After the Test:
How Schools are Using Data
to Close the Achievement Gap

In recent years, closing the achievement gap between higher- and lower-achieving groups of students has become the focus of both state and federal education policy. Yet while there is decades of research about classroom-level practices that are associated with increased student performance, there have been few studies that examine what are the school-level policies and strategies that help schools close the achievement gap. To investigate this question, the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) surveyed 32 K-8 schools in the San Francisco Bay Area and compared answers between respondents from schools narrowing the gap with respondents from schools maintaining or widening the gap. Schools' gaps were measured using California's Academic Performance Index (API) ranking system over the four year time period between 1998-99 and 2001-2002. We defined "gap-closing" schools as those schools where all students made improvement, but low-performing students made more rapid progress; conversely, we defined "non-gap-closing" schools as those schools where high-performing students made more improvement than low-performing. We also conducted case studies of three schools making outstanding progress narrowing the achievement gap.

FINDINGS

The survey explored policies and practices on a variety of issues, from the role of leaders to instructional strategies. Stark differences between the gap-closing and non-gap-closing groups emerged regarding use of data, painting a distinctive picture of what happens in gap-closing schools. Findings from our study are grouped into three categories—teacher supports for use of data, leadership for equity, and school focus—with case studies after each to illuminate what survey findings can look like in practice.

1. Teacher Supports for Use of Data

Teachers at gap-closing schools are more likely to:

1. Use data to understand skill gaps of low achieving students.
2. Administer frequent assessments of students.

3. Receive professional development on analyzing low-performing student data.

4. Receive professional development on linking low-performing student data to instructional strategies.

5. Have leaders that encourage or lead systematic inquiry into the gap.

6. Discuss low-performing student achievement data with colleagues.

7. Visit each others' classrooms to observe instructional strategies more frequently.

8. Recommend using data and teacher collaboration when asked "what should schools do to close the gap?"

Case Study: Belle Air Elementary School

A K-6 school located in San Bruno, about two-thirds of Belle Air Elementary's students are Hispanic/Latino, about 20% are Asian/Pacific Islander and 15% are white. While all student groups improved, between 1998-99—2001-02, Hispanic/Latino students made almost three times the achievement gains of white/Asian students. Teachers at Belle Air are constantly using data to ask questions, challenge themselves to try new approaches and evaluate results. Each grade level has its own inquiry question to investigate, analyzing how that grade can contribute to the school's goal of closing the achievement gap; similarly, each teacher conducts inquiry into his/her own classroom practice. The school uses a variety of diagnostic assessments and teachers have time built into the schedule for collaboration. Data prompted Belle Air to focus more intensively on literacy; students now spend a minimum of 2_ to 3 hours daily on reading, and all grades use the Open Court reading program. In addition to student achievement gains, teachers cited many changes linked to using data, including richer professional interactions, an increased focus on supporting low-performing Hispanic/Latino students, and full faculty buy-in to a "no blame, no shame, no excuses" culture.

2. Leadership for Equity

Gap-closing schools are more likely to have:

1. Leaders for whom closing the gap is a primary goal.

2. An agreed-upon and explicit definition of equity.

3. People of color in positions of leadership.

4. Leaders who set measurable goals for closing the gap.

5. Leaders who provide structured opportunities for faculty to discuss race and ethnicity.

Case Study: Roosevelt Middle School

Located in southeast Oakland, Roosevelt Middle School serves children in grades 6-8. About half of the students are Asian—the largest ethnicity Chinese—just over a quarter are Hispanic/Latino and just under a quarter are African-American. While all student groups improved, between 1998-99—2001-02, African-Americans

made about three times the achievement gains of Asian students. Roosevelt made dramatic changes in its academic program so that students could spend a daily minimum of two hours on reading, with every Roosevelt teacher, including science and math, now teaching reading. Every day, students attend English class, Reading class—focused on explicit literacy instruction—and Literature class, giving students 35-minutes of silent sustained reading. Roosevelt also made dramatic improvements in climate. In 1997-98, 60%, or three out of every five African-American students received suspensions, prompting faculty to hold data-based discussions on bias and develop stronger classroom management styles. By 2002-03, the suspension rate for African-American students was 18%, a decrease of 70%. Other climate-improving strategies include a full-service student health center, a student rewards program and specific supports for African-American students.

