

## Creating Schools Where Race Does Not Matter:

### The Role and Significance of Race in the Racial Achievement Gap

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The effort to find ways to close or at least reduce the achievement gap -- the disparities in test scores and academic outcomes that tend to follow well-established race and class patterns -- has become a national priority. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and its requirement that schools and students be held accountable for achievement through annual standardized tests, a sense of urgency has developed over the need to improve the educational outcomes of under-performing students. In many communities, this has placed greater focus and attention on the need for strategies to improve academic achievement among children who have traditionally not done well in school, namely, poor and disadvantaged children, students with learning disabilities, recent immigrants and English language learners, and in many communities African Americans, Latinos and other students of color generally ([Miller 1995](#)).

Those familiar with American history and the history of American education in particular will undoubtedly be struck by the irony and significance of the current national preoccupation with closing the racial achievement gap. Racial gaps in achievement, attainment and measures of intellectual ability are by no means new. In fact, throughout most of American history, racial disparities in educational achievement and performance were attributed to innate genetic differences between population groups, and as such, were regarded as acceptable and understandable "natural" phenomena ([Fredrickson 1981](#)). Intelligence was regarded as an innate human property rooted in the particular genetic endowments of individuals and groups ([Duster 2003](#)), and therefore altering patterns of academic achievement was not regarded as feasible or even desirable.

Given this history, the fact that federal educational policy has made the goal of closing the racial achievement gap a national priority is truly remarkable. Although policy makers have not called attention to the fact that the effort to eliminate racial disparities in student achievement represents a repudiation of America's past views on race, educators at the center of this effort often find that they engage attitudes and beliefs that are associated with the vestiges of racial attitudes from the not so distant past. The notion that children of color are not as intelligent and capable as white children continues to find adherents among educators and the general public. Furthermore, seven years after the adoption of NCLB, it is clear that eliminating racial disparities in academic outcomes will require more than an official renouncement of traditional views about the nature of race. Race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement in predictable and disturbing ways, and the persistence and pervasiveness of these patterns compels us to ask why? It also forces us to reconsider what it might take to alter the long-standing relationship between race and achievement since so many efforts to alter racial patterns have been unsuccessful.

This paper explores these issues through an examination of the historical and theoretical factors that influence the role of race in educational performance. Additionally, through analysis of empirical research in two school districts where efforts to close the racial achievement gap have been undertaken we will consider why greater progress has been achieved in some communities as compared to others, and we will examine the factors that seem to obstruct progress in other places. The goal of such an exercise to clarify how and why race continues to be so controversial and confounding to educators who are working to insure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, receive a quality education and have the opportunity to experience academic success.

## What's Race Got to Do With It?

According to the view of intelligence that prevailed throughout most of the 19th and 20th century, non-whites, particularly Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and even some Eastern Europeans, were believed to possess lower levels of intellectual capacity than Caucasians, particularly those that originated in the countries of northwestern Europe ([Gould 1981](#)). Such views about the relationship between race and intelligence had considerable influence upon social science research, psychology and education (Lehman 1996). Though less overtly pernicious, these views were consistent with beliefs about race held by previous generations; beliefs that rationalized slavery, genocide, imperial aggression, Manifest Destiny and later, Jim Crow Segregation ([Zinn 1980](#); [Fredrickson 1981](#); [Takaki 1989](#)). Early in the twentieth century, advocates of Eugenics - the "science genetic engineering" - propagated the notion that groups and individuals with superior intellect and physical ability, should be encouraged to pro-create to strengthen the national gene pool, while inferior groups should be actively discouraged and even prevented from reproducing their progeny ([Duster 2003](#)). Given their views, it is not surprising that many of the Eugenists were leaders in the effort to devise tests for measuring intelligence ([Lehman 1996](#)). Often, they sought to insure that intelligence tests and exams like the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) would be used to provide an "objective" measure of talent and ability. They also pushed for the results from these standardized tests to be used to determine who should be recruited for top occupations and for enrollment at elite universities ([Fischer, et.al. 1996](#)).

The history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States is not irrelevant to current efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap. Though it is increasingly politically incorrect to attribute differences in achievement to genetic differences between racial groups, it is important to remember that as recently as 1994 *The Bell Curve* ([Hernstein and Murray 1994](#)) made precisely this point, and the book received a mix of condemnation and acclaim at the time of its' release ([Fischer et.al. 1996](#)). Such views have been prevalent in American society for many years even though they have never been supported by research on genetics or advanced by scientists engaged in research linking human biology to intelligence. For example, even though neither of the authors of the *Bell Curve* ([1994](#)) studied genetics (Hernstein was a psychologist, Murray is a political scientist), their lack of knowledge about genetics did not stop them or others from making arguments about the genetic basis of intellectual ability or the inferiority of racial minorities. Not long ago, former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers, suggested that one of the reasons why women were not well represented in math and science related fields was due to innate differences in intellectual ability ([Boston Globe 1/17/05](#)). We can be sure if the President of Harvard University, an economist by training, felt comfortable making remarks about the genetic basis of intelligence, it would not be a stretch of logic to conclude that similar views about the relationship between race, gender and innate ability continue to be widely held throughout American society.

