

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE FOURTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE MINORITY STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK
MONTCLAIR, NJ, JUNE 26-28, 2002**

“This is the only network in the country working across districts in a systematic way to fulfill a moral obligation. You are determined to show that race is not a determinant of academic ability.”

Uri Treisman, Professor of Mathematics, University of Texas/Austin

The fourth annual conference of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) began in a setting that celebrates diversity – the Montclair Art Museum with its collection that ranges from traditional art, to Native American, to the abstract. It was a fitting start for a group of educators who work in diverse environments. The personal achievements displayed around them also were reminders of the common purpose for the 15 member districts – a commitment to overcoming the barriers that prevent minority students from achieving their personal best.

The conference was both a time to sum up a year of accomplishments and an opportunity, said Allan Alson, Evanston Township High School District superintendent and MSAN chair, to “express our readiness and our grit to reach a point where we will no longer be able to predict achievement by race.”

The keynote speaker, Uri Treisman, director of the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas-Austin, underscored the challenge to the MSAN districts in describing his research. Treisman’s hypotheses about why minority students often perform poorly in college were discarded when he spent 18 months living in a college dorm with students. Faculty surveys attributed the academic gap to the usual suspects – lack of motivation by students, lack of preparation for college work, insufficient family support, and family incomes. However, “the students entered college well motivated, they were smart, and they came from middleclass, integrated communities,” Treisman said. The problem was not the students, but “the unhealthy responses of the institutions.”

The institutions provided remedial supported focused on the students’ weaknesses, not on their strengths. African-American students were so focused on showing their self-reliance “that they never figured out what they needed to know,” Treisman said. Instead, they received messages early that they “were dumb” and that they needed to deal with issues related to racial identity. Asian students, on the other hand, immediately formed study groups for academic support and delayed getting

involved in campus affairs until they were upperclassmen. The institutions showed “a horrible misunderstanding” of the complexities in students’ lives, he added.

The solution – for campuses and high schools – is “to build a community of kids around excellence, spell out what you expect is worthy of them, and form multi-ethnic groups focused on academics.” In one Texas high school Treisman studied, mixed groups of students met twice a day in the hallways to study together. Also, in successful high schools, “teachers understood that what kids could do is a function of what they were taught.”

Lessons from Dana Center Study of High Schools

The Dana Center selected five Texas high schools for a study on how to narrow the achievement gap. A majority of the students were economically disadvantaged, enrolled in a large district in a school without selective admissions, and their achievement was higher than the state average on at least one of three academic indicators. Also, exam participation rates were greater than the state average. While each school was unique, certain critical practices were common among them:

- Set clear goals and high expectations for student achievement. Staff expected all students to be fully prepared to be successful in college.
- Used data to guide instruction, evaluating both strategies and individual student progress; teachers received development on using data.
- Focused on instruction and individual learning, paying as much attention to the needs of advanced learners as to those of students who were struggling academically. Administrators encouraged teachers to experiment with new approaches and provided them with the time and resources for planning, data analysis, collaboration, and professional development.
- Supported teachers and enhanced collaboration. Administrators supported teachers as professionals; worked with them to identify problems related to student achievement; and maintained open-door policies toward teachers, parents, and students.
- Fostered an environment of respect and affection for students. Administrators, teachers, and counselors showed great respect and affection for their students, made it comfortable for them to ask for help, involved students in decisionmaking on campus, and encouraged student involvement in extracurricular activities including attending student-led events.

Opening Doors: Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools, Charles A. Dana Center

Treisman also said that poor counseling in early grades allows students to be tracked and to track themselves, making it almost impossible for minority students to “break into” advanced courses in high school. Good schools, he said, “do not allow 14-year-olds to determine academic decisions about their lives.... Almost all kids will make better choices if you set it up so that it is really hard for them to make stupid choices.”

