Featured Article: The Role of an SEA in Closing Achievement Gaps

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The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act focused national attention on improving schools and placed closing achievement gaps at the center of educational reform. The expectation that every student across the nation reach proficiency by 2014 has meant changes for educators at every level. With the reauthorization of the NCLB Act before us, now may be an opportune time to consider the role of SEAs in closing achievement gaps.

The charge to close achievement gaps is not a small undertaking. National performance assessments reveal the severity of the problem particularly as it relates to performance for ethnic-minority and low-income students. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in 2007, national performance averages indicated a 27-point gap between Caucasian and African-American fourth-grade reading scores and a 26-point gap between Hispanic and Caucasian students (NCES, 2007b, p. 11). Eighth-grade reading averages also are cause for concern, revealing a 27-point gap for African-American students and a 25-point gap for Hispanic students in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts (NCES, 2007d, p. 29). Mathematics scores for 2007 show a similar trend, with national averages measuring 26- and 21-point gaps for African-American and Hispanic fourth graders, respectively, and 31- and 26-point gaps for African-American and Hispanic eighth graders, respectively (NCES, 2007a, p. 11; 2007c, p. 27; see Tables 1 and 2 for Illinois and Wisconsin averages). Although national assessments provide an overview of the problem, achievement gap issues also include advanced placement course enrollment, high school graduation rates, college entrance and completion rates, and eventual earned income discrepancies (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). The prolonged and persistent systemic deficiencies that continue to produce these gaps limit the life chances, social mobility, and educational opportunities of low-performing students; therefore, understanding, identifying, and rectifying the problems that create achievement gaps is of utmost importance.

At a recent Achievement Gap Summit, California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell (2007) charged educators across his state to focus on finding and implementing strategies that will close the state's achievement gaps. Speaking to a group of more than 4,000 California educators, O'Connell stated that closing achievement gaps is a moral, social, and economic imperative. He went on to argue that it is the civil rights issue of our day. While contextualizing the urgency of the matter, O'Connell challenged the group to prepare for the long, difficult, and uncomfortable work that is necessary to produce and cultivate the changes that will close achievement gaps. He noted that these adjustments would call for not only a change in practices but also for a change in beliefs. Furthermore, the superintendent acknowledged that SEAs also must ask what they can do differently to ensure that they are accountable for creating conditions necessary for change in order to add value and remove barriers.

Most pointedly, O'Connell called for movement away from ensuring compliance toward a state role of leadership and assistance. Closing the achievement gaps requires leadership at levels—particularly at the state level—that can create the conditions necessary for change and leverage resources to provide schools and districts with assistance targeted to their needs. The first step is a critical examination of current policies and practices that either support or impede progress at the district level. Given the scarcity of resources at all levels of the education continuum, it is important to identify where changes in the system's structures, policies, and practices can lead to significant, enduring improvements.

Under NCLB, responsibilities and expectations of SEAs have expanded, requiring them to play a pivotal role in educational improvements by establishing assessment and reporting systems, building district and school capacity to improve student achievement, ensuring quality teaching, and communicating school progress to the public (Ikemoto, Clifford, Tack, & Hansen, 2008). Furthermore, SEAs must continue to regulate and monitor public education, and under NCLB, they also must lead and support district and school improvement. These new responsibilities may require some SEAs to shift the nature of their relationships with districts from one of comparatively little intervention by the state to one of support and guidance. In addition, "new responsibilities also may require SEAs to adjust their staffing to acquire the skills and expertise necessary for guiding district and school personnel on improvement efforts" (Ikemoto et al., 2008, p. 1). The expectations for the function of an SEA have shifted and require a new approach for working and interacting with districts.

Bennett et al. (2004) remind us that it is important to remember that academic ability is not an inherited or predetermined trait but rather is developed through a broad range of deliberate pedagogical, social, and educational interventions. Bennett et al. assert that a systemic approach to closing achievement gaps and improving learning for all students necessitates access to a combination of educational interventions in the classroom, school, and community. Furthermore, as Superintendent O'Connell noted, closing our achievement gaps requires a deliberate focus and examination of issues related to access and equity. Educators at all levels must intentionally ask why our African-American, Hispanic, and low-income students are systemically and continuously less successful in school than their Caucasian and Asian peers. Engaging in intentional and courageous conversations about questions such as these will shed new light on statewide initiatives, such as teacher and principal preparation, the equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers, accountability systems, resource allocation, standards, curriculum, instructional practices, school climate, parent and community involvement, and teacher and student expectations. It is important not to downplay the significance of courageous conversation that allows for the examination of common practices. For example, such a change in discourse may lead to the alteration of teacher preparation programs by requiring teachers to take courses that focus on serving underachieving students and require that teachers demonstrate a level of cultural proficiency as a prerequisite to certification.

As a technical assistance provider, Great Lakes West is positioned to support systemic change and further the shared goals and visions of our state departments by coordinating activities and assisting in building collaborative relationships that result in integrated services. For instance, with the intention of continuously improving services and support to Illinois districts and schools, the Illinois State Board of Education, with assistance from Great Lakes West, is

currently assessing their statewide system of support that provides assistance to those districts and schools identified by NCLB as being in need of improvement.