While it is increasingly less common for arguments about the genetic inferiority of minority groups to be made in public, it would be a mistake to suggest that they have disappeared entirely. In their place, arguments that attribute differences in achievement to differences in broad and undefined notions of culture ([McWhorter 2000](#); [Ogbu 1987](#)), parental influences ([Epstein 1994](#); [Cosby and Poussaint 2007](#)) and even rap music ([Ferguson 2002](#)) have been used to serve a similar purpose: rationalizing the lower rates of achievement among Black and Latino students as the result of problems that are inherent to these groups. Unlike biology, culture has been embraced as a less politically distasteful explanation because it is assumed that cultures are not immutable but can be changed over time. Among those advocating this perspective are scholars such as anthropologist John Ogbu ([1987, 2003](#)) who have argued that non-voluntary minorities - groups that were incorporated into the United States through conquest, slavery or force (i.e. Native Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans) consistently do less well in school because they adopt an "oppositional culture" in relation to schooling ([Ogbu 1987](#)). According to Ogbu, to the degree that non-voluntary minorities regard schooling as a form of forced assimilation, they are less likely to embrace the behaviors that contribute to school success (e.g. obeying school rules, studying for exams, speaking standard English, etc.). Ogbu's views have been embraced by many scholars as an effective way to explain why many "voluntary" immigrant minorities (especially Asians) do well in school while many domestic minorities do not.

Similarly, linguist John McWhorter has attributed the lower achievement of many African American students to a "culture of anti-intellectualism", while former English professor Shelby Steele has attributed it to what he calls "victimology": the tendency on the part of blacks to blame "the white man" for their problems ([McWhorter 2000](#);

[Steele 1996](#)). McWhorter contends that “victimology stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor” and he adds that it “condones weakness and failure” (p. 28). Others such as sociologist Orlando Patterson and journalist Juan Williams have cited the culture of gansta rap with its emphasis on “bling” (flashy jewelry), violence and disdain for hard work, as producing a ‘culture of failure’. Finally, a number of others (such as Ruby Payne whose work has been embraced by a number of school districts) have cited a “culture of poverty”, as the reason why poor children of all races often fail to perform well in school. Such theories draw on the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis who argued that inter-generational poverty among Puerto Ricans was reproduced because the poor embraced norms that perpetuate poverty ([Lewis 1966](#)).

Cultural explanations of the achievement gap like those articulated by Ogbu, Payne and McWhorter have been widely embraced by researchers, policy makers and educators ([Noquera 2003](#)). Even though such explanations of academic performance fail to account for those who deviate from established patterns -- poor Black students who excel, middle class white and Asian students that struggle -- but who share a culture with others who conform to these patterns, such theories continue to be embraced by a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners. A recent article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine entitled “Still Left Behind” (November 26, 2006) put the cultural argument in this way: “Kids from poor families might be nicer, they might be happier, they might be more polite -- but in countless ways, the manner in which they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in the measures that count in contemporary American society”. Recognizing how difficult it will be to achieve the goals of NCLB if cultural differences are at the root of the achievement gap, the article goes on to ask “Can the culture of child-rearing be changed in poor neighborhoods, and if so, is that a project that government or community organizations have the ability, or the right, to take on?”

When asked whether low achievement among African American students might be explained by a fear smart Black children have of being accused of “acting white”, or if Asian students are culturally oriented to excel in mathematics, I often point out that such arguments are based upon gross generalizations of culture and overlook the powerful role that schools can play in promoting or hindering academic achievement. For example, cultural arguments cannot explain the large number of Asian American students at schools such as Galileo High School in San Francisco or Richmond High School in Richmond, California who drop out of school, or conversely the large number of low-income African American students at schools like Fredrick Douglas Academy or Medgar Evers Middle College High Schools in New York City who excel. I would argue that the success or failure of such students cannot be attributed to the amount of culture they do or do not possess. Rather, a close examination of achievement patterns at the schools mentioned reveals that it is conditions within these schools that play a major role in shaping the academic outcomes of students.

