

Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha: An Evaluation of a Community Initiative

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Executive Summary

AEL partnered with the Kanawha County Schools (West Virginia) and African American community leaders to explore ways to narrow the achievement gap between African American and White students being served by the district. This report documents an effort to engage members of the African American community and a school district administration in dialogues on race and education. The report includes firsthand accounts of perceptions on the racial achievement gap in education from school district personnel, members of the African American community, parents, and teachers. Findings suggest that the strategies used by AEL and the school district to support cooperation among stakeholders contributed to a better understanding of the needs of African American students and ultimately could help close the gap in achievement.

MAACK: An Evaluation of a Community Initiative

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) took effect. This federal legislation holds states accountable for the progress of students who attend schools that receive any federal funds. Gaps in achievement between primarily White, middle-class students and students of racial minority groups (in particular African American and Hispanic) have been the focus of numerous articles and discussions in recent years. Initiation of a dialogue between Kanawha County Schools and African American community leaders was fortuitous in its timing. The district set a goal to work with the African American community to find new ways of addressing the achievement gap.

The achievement gap has long been an issue in public education in the United States. According to Jewelle Gibbs (1988), African Americans made significant gains in narrowing the achievement gap starting in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1970s. Factors contributing to decreases in the achievement gap between African American and White students likely included widespread interest in economics, education, and race during the mid-1960s, as well as the implementation of expansive federal programs such as Title I (Taylor & Kemper, 2000). Despite increased opportunities in education for African Americans, the latest crisis has persisted for nearly two decades and has far reaching implications.

History of the Partnership

In 2000, AEL began a partnership with faith-based organizations in Charleston, West Virginia, which aimed to expand educational support for African American and low-income youth. AEL focused on bringing its knowledge of education to organizations that had long-term relationships with young people, particularly Black churches (Keyes & Kusimo, 2004). Historically, Black churches have been the impetus for many changes that have positively affected the lives of African Americans in our society (Gibbs, 1988).

In May 2001, AEL partnered with the Kanawha County Schools, Charleston, West Virginia, in an effort to establish a dialogue with African American community leaders regarding the increasing gap in achievement between African American and non-African American (i.e., White) children being served by the district. The school district initiated the dialogue in response to its unsuccessful efforts to help African American students make acceptable gains in achievement and ACT test scores, college preparedness, and high school graduation rates. The initiative led to a 16-month collaboration between African American community leaders and school district personnel with a focus on race and education; two AEL staff members served as liaisons and meeting facilitators. The primary function of the initiative was to improve the quality of education for African American children by attempting to better understand the experiences and perceptions of African Americans and school district personnel regarding education. The formal Maximizing Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha (MAACK) dialogue sessions ended in 2002; however, the movement to decrease the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students continues.

As a result of those dialogues, AEL began a three-year technical assistance effort to reduce the achievement gap in four Kanawha County schools. Known as the MAACK Pilot School Project, activities include specialized professional development for teachers, the introduction of culturally sensitive curricula, and engagement of students and parents. The pilot schools project is evidence that the school district and MAACK community have broadened their commitment to provide the support needed to close gaps in student achievement.

At the same time, AEL has continued to work with the community leaders who participated in the dialogues. These leaders work to mobilize the broader community to take action to improve the academic achievement of African American and low-income students. That effort is known as the MAACK Community Mobilization Initiative. AEL assists the group with record keeping, mailings, printing, and copying. AEL also maintains a Web site (www.maacknews.org) for the Initiative, funds two part-time community coordinators, and helps to plan and publicize activities.

Methodology

This evaluation report addresses the effectiveness of the collaborative process used by AEL and the school district to share with the African American Community their ideas and goals pertaining to closing the achievement gap. The primary audience for this report includes the MAACK Community Initiative steering committee, AEL staff, and Kanawha County school district officials.

Research Questions

This formative evaluation used qualitative methods to answer six questions:

1. How do MAACK participants perceive their capability to advocate for the education of children, particularly African American students of low socio-economic status (SES)?
2. What is the format and substance of communication among school district personnel, MAACK participants, and other community members about education?
3. What is the format and substance of communication among MAACK participants about education, particularly of African American and low-SES children?
4. What advocacy efforts does the MAACK Community Initiative undertake, and what are the results?
5. What, if any, effects do teachers perceive the MAACK Community Initiative having on school-community connections?

