Four Steps to Close the Gap

Educators may continue to argue about the best methods to measure student performance. But most of us agree that achievement gaps resulting from race and socioeconomic status are a moral imperative that educators have a responsibility to address.

We know that principals play a key role in closing achievement gaps. Research over the past 30 years shows that strong school leadership is second only to teaching among school influences on student success and is most significant in schools with the greatest need.

As the role of the principal expands, and becomes more and more complex, it may help to keep a focus on four key things that principals can do to improve learning conditions for students and create a school culture that helps close the gap:

1. **Hire effective teachers.** Here’s why Finland sits at the top of international rankings: It trains and supports teachers better than we do in the United States. For one, teacher education in Finland is a five-year, university-based program, with emphasis on teaching diverse learners higher-order skills.

While you might not be directly involved in pre-service teacher training, you can be highly selective about who teaches in your school. When recruiting, look at teacher preparation programs that include extensive coursework on how to teach—with strong emphasis on state-of-the-art practices and teaching students with special needs—and at least a full year of clinical experience.

Insist on hiring teachers who know that students—especially those with special needs—learn in different ways, and who understand cultural content and learning difficulties. Support teachers in creating challenging curricula and developing performance assessments that engage students in research and inquiry.

2. **Commit to professional growth and development that ensures teacher effectiveness.** An effective teacher is the single greatest key to increasing student achievement. To get more effective teachers in our schools, we first need to be clear-eyed about what an effective teacher is and does.

Effective teachers do all three of the following:

- a. They are extremely good classroom managers.
- b. They know how to teach lessons that engage students, spark their eagerness to continue learning, and then lead them to mastery of the subject matter.
- c. They have positive expectations for student success.

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3. **Integrate arts into the curriculum.** Perhaps you think that teaching in the arts—music, drawing, painting, dance, theatre—is a kind of luxury content that is nice to bring into the curriculum only after a student has mastered the core subject areas. (In many schools, these classes are considered “specials.”) Or perhaps you say this can’t be a priority in Title I schools, where principals are fighting to keep all kinds of basic tools available.

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4. **Build your own—not just your teachers’—knowledge of the core learning needs of students.** Stephen Covey referred to investing in one’s own growth as “sharpening the saw” and called it one of the seven habits of highly effective professionals. Focusing on the learning needs of students and teachers is obviously important—but prioritizing it over your own learning as a principal is perilous in that it may seriously limit your effectiveness as well as overall career growth.

Research demonstrates the particular value of a highly effective principal in schools with low-income students, who are minority or English-language learners, and who are low achieving. So understanding the learning needs of the students in your school—and what works to support their growth—is an obvious place to start to focus your own professional growth. Combine this knowledge with the most effective instructional leadership skills to realize immediate benefits in your school.

Principals who influence the learning conditions in their schools—for adults as well as students—are the ones who are increasing performance across the board, and especially for students with the greatest needs.