Ironically, broad generalizations about culture are so widely embraced and so deeply imbedded in popular thinking about race and school performance that they manage to survive even when there is empirical evidence that appears to undermine their validity. For example, one of my former students at University of California, Berkeley, Julian Ledesma, tested the strength of the Asian model minority stereotype in a paper that he wrote for one of my courses ([“Re-thinking the Model Minority Thesis” Unpublished paper, 1995](#)). He surveyed students and teachers at Fremont High School in Oakland about which ethnic group they believed was most academically talented. The vast majority of those he surveyed identified Asian students as the highest performers. This was even true for the Asian students he interviewed who were not doing well in school. Given that Asian students were overrepresented in honors and advanced placement courses at the school, and given that several of the school's valedictorians had been Asian, their responses were hardly surprising. However, in his analysis of student performance data Julian showed that though many of the academic stars at the school happened to be Asian, such students were not representative of Asian students as a whole. In fact, the grade point average for Asian students at the school was a 1.9 on a scale of 4.0. He pointed out that because Asian students were perceived as academically successful, little effort had been expended to provide them with the kind of academic support or special services that had been made available to other students.

Examples like this one do not prove that cultural influences are irrelevant to student achievement. At an aggregate level, Asian American students do out perform other groups in math, White students do achieve at higher levels than Black and Latino students, and middle class children generally out perform poor children ([Farkas 2004](#)). Individual

exceptions exist but the patterns cited are fairly consistent ([Ferguson 2007](#)). To some degree these patterns may in fact be attributed at least in part to characteristics that may be loosely associated with culture. However, in order to be helpful in finding ways to ameliorate or at least reduce disparities in achievement, the specific aspects of culture that seem to be most influential must be identified. For example, certain child rearing practices such as parents reading to children during infancy or posing questions rather than issuing demands when speaking to children, are associated with the development of intellectual traits that contribute to school success ([Rothstein 2004](#)). Similarly, parental expectations about grades, homework and the use of recreational time have been shown to influence adolescent behavior and academic performance ([Cosby and Poussaint 2007](#); [Ferguson 2007](#)). In his research at the University of California, Uri Triesman found that many Asian American students studied in groups and helped one another to excel while reinforcing norms that contribute to the importance of academic success. In contrast, the African American students he studied were more likely to socialize together but study alone ([Triesman](#)). Whether or not such behaviors can be attributed to culture can be debated, but clearly identifying specific behaviors that seem to positively influence academic achievement -- parents reading to children, studying in groups, teaching study habits and organizational skills - is more helpful than making broad generalizations about "oppositional" ([Ogbu 1987](#)) and "anti-intellectual" ([McWhorter 2000](#)) cultures because we can use this information to teach others to emulate behaviors that lead to success.

Even when we can identify behaviors that appear rooted in culture that seem to undermine an orientation toward academic achievement we must be careful about relying upon broad generalizations of culture to explain or guide our thinking about learning. Such thinking often has the effect of reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes because they fail to account for the high degree of diversity within racial groups. Differences related to socio-economic status and income, the educational background of parents, peers, the kind of neighborhood a student lives in, and most importantly the quality of school a student attends, all have an impact upon student achievement ([Miller, 1995](#); [Noguera 2003](#)). Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to over-emphasize the influence of culture on the performance of racial groups, they may be ignored and as a consequence, unaddressed. For example, although there are a large number of White students who do poorly in school ([Steinberg 1996](#)), there is substantially less attention paid to this problem than to the issues facing minority students. Academic failure among White students, like the existence of poverty among White people in the United States, are phenomena that are rendered invisible due to the disproportionate emphasis placed on race in many aspects of American social policy. Moreover, it is rare to hear "experts" cite culture as an explanation for why some White students do poorly in school.

It is hard to imagine how we might go about changing the culture of individuals who seem to embrace attitudes and norms that undermine possibilities for academic success. For that reason alone it is far more sensible to focus on factors that that we actually can do something about. There is a lot that our nation could do to reduce poverty and racial segregation, to equalize funding between middle class and poor schools, to lower class size, and to insure that we are hiring teachers who are qualified and competent. These are all factors that research has shown can have a positive effect upon student achievement ([Miller 1996](#); [Darling-Hammond 2004, 2007](#)), and none of them involve trying to figure out how to change a person's culture.

