Tackling the achievement gap head-on

Trends and issues

A wide gulf divides public school classrooms throughout the Twin Cities region. It closely follows the lines of family income and of race and ethnicity. This achievement gap persists throughout the school years, from grade-school test scores through high school graduation rates.

An estimated 29,000 Saint Paul school-age children are at substantial risk for school failure because they are from low-income families

Saint Paul school district figures for 2005-2006 show that 73 percent of the students are racial or ethnic minorities and 71 percent of the students are from low-income families. Over 80 percent of racial or ethnic minority students are from low-income families. Students in these categories under perform academically compared to their higher-income and White peers.

While English language proficiency is part of the explanation for the achievement gap for Asian, Latino and Black students from immigrant families, it does not explain the wide gap for students of color who are native speakers of English.

Of course, students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and of all incomes can and do succeed in our public schools and go on to succeed in college. Poverty and minority status do not doom a student to fail, any more than a wealthy White student is guaranteed to do well. However, their chances of success are dramatically and persistently different, both locally and across the country.

It starts before kindergarten

The achievement gap begins early, before students are old enough to enter school. Low-income children lag behind their peers in health; cognitive achievement; language and literacy; mathematical thinking; and physical, social and emotional development before they enter kindergarten. National studies show minority children also lag behind in many of these areas.

Preschool screening can be critical for early identification of health and developmental needs that may interfere with learning. The earlier children are screened, the more time there is for them to receive help before entering school. Unfortunately, in Saint Paul only about half of the children are screened by age 4, and 14 percent are not screened until they enter kindergarten when it is mandatory.

The gap persists in school

Student tests scores have shown improvement over the past five years for Saint Paul's student population as a whole, but the gaps persist between students of different races, ethnicities, and incomes. For example, third-grade test scores in 2005 show only 52 percent of low-income students proficient in reading, compared to 85 percent of

An early childhood education program helped prepare 5-year old Amarti for kindergarten. Her parents, Tesfaye and Messeret, recently settled in Saint Paul with Amarti and their older son Guttu, seeking freedom and a safe home for their family far from war-torn Africa.

higher-income students. Slightly over half of minority students are proficient in reading, compared to 85 percent of White students. These gaps are again reflected in results for eighth-grade test scores and in high school graduation rates. While 75 percent of White students graduated on time in 2005, only 48 percent of African American students, 43 percent of Latino students, and 27 percent of American Indian students did. Asian students are faring better, 70 percent graduated on time in 2005.

WHY IS THERE A GAP?

The achievement gap persists for many reasons, including broad social conditions. Research evidence indicates that students from lower-income families and racial/ethnic minorities tend to have fewer of the following advantages while their higher-income and White counterparts have more.

School factors
- Teacher preparation, experience and stability (teachers with certification to teach their subjects, at least 3-5 years experience, and low turnover)
- Small class size (fewer than 25 students per class)
- Technology-assisted instruction (access to and use of computers and the Internet in the classroom)
- Safe schools (little or no fear of being attacked, no gang presence)

Other factors
- Parent participation and parent availability (attendance at school events, volunteering at school, teachers' high ratings of parent involvement, living with two parents)
- Student stability (rarely changing schools)

- Absence of lead poisoning and adequate nutrition
- Reading to young children (daily for 3- to 5-year-olds) and limited television watching (less than six hours per day)

CLOSING THE GAP

Ultimately, we want every child to have the same chance to excel – regardless of their skin color, their cultural background, or their family's income. At a minimum, it is essential that every student gain basic proficiency in core academic skills like reading, writing, math, and science, so that they have the skills that enable them to graduate from high school, successfully pursue post-secondary education, and make a living.

The Twin Cities also needs an educated workforce in order to compete and thrive economically. The community must be able to offer a new generation of well-educated employees to attract knowledge-based companies. This will become especially crucial as the relatively well-educated baby boom generation begins to enter retirement. The school-age population isn't expected to grow much in the next 20 years. Hence, our education system needs to produce as many well-educated future employees as possible. The new generation of employees will be increasingly made up of racial/ethnic minorities.