A mathematics professor and consultant to MSAN on its math grant, Treisman knows personally about low expectations for minority students. When his adopted son was enrolled in the middle grades in Berkeley, he was placed in career math, “but when I went to the counselor and she saw that I was white, she apologized and put him in algebra.” He added that students sometimes contribute to stereotyping. Black students, he said, used to think math “was for whites,” now “whites believe math is for Asians.”

Treisman said it was important “to directly confront teachers with evidence” of minority student capabilities and praised MSAN as “the only network in the country working in a systematic way on a moral obligation. You are determined to show that race is not a determinant of academic ability.”

The Montclair Setting and the MSAN Updates

Michael Osnato, superintendent of the Montclair school district and host of the conference, welcomed participants to the opening of the first full day of activities and business, held at Montclair State University. His district, he said, “has a great partnership” with Montclair State, a sentiment echoed by leaders of the university.

President Susan Cole told the MSAN conference that the network’s goal “is the most important work that can be done in society today.” The education community, she acknowledged, has failed to get ahead of public policy issues and lead the debate on school reforms. Consequently, “everybody is telling us what is wrong and what do to, but the policies are rarely based on the knowledge and research necessary to make them successful.” Cole said that the education community can only assume leadership when it has done the research needed and praised MSAN for bringing together teachers, universities, and researchers to work together.

The Montclair school district was described as a “living laboratory for the future of America” by Ada Beth Cutler, dean of the College of Education and Human Services at Montclair State. It is a member of the 23-district Network for Educational Renewal sponsored by her college and provides the campus with professional development schools. Also, students from throughout the campus often serve as tutors in the Montclair schools to fulfill the university’s requirement for community service before graduating.

The Montclair district’s goals fit with those of the college, Cutler said. Her program emphasizes culturally responsive teaching and has spent the past four years focusing professional development on the issues of race, racism and white privilege. “The majority of teachers we graduate are white,” she said, “and it is important for our

graduates to know what white privilege means. That is sometimes painful, but it is important.”

Network Updates

What started a few years ago as a conversation among a few people resulted in the first MSAN conference four years ago, MSAN Chair Allan Alson recalled – and, four years later, to an impressive record of accomplishments. Unlike most other reform groups, MSAN was started and is controlled by school districts, he said, and is able to take on so much activity because of the dedication of a small staff and of funders. The major MSAN initiatives include:

- Research. The student survey, still to be mined for insights and for presenting MSAN’s work to the public, “begins to diminish some of the stereotypes about students, especially peer pressures, and draws attention to issues around the necessity of trusting relationships with teachers,” Alson said. The survey results underscore the need for teachers not only to know content but also to have knowledge about how to reach students and personalize teaching. These findings have led to the proposed Tripod Project, which connects content, pedagogy and relationships as the base for research among the districts. While a possible grant will pay for the research, MSAN and its districts must support teachers and build in teacher time to carry it out. MSAN also received a grant from the National Science Foundation to focus on parent and teacher roles in overcoming barriers to minority success in advanced math courses; six districts are participating in the study. Other research projects are being developed in the areas of early and adolescent literacy. (Details below)
- Network building. MSAN has a new web site intended to build communication among teachers, students, and others involved in MSAN work. The Research Practitioner Council forms policies around research endeavors and content for conferences. In its meeting prior to the Montclair conference, it developed a document that sums up assumptions about the relationship between race and achievement. Teacher and student conferences launched new networks. MSAN also is cooperating with Temple University and an urban superintendents group to sponsor a conference on the role of secondary school counselors.

MSAN, Alson said, “is about discovering not only what we know but what we don’t know, reaching out and engaging all our constituents, district-wide systemic change, changing school cultures, and building, as best we can, true learning communities that care about learning and about making significant changes.”

Teacher conference:

The May 2002 first MSAN teacher conference, held in Madison, WI, was significant because “it brought so many people doing so many great things to one place at the same time,” commented Lynette Russell, coordinator of staff and organizational development of the Madison public schools and conference

coordinator. The conference resulted in two goals for MSAN, she said: to continue with national conferences and to find ways of bringing together teachers with common interests in smaller groups, e.g. on a regional basis or in paired districts.