## **Toward A New Understanding of Race and its Influence on Academic Achievement**

Despite a history of using race as a basis for making social policy ([Fredrickson 1981](#); [Omi and Winant 1986](#)) Americans are confused about race. As a result of the high degree of mixing within so-called racial groups, and because of the amorphous nature of racial categories themselves, a growing number of scholars have rejected the notion that race should be regarded as a biological concept, or that differences between racial groups should be attributed to essential genetic differences. Instead, several scholars in recent years have advanced the idea that race should be considered largely as a socially constructed political category ([Omi and Winant 1986](#)). To justify this approach to the study of race these scholars point out that throughout U.S. history racial categories have changed over time and even been defined differently by states and regions ([Roediger 1991](#)). For example, while the so-called "one drop rule" has been used to determine who is Black in America (i.e. one drop of Black blood makes you Black) ([Twombly 1971](#)), several states historically utilized conflicting criteria for how to defines Blackness. Whereas in Virginia an individual with one-eighth or more of Black blood was defined as Black, in South Dakota anyone one-

sixteenth Black or more was placed in that category, while as recently as 1980 courts in Louisiana ruled that a person was Black if their genealogical make-up exceeded one-thirty-second ([Takaki 1989](#)). That a person could literally change their race simply by moving from one state to another is often cited by contemporary race scholars as further evidence of its' arbitrariness. (1) Similar points have been made in relation to other groups -- Latinos, Asians, etc. because of the high degree of diversity in phenotype and other physical characteristics associated individuals who have been assigned to these groups.

In concurrence with this view, I take the position that if racial categories are indeed social and not primarily biological in nature, (2) then it should be possible to fundamentally alter the predictability of racial patterns related to academic ability and performance if you can eliminate the ways in which racial patterns can become entrenched with the structure and culture of a school. This does not mean that the racial patterns manifest in most academic outcome data can be dismissed as a figment of our collective imagination. Rather, it suggests that we must address the social conditions that produce, perpetuate and give meaning to these disparities. In order for schools to produce academic outcomes that demonstrate that race is irrelevant to achievement they must address the many ways in which racial identity and racial stereotypes are reinforced and even reproduced within academic settings. The notion that African American, Latino and Native American children are not as smart or capable as White students, is not only deeply rooted in American history, it is also propagated in the media and popular culture. Because schools generally reflect the larger values and beliefs of society, stereotypes about the relationship between race and intelligence are invariably reinforced within the structure and culture of schools. Unless educators make a deliberate and concerted effort to challenge them, these forces can have the same impact on student achievement as older views about the relationship between race and intellectual ability.

Unfortunately, the number of schools where race is not a strong predictor of academic performance and no longer "matters" with respect to its ability to predict academic outcomes are relatively few ([Ferguson 2007](#)). While there are a small number of schools where it is common to find Black (3) students among the highest achievers ([Jencks and Phillips 1998](#)) and even a number of high performing high poverty schools ([Education Trust 2002](#)), in most schools in the United States the racial achievement gap remains, despite the Presidents exhortations to eliminate it.

In order to understand how schools can address the ways in which race continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement the remainder of this paper presents an analysis of two suburban school districts that have gone to great lengths to address the achievement gap. As I will show, one district has made significant progress in its efforts to reduce the achievement gap while the other has not. In presenting these two cases it is my hope that by understanding the factors that contribute to success in one setting and paralysis in another we might gain a clearer sense of what it might take to create schools where the race of a child has no bearing at all upon their performance in school.

## A Tale of Two Districts

Suburban school districts with a disproportionate number of low performing Black and Latino students are faced with both top-down and bottom-up pressure to find ways to address the achievement gap. NCLB and state level accountability measures force district and school leaders to show evidence of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in the achievement of their historically underachieving students. Simultaneously, district leaders are faced with pressure from parents' groups and community organizations who seek to hold them accountable for the low performance of these students. In the face of such pressures, the leadership in suburban districts typically can not offer superficial solutions to the challenges facing their low performing minority students because the parents they serve are generally too savvy and well organized to be easily put off. Instead, suburban districts are compelled to develop new approaches to addressing the achievement gap and to demonstrate real evidence that the strategies they implement are working.

While the factors that contribute to the achievement gap, both those external and internal to schools, are similar across most districts, there are clear differences in the policies and practices that districts have used and in the commitment they have shown to address disparities. Not surprisingly, some have made more progress and shown

greater resolve in closing the achievement gap than others. In 2006 and 2007, I conducted research in two school districts in suburban communities in the New York City metropolitan area. Prior to the research both districts had undertaken a variety of measures to reduce disparities in student achievement. Despite their efforts neither had experienced the level of improvement necessary to meet the demands of NCLB or to assuage the demands of the local community. In an effort to understand why past efforts had failed and concerned that public frustration with their inability to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population were growing, the two districts approached me for assistance. Over the course of two years, one year in each district, extensive research was carried out to uncover the factors that contributed to the persistence of racial disparities in student achievement. The findings suggest that while both districts continued to exhibit racial disparities in student achievement, one has made clearer measurable progress while the other has experienced stagnation and paralysis. As will be shown, there were clear differences in the strategies used by the two districts to close the gap and in the institutionalization of policies and practices that would reduce the disparities.

