Putting Beliefs Into Action

Principals can close the achievement gap by following this six-step framework.

By Christopher Wooleyhand
The buzz around closing the achievement gap will not abate. The causes and potential solutions to ending the gap remain hot topics in the staff development efforts of nearly every major school district. School leaders across America puzzle over the continued impact of the achievement gap. It confounds even the most skilled researchers who have examined its presence in schools over the past 45 years.

As the 2012 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning? states, “Gaps between socioeconomic groups as measured by prominent tests have long interested observers of U.S. education.” The report also notes that the focus on the achievement gap began more than 45 years ago with the publication of Equality of Educational Opportunity, often referred to as the Coleman Report. Data collected from the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top continue to suggest that progress is incremental and inconsistent. Despite our efforts as a nation, the gap persists. What can the average, hard-working principal do to address the achievement gap?

Principals should research and read as much as they can about the causes and effects of the differences in student achievement, but they should be careful not to get so caught up in the discourse that they forget to act in their schools. Action is required by every principal, daily. The following is a framework for principals to begin to address the achievement gap in their schools. By putting their beliefs into action, principals can be the nexus of meaningful change.

Believe
The first step in addressing the achievement gap is acknowledging its existence. Principals must also believe that they can make a difference in eliminating disparities in the schools they lead. While these two beliefs seem to be synonymous with the duties expected of every principal, dissonance prevails between beliefs and actions.

Principals must steadfastly connect actions to their beliefs. Their ongoing message to students, staff, and parents must include genuine concern for the progress of all students. Nothing undermines efforts toward eliminating the achievement gap quicker than half-hearted, weak messages that suggest confusion regarding the nature and seriousness of differences in student achievement. Principals also must believe they can address the achievement gap even if they feel their school faces challenges outside of their control.

All schools face challenges outside of their control. For example, in a study funded by the National Education Policy Center, William Mathis explains that class size, adequate funding, and parental wealth and education are
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Discuss

By maintaining a regular dialogue that focuses on student achievement and learning gaps, principals can have a strong influence on teachers, parents, and students. Regardless of a school’s demographic makeup, principals need to engage their stakeholders in honest conversations about student performance. Success is unlikely if principals fail in this role.

In examining social justice in the context of the training provided to principals, Nelda Cambron-McCabe and Martha McCarthy found that school leaders need to question the assumptions that drive school policies and practices related to equity. Principals cannot assume that student characteristics, a lack of resources, politics, or societal conditions are the sole factors impacting student achievement. Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy further note that school leaders should be able to support the learning of both the students and the adults in their buildings.

The authors urge principals to raise critical issues concerning equity and provide leadership that includes a collective responsibility for school improvement. For example, the achievement gap topic needs to be included on the agenda of staff, parent, and community meetings throughout the school year. By keeping the conversation going, principals ensure that the focus on student performance is never left to chance.

Look at the Right Data

In his research on the opportunity gap, Richard Milner raises the question of whether we are focusing too much on testing and not enough on teaching. High-stakes testing distracts us from focusing on the students in front of us. Who can afford to be distracted from the huge responsibility of ensuring equity in schools? Principals must ensure that their teachers look at a variety of data, but the use of formative data must take a front seat to all other forms. Teachers collect data on a daily basis that is far more valuable than standardized testing results.

Richard Dufour and Robert Marzano identify high-leverage strategies that principals can use to focus teachers on student achievement. They suggest that principals provide structures and collaborative teams, as well as schedule the time teachers need to focus on issues and questions directly related to student learning.

Principals need to make it easier for teachers to look at data that provides clear evidence of learning. When teachers collaboratively plan using structures that guide them through the standards, focus on the essential questions, and identify what mastery looks like, they naturally begin looking at the “right” data. Principals play a crucial role in making sure that teachers aren’t spending time with data that won’t help them teach the children in their classrooms.