Research plans:

The MSAN research agenda is unique because it emerges from and informs practice and embraces both traditional and non-traditional research strategies at the same time, according to John Diamond, MSAN research director. The MSAN approach, he said, is to produce research findings that shape interventions, school policies and instructional practices as well as future research. It will need to be rigorous and accessible (user friendly) and contribute to capacity building for reflective practice in the MSAN districts.

MSAN research organization consists of the Governing Board for policy; the Research and Practitioners Council representing all districts; research collaborators, the Research Advisory Board, and teacher involvement in action research.

Districts participating in the NSF math grant include Ann Arbor, Arlington, Cambridge, Chapel Hill, Evanston Elementary District 65, and Evanston Township High School. The project will convene a committee of math educators to identify barriers faced by African-American and Hispanic students to higher level math and to recommend strategies, conduct interviews with parents to learn what they know about the schooling process, and do a literature review of relevant research. One of the products from the grant will be a guide for parents to help them be advocates for their children in the early grades. Other outcomes will focus on professional development, enhanced support for parents, and summer/school year interventions with minority students.

Participating in the development of a proposal to improve adolescent literacy are Evanston Township High School, Montclair, and Cleveland Heights-University Heights. The research survey found few tested models, especially on helping students with understanding text and on the social processes involved in reading. Each district is at a different point in developing literacy programs, but the committee believes there would be benefits from sharing common strategies and involving teachers in developing successful strategies. The adolescent literacy committee also is analyzing the student survey to find out how it could help with an understanding of the adolescent literacy problem, Caroline Kaczala, from Cleveland Heights-University Heights, reported.

The early literacy committee has taken longer than expected to develop a research focus because of many conflicting views about early literacy, according to Larry Kilian, coordinator of testing, evaluation, and funded programs for the White Plains (NY) public schools. The three districts participating on the committee are Cambridge, Shaker Heights, and White Plains. Working with consultants from Harvard University and the University of Maryland, the committee decided to

emphasize vocabulary building in early readers. The enormous differences in reading experiences children have before entering kindergarten create a gap of at least 2,000 words in the vocabulary of young students, he said. The proposal will seek to establish model practices on vocabulary building in classrooms and to work with parents on using picture books regularly at home.

Student conference:

The MSAN student conferences began as a one-time thing – to find out what students were thinking – but they have taken on a vigorous life of their own, “and we are struggling to keep up with the students,” reported Carolyn Ash, MSAN program coordinator. Postponed from October, the second student conference was held in Ann Arbor in March 2002, and a third is planned for October 2002 in Evanston.

So far, Ash said, the students have been emphatic about wanting teachers to make the curriculum more interesting, show a genuine interest in what students have to say and try to see how students are experiencing their school, and provide help in class. The conferences, she added, “let students see adults in roles they want to have and hear how other students have overcome obstacles.” Pedro Noguera of Harvard University and a research advisor to MSAN led seminars at the March conference, captured in a new video presented at the MSAN national conference. He confronted the students with the question: “How do we motivate young people like yourselves to take advantage of opportunities to learn?”

Ash led a panel of Montclair students who have attended the conferences through a series of questions aimed at answering Noguera. For Jafreen Uddin, now a Montclair senior, and Brian Day, headed for the University of Connecticut, the answer is to make classes so interesting students won’t want to miss them. Teachers should “hang out” with freshmen, even 8th graders, Brian said, in order to understand “where a student is coming from and what a student knows.” Tom Reynolds, who will attend the New Jersey Institute of Technology, recalled that in classes where he was never called on, “I shut down.”

Another key to student motivation is for a young person “to get knowledge of yourself at an early age,” according to Al Brooks, who will be attending Rutgers. “To be secure with who you are helps you be around different people. If you are content with who you are, you don’t have to act corny.”

