Superintendents and School Boards Collaborate to Narrow Achievement Gaps: A Suburban New York Multisite Case Study

By Lara Gonzalez, Ed.D.

Abstract

This study explored the role of school superintendents and board of education trustees in closing the achievement gap, which can be defined as "the disparity in academic performance between groups of students" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 14). District leaders (superintendents and school boards) set the priorities and policies in their school systems and have the power to promote or thwart educational equity (Skrla et al., 2009). The purpose of this qualitative study was to highlight effective practices of superintendents and school boards that have prioritized closing achievement gaps and have succeeded in narrowing them. This study involved four case studies and made use of interviews, observations, and document review. The data revealed that the most formidable challenges to closing achievement gaps were increasingly diverse student needs, stakeholders' deficit-thinking about students, lack of family engagement, and financial obstacles. To overcome those challenges, the researcher found that superintendents used various strategies, including setting a vision for equity at the district level, using data to drive decision-making, hiring quality teachers and leaders, using district funds resourcefully, providing rigorous curricula for students, and creating innovative academic and non-academic programs for students. Although there is academic literature on the challenges that school superintendents face in closing achievement gaps and the strategies that they have used to overcome them, there is a lack of research on how superintendents and their school boards collaborate to narrow achievement gaps. The aim of the study was to address that gap in the literature. Data revealed that district leaders collaborated to narrow gaps by setting district visions, goals, and policies, sharing information, and partnering on the budgeting and hiring processes.

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into legislation in 2002, required school district leaders for the first time to report student achievement along racial and ethnic lines as well as according to special education status and socio-economic level (Maranto et al., 2017). Considered the "most sweeping reform of U.S. Federal education policy since the 1960s," NCLB compelled leaders in K-12 public school systems nationwide to address achievement gaps among White, economically advantaged students and their African-American,[1] Latino,[2] and economically disadvantaged counterparts (Skrla et al., 2009, p. 4). In 2015, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA obligates school districts to continue to provide educational opportunity for our nation's schoolchildren consistent with Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), originally enacted in 1965. ESSA allows states greater flexibility than NCLB in allowing school districts to demonstrate improved outcomes for under-represented minority and economically disadvantaged students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Still, despite decades of federal and state legislation and efforts in school districts nationwide, such as mandated reporting by student subgroup and improved accountability measures, achievement gaps remain.

Although there are myriad ways to define the achievement gap in schools, this study used the definition from the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI), which is a collaboration between Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and its Graduate School of Education. AGI, established to bring education scholars and practitioners together to better understand achievement gaps and to work towards remedying them, defined the achievement gap as follows:

> the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other success measures. It is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between African-American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white peers, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those who are better off. (Muhammad, 2015, p. 14)

Turner (2015) asserted that our schools today are "more diverse and unequal than ever" and that "over half of

_____

[1] African American and Black used interchangeably.

[2] Hispanic and Latino used interchangeably.

U.S. cities are now majority non-White" (p. 4). Public school districts in recent years have experienced three major demographic shifts-increasing numbers of students of color, students living in poverty, and immigrant students (Welton et al., 2015). These demographic trends make addressing the achievement gap even more timely and pressing.

While some school districts have adapted to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, others have been unable or possibly unwilling to adapt. According to Skrla et al. (2009), superintendents and their respective school boards have the power to promote or thwart the district's focus on equity. Although superintendents and school board members have various responsibilities, it is at least arguable that student academic performance should be their top priority. For a variety of reasons examined in this study, district leaders (superintendents and school board members) may experience difficulty in their attempts to narrow achievement gaps among students.

Through one-on-one interviews, observations, and a review of documents, this study examined the barriers to collaboration between school superintendents and their boards of education and the ways in which they overcame them to narrow achievement gaps for students. The following questions guided this study: 1) What challenges have superintendents who have prioritized closing achievement gaps faced in their efforts to close achievement gaps, and how have they attempted to overcome those challenges? 2) What strategies have superintendents who have prioritized closing achievement gaps used in their efforts to close achievement gaps? and 3) How, if at all, have superintendents who have prioritized closing achievement gaps collaborated with their school boards with the goal of achieving educational equity for students in their school districts?

