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Gaping at Gaps



The term “achievement gap” has become a virtual cliché in education today, thanks in part to the spotlight cast by the No Child Left Behind Act and its provisions for Adequate Yearly Progress. We are all aware of the disparities that exist between the test scores of so-called average students and those disadvantaged by poverty, race, ethnicity, and language.

Gaps, by definition, can be any size. But when they reach the dimensions cited by Paul Barton in this issue, it might be more appropriate to call them chasms. How else would you describe the finding by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that the average eighth-grade minority student in the U.S. scores roughly the same as an average white fourth grader?

How do gaps that large get started, and what can be done to halt and possibly reverse their growth? In a memorable recent study, Barton pinpointed 14 factors that could affect achievement, ranging from low birth weight and excessive TV-watching to parent participation and teacher experience. But he noted that principals have varying degrees of control over only six of the 14. There is little or nothing they can do about the other eight, which relate to events and activity before and beyond school.

If there is a glimmer of hope, according to Barton, it rests on the fact that achievement gaps, while large and persistent, have not grown in recent years. “What this means,” he says, in reflecting on the poor NAEP showing of minority fourth graders, “is that the large gap was already there when students were tested...and that it was simply carried forward.”

That said, what can a principal do to narrow those gaps? More than you might believe possible, if you follow the example of Kentucky principal Peggy Petrilli. She describes how she and her staff closed a huge gap in reading scores with an all-out effort focused on discipline and literacy. Over a four-year period, the number of children reading at grade level rose from 15 percent to 89 percent—and students in the school’s free and reduced-cost lunch program actually outperformed students not in the program.

You will find other useful articles addressing the gender gap, the digital gap, the cultural gap, and the teacher experience gap. They’re all related to that all-too-familiar achievement gap. Maybe it would help if we try a fresh term, like “cognitive separation” or “ability disparity.” No? Well, we tried.

Interested in submitting an article for *Principal*?

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