6. What factors are perceived to contribute to parental and community involvement or non-involvement?

Participants

In 2004, MAACK community participants, parents, teachers, and school district personnel were invited to participate in focus groups to obtain information regarding their involvement in MAACK. The focus groups were facilitated by AEL staff who met with each role group separately. A purposive sampling technique (Padgett, 1998) was used, based on respondents' ability to provide the information needed to complete this evaluation.

Data Analysis

Evaluators used various strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the evaluation data. An audit trail was kept in an effort to promote openness (i.e., making copious notes and other documents available to authorized individuals who wish to analyze the data). Qualitative data obtained from focus group interviews, project plans and reports, and other existing data—such as meeting notes and educational brochures produced by the Community Initiative—were coded into themes and supported with examples and quotations from MAACK participants, non-MAACK participants, teachers, and parents who offered relevant answers to specific questions regarding student achievement (Padgett, 1998).

Results and Discussion

Results for each research question are presented separately; under each subheading is a brief statement of the methods used to gather results. The questions were answered using information obtained through focus group interviews, AEL extant data, and existing reports such as the dialogue protocol and the report on faith-based initiatives (Keyes & Kusimo, 2004; Keyes, 2004).

1. How do MAACK participants perceive their capability to advocate for the education of children, particularly African American and low-SES students?

Downplay Abilities

It appears that MAACK participants downplay their ability to advocate for African American and low-SES students. According to Keyes & Kusimo (2004), MAACK participants have been involved in recruiting parents to attend open houses and parent-teacher conferences. They also reported that representatives from the MAACK community regularly attend school board meetings and some local school improvement councils. The MAACK community also successfully lobbied for the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4669, which established professional development for schools in 10 West Virginia counties with significant populations of African American students. Some

participants also tutored students in math and science and have actively recruited potential stakeholders from churches and after-school programs to be trained as community academic advisors to work with parents and students on selecting courses that prepare students for college-level work. The MAACK steering committee continues to meet monthly with the superintendent of Kanawha County Schools to help assure that the district's commitment to improve the achievement of African American students remains in focus (Keyes & Kusimo, 2004).

The following comments were made by MAACK community participants and were extracted from focus group transcripts.

“I think I have been (advocating), with my limited ability.”

“I think you have to adapt to the situation. When we have asked people to do a specific chore, they show up.”

“MAACK doesn't have that magic secret . . . it is trying a variety of means to focus on the education of children.”

“I spend a lot of my time visiting the central board with parents.”

“There are parents who are just not going to get involved and we have to advocate for those children.”

“I wrote an article for the United Methodist Women's newsletter for this district to let the women in this area know about the MAACK initiative . . . these are not African American women, but we take everybody's help.”

2. What is the format and substance of communication between school district personnel, MAACK participants, and other community members about education?

Open Dialogue

The primary purpose of the MAACK Initiative was to begin a dialogue with African American community leaders about ways to narrow the achievement gap between African American and White students attending public schools in Kanawha County. This was an effort by the school district personnel, who are mostly White, and AEL staff to understand African Americans viewpoints on education and to create an ongoing forum for sharing ideas on alleviating sensitive education issues related to race.

It appears that the school district, with assistance from AEL staff, made an effort to help MAACK participants feel comfortable. Indicators include the decision to meet at a neutral location and the time dedicated to sharing personal beliefs and perceptions about educating African American children. It is worth noting that, as participants'

comfort levels increased, MAACK meetings began to be held in churches and community centers in African American neighborhoods. Holding MAACK meetings in the African American community was designed to accomplish two goals: (1) it gave the mostly White, middle-class school district personnel the opportunity to see where and how African American students live, and (2) meeting MAACK participants in places familiar to them also allowed district personnel to continue assuring that participants felt comfortable sharing information. The open dialogue provided MAACK participants with a platform to voice their opinions on education. The process used to engage the community was an attempt to bring about understanding.

3. What is the format and substance of communication among MAACK participants about education, particularly of African American and low-SES children?