Review of Literature

Challenges to Closing the Achievement Gap

The literature has shown that one major challenge to creating equitable outcomes for students is stakeholders' deficit thinking about students and their families. Turner (2015) defined the cultural deficit discourse as "an explanation of educational and social inequality that attributes school success or failure to individual children, families, or group cultural characteristics" (p. 29). Sherman and Grogan (2003) discovered that even though superintendents in Virginia knew that teachers held lower expectations for Black students, few leaders could point to specific district level efforts to address those low expectations. Sherman's (2008) research revealed that Virginia superintendents studied implemented programs to improve the performance of underachieving students in general; yet they were reluctant to create programs that targeted specific minority groups possibly because of the political milieu in the community (Sherman, 2008).

In Welton et al.'s (2015) case study, researchers examined how suburban district leaders reacted to significant demographic shifts in student population in Texas.

The study placed the "onus of failure in achievement on the individual student, not the district" (p. 708). Welton et al. (2015) concluded that there was little discussion among district leaders in Texas about the need to develop more culturally responsive schools to meet the diverse needs of the student and parent populations that they served. Whitt et al. (2015) found that the superintendents attributed the academic failure of their students to perceived shortcomings based on individual, family and cultural deficits (Whitt et al., 2015).

Sherman and Grogan (2003) reported that some superintendents were not willing to communicate disaggregated assessment data because their school boards did not want that information shared publicly. Given the significant discrepancies between Black and White students' scores, superintendents reported that possible negative reactions to test score gaps discouraged them from raising the issue in the communities that they served. Sherman and Grogan (2003) explained the range of reasons that superintendents withheld information from the community as follows: 'from the desire to 'soft-pedal racial differences' to the desire to avoid 'another suit filed against us' to a general feeling that 'scores can't go up in the general population due to large numbers of minority students'" (p. 230).

Turner's (2015) findings concluded that the school district leaders' decision-making did not directly address the systematic inequalities in students' lives, namely those related to race, immigration, and poverty. Turner explained, "Community members and parents often limit changes-particularly equity-oriented policies-that stray from their values or group interests" (p. 8) because their perception is that if one group benefits, it will likely be at the expense of another group. Williams and Tabernik (2011) examined school board politics in Ohio and its impact on superintendents' ability to lead. Instead of student achievement, those boards were motivated by social or personal agendas (e.g., lobbying on behalf of their own children or for specific programs).

Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap

Sherman (2008) found that the Virginia districts that she studied implemented activities and programs designed to raise performance levels for underachieving students. Superintendents pointed to greater collaboration among stakeholders, increased professional development for teachers, attention to student sub-groups, and use of data to drive instruction as strategies that yielded improved student achievement (Sherman, 2008). In Wright and Harris' (2010) qualitative, narrative study, the researchers examined the role of superintendents in Texas in narrowing the achievement gap by implementing culturally proficient practices. The definition of cultural proficiency used in the study was: "the honoring of differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully with a variety of cultural groups" (p. 221). The major findings were as follows: superintendents must articulate a clear vision regarding narrowing the achievement gap, be role models for cultural proficiency, and work collaboratively with their school boards to ensure

Table 1. Participant Information

District	Superintendent	Board of Education officer/trustee
A	White female	Black female
B	White female	White female
C	White male	White male
D	White male	White female

that cultural proficiency can become part of the fabric of the district (Wright & Harris, 2010).

Sherman (2008) found that building relationships between the district and the community was key to improving student achievement. Programs referenced in Sherman's study included community meetings, Saturday school, parent centers, before and after school tutorial programs, and district-university partnerships. According to Sherman, "Superintendent leadership and community activism is crucial to the success of such a transformation and increased visibility to all minority groups" (p. 699). The leaders in Hentschke et al.'s (2009) partnered with local universities for early college opportunities for students and curriculum development for teachers and collaborated with local and national foundations for financial support.

In summary, the existing literature found that various barriers exist for school district leaders who prioritize narrowing achievement gaps but that those challenges can be overcome with strategies such as a district-wide commitment to cultural proficiency, a focus on teacher professional development, and partnerships between the district and outside educational agencies.

Method

The data for this article came from a qualitative, multisite case study conducted by the author during the 2018-19 school year (Gonzalez, 2019). Methods of data collection included one-on-one interviews, observations, and document analysis. The study involved four public, suburban school districts in New York; two of the four districts were "majority minority" districts and two districts had majority White student bodies with approximately one quarter of students identified as non-White. Districts were selected based on their public commitment to closing achievement gaps.

The selection of participants was purposive; four district superintendents and four school board trustees, one from each district, were interviewed for this study (**Table 1**). Data were collected via semi-standardized interviews, as defined by Lune and Berg (2017). Data collection was triangulated through observations of school board meetings and analysis of documents (e.g., policies related to closing gaps, etc.). Data analysis was conducted throughout the data collection process (transcription, coding, connecting data to research questions) as suggested by Gibbs (2007). Data were compared from one case to another as Gleason and Gerzon (2013) recommended for cross-case analysis.