3. School Focus

Gap-closing schools are more likely to:

1. Focus on inside-school vs. outside-school factors affecting achievement.
2. Have a narrow reform focus.
3. Provide teachers with more professional development on literacy instruction.

Case Study: Musick Elementary School
Located in Newark, Musick Elementary School serves students in grades K-6. Its two largest student groups are Hispanic/Latino (half of all students) and white (one quarter of all students). While all student groups improved, between 1998-99 and 2001-02, Hispanic/Latino students made about five and a half times the achievement gains of white students. The school has focused considerable time and resources on building a strong foundation in reading. For most of the past decade, all Musick teachers, and all teachers in Newark Unified School District, participated in intensive, classroom-based training on strategies to teach reading comprehension. The school has released a teacher full-time as a literacy coordinator to provide schoolwide professional development. Musick has also built comprehensive leveled libraries in every classroom and a leveled reading book room. Use of guided reading, Running Records and a K-3 reading specialist give students at Musick an early advantage, bringing most up to grade level by the 3rd grade.

Recommendations

Schools narrowing the achievement gap are using data in a variety of ways to engage in a continual improvement process. Although data use is frequently thought of as an analytical, technical strategy, data can also be a catalyst for the affective work that schools need to engage in to change school culture.

1. SCHOOLS NEED FREQUENT, RELIABLE DATA

Schools need quarterly, monthly, or even weekly feedback on progress. Gap-closing schools go beyond state-mandated testing to use diagnostic assessments that provide teachers with a clear portrait of individual students' strengths and weaknesses and, in turn, feedback on the effectiveness of instructional strategies.

2. TEACHERS NEED SUPPORT TO USE DATA

For teachers to take action on data, they need structured opportunities to reflect, discuss, collaborate and learn new instructional strategies. They also need professional development, particularly classroom-based coaching, on how to tailor instruction to student needs. Collaboration time enables teachers to help one another with challenges, share successes and mutually provide the practical support needed to change practice.

3. RACE MATTERS

With African-American and Hispanic/Latino children languishing far behind their white and Asian peers, educators cannot choose to be colorblind. Emphasizing race in educational discussions and activities may seem controversial or counter-intuitive, but it appears to be more effective than the alternative if the goal is narrowing the achievement gap. School faculties need to have structured conversations about race and ethnicity with teachers actively discussing why gaps exist, how classroom practice might reinforce systemic gaps and how teachers can actively combat bias. More people of color need to be hired as teachers and promoted as principals. School communities need to develop and agree on an explicit definition of equity and then establish a roadmap with measurable goals for closing the gap.

4. FOCUS

Successful schools don't try to do it all; they use data to determine what matters most and focus their efforts accordingly. Since strong reading/literacy skills are the foundation of learning, schools with achievement gaps need to make tough choices, devoting less time and resources to other aspects of schooling until all children can read at grade level. Additionally, a focused effort on raising achievement in one subpopulation can have widespread benefits for all students. Finally, school leaders need to bolster faculty's sense of efficacy by encouraging a focus on what can be done inside school to close the achievement gap.

Recommendations:

1. Schools need frequent, reliable data. Whether in the form of diagnostic assessments or qualitative data, teachers and school leaders need frequent feedback to identify strengths and weaknesses.

2. Support teachers to use data. Teachers need professional development regarding how to understand data and how to take action on the data. They also need collaboration time to discuss strategies and visit each others' classrooms to observe practice.

3. Race matters. Hire and promote people of color and provide structured, data-based opportunities for faculty to discuss how race and ethnicity affects students' experiences in school. Get specific regarding what equity should look like and then set measurable goals regarding how to reach that vision of equity.

4. Focus. Don't try to do everything; choose what matters most and can be controlled within school walls and focus on it. Make sure students are mastering reading/literacy skills; they are the foundation of learning.