## **Gardenville (4)**

Gardenville placed the need to address the achievement gap as a high priority largely as a result of political pressure. Long recognized for its cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, Gardenville was one of the first communities in the United States to voluntarily integrate its public schools. However, in recent years the district's schools experienced considerable White flight. Despite a steady decline in White student enrollment since the 1980s, the district retained a diverse student population from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. During the 2005-06 school year the district had 5,500 students. Black students constituted almost half of the student population (48.7 percent) followed by Latinos (21.2 percent), Whites (18.8 percent), and Asians (10.9 percent). Although the community was relatively affluent, with an average home value exceeding \$350,000 and a median family income of \$74,903, nearly one in five (19 percent) students qualified for free and reduced lunch. The presence of such a large number of low-income students was a source of controversy among the district's educators, several of whom suggested that a sizable percentage of these students were illegally attending school in the district by using local addresses of extended family members. Several remarks were made to the researchers that this issue was one of the key causes of the achievement gap in the district.

In addition to controversies related to low student achievement there was considerable pressure in the community over local property taxation. In 2006, per pupil spending in Gardenville was \$14,320; one of the highest rates of expenditure in the state. However, approximately 40 percent of families in the town did not enroll their children in the district's public schools. This was particularly the case for Orthodox Jewish residents who constitute a large and growing presence in the community and on the school board. With a large percentage of voters (particularly those without children enrolled in the public schools) resentful over the heavy tax burden created by the cost of public education, and still others dissatisfied by low levels of student achievement among Black and Latino students, Gardenville district leaders found themselves in an increasingly untenable situation.

## **Riverview**

Riverview is a small town with a rich history and a racially and ethnically diverse population. Like many suburban communities nationwide, Riverview is experiencing dramatic demographic change. While there was historically a significant Black presence in the area, during the past decade there has been a steady increase in the number of Black and Latino families moving into the community. Latinos moving into Riverview came from a variety of national backgrounds, and there is evidence that the population is comprised of both documented and undocumented persons. Finding ways to respond to the needs of its changing student population was the primary reason given for the district's interest in examining the factors behind its persistent gaps in student achievement.

Like Gardenville, the Riverview school district has benefited from a high tax base (per pupil spending in 2007 was \$19,054). Riverview, however, is far from a monolithic community and median household incomes ranged from \$53,549 to \$127,274 based upon the highly segregated areas within the community. Similar to Gardenville, Riverview voluntarily integrated its schools. The district adopted an integration plan in which children in the district move through each grade together from elementary through high school. The plan was fully implemented in 1981 and the

graduating class of 1993 was the first group to complete their entire K-12 schooling experience in integrated classrooms. The district has received national recognition for its academic accomplishments, and its high school has been ranked as one of the top one hundred high schools in the nation. Despite these accolades district leaders were fully aware that not enough of their Black and Latino students were meeting educational standards. Having fully acknowledged the disparities that existed, Riverview made closing the achievement gap a top district priority.

While the data collected from Riverview did not identify it as an unqualified success story, many of the strategies that were utilized there show promise and are worthy of emulation by other districts interested in addressing the achievement gap. Most importantly, the lessons learned from the relative success of Riverview, especially when juxtaposed to the reform paralysis experienced by Gardenville may prove instructive to researchers, policymakers and educational leaders who seek to understand what it takes to begin to narrow gaps in student achievement.

## Race and Achievement in School

Not surprisingly, disparities in student achievement are reflected in graduation rates. In 2005, one third of all Gardenville high school graduates received alternate diplomas since they were not able to pass the state's mandatory exit exam. Disproportionately, these students were Black and Latino males. In Riverview, there was a significant difference in the percentage of students among demographic groups graduating within four years. White students had a four-year graduation rate of 97 percent, while Black students only had a four-year graduation rate of 50 percent and Latinos fared only slightly better at 60 percent.

During the 2005-2006 school year, White and Asian students in Gardenville were overrepresented in 4th grade gifted and talented courses, while Black and Latino students were underrepresented. Nearly twenty percent (17.2 percent) of White students and 16.7 percent of Asian students in the 4th grade were placed in gifted and talented compared to 5.7 percent of Black students and 3.9 percent of Latino students. Students who were enrolled in advanced courses attained higher achievement and SAT scores, and not surprisingly, these students were also more likely to be admitted to Tier I post-secondary institutions. Black parents expressed dissatisfaction with the inequitable access to the district's top courses for their children and several parents complained that their students were discouraged from enrolling in the rigorous courses. Although Gardenville offers open enrollment to advanced classes, students of color reported that they felt discouraged about enrolling in honors courses.