Based on available data through the New York State Report Card (data.nysed.gov), the four participant districts exceeded the New York State (NYS) average 4-year high school graduation rate of 90.1% for White students for August in 2017, 2018, and 2019 and 72.2 % for Black and Hispanic students combined during that same period. The average 4-year high school graduation rate for White, Black, and Hispanic students for August 2017-August 2019 in the participant districts is illustrated in **Table 2**. Also included in **Table 2** is the percentage the participant districts outperformed the NYS average high school graduation rates. During August 2017-August 2019, District C narrowed the 4-year high school graduation gap between White and under-represented minority students to 2% and that even with an approximately 7% difference, District D was still well below the NYS high school graduation rate gaps between the same groups of students.

Findings

Challenges to Narrowing Achievement Gaps

The data revealed that a major challenge to narrowing achievement gaps is stakeholders' beliefs about students' potential. In all four

Table 2. Participant District High School Graduation Rates v. NYS Average

	High School Graduation Average August 2017-August 2019	% District Exceeded NYS Graduation Average (August 2017-August 2019)
District A		
White	96.0%	5.9%
Black/Hispanic	93.2%	21.0%
District B		
White	95.7%	5.6%
Black/Hispanic	89.7%	17.5%
District C		
White	99.3%	9.2%
Black/Hispanic	97.3%	25.1%
District D		
White	99.3%	9.2%
Black/Hispanic	92.2%	20.0%

districts studied, participants indicated that some teachers, community members, and parents held limiting views of students' potential. One of the superintendents in the study described the concept as "the kids can't because…" That type of negative thinking about students' capabilities because of their race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status is referred to in the academic literature as "deficit-thinking" (Maxwell et al., 2013; Turner, 2015; Welton et al., 2015; Valencia, 1997; Valencia, 2015).

The data also showed that financial obstacles to closing achievement gaps exist. In three of the four districts, interviewees referenced the financial constraints that their districts must operate in as challenges; they identified insufficient state aid and the budget limitations placed upon them by a tax levy limit as challenges to narrowing gaps. Participants spoke about "shifting" funding and "juggling" resources to meet the needs of students.

Strategies for Closing Achievement Gaps

To overcome barriers to closing achievement gaps, district leaders in the four school systems studied seemed to possess an equity-oriented attitude and vision for their districts. When asked which stakeholder was most responsible for narrowing achievement gaps among students, one superintendent replied, "Me." He went on to explain how it is the responsibility of leaders to inspire and of teachers to adapt to students. Another superintendent explained the importance of setting the tone for the district and then having everyone "row in the same direction." Additionally, in interviews, successful gap-closing superintendents shared their commitment to transparent leadership when encountering resistance to their efforts to provide equity for all students.

The data suggested that an academically demanding curriculum was a strategy for narrowing achievement gaps among groups of students in three of the four districts studied. To convince a skeptical public, one superintendent shared his team's reliance on data. He explained that data are the "handmaid of the conversation [on closing achievement gaps]." In all four school systems, district leaders relied heavily on data-driven decision-making. Additionally, the data revealed that hiring teachers with an "assets-based" attitude toward students and developing those teachers are common strategies in successful gap-closing school districts. One superintendent explained that the district sought teachers "with heart, dreaming about kids, [teachers] who have no limits for kids."

Collaboration with School Boards

Participants in all four districts highlighted their commitment to professional learning at local, state, and national conferences. During an observation of one district's board of education meeting, each board member spoke publicly about workshops he/she had attended at a recent school boards' conference. One interviewee in a different district shared that she felt that her role on the school board was to share information with the superintendent and maintain the "pulse" of the community. In that school district, the board of education participant shared that the issue of hiring a more diverse faculty was a "hot topic" in the community and that it was the responsibility of trustees to convey that information to the superintendent.

Regarding collaboration, when asked what role board of education support has played in reducing achievement disparities, one superintendent indicated that the school board had allowed him to "do his job without interfering." In that same district, when asked how involved the school board had been in equity-related matters, the board of education officer replied that school board was "very involved … informed" and that "we actually approve everything they present to us."

Another theme that emerged was the way in which the school board sometimes acts as a buffer between district administrators and the community. In at least two of the four districts in this study, participants alluded to the board's role in standing firm in the face of community resistance to district initiatives such as the elimination of lower academic tracks and the implementation of a rigorous course of study for all students.