In Wisconsin, Great Lakes West is working with state staff to support the implementation of State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's priorities under the New Wisconsin Promise, which include the following: "reading as a fundamental skill for all children; quality teachers in every classroom; strong leadership in every school; shared responsibility and increasing parental and community involvement in our schools and libraries to address teenage literacy, dropouts, and truancy; and providing effective pupil services, special education, and prevention programs to support learning and development for all students while preventing and reducing barriers to student success" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Superintendent Burmaster, recently noted, "In Wisconsin, our commitment to raising the achievement of all students and closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and their peers is our number one priority" (2008, p. v). In the coming years, Great Lakes West will continue to work with the SEAs in our states to assess needs, find solutions, and support the implementation of systemic change in order to develop better tools and processes.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet that will help us close achievement gaps. The solution requires an intentional focus on systemic change coupled with leadership committed to change and the resolve to see these changes through to completion.

Illinois NAEP Scores

The 2007 Nation's Report Card for fourth-grade mathematics in Illinois indicates that African-American students had an average score that was lower than that of Caucasian students by 32 points, as shown in Table 1 (NCES, 2007m, p. 18). Hispanic students had an average score that was lower than that of Caucasian students by 25 points, and the gap between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and those not eligible was 26 points (NCES, 2007m, pp. 18–19). Furthermore, the gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 40 points (NCES, 2007e). All of these scores indicate that between 2000 and 2007, there has been little change in the achievement gaps. Gaps persist in the eighth-grade mathematics performance averages with a 38-point gap between African-American and Caucasian students, a 26-point gap between Hispanic and Caucasian students, and a 30-point gap between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and those not eligible (NCES, 2007o, pp. 34–35). In 2007, the gap between eighth-grade mathematics students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 48 points (NCES, 2007g).

Table 1. 2007 Illinois NAEP Scores

	Grade 4 Mathematics Gap	Grade 8 Mathematics Gap	Grade 4 Reading Gap	Grade 8 Reading Gap
African-American students	32	38	29	27
Hispanic students	25	26	24	21
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	26	30	28	23
Difference between 75th and 25th percentile	40	48	49	43

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2007e, 2007f, 2007g, 2007h, 2007m, 2007n, 2007o, 2007p)

With regard to reading scores, all reported subgroups, with the exception of gender, narrowed gaps between 2003 and 2007. Specifically, fourth-grade reading scores indicate a 29-point achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students, which is a decrease of 5 points between 2003 and 2007 (NCES, 2007n, p. 18). The gap for Hispanics in 2007 was 24 points, which shows a 6-point narrowing between 2003 and 2007 (NCES, 2007n, p. 18). Likewise, the gap between free or reduced-price lunch students was 28 points, demonstrating a 7-point reduction between 2003 and 2007 (NCES, 2007n, p. 19). The overall fourth-grade reading scores show that in 2007, the score gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 49 points, which illustrates an overall decrease of 4 points between 2003 and 2007 (NCES, 2007f). Similarly, in eighth-grade reading, scores indicate that African-American, Hispanic, and free or reduced-price lunch students all experienced a narrowing in the gap. The gap between African-American and Caucasian students was 27 points, down 2 points (NCES, 2007p, p. 36). The gap between Hispanic and Caucasian students was 21 points (down 5 points from 2003), and the gap between free or reduced-price lunch students was 23 points, which decreased 4 points (NCES, 2007p, pp. 36–37).

The only increase in achievement gaps between groups occurred between male and female students. Scores from 2007 indicated that fourth-grade male students had an average score of 5 points lower than females, and this gap increased to 8 points for male students in eighth grade (NCES, 2007n, pp. 18–19; 2007p, pp. 36–37).

Wisconsin NAEP Scores

The 2007 Nation's Report Card for fourth-grade mathematics in Wisconsin indicates that African-American students had an average score that was lower than that of Caucasian students by 38 points (NCES, 2007m, p. 18; see Table 2). Hispanic students had an average score that was lower than that of Caucasian students by 21 points, and the gap for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and those not eligible was 25 points (NCES, 2007m, p. 18). Furthermore, the gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 36 points (NCES, 2007i). Gaps persist in the eighth-grade performance averages with a 45-point gap between African-American and Caucasian students, a 24-point gap between Hispanic and Caucasian students, and a 28-point gap between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

and those not eligible (NCES, 2007o, pp. 34–35). In 2007, the eighth-grade mathematics gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 47 points (NCES, 2007k).

Table 2. 2007 Wisconsin NAEP Scores

	Grade 4 Mathematics Gap	Grade 8 Mathematics Gap	Grade 4 Reading Gap	Grade 8 Reading Gap
African-American students	38	45	38	38
Hispanic students	21	24	21	22
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	25	28	26	26
Difference between 75th and 25th percentile	36	47	44	44

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2007i, 2007j, 2007k, 2007l, 2007m, 2007n, 2007o, 2007p)

Specifically, fourth-grade reading scores indicate a 38-point achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students, which is an increase of 10 points from 1992 (NCES, 2007n, p. 18). The gap for Hispanics in 2007 was 21 points, which shows a substantial increase from 1992 when there was no significant difference between Hispanic and Caucasian students (NCES, 2007n, p. 18). Likewise, the gap between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and those not eligible was 26 points (NCES, 2007n, p. 19). The overall fourth-grade reading scores show that in 2007, the score gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 44 points, which illustrates an overall increase of 3 points between 1992 and 2007 (NCES, 2007j).

With regard to eighth-grade reading, in 2007, male students in Wisconsin had an average score that was lower than that of female students by 15 points (NCES, 2007p, p. 37). African-American students had an average score that was lower than that of Caucasian students by 38 points (NCES, 2007p, p. 36). Hispanic students had an average score that was lower than that by 22 points, which was a 9-point increase since 1992 (NCES, 2007p, p. 36). Students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch had an average score that was lower than that of students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch by 26 points (NCES, 2007p, p. 37). Thus, in 2007, the score gap between students at the 75th percentile and students at the 25th percentile was 44 points (NCES, 2007l).

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