doing what is right and doing what is convenient.

Education is not easy. Improving education is even less so. But it is worth doing, and it can be done. Making the effort to build the right foundation for school reform and improvement efforts can make all the difference between failure and success.

Endnotes

¹Title I: Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (1965). Retrieved January 24, 2005, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html>

²Frahm, R. (2002, June 9). Too many schools to be left behind? Educators: New law raises bar too high. *The Hartford Courant*.

³Campbell, J., Hombo, C., & Mazzeo, J. (2000). *NAEP 1999 trends in academic progress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴Heaney, S. (1991) *The cure at Troy: A version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁵Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute. Elmore persuasively describes how a tradition of “loose coupling” between school administration and classroom instruction have built a protective, dysfunctional buffer around the core functions of schooling and made instruction hard to improve.

⁶Sanders, W., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. Knoxville: TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.

⁷Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2004). *How to improve the supply of high quality teachers*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. Estimates based on research using data from Texas described in “Teachers, schools, and academic achievement,” Working Paper Number 6691, National Bureau of Economic Research, revised July 2002.

⁸Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the tool box*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁹Haycock, K. (2001, spring). New frontiers for a new century. *Thinking K-16*, 5(2).

¹⁰Babu, S., & Mendro, R. (2005, April). *Teacher accountability: HLM-based teacher effectiveness indices in the investigation of teacher effects on student achievement in a state assessment program*. Presentation at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Chicago.

¹¹Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Vigdor, J. (2005). *Who teaches whom? Race and the distribution of novice teachers*. Durham, NC: Sanford Institute of Public Policy. In a paper originally prepared for the American Economic Association Meetings in Atlanta, Georgia, in January 2002, the authors found that a full two thirds of the statewide gap was due to assignments within, rather than across, school districts.

¹²Mitchell, R. (2004, April 27). Dumbing down our schools. *The Washington Post*, p. A21.

¹³Puma, M. J., Karweit, N., Price, C., Ricciuti, A., Thompson, W., & Vaden-Kiernan, M. (1997). *Prospects: Final report on student outcomes*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates.

¹⁴This term means different things when used by different organizations. The National Center for Educational Accountability uses it to refer to the difference between a school’s assessment results and the results for top performers who educate similar students. Here the term is used as The Education Trust does, to refer to gaps in access to tangible school resources that have the greatest impact on learning, such as teacher quality and rigorous curriculum.

¹⁵Johnson, D. (2002, November 10). A classroom crusade. *The Washington Post Magazine*, p. 22.

¹⁶Kahlert, R., Sobel, A., Picucci, A. C., & Brownson, A. (2005). *Distributed leadership at the middle school level: Evidence from the field*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas. The evidence comes from high-improving middle schools studied for a previous Dana Center report, *Driven to succeed: High-performing, high-poverty, turnaround middle schools*, 2002.