Discussion

Strategies that successful gap-closing districts use to advance their equity agendas included focusing on high quality instruction through hiring and professional development for teachers, emphasizing culturally responsive practices, removing barriers to high level curriculum for students in lower-level academic tracks, creating academic and non-academic supports for students, and partnering with community educational and non-profit organizations.

The findings revealed that superintendents and their boards of education collaborate in a multitude of ways to foster educational equity. The superintendents and school board members reported that they had positive working relationships; they had clearly defined their respective roles, engaged in professional learning, and shared information together. They also collaborated on setting a district vision, priorities, and policies. It was also evident that in the budgeting and hiring processes that the superintendents and their boards worked together to achieve best outcomes for all students in their school systems. School leaders (superintendents and board members) throughout the state might benefit from specific training about how to work together to narrow gaps in their districts.

References

Alsbury, T. (2008). School board member and superintendent turnover and the influence on student achievement: An application of the dissatisfaction theory. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 7*(2), 202–229.

Aberbach, J., & Rockman, B. (2002). Conducting and coding elite interviews. *Political Science and Politics, 35*(4), 673–676.

Beard, K. S. (2013). Character in action: A case of authentic educational leadership that advanced equity and excellence. *Journal of School Leadership*, *23*(6), 1015–1046.

Beard, K. S. (2018). Standing in the gap: Theory and practice impacting educational opportunity and achievement gaps. *Urban Education, 53*(5), 668–696.

Bird, J., Dunaway, D., Hancock, D., & Wang, C. (2013). The superintendent's role in school improvement: Relationships between authenticity and best practices. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 12*(1), 37–59.

Björk, L. G., & Keedy, J. (2001). Politics and the superintendency in the USA: Restructuring in-service education. *Journal of In-Service Education*, *27*(2), 275–302.

Blankstein, A., Noguera, P., Kelly, L., & Tutu, D. (2015). *Excellence through equity*. ASCD.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). Racial attitudes or racial ideology? An alternative paradigm for examining actors' racial views. *Journal of Political Ideologies, 8*(1), 63–82.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a quantitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40.

Collins, E. C. (1992). Qualitative research as art: Toward a holistic process. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(2), 181–186.

Creswell, J. W. (2014) *Research design* (4th ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (4th ed.). Sage.

Decman, J. M., Badgett, K., Shaughnessy, B., Randall, A., Nixon, L., & Lemley, B. (2018). Organizational leadership through management: Superintendent perceptions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 46*(6), 997–1013.

Diem, S., Frankenberg, E., & Cleary, C. (2015). Factors that influence school board policy making. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 51*(5), 712–752.

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177

Fowler, D. J., & Brown, K. (2018). Data-driven decisions: Using equity theory to highlight implications for underserved students. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice, 14*(4), 18–28.

Gibbs, G. (2007). *Analyzing qualitative data.* Sage.

Gleason, S. C., & Gerzon, N. (2013). *Growing into equity: Professional learning and personalization in high-achieving schools*. Corwin.

Gonzalez, L. (2019). *Achievement Gap-closing School Superintendents: Challenges Faced, Strategies Used, and Collaboration with School Boards* (Publication No. 13814846) [Doctoral dissertation, Hofstra University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Goulet, L., Krentz, C., & Christiansen, H. (2003). Collaboration in education: The phenomenon and process of working together. <u>*Alberta Journal of Educational Research*</u>, *49*(4), 325–340.

Hallinger, P. (2011). A review of three decades of doctoral studies using the principal instructional management rating scale: A lens on methodological progress in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *47*(2), 271–306.

Harris, E. A. (2018, April 10). As tests begin, chancellor comes out against 'opt out.' *The New York Times.*

Hentschke, G. C., Nayfack, M. B., & Wohlstetter, P. (2009). Does district size influence superintendent behavior? *Education and Urban Society, 41*(3), 317–337.

Jeynes, W. H. (2015). A meta-analysis on the factors that best reduce the achievement gap. *Education & Urban Society*, *47*(5), 523–554.

Johnson J. F., Jr., & Uline, C. L. (2005). Preparing educational leaders to close achievement gaps. *Theory Into Practice, 44*(1), 45–52.

Johnson, P. A. (2012). School board governance: The times they are a-changin'. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 15*(2), 83–102.

Johnson, P. A. (2013). Effective board leadership: Factors associated with student achievement. *Journal of School Leadership, 23*(3), 456–489.