Make Decisions Based on the Right Data

Meaningful data must be used to make instructional decisions. This is one of the greatest challenges for school leaders. Very often, summative data arrives too late for schools to make meaningful changes for individual students. Teachers, however, are very skilled at breaking down the results of formative assessments to make critical decisions in their classrooms. Teachers can use formative data to reflect on the needs of their students, re-teach the content, and re-group the learners for maximum engagement.

The Institute of Education Sciences’ practice guide, Using Student Data to Support Instructional Decision Making, recommends:

- Making data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement;
- Teaching students to examine their own data and set learning goals;
- Establishing a clear vision for schoolwide data use;
- Providing supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school; and
- Developing districtwide data systems.

These recommendations, while easy to understand, continue to challenge principals. When principals and teachers are given more time to examine student data, they will be more effective at refining instruction.
The systemic use of data is critical to ensuring equitable student progress. Principals must establish the practices within their buildings that connect the examination of data with changes in how children are instructed.

Celebrate Your Community’s Diversity
School leaders and teachers must demonstrate a unified belief in the families from their community, valuing and appreciating the culture of students. In Empowering Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Families, Mubina Kirmani examines the factors needed to develop culturally responsive classrooms. Some of her suggestions for celebrating diversity include:

- Acknowledging the names of students. Sometimes names are given based on family ancestors or religious figures. We may want to shorten names for our own convenience. This distorts their meaning and denies the student’s cultural heritage.
- Promoting the home language. Numerous studies suggest the importance of the first language in developing the second language. Additionally, the first language forms the foundation of the family. Capitalize on it.
- Creating culturally responsive classrooms. Being color-blind is no longer an effective approach to working with families. Recognizing, celebrating, and incorporating the cultures in classrooms tells students that they are safe and respected.
- Including multicultural materials. Posters, displays, and textbooks should reflect the faces and cultures in the classroom. The use of multicultural materials affirms the value of every student.

Building home-school partnerships. Removing the language barriers is the first step in this process. Providing translators reinforces the parent/teacher relationship. Invite families in to share their culture with the classroom. For most students, schools are the first place where they experience cultures different from their own.

Build Teacher Capacity
No school can succeed in eliminating the achievement gap without a philosophy centered in the values of collective responsibility. Leadership that is shared is exponentially more effective than leadership that comes from position. Principals must be willing to share leadership with teachers, staff members, and parents if they truly seek to have all students succeed.

The relationship between shared leadership and student achievement is clear. In 2010, a study by Karen Seashore Louis and colleagues found solid relationships between the level of shared leadership in schools and the achievement of students. In Learning from Leadership: Investigating Links to Improved Student Learning, the researchers note that they were unable to find a single case of increased student achievement without talented leadership in place. Their key finding suggests that when teachers and principals work collaboratively, and relationships are strong, student achievement is higher.

The achievement gap is too big of an issue to expect that one heroic leader can be the sole reason a school makes gains toward narrowing the gap. Principals must find ways to value and include the perspectives of everyone who has a stake in the growth of students. When principals seek support from teachers, students, staff members, parents, and the community, they start a cycle of empowerment that can be a catalyst toward true academic success.

The Work Is Yours
Eliminating the achievement gap is a tremendous undertaking. The reality, however, is that it won’t be done unless principals take the lead. Federal, state, and local initiatives will not be the reason that the achievement gap is closed. While external forces may push and prod school systems to improve, the changes needed to address the achievement gap must take place within the schoolhouse walls. If every principal does his or her part, the gap can be closed. It is as simple as it is complicated. It starts with the belief that school leaders can make a difference and grows through the actions they take for each and every student.

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Principal ONLINE
Access the following Web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: www.naesp.org/MayJun13

Bridge research and practice with resources from The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University.

Examine links to improved student learning by reading Learning from Leadership, a 2010 report funded by the Wallace Foundation.

Explore data on achievement gaps using resources from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The National Education Association hosts a Diversity Toolkit, which can help educators better understand student diversity, and provides strategies and tools to develop culturally competencies.