Collaborators

MAACK participants meet regularly with school district personnel to collaborate about ways to improve education. Since the 16-month dialogue between district administrators and community leaders, which led to the formation of the MAACK Community Initiative, the group of community leaders has broadened its membership to include African American parents who otherwise might have found themselves disenfranchised, intentionally or inadvertently, by the education system. The MAACK community has developed a rapport with school officials and appears to have increased its knowledge about school programs and expectations. This has given community members credibility to act as liaisons between the school district and the African American community when the need arises. The MAACK community members continue to make their presence known. The group's advocacy role has positively influenced decisions made by the school district that affect the quality of education for African American children in Kanawha County.

“Community members who form relationships that allow them greater influence in the district, and who gain a greater understanding of changes that need to happen in the community will be in a better position to act to improve student achievement.” (Keyes, 2004)

The following comments were made by MAACK community participants and were extracted from focus group transcripts.

“We do have a reputation for being willing to work with parents who have special problems.”

If a student is expelled, “Somebody from the group will go with a parent to the board to talk about how the kid is going to continue to be schooled.”

“We learn about IEPs and how kids get put into all these behavioral disorder classes and all that kind of stuff.”

“We have an agenda for each meeting . . . some of it comes from the board; we go to the board meeting every month.”

“We develop brochures for parents . . . it just has some tips for children in school.”

“We went to an event and passed out little bookmarks to remind people about what their children should be doing over the summer.”

“I don’t think you can do the job well if you don’t have parents involved . . . I think you have to listen to what they want . . . I think you have to listen to their feelings . . . And I think you have to talk to the students, too, to see how they feel . . . and maybe have a meeting of the minds and work things out.”

4. What advocacy efforts does the MAACK Community Initiative undertake, and what are the results?

For the answer to above question, please refer to the discussion under the subheading Downplay Abilities on page 3.

5. What, if any, effects do teachers perceive the MAACK Community Initiative having on school-community connections?

Learning Experience

Focus groups with teachers working in MAACK pilot schools revealed that some teacher perceptions about African American students and their communities are changing. Focus groups were conducted in 2001 among teachers in 5 schools with significant populations of African American students. In 3 elementary schools, teachers attributed the achievement gap overwhelmingly to problems and attitudes in the family and community (84%, 77%, 81%). The high school followed suit, attributing 65% of the factors that affect student achievement to community and family. Only in the middle school focus group, which contained several vocal African American teachers and administrators, did teachers talk primarily about school factors (70%) (Howley, 2001).

In 2004 focus groups, rather than talking about family and community problems, teachers talked about new skills they had gained in dealing with students, family, and community. They said they were learning new ways to communicate with African American children and their families as a direct result of their involvement with the MAACK community or the pilot schools program.

The dialogue process initiated by AEL and the school district appears to have had residual effect on the school community. From the time the MAACK community leaders were first engaged by AEL and the district, community leaders have focused on learning what the district, teachers, parents, and children need before measurable improvements in educating African American children can be realized. They seem committed to sharing their knowledge with others interested in their cause.

The following comments by MAACK pilot school teachers were extracted from focus group transcripts.

“Being involved in the MAACK project [has] been one of our major focuses throughout the school. This year we are trying to go schoolwide with the effort. We are trying to get every teacher in the school to teach culturally responsive instructional materials. We have seen a decrease in the achievement gap based on last year’s scores.”

“We learned many different strategies for teaching African American children through MAACK and it really did work at our school. The scores came up a significant amount in some areas because of the strategies we used, which reached all the students, Black and White.”

“I see there is a difference in teaching African American and White children.”

“They [the MAACK community] gave us a sheet last year in the MAACK program telling us how some things we do would be perceived by African American students and how the same action would be perceived by White students.”

“The MAACK community is trying to work with parents to see where we can help . . . MAACK in the community is making African American parents aware of what is going on with their children and what they need to do.”

6. What factors are perceived to contribute to parental and community involvement or non-involvement in MAACK, the schools, with children’s education generally?