The lack of minority students in advanced courses was confirmed by classroom observations and other data on student performance collected during the research. Most students of color were enrolled in general education classes that drew considerable criticism from parents. One high school parent said "classes [were] rigorous if you're in honors; but if not, the kids [were] not being challenged." This belief, combined with the limited access to gifted and talented honors and AP courses for students of color, added significance to the over representation of White students in rigorous and accelerated courses.

In Riverview, students enrolled in advanced courses also had higher academic outcomes than students who did not participate in advanced level courses. The study revealed clear patterns of an achievement gap between students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and non-AP courses. During the 2006-07 school year, Black and Latino students were the most underrepresented in the advanced math sequence. Black students were nearly 10 percent and Latino students 13 percent less likely than White and Asian students to take and pass the math state exam in the 8th or 9th grades after controlling for achievement. While approximately half of Black and Latino students reported they would be attending two or four-year colleges after graduation, more than 82 percent of White students and 100 percent of Asian students made similar assertions. For the high school state mathematics exam, Black and Latino students had mean scores below 70 (out of a maximum 100) while White and Asian students had mean scores in the 80s.

Students in advanced academic tracks made up the largest portion of Riverview's highest performing high school students. These students were estimated to perform 6 to 16 percent better on the study's selected achievement measures. They were also estimated to be 48 percent more likely to pass the exams required for a diploma with

Advanced Designation and 38 percent more likely to report that they would attend a four-year college upon graduation. In Riverview, the effect of being on the advanced academic track was positive, relatively large, and strongly significant, even after controlling for a student's prior achievement. An examination of all students who were in the 11th grade during 2005-06, revealed that more than 70 percent of White students in the grade and all of the Asian students took at least one AP or college course, while only 45 percent of Latino students and 28 percent of Black students took one of these courses. Less than half the Black and Latino students passed the exams required for the Regents Diploma compared with 84 percent of White students. Regarding Advanced Designation diplomas, 23 percent of Black students, and 11 percent of Latino students qualified for this type of diploma compared to 63 percent of White students. (5)

As a way to address the lack of diversity in the AP courses at the high school, the Riverview district worked with a local college to offer a variety of college credit-bearing courses to attract Black and Latino students. Some of the courses focused on African American and Latino history and culture and were aimed at recruiting Black and Latino students. Additionally, this initiative offered other courses in math, science, foreign language and history, and consistently, there were more minority students enrolled in these classes than in the high school's advanced placement courses.

## Efforts to Close the Achievement Gap

The investigation of the two districts revealed strong connections between the social conditions, academic placement procedures and the widening of the racial achievement gap. Interestingly, whereas in Gardenville there was a distinct tendency to blame students and parents for low minority student achievement among teachers and administrators, in Riverview there was greater willingness to accept responsibility for changing student outcomes. Prior to carrying out research there the Riverview district had put in place mentoring programs specifically for Black and Latino students at the middle and high school levels to address some of the social marginalization felt by the students. It had also introduced other reforms, including block scheduling and advisory groups at the high school, that were intended to change the context for teaching and learning and provide students with a greater degree of personal support. These efforts appear to have had a positive impact upon the achievement of African American and Latino students. The measures also contributed to considerable support for the district among minority students and parents. In contrast, data from surveys and focus groups revealed that while Gardenville was mired in a debate over who was to blame for low student achievement, stakeholders in Riverview were working together to find solutions to a problem they believed could be solved.

## The Role of District Leadership in Closing the Achievement Gap

The experience of these two suburban school districts should serve as a sobering reminder of why it is so difficult to bring about genuine, concrete progress in efforts to close the achievement gap. Despite their stated commitments to educate all students and despite the considerable resources at their disposal, neither Riverview nor Gardenville can be held up as examples of school districts that are closing the achievement gap. In both districts wide disparities that correspond to race and class backgrounds of students persist and in neither district is there clear evidence that these will close in the near future. The lack of success in these school districts that have had success in educating White middle class students and where conditions for change are not hampered by a lack of funds or overt racial bias should be seen as a clear indication that changes at a national level will be slow and arduous.

However, while the lack of progress in these two districts is discouraging there are signs that in Riverview at least steps are being taken to reduce disparities in student achievement that may produce change in the long term. Through concrete measures such as increasing access of minority students to rigorous courses, improved mentoring and counseling for students regarded as "at risk" of failure, and by increasing stakeholder involvement in school-related reforms, the district appears to be serious about closing the gap. While these initiatives are unlikely to result in short term changes in academic outcomes, it seems likely that in the long term these strategies may result in incremental change and higher rates of achievement for students of color in the future.