The student panel agreed that parent support is essential. “My accomplishments are all due to my parents,” said Abimbola Okeowo, now an engineering student at the University of Pennsylvania. “The reason some students are different from others goes back to the differences in what parents will accept.” Brian, who experienced overt racism in the Atlanta public schools, said he didn’t get discouraged because he had support from his family. “I wanted to be as successful as possible,” he said, “and that came from my family. They made me read, blocked TV viewing, and required me to read a book for every CD I bought.”

What advice would they give to freshmen students of color? “Don’t let teachers ignore you,” Tom said, and Jafreen advised students to get involved in student activities. Abimbola said to aim for good grades from the very beginning and pick friends who share your goals. Al admonished beginning high school students to not be intimidated. “Challenge teachers when they present opinions you don’t agree with,” he said.

The conference gave the students a standing ovation. In small break-out sessions later, participants discussed their responses to the student conference video and the student panel.

Research Practitioner Council Draft Statement on Race and Achievement

A major portion of the Research Practitioner Council meeting, held for the two days preceding the national conference, addressed the central purpose of MSAN – understanding assumptions about the relationships between race and achievement. The Council’s discussions were candid, ranging from school cultures, to white power structures, to new conceptual thinking about the language used to describe the issues. As one Council member observed: “We could not have had this conversation two years ago. We needed to learn to trust each other.”

The outcome of the discussions was a draft document that delineates several issues and ranks their importance. The issues and the explanations considered the most relevant by Council members include:

- Talking about race: discussions about race and achievement are more likely to be effective when they are clear, there is follow up, the discussions are blame free, and responsibility for doing something is shared.
- Causes and solutions are connected systemically: the factors that create the gap are a system of separate pieces (home, school, societal conditions) that interact with each other.
- School cultures: schools are culturally white and are racially defined, contributing to the underachievement of African American and Latino students.
- Bridging racial/cultural divides: relationships are critical; solutions are beyond instructional strategies and content knowledge; teachers need to be open to examining bias in their teaching.
- Strategies for network goals: schools must change to address MSAN goals; this will require buy-in from teachers, which means making closing the gap worthwhile to teachers by being consistent, providing resources, and giving them opportunities to learn successful strategies.
- The achievement gap should not be simplified: the gap is not monolithic and involves several sub-groups.
- Myth busting is necessary: while SES matters, when it is eliminated as a factor in achievement the gap still exists; racial discrimination exists and negatively impacts the learning of minority students.

- The issues are complex: tests do not capture many of the strengths that minority students bring to school; does the student or the school need to adapt, and is there an achievement gap or is there a school performance gap?
- Conviction: the gap can be eliminated and MSAN can demonstrate that race does not predict achievement.

The document will be used by the Research Practitioner Council members in their districts to stimulate similar discussions and provide feedback to the Council for continuous revision of the statement. It is meant to be a dynamic document.

Breakout Sessions on Issues/Best Practices

Impact of Education Equity and Other Legal Strategies on Students of Color

New Jersey has been embroiled in school finance litigation for 30 years, with advocates for poor districts winning significant financial support only in the last few years. Paul Tractenberg, Rutgers law professor and founder of the Education Law Center, which has been at the core of the legal battle, discussed the impact of changing education finance environments on districts like those in MSAN.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision on vouchers, for example, will likely direct more federal funds to families already using private schools, taking money away from public schools. The graying of America also will affect local funding, he said, particularly where schools are more dependent on local property taxes than on state aid. Where state aid predominates and puts restrictions on local taxes, the competition for funding takes place within state political contexts. Also, school finance suits that level up poor districts may take funds away from wealthier districts, especially when states are in financial trouble.

One of the contributions that MSAN can make to education policy is to show that the achievement gap can be narrowed when there are sufficient resources, used wisely, Tractenberg said. Because so many states have poor data collection systems, he advised districts with the capacity to collect good data provide models for a “broader vision of what achievement is beyond how well students do on state tests.”