Cooperation

From its inception, the MAACK community was designed to foster an open dialogue among stakeholders. This approach appears to have appealed to the group of African American leaders invited to participate in the MAACK because it allowed them to voice their opinions and because the school district personnel seemed interested in hearing what they had to say, as both groups looked for better ways to educate children. Dialogues set the tone for success of the MAACK initiative. Once individuals were

invited to voice opinions, they appeared to be less reluctant about getting involved. The dialogue approach raised the level of consciousness about gaps in student achievement. Ultimately, every stakeholder had opportunities to be heard. Not to say that everyone had to agree, but participants were encouraged to listen for understanding. It appears that MAACK created an atmosphere in which stakeholder views were respected and participants felt valued. AEL staff members Keyes and Kusimo (2004) discussed some of the strategies used to create this atmosphere in a separate report. Here is one example:

The first (MAACK) meeting began at 8:30 and ended at 3:00. Planners catered lunch so that people were together for the full time. This was the only full day meeting. Since it was to set the tone for the remaining sessions, it was longer in order to assure time for everyone to feel heard and affirmed. (Keyes & Kusimo, 2004)

The school district's invitation to community leaders to talk about the achievement gap led to cooperation and to identification of possible ways to decrease the gap. The community leaders' decision to continue working toward improving the education of African American children has led to cooperation from parents and teachers. This is demonstrated by their willingness to learn more about what can be done to help close the education achievement gap.

A principal made the following comment about his perceptions before dialoguing with community leaders.

"It was felt that that there was a disregard, a disinterest, a downright negligence in the community."

A MAACK community participant made the following comment after the dialogue sessions with school district personnel.

"I feel more comfortable approaching [the superintendent] and his key staff about issues . . . as a direct result of the MAACK sessions."

A pilot school teacher made the following comment about MAACK.

"It [MAACK] raised awareness that we need to work hard with our children to get them and their parents to value school."

The following statements were made by non-MAACK parents.

"MAACK's angels in the hallways . . . allowing people in the community and parents to volunteer in the schools [and] students feel that they can trust these volunteers and feel they have someone there for support."

"No parent should ever be made to feel like any concern they have is invalid."

“Can I add something to the list? . . . Validation . . . a lot of times a parent would like to go to a school and address something and they’re made to feel like it’s not a valid concern . . . for schools and parents to build a better relationship, the schools really need to validate a parent’s concern.”

“. . . MAACK was birthed . . . [to] also embolden parents to be able to speak or to be able to have someone go with them to speak . . . MAACK is trying to fill a void.”

“I think students have the ability; I don’t think they demonstrate it in all cases. Previous to MAACK there has not been a lot of sensitivity. . . . The sensitivity is not there to deal with diversity issues.”

“The MAACK initiative is an empowerment organization.”

Below are some reasons why parents do not get involved at schools. The following comments were made by teachers.

“[Parents] are overwhelmed They don’t feel like they are equipped to go in [the schools] and take on whatever the issue is.”

“Some of them [parents] just give up.”

“Lack of transportation . . . education . . . and apathy.”

Conclusion

For centuries, issues related to race have been a topic of many conversations for socially conscious Americans. Our preoccupation with race in this country might be attributed to our attempt to deal with the fallout from slavery and based on the perceived differences between the White and African Americans cultures. Conversations about race often evoke deep-rooted emotions that lead to failed attempts to understand its complexities (Gibbs, 1988).

The level of accountability for equity in education has increased under the NCLB Act, but there is no blueprint for helping school districts close achievement gaps in education. Before NCLB took effect, the Kanawha County Schools, in recognition of its failure to show sufficient improvement in the achievement of African American students, chose to reach out to the community for answers.

This study sought to capture the level of cooperation needed to support the predominantly White school district personnel and the African American community in their efforts to understand why African American students are not keeping pace academically with White students. The MAACK Community Initiative ended in 2002, after more than one year of facilitated cooperation between the Kanawha County School

District and African American community leaders. AEL staff carefully designed the MAACK initiative to encourage relationship building, understanding, and racial balance. The initiative gave participants opportunities to create a safe environment for sharing perceptions and find avenues for alleviating the complex difficulties associated with gaps in education based on race.

The evidence used for this evaluation of MAACK activities suggests that project goals have been met. The MAACK initiative paved the way for involvement in the school district by the African American community. The dialogue between the district and the community appears to have helped in creating a level of acceptance and respect that did not exist before and gave a voice to a community of people, both African American and White, who, in the past, might have been reluctant to address sensitive issues regarding race. The willingness of the MAACK community and the school district to work together with parents and teachers toward a common goal has helped forge new hope, through tolerance and understanding, for the future success of African American children. Further research is needed in order to measure what effect, if any, the MAACK initiative is having on student achievement.

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