

Focusing on Achievement Gaps

Mention the No Child Left Behind Act in a discussion and watch the range of responses: Some eyes may roll, expressing frustration. Others will widen, eager for discussion or new understanding. Certainly we've raised issues and concerns with parts of the law, but we also need to give credit to those who put this federal law together with the intent of raising academic achievement for all socioeconomic and racial groups.

Across the country, we now see an unprecedented effort to narrow and close achievement gaps. We've begun to realize that the simplistic ways used in the past to measure school success by averaging scores can hide persistent problems in delivering a first-class education to all our students. NCLB's new focus on long-standing achievement gaps is pushing principals to be more forceful in confronting issues of school readiness, more analytical in finding ways to meet a multitude of improvement targets, and more creative in finding ways to define school success.

You Have to Start Early

Getting serious about achievement gaps means understanding and addressing their causes. Richard Rothstein, in his recent book *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Education Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, writes that the achievement problem is not a result of school failure. Rather, he says, social class differences contribute to a situation that many people look to schools to fix.

If schools are to be held accountable for closing achievement gaps, educators need to be outspoken in making the case that expansion of quality preschool programs is an obvious and effective way to begin the process. We need to emphasize the important role quality preschools can play in closing achievement gaps—whether the issue is race, income, gender, language, or technology—by providing educational opportunities for children in the early years.

Finding Solutions

For principals, closing achievement gaps means being the savvy hunter, gatherer, and analyst of information NAESP



envisioned in *Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. It encourages principals to make sense of achievement data, communicate its meaning to teachers and parents, and to use it constructively to improve teaching and learning.

Closing achievement gaps for various demographic groups—and for individual students within those groups—requires a variety of data to establish a plan to help those students catch up or move ahead and to monitor its progress. Another way of finding solutions for your school's achievement gaps is to identify successful schools with similar demographics, whether in another district or another state, to learn as much as possible about what's already working.

Feeling and Fueling Success

Ending chronic achievement gaps is a huge challenge that takes commitment from everyone. Principals need to get the entire school community to understand and focus on a wider set of performance measures to measure

achievement levels of different groups of students.

No Child Left Behind comes with a number of categories where schools need to show adequate progress each year. One effect of this expanded accountability is that outright success is harder for schools to claim. With so many goals, a school may succeed in some categories while falling short in others. Building momentum and sustaining morale may get more complicated, and school leaders need to think about how to celebrate progress in

moving toward a challenging ultimate goal.

Even without the federal pressure of NCLB, focusing on achievement gaps is a logical step for schools that have defined what they expect all students to know and are prepared to undertake the serious work of trying to get there. While we all know that schools are not totally responsible for learning gaps between rich and poor, black and white, and boys and girls, too often those gaps have persisted and even grown as children move through our classrooms.

No matter what you may think of No Child Left Behind, it is forcing us to focus on a truly momentous challenge. Now that the spotlight has been aimed at groups of students within our schools who lag behind their classmates, we cannot afford to stand still and maintain the status quo. Focusing on achievement gaps is an issue begging for serious and creative attention, as well as a community response built around early childhood solutions. Let's be the leaders in meeting this challenge. ■

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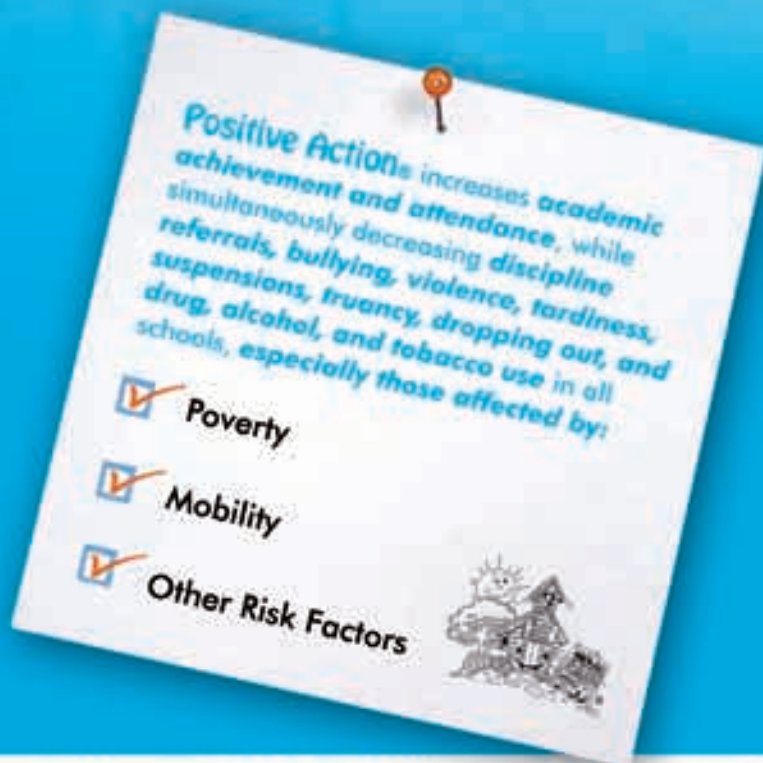
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