How to Build a Village

A Conversation With Freeman Hrabowski

This college president and dynamic NAESP conference speaker outlines the key building blocks to closing the achievement gap.

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) has made a name for itself empowering students—especially minority students—in science and engineering. Freeman Hrabowski, president of the university since 1992, has shown that the achievement gap can be closed. But how did he do it? Hrabowski currently chairs the President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans. Over his long career as a teacher, professor, and higher education leader, Hrabowski has learned that teaching diverse learners takes “a village.” And that involves tough lessons for educators.
Hrabowski likes to tell a story about a time, years ago, that he was working with a group of students in Alaska on math. The white students readily answered all his questions, while the native Alaskan students held back.

“I was becoming a little frustrated because the pattern was so clear,” he says. “When we had a break, one boy came up to me and said, ‘What you need to understand is that in their culture, it is considered disrespectful when an adult asks a question to answer quickly. They are expected to take the time to think about their responses before answering.’ Well, that was a concept I hadn’t thought about.”

For his next problem, he gave students half an hour to work, and when he asked for responses, he was floored: grinning, the native Alaskan students had their answers ready.

As Hrabowski learned that day, culturally-responsive teaching is a key strategy in narrowing the achievement gap. It is one of the building blocks of the “village approach” needed to reach learners of different backgrounds.

Hrabowski—a keynote speaker at NAESP’s 2013 conference in Baltimore—sat down with NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly to explore these building blocks and explain how principals can lead the charge to cultivate supportive communities for all students.

GAIL CONNELLY: Where should educators start when trying to craft solutions to close the achievement gap?

FREEMAN HRABOWSKI: I think it is very important for educators to understand what that gap means. That involves, of course, looking at both reading skills and math skills. For instance, African American students’ average reading and math scores in the twelfth grade equate to about the level of the average scores for a middle class white child in the eighth grade—about a four-year gap. Large numbers of African American students, particularly in urban settings, don’t even make it to the twelfth grade.

But, there are other disparities [beyond race] that people need to address. When I talk about the achievement gap, I remind people that we have to talk about the gap between minority children and middle class white children and, quite frankly, the low-income white children who don’t do well either. We also need to make sure we are looking at the gap between our best prepared kids in math, for example, and the kids around the world. There is a gap there, too.

Much has been made of American students’ lagging math and science skills. How can elementary and middle schools have an impact in raising the numbers of students—especially minority students—pursuing science and technology degrees?

As a math teacher for forty years, I’m often saying something that surprises people: If you give me a child who can read well, I can teach her to solve word problems. When I talk about improving performance in math and science, I begin with reading and thinking skills. I want to look at how we are teaching children to read critically. I want to help elementary teachers—and middle school teachers in particular—understand the relationship between language skills and math skills.

If we want to improve the academic performance of students in math and science, we start with the reading and then connect it to math and science. The fact is the better a student can read, the more easily a teacher can teach that child to solve story problems. Getting that strong reading and thinking background as a foundation is really important.

What can principals do for their teachers to help them grapple with deeper math and reading instruction?

Chairing major committees in my own state on math education, I’ve observed that a lot of elementary teachers are afraid of math themselves. We need to face that fact not by pointing fingers at those teachers, but by giving them support so they can learn how best to be effective in working with children on the math problems and reading issues.

What would you say to those who think focusing on closing achievement gaps results in some students getting more attention than others?

I don’t think that has to be the case. At my university—and we’ve used this in K-12 initiatives—we get students who are doing well involved in the tutoring process. It takes a higher level of understanding to be able to help someone else to perform well. There are creative ways that we can close that achievement gap by focusing, yes, on those students who may be at the bottom, while also getting students doing very well to get involved in that process. There needs to be more collaboration.

What do you believe schools will be like in the year 2030, particularly in terms of a stronger continuum of learning in pre-K through 20?

The name of the game will be blended instruction. More emphasis on flipping courses, less emphasis on lecturing to students initially. More emphasis on helping students learn how to learn.

For example, a teacher gives students a video before they come to class that they can review to understand a basic concept. In class, they are
Culturally responsive teaching is a key strategy to amending the achievement gap—one of the building blocks of the “village approach” needed to reach learners of different backgrounds.

given problems to solve. The teacher observes students working through these problems with each other. Students learn to solve some, and they are stuck by others and frustrated. So, when the teacher begins to lecture, he can affirm what the students know well. And, more important, he can work to help them understand where they became frustrated. As a result, students are much more interested.

It seems to me [in the future] K-12 will involve less rigidity in terms of testing. There will be more emphasis on mastery of concepts, and more of an understanding that even if a student doesn’t do well on one test, there should be opportunities through online instruction and collaboration to keep building skills while going on to other topics.

How can stereotypes and expectations about different groups of students adversely affect an individual’s performance?

Too often, teachers can be turned off by students when their behavior is not what we expect—when their attitude is somewhat negative, or when they tend not to be responsive or as cooperative. If we’re not careful, it’s only human to find all of that off-putting and just to assume, “Well, it is just the way it is.”

It takes extra effort on the part of the teacher to go beyond the child’s unfavorable behavior to pull out the best of this child. It takes attention and deliberate effort to think through strategies to help that little black or Hispanic boy who is acting out to understand how important it is for him to get that work done.

And sometimes because of the challenges teachers face and the emphasis on the discipline problems, the time is not there or they haven’t figured out how best to balance all of those challenges against the need to have high expectations for that child.

How can schools encourage more culturally sensitive teaching?

I think it needs to be with some understanding of the child’s context and background. That’s not to lower standards at all. It’s simply to understand the child’s perspective. [My experience in Alaska] was such a lesson to me. Sometimes we don’t know what inspires a child to respond in a particular way.

Principals often struggle with bridging the achievement gap because there are so many outside factors that influence students. What specific steps can you recommend school leaders take to affect some of this meaningful change that we’re talking about?

It’s very important to bring community leaders into schools, especially in a creative way. We might be talking about people from churches, or senior citizens who are respected in communities. We might be talking about parents, both parents of kids who have done really well and also the parents of kids who have had real problems.

We can also bring schools into communities. For instance, I have a mentor who works on home visits. [We have to] help teachers understand how to go into homes without judging what’s going on there. I’ll give you a perfect example. A middle-class teacher, black or white, can go into a home in the projects or in a very poor area and see a very big TV. A typical middle-class response is, “What is this TV doing in the midst of this poverty?” Before she knows it, [the teacher’s] face shows just that. What she doesn’t know is that the mother is watching to see how she is going to respond.

While I certainly wish they didn’t have such a big TV there and that they’d turn that TV off, the worst thing I can do is to show my judgment. As soon as I do that, I have turned that parent off. Again, that’s cultural sensitivity. It’s a two-way street: people from schools getting into the homes, and getting communities into the schools. I think it takes that kind of iterative process (going back and forth) to build trust among different constituencies. It’s the only way we can help our children.

It goes back to what we said some time ago: This is how you build a village. When you think about a village or a community, you really are talking about building trust where people believe people care.

Make a difference.

Learn more about creating a climate for success with Freeman Hrabowski at NAESP’s national conference!

Register now at naesp.org/2013