Small Schools as a Strategy for Rigor and Engagement

“Small” has always been a hallmark of good private schools, noted Michelle Fine, well-known author and researcher on youth and race issues and a professor of psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Now, it is a strategy moving into urban public school districts, which once extolled the benefits of mega-campus for secondary students.

Evidence is now available on the advantages of small schools. Fine discussed: narrower achievement gaps between student groups, fewer violence and discipline issues, more information about students available to adults, and larger percentage of students

involved in extracurricular affairs. There is not as much evidence about improved achievement as there is about increased engagement, “but for low-income students, engagement is necessary for achievement,” Fine pointed out. Also, smaller schools do not make it more difficult to enroll at large colleges. The critical factor “is knowing how to get help – and students in smaller schools have learned to do this,” she said.

Small schools take on several forms. They may be free-standing public schools, a ninth-grade academy in a large high school, a small school within a larger one (“this is the hardest to implement because it creates tension among faculty”), or several small schools housed in one building.

Fine advised that those interested in forming smaller schools take a year to review and plan for it, involve everyone including parents and the teachers’ union, and do research. Also, “people with explicit power have to say what is negotiable and not negotiable up front,” she said. Other guidance from Fine: don’t take an effective small school and double its size; do things incrementally, such as one grade at a time; provide professional development because “weak teachers will become obvious;” and work out organization problems early such as common space and activities in a school with several smaller schools.

Structuring Latino School Success – Listening to High Achieving Youth

While the researcher/professor who was to lead this session canceled because of illness, participants carried on the conversation anyway. A theme running through their discussion was the diversity within the Latino student population – each nationality has its unique issues, more Latino students tend to work part time, some students are deficient in their home language, skills differ among recent and 2nd or 3rd generation immigrants, parent involvement often is difficult because of language barriers and parents’ fears about their immigrant status, many students are being raised by siblings, and some families are culturally inured to post-secondary education for their children. Any of these problems can inhibit Latino student achievement, the participants agreed.

Strategies being used in MSAN districts include:

- Multiple language support programs including dual and Spanish for fluent speakers, bilingual resources assistants in schools, and Spanish interpreters at meetings for parents.
- Student-focused initiatives such as support groups for students sharing the same language, mentoring of younger Latino students by older ones, using students as translators.
- Support programs for students such as using Latino role models, sponsoring extracurricular groups for Latino students, and involving the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering and other such groups.

The group recommended that the Network increase the dialogue about Latino student issues and model the coalition building that should be taking place within the districts

such as partnerships with universities and their teacher education programs and with corporations. MSAN also should advocate for bilingual education and culturally responsive standards.

Improving Literacy Learning for All Children – Bridging the Gap for Some

“Reading is thinking with text,” declared Dorothy Strickland, professor of reading at Rutgers University and past president of the International Reading Association. Just as people put different skills together for thinking, the same is called for in reading, which is why she advocates a balanced literacy approach. This includes: reading and writing out loud (teacher models reading and writing processes; students listen, observe, and respond); shared reading and writing between teachers and students; independent reading and writing monitored by the teacher; word study led by the teacher; and guided reading.

Ideally, “interventions occur within the classroom,” Strickland said, adding that the 90-minute block of uninterrupted time “should be sacred.” In shorter periods, she explained, “struggling kids never finish anything.” She took some exception to the National Reading Panel’s lack of support for independent reading, saying it is worthwhile if teachers put structure into silent and/or independent reading time. She advised that teachers conduct individual conferences with students systematically during silent reading and keep a record of each student’s selections – with comments by the teacher.

Scaffolding student learning is a way of “requiring kids to think,” Strickland said. For example, teachers ought to ask students to find and read passages that back up a point they are making in discussions. Showing students examples of model writing and demonstrating writing with rubrics stimulate student engagement.