In contrast, there is less optimism for change in Gardenville where there has been little effort to make change in the structure or culture of schools. Whereas educators in Riverview have embraced the challenge of closing the achievement gap and they continue to search for ways to improve learning conditions in its schools, in Gardenville there is no such commitment. This is because educational leaders have addressed this issue largely as a response to political pressure from a community that is increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of its public schools. While these leaders would like to reduce the pressure they are under they lack a clear commitment to address the more complex educational issues that stand in the way of change. The mere fact that so many teachers and administrators continue to blame students and parents of color for low achievement is the clearest sign that they have not yet begun to accept responsibility for addressing the obstacles to achievement. The first step in such a process would be a willingness to ask what they might do differently with respect to the ways in which they are sorting and labeling students, the way they are teaching them, and the way they have organized their schools. Unlike Riverview where this type of introspection and critical analysis is widely embraced, in Gardenville the community remains paralyzed in a fruitless debate over who should be blamed. Even in the face of empirical evidence which showed how racial disparities are maintained, the leaders in Gardenville were not able to escape the paralysis that characterized their reform efforts.

These two cases suggest that educational efforts to reform schools and raise student achievement cannot be viewed separately from political issues related to race and achievement, and questions of leadership. Several researchers have found that political attitudes toward the presence of minority students and their families influence how these students are treated in school ([Lipman, 1998](#); [Meier, Stewart and England, 1989](#)). In communities where White educators lament demographic change and "White flight", and are unconcerned when students of color remain stuck in low level courses ([Weelock 1992](#)), progress in raising achievement and reducing disparities is rarely forthcoming. In contrast, in schools and communities where students of color are embraced and challenged, and where educational leaders willingly accept responsibility for making sure that all students receive a good education, possibilities for change in student outcomes benefit from broader openness to change.

The experience of these two school districts also demonstrate why it is important for educational leaders to openly address the highly politicized nature of the relationship between race and student achievement. District leaders must convince their teachers, students, and other community stakeholders that increasing the achievement of Black and Latino students is not only possible but necessary. In order to accomplish this, district leaders must move beyond the all too common tendency to perceive efforts to promote educational equity as a zero sum scenario in which efforts to address the needs of struggling students are perceived as coming at the expense of high achieving White students. When this occurs, racial polarization and incrimination often stymie efforts to promote change ([Noguera and Wing 2006](#)). In contrast, districts and communities that confront this challenge of racial disparities directly, with a clearly articulated and fully funded strategy, are more likely to experience tangible gains for their students. The ability of educators to accomplish this will ultimately determine whether or not progress is made in closing the nation's racial achievement gap.

## Changing the Discourse on the Relationship Between Race and Achievement

In an unusual break from past practice, NCLB has significantly expanded the role of the federal government in the operation of the nation's public schools. With its requirement that states adopt clear academic standards and accountability measures for schools and students, the federal government has extended its influence over public education in ways that break significantly from the tradition of state and local control ([Darling-Hammond 2007](#)). Even among his fiercest critics, few have argued that the President's desire to improve public education has not been an important and even laudable goal. However, the law remains controversial and it appears likely that the law will be either scrapped or significantly modified by the next Congress.

Undoubtedly, at least part of the reason for the controversy surrounding compliance with NCLB can be explained by the fact that for the first time in our nation's history schools are required to produce evidence that all students are learning. Many schools and districts are struggling under the new law simply because they have never been expected to educate all children before and they have experienced difficulty in fulfilling this basic requirement of the law. This is true in large urban school districts where the majority of students are poor, Black and Latino, and

achievement has historically been low, and it is true in affluent suburban communities where the under-performance of a relatively small number of poor and non-white children was previously overlooked or simply unrevealed because the overwhelming majority of privileged White students were relatively successful. NCLB's requirement that schools disaggregate test scores by race and other designated subgroups has exposed the fact that even in schools and districts with ample resources and a track record of academic success, in many cases, poor and racial minority students have not been well served. Not surprisingly, much of the opposition to NCLB emerged first in these communities, as a result of opposition to the law's heavy emphasis on standardized testing and the resentment generated over the embarrassment of having some of their schools labeled "failing" because of the performance of children of color.

## Moving Beyond Rationalizations of the Gap

As I mentioned previously, cultural explanations of the achievement gap that over-emphasize the importance of race are often associated with a tendency to rationalize the failure of certain students as a "normal" phenomenon simply because it has been manifest for so long. In schools where race and class are strong predictors of achievement, where few Black or Latino students are enrolled in gifted or honors courses but they are overrepresented in special education and remedial courses, and where the link between race and achievement has been firmly established in the minds of educators, students, parents and even the broader community, a sense of complacency about student achievement can develop. In such communities, the failure of students of color can become normalized when educators others rationalize and accept the low performance of students who have consistently under-achieved as the by-product of factors they cannot control.