Korelich, K., & Maxwell, G. (2015). The board of trustees' professional development and effects on student achievement. *Research in Higher Education Journal, 27.*

Kowalski, T. J. (2013). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice and cases* (4th ed.). Sage.

Land, D. (2002). Local school boards under review: Their role and effectiveness in relation to students' academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research, 72*(2), 229–278.

Leon, R. (2008). District office leadership: Hero or villain? *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 20*, 46–56.

Lindsey, R. B., Robins, K. N., Lindsey, D. B., & Terrell, R. (2009). Cultural proficiency: Changing the conversation. *Leadership, 38*(4), 12–15.

Lune, H., & Berg, B. L. (2017). Qualitative research methods for the social sciences (9th ed.). Pearson.

Lutz, F., & Iannaccone, L. (1986). *The dissatisfaction theory of American democracy: A guide for politics in local school districts* [Paper presentation]. American Association of School Administrators Conference, San Francisco.

Maranto, R., Trivitt, J., Nichols, M., & Watson, A. (2017). No contractual obligation to improve education: School boards and their superintendents. *Politics & Policy*, *45*, 1003–1023.

Maxwell. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Maxwell, G. M., Locke, L. A., & Scheurich, J. J. (2013). Case study of three rural Texas superintendents as equity oriented change agents. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(22), 1–23.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (pp. 137–161). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Moffett, J. (2011). Perceptions of school superintendents and board presidents on improved pupil performance and superintendent evaluation. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 6*(1).

Moore, A., Dexter, R., Berube, W., & Beck, C. H. (2005). Student assessment: What do superintendents need to know? *Planning and Changing, 36*(1-2), 68–89.

Mountford, M. (2004). Motives and power of school board members: Implications for school board-superintendent relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 704–741.

Muhammad, A. (2015). *Overcoming the achievement gap trap: Liberating mindsets to effect change*. Solution Tree Press.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*.

Natow, R. S. (2019). The use of triangulation in qualitative studies employing elite interviews. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(2), 1-14.

Plough, B. (2014). School board governance and student achievement: School board members' perceptions of their behaviors and beliefs. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 25*, 41–53.

Rice, D., Delagardelle, M., Buckton, M., Jons, C., Lueders, W., Vens, M. J., & Weathersby, J. (2000). *The lighthouse inquiry: School board/superintendent team behaviors in school districts with extreme differences in student achievement* [Paper presentation]. 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.

Sherman, W. (2008). No Child Left Behind: A legislative catalyst for superintendent action to eliminate test-score gaps? *Education Policy, 22*(5), 675–704

Sherman, W., & Grogan, M. (2003). Superintendents' responses to the achievement gap: An ethical critique. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 6*(3), 223–237.

Singh, M., & Al-Fadhli, H. (2011). Does school leadership matter in the NCLB era? *Journal of Black Studies*, *42*(5), 751–767.

Skrla, L., McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2009). *Using equity audits to create equitable and excellent schools.* Corwin.

Tripses, J., Hunt, J., Kim, J., & Watkins, S. (2015). Leading into the future: Perceptions of school board presidents on the essential knowledge and skills for superintendent preparation programs. *Education Leadership Review, 16*(2), 36–54

Turner, E. (2015). Districts' responses to demographic change: Making sense of race, class, and immigration in political and organizational context. *American Educational Research Journal*, *52*(1), 4–39.

Valencia, R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit-thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Routledge Farmer.

Valencia, R. (2015). *Students of color and the achievement gap: Systemic challenges, systemic transformations.* Routledge Farmer.

Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, *34*(1), 89–126.

Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. J. (2007a). The primacy of superintendent leadership. *School Administrator, 64*(3), 10.

Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. J. (2007b). School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement. *ERS Spectrum, 25*(2), 1–12.

Welton, A. D., Diem, S. & Holme, J. J. (2015). Color conscious, cultural blindness: Suburban school districts and demographic change. *Education and Urban Society, 47*(6), 695–722.

Whitt, K., Scheurich, J. J., & Skrla, L. (2015). Understanding superintendents' self-efficacy influences on instructional leadership and student achievement. *Journal of School Leadership, 25*(1), 102–132.

Williams, P., & Tabernik, A. M. (2011). School district leadership stability: The relationship between the stability of a board of education and the superintendent. *International Journal of Educational Reform, 20*(1), 16–32.

Dr. Lara Gonzalez, a graduate of Hofstra University's School of Education, is a public secondary school building leader on Long Island, NY.