In addition to differentiated instruction and scaffolding, Strickland urged teachers to become “more enlightened” about test item preparation. Some state prompts are examples of the lack of enlightenment, she said, describing a meatloaf story that confused students in a Hispanic district and a Thanksgiving story that did not go over well in a district with Asian and Indian immigrants. She advised that teachers dissect student results on test items to learn how they perform as individuals, by groups, and by learning styles.

The TRIPOD Project

The overarching goal of the Tripod Project, according to its designer, Ron Ferguson, is “to extend conversations among teachers about teaching.” The Harvard University economist is a principal research consultant to MSAN on its student survey and used the findings to develop the Tripod Project. It links teacher content knowledge, pedagogy, and relationships with students as the “legs.” The participating districts will be documenting how each of the legs interacts with five tasks of social and intellectual engagement in classrooms:

- Trust and interest versus mistrust and disinterest: the ideal is for the beginning of classes to foster feelings of positive anticipation about the class.
- Balanced versus imbalanced teacher control and student autonomy: the ideal is for teachers and students to find an appropriate balance between the two.
- Ambitiousness versus ambivalence: the ideal is for each student to collaborate with the teacher on a commitment to ambitious learning goals and for either party to overcome any ambivalence.
- Industriousness versus discouragement: the ideal is for teacher and students to work industriously to achieve goals for learning and to overcome any discouragement because of setbacks.
- Consolidation versus irresolution and disconnection: the ideal is for teachers to help students consolidate what they have learned and connect it to future classes and experiences.

Teachers participating in the research will work collaboratively to implement each task and collect data, using teacher and student surveys at the beginning of class four times a year, each requiring about 20 minutes. The researchers will select a few “nuggets” from each school to post on the web for others to try out. Schools will receive semester reports and end-of-the-year on-site summaries.

District Program Showcase

High School Achievement Summit/Ann Arbor

Data made public, plans made to address the problems, and schools held accountable – these were the components of Ann Arbor’s initiative to hold “summits” on secondary school achievement gaps. Last November, Superintendent Rossi Ray-Taylor sent a memo to middle and high school administrators containing data about students who were academically at-risk and requested that each school first discuss the data. She sparked discussions by asking some very candid questions – why were 40 percent of 9th grade African-American males at one high school achieving GPAs of 1.5 or less? Why were 33 percent of 10th grade African American females failing at another high school? One by one, she used the district’s disaggregated data to let every school know it had some challenges. Each school also was asked to:

- Develop specific intervention plans for the identified students and make parents, students, and staff aware of the intervention plans
- Prepare a summary of the steps taken to address the issues and any impacts
- Submit a report by the end of the first semester

All secondary school administrators as well as counselors, parents, and students came together at a summit in February to hear a presentation by Glenn Singleton on the conditions necessary for student achievement. They also presented to each other their analyses of their school’s problems and their actions. Many schools sought greater personalization, or stronger contacts with parents, or more involvement of students in

decisions. All spent more time analyzing data. Their reports were distributed to each school team at the summit, and later to the Board of Education. Each school was to develop more specific plans and report at a follow-up summit held in May. One principal praised the summits later, largely because of a comment from one of her students – “He said he had no idea that people were really trying hard to help failing kids. It has always felt to him exactly the opposite.”

“People came to the summits ready to talk and address the issues because they had seen the data and taken ownership of the issues,” said Ray-Taylor. Instead of playing a blame game, “the level of conversations was high and positive.” At the first summit, participants discussed feelings of entitlement, access to high-level courses and how schedules block the access. At the second summit, “they opened up on issues of homework and grading,” she said. “These issues bubbled up, and they were willing to put them on the table.”

Perspectives on Addressing Equity and Race in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools

The consistent focus of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools on achieving equity ripples through the system from the classroom to the board room. The main goal of the district’s strategic plan is to eliminate the achievement gap within six years. The school board, for example, participated in a two-day Beyond Diversity training seminar that helped the board be more sensitive in its policymaking. “The training brought to light how attitudes, patterns, and practices impact minority student achievement,” according to board chair Valerie Foushee. It became easier for the board to review policies through the lens of equity and excellence, added Neil Pedersen, superintendent.