Effective strategies
The strongest research evidence points to school-related factors and early childhood education to close the achievement gap. Research shows effective strategies include:

High-quality, center-based preschool programs

The most promising strategy is to increase access to high-quality, center-based early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. If more economically disadvantaged and minority children could participate in such programs, the school readiness gap would likely be narrowed considerably. Research indicates that these programs can have a long-lasting impact on the school success of low-income and minority children.

Strong core academic elements

Previous research and evaluation studies have identified some core elements of schools that are effective in improving the academic achievement of low-income and minority children. They include:

- Focus on teaching and learning
- Challenging, rigorous curriculum
- Alignment of curriculum, instruction, standards and assessment
- Strong teacher professional development program
- Effective leadership

Comprehensive school reform programs bring together many of the core elements just described into one package. These programs seek to integrate instruction, testing, classroom management, teachers' professional development, parent involvement, and school management to achieve school-wide academic improvement. The best of these models have boosted student academic achievement and reduced achievement gaps.

Additional factors

If a school has the core elements in place, or most of them, there are a number of things that can provide further help in improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap. Conditions that can support or enhance a sound school program include the following:

- Well-qualified teachers
- Small class size
- Smaller schools
- Individual tutoring for students in school

Removing barriers to learning

Student and family support services can be helpful in reducing or eliminating conditions that interfere with a child's learning, such as behavioral and health problems and family stresses and instability.

In working with schools to remove learning barriers, service providers and Wilder Research evaluators have learned the following to increase the success of school-linked programs:

- Removing barriers to learning, without more direct academic intervention, is likely to have only a small impact on students' achievement.
- Schools can be unpredictable partners in these efforts due to high turnover among leadership and staff, shifting priorities, political pressures, and budget cuts.
- Given this reality, it is important when entering into cooperation or collaboration with schools to have a strongly aligned agenda, a strong commitment from both the school and the school district (including some financial commitment), and strong operational leadership within the school district for the project.

TAKING ACTION

In the end, closing the achievement gap depends on highly effective public schools. However, schools cannot do this alone. Strong community support is required. Here are some thoughts for organizations to take action:
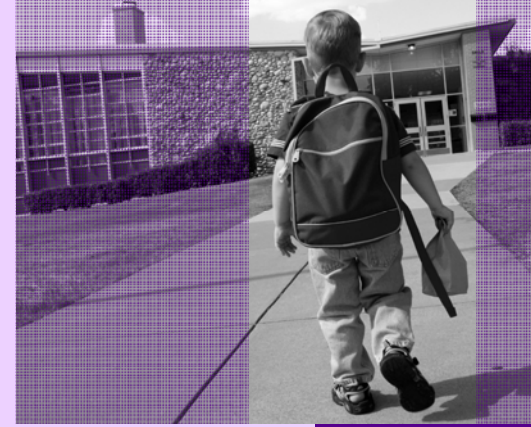
1. **Address both the barriers to learning and the academic/learning factors.**
    To close the achievement gap, differences in school readiness and preparation need attention. Two potential areas of focus:
    - Increase the number of urban children who receive screening for health and developmental problems by age 4, and also the number who receive the follow-up services they need.
    - Increase the access of low-income families to high-quality preschool programs that emphasize academic skills.

2. **Increase adult involvement in the education of high-risk children**
    Every child needs adults who reinforce the importance of school, expect the child to succeed in school, and help the child with schoolwork when needed. Community organizations can establish ways for more adults to become meaningfully and consistently involved in the education of high-risk children through mentorship or tutoring, or through efforts to increase parents' availability and involvement in their children's education.

3. **Marshal community attention and action.**
    - Bring disparate groups together to discuss factors that perpetuate the achievement gap and ways to reduce those problems.
    - Serve as an informed and informative advocate, speaking out for the educational needs of poor and racial/ethnic minority children – for example, helping the public and policy-makers to better understand the issues.
    - Conduct and share research on factors that add to the achievement gap and promising ways to reduce the gap.