What is the Relationship between Race & Achievement in Our Schools?

Minority Student Achievement Network - Statement of Purpose
Adopted June 2003

Our goal is to ensure that racial differences in achievement are eliminated while we improve achievement for all students.

Note: This document was developed by the Research Practitioner Council and was approved by the Governing Board of the Minority Student Achievement Network in June 2003. This document summarizes our beliefs and the knowledge base that guide our work; it is a living document that will change as we increase our knowledge on improving minority student achievement.

What core beliefs guide our work?

• Eliminating the gap is not only the right thing to do, but it is essential to ensure the future of our democracy.

• Because achievement is not innately determined, children will achieve when they are effectively taught how to learn.

• All children come to school with a variety of individual strengths; our responsibility is to discover and build upon these strengths.

• While recognizing the crucial roles that parents and community groups play, we need to focus on what schools can do.

• Schools that concentrate on how their practices affect students will be more productive than those that blame students, families or poverty for underachievement.

• Each individual staff member must examine his or her beliefs and change practices to counteract the contemporary and historic impacts of racism and discrimination.

• Schools should be considered excellent only when students of all racial and ethnic groups are achieving at high levels.

What do we know about the relationship between race and achievement?

• Analysis of test scores, grades and graduation rates document significant gaps in achievement between white students and students of color.[1]

• Despite the gaps in average performance among racial groups, there are substantial numbers of high achieving students of color.[2]

• Causes of achievement gaps are complex and include school, community, home and societal factors.[3]

• The current gaps in achievement are not due to racial differences in innate ability.[4]

• In the early grades, there are measurable gaps between students of color and white students in the skills that schools value; too often, these gaps widen as students move through school.[5]

• Schools can have a powerful, positive impact on the achievement of students.[6]

• Racism within schools continues to be a significant barrier to student achievement.[7]

• Partnerships between schools and parents can have a positive impact on student achievement.[8]

• Strong and encouraging teacher-student relationships, when accompanied by effective instruction, may contribute to improving achievement even more for students of color than for whites.[9]

• To close the gaps in achievement, African American and Latino students must improve at a greater rate than others.[10]

How will we eliminate racial differences in achievement?

• Implement, monitor and evaluate changes in what we do that improves student achievement.

• Develop in teachers, students and administrators the leadership skills and beliefs that are necessary and critical for change.

• Synthesize, interpret and contribute to conduct research that informs practice and that combines the wisdom of researchers and practitioners.

• Contribute to the policy debate on "The Gap" at the local, state and national levels.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The analyses are available from multiple sources, for instance: Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, "The Black-White Test Score Gap: An Introduction," in Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, Eds. *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1988) pp. 1-51; The College Board, *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*, (New York: The College Board, 1999); in addition, MSAN districts' annual reports of student achievement document the gap in test scores, grades and graduation rates. See, for example, *Superintendent's Annual Report 2001-02*, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Illinois.

[2] See, for example, W Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River* (Princeton Press, 1988).

[3] Nancy Kober, *It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap*, (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2001), pp. 21-25. This document provides a brief summary, with citations, of many factors influencing the gap.

[4] Richard Nisbett, "Race, Genetics and IQ," in Jencks and Phillips.

[5] Gaps in early childhood (preschool or kindergarten) performance are summarized in Jerry West, Kristin Denton and Lizabeth M. Reaney, *The Kindergarten Year* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The widening of the gap is discussed in Meredith Phillips, James Crouse, and John Ralph, "Does the Black-White Test Score Gap Widen after Children Enter School?" in Jencks and Phillips.

[6] In the 1980's, the Effective Schools Research effort established that there are significant differences in student achievement among schools that were very similar in terms of resources and in terms of the students they served. The focus on identifying unusually successful schools includes recent studies, for instance: *Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High–Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools,* (Charles A. Dana Center: University of Texas/ Austin for the US Department of Education, 1999); Craig D. Jerald, *Dispelling the Myth Revisited: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Analysis of "High-flying" Schools,* (The Education Trust, 2001).

[7] While effects of racism are less visible and subtler, racism continues to have a negative impact on students in academic settings. See, for instance, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and Test Performance of Academically Successful African Americans," in Jencks and Phillips.

[8] While research has not conclusively demonstrated that parent involvement enhances student achievement, and under what conditions, several literature reviews suggest that parent involvement may lead to improved student outcomes. See, for example, *1994 A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1994).

[9] The importance of encouraging (versus demanding) teachers was identified as an important element in creating effective teacher-student relationships with students of color in *What DOESN'T Meet the Eye: (mis) Understanding Racial Disparities in Fifteen Suburban School Districts*, Ron Ferguson, 2002. The Tripod Project, led by Ron Ferguson, and involving many MSAN districts continues this work by asking teachers and students to experiment and study aspects of the classroom routines that contribute to positive teacher-student relationships.

[10] Kober, p.11.