Too often, attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the normalization of failure are unchallenged, and when failure is normalized educators can grow comfortable with seeing their minority students under perform and fail in large numbers. In such schools, students of color may also grow accustomed to receiving failing grades and may actively avoid academic pursuits or taking challenging courses. Likewise, parents and the broader community can become so conditioned by pervasive and persistent failure among certain groups of students that low test scores, discipline problems and high drop out rates generate little outrage or concern.

When failure is normalized and no one is disturbed by low student achievement it can be nearly impossible for student outcomes or schools to change. Reforms may be implemented -- new textbooks and new curricula may be adopted, schools may be reorganized and restructured, principals may be replaced -- but unless there is a strategy for countering the normalization of failure, it is unlikely that disparities in achievement will be reduced or that schools will ever change. Like cultural explanations of under-achievement, the normalization of failure can reinforce stereotypes about the link between race and intelligence, and unless these beliefs can be countered, it is highly unlikely that patterns of achievement can be altered.

It is important to acknowledge that the factors that contribute to normalization are often quite real and should not be dismissed as merely a form of whining. Student motivation and the attitudes that students display toward learning profoundly affect patterns of achievement. Schools that do not have a strategy for convincing students to become more invested in their education - to work harder, to study, to come to school on time and prepared, and to generally care about learning, are unlikely to reduce disparities in academic outcomes and raise student achievement. Similarly, parents who are negligent about reinforcing the value of education, who fail to encourage their children to apply themselves, or who do not regard education as an effective means to improve the lives of their children because it did not work that way for them, may engage in behaviors that contribute to the failure of their children. All of these factors can contribute to the normalization of failure and complacency related to racial patterns in achievement. This is why the normalization of failure must be addressed if progress is to be made. Educators who are serious about closing the achievement gap and raising achievement for all students must be willing to confront these obstacles rather than merely dismissing them as excuses. What is needed is a strategy that makes it possible to change the discourse about the relationship between race and achievement from one focused on who's to blame to one in which all of the key stakeholders -- teachers, parents, students and administrators, accept responsibility for their role in raising achievement.

President Bush has called for the nation to “end the soft bigotry of low expectations”, as his way of describing what I am calling the normalization of failure. Like other slogans used by the President to further his policy objectives, I have not found such a phrase useful in helping educators to figure out how to approach the challenge of raising achievement for all students. However, I do agree that how we feel about the persistence of the racial achievement gap is important. If we feel some students won’t achieve because they are racially inferior, come from a dysfunctional culture or simply because such students have never done well before, chances are that no reform measure will succeed in changing student outcomes. Our attitudes invariably influence our actions and whenever educators blame low student achievement on some factor they cannot control there is a strong tendency for them to refuse to accept responsibility for those factors they do control. For this reason, countering the normalization of failure must be seen as the first step in any effort to close or at least reduce the achievement gap.

Closing the racial achievement gap and pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be a long term, uphill struggle that is fraught with difficulty because of our history and because our nation remains so profoundly unequal. We must recognize that the sources of inequity typically lie outside of schools -- in disparities in income and wealth, in inequity in parent education and access to healthcare, in access to good paying jobs and vital social services. At this time, there is very little political interest in closing these vital gaps in quality of life but there is lip service at least about the need to close the achievement gap. Even if many of those who have embraced this call do not truly believe that it can be done, the mere fact that the call has been made provides an opportunity to a broader agenda for equity within and among schools. The effort to promote educational equity and close the achievement gap is consistent with the basic promise of American public education: that schools should function as the equalizers of opportunity ([Jencks 1972](#); [Sizer 1984](#)). No matter how difficult and elusive such an effort may be, closing the achievement gap remains a goal that schools must pursue if they are to remain viable as public institutions, and that our society must embrace if we are to avoid greater racial polarization and conflict.

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## Footnotes

1. Changing racial identity by moving across state lines literally happened to the former Dean of Ohio State Law School . For a narrative on his life history and experience dealing with the malleability and ambiguity of American racial categories see: *Beyond the Color Line*.
2. I am not implying that the physical differences associated with race -- skin color, hair texture, etc. are irrelevant, rather I am arguing that the social significance associated with these differences varies over time. For a discussion on how phenotype and the physical characteristics associated with race relate to the idea that race can be regarded as a social construct see by Edward Fergus.
3. For the purpose of this paper I will use the term Black rather than African American to identify students of African descent because the term Black includes students of African and Caribbean heritage. In many school districts data on student performance do not draw distinctions within racial groups based on immigration status or national origin.
4. District names are pseudonyms
5. The finding does not suggest that the students who did not pass at the Regents level were not eligible to graduate as the Local Diploma option was available for those students who did not score at the passing mark on the Regents exams. Students who earned a Regents Diploma, however, were more competitive applicants for college admission than students earning Local Diplomas.

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