The Beyond Diversity training, conducted by Glenn Singleton of the Pacific Education Group, moved to the principal level. Rather than rely on consultants to do the staff development in schools, each principal and four equity team coaches were trained to work in the schools. The principal training led to ongoing lunchtime study groups convened by the principals around the use of resources to promote equity. When the Beyond Diversity training was offered to junior and senior high school students, “it took them less than a day to get through what it took adults two days to absorb,” Pedersen said.

Finally, when the school district’s Diversity Team opened up to the community, “people came out of the woodwork to be a part of the effort,” Pedersen said, and today more than 100 have joined the team.

High School Redesign for the 21st Century/Montclair

The Montclair High School did more than break up into small learning communities, funded by federal and local grants. It redesigned student involvement as well. In the fall of 2000, following community-based planning, students selected from eight small learning communities ranging from civics and government, to global research, to medical biology to pre-engineering. Each community has interdisciplinary blocks of courses; collaboration among faculty, including common planning time; more

personalized learning environments for students, and extensive involvement of parents and the community.

The smaller settings foster faculty learning as well. Lunchtime Faculty Discussion Series allow individual teachers to lead discussions on books. Monthly SEED seminars encourage teachers to discuss the latest resources on diversity and equity issues.

For students, however, the redesigned high school experience has been truly transforming. Students are assessed through portfolios of work that are critiqued by peers and teachers. Service learning, required of each student, is designed to give students credit for authentic work projects carried out in partnerships with community organizations. Students selected for the Leadership Institute sponsor annual Days of Dialogue, a two-day, school-wide program to give all students a chance to voice their opinions, exchange ideas, and offer feedback in small group settings on issues affecting their daily lives. Some of the proposed actions from the 2002 Days of Dialogue, for example, show the relationships that are building between teachers and students. Teachers volunteered to work with students on three committees – respect, communication, and student/teacher interaction. The respect committee, for example, will develop programming to address sexual harassment, homophobia, lack of respect for property, disrespect by upperclassmen for freshmen, and lack of respect for subs and student teachers.

With a state grant on closing the achievement gap and in partnership with the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence, the Montclair school district is encouraging parent and student awareness of expectations for college, beginning in the middle grades. Improving Montclair Achievement Network Initiative (IMANI) sponsors information programs for parents and students; recruits students for test prep programs; provides summer extended programs in language arts, math and science; sponsors study skills workshops; and organizes in-home course-based study groups.

An ongoing, highly praised initiative in Montclair is the Writers' Room Program. Started in 1993, the program provides extensive professional development to and supervision of volunteer writing coaches for centers in each school – elementary, middle, and the high school. The coaches start with the assumption that every piece of writing contains a workable strength that can be developed through revision. Coaches emphasize that writing involves many drafts. The program documentation shows that students' drafts improve measurably, scores on state and national assessments requiring students to write have improved, and the achievement gap has narrowed.

Final Remarks

Following district planning sessions, the 2002 national MSAN conference ended with expressions of appreciation to the Montclair coordinating team of Superintendent Michael Osnato, Assistant Superintendent Jeanne Pryor and dozens of staff. As evidence of the growing interest in developing networks, Elaine Davis, principal of Montclair High

School, invited all high school principals in the network to a meeting in the Montclair district to talk about common issues.

MSAN Chair Allan Alson reminded the participants that the network efforts are all about students, “but also about us and our schools. The network can only be as good as what happens in the individual districts and schools.” He also urged the participants to seize the moment offered by this year’s conference and the Research Practitioner Council’s effort to reach a consensus on MSAN’s assumptions about race and achievement. “Be brave enough,” he said, “to go home and have deeper conversations around the issue of racism in our education system.”

(Proceedings written by Anne Lewis, education writer)