

The Principals Role
In
Closing the Achievement Gap

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Leadership and Organization

Effective school leaders will enhance teaching and learning and are a key component to the success of a school and the achievement of students. Robert Marzano says in his book *School Leadership that Works*, “Principals can have a profound effect on the achievement of students in their schools.” Knowing that school leaders play a role in the achievement of students, what role do they play in closing the achievement gap?

We often want to point fingers at our teachers, however, what about those that lead our teachers? Should principals be held accountable for their leadership ability as it relates to the achievement gap? How does ineffective leadership perpetrate the achievement gap?

What is the Achievement Gap?

Before we can examine the role a school administrator plays in the achievement gap, we need to address what it is. The Public Schools of North Carolina offer a clear definition. They state, “The achievement gap is a persistent, pervasive and significant disparity in educational achievement and attainment among groups of students as determined by a standardized measure. When analyzed according to race and ethnicity, achievement disparities negatively impact educational outcomes for poor children and children of color on a consistent basis.” The achievement gap is something that the whole nation faces. Unfortunately, “in Minnesota that gap is particularly wide, the fifth worst in the nation” (Mariani).

There are many causes for the achievement gap and it is difficult to say that one or two things are the cause of it. “Exactly to what depth the role of poverty, home situation or institutional bigotry play in the achievement gap is still under debate” (Fitzgerald). However, when we look at how we can begin to close the achievement gap, there are many ways in which our school leaders can have an impact on it.

Changing Role of the Principal

The principals' role has drastically changed over the last ten years. Gone are the days when they are just supposed to be good managers. The role once involved "setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers" (Lashway). Today however, principals need to be actively involved in student and teacher learning. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, "school leadership has gained considerable attention over the past six years of implementation" (Van Roekl). An article put out by the National Education Association, titled *Changing Role of School Leadership* says, "The requirements of NCLB have not only put the spotlight on principals' instructional leadership skills but also make the point evident: academic achievement and instructional leadership are clearly and definitely linked." With that we now know that one of the most important roles a principal has is to be the instructional leader.

It is evident that when the principal takes on the role of the instructional leader, teachers should be able to count on them for "resources of information on current trends and effective instructional practices. Instructional leaders are tuned-in to issues relating to curriculum, effective pedagogical strategies and assessment" (Phillips). If teachers become better teachers, then student achievement can begin to increase. If we can begin to increase student achievement, we can begin to close the achievement gap.

One book that takes an in-depth look at the achievement gap and our black students is *Black Students. Middle Class Teachers.* by Jawanza Kunjufu . In this book, Kunjufu analyses studies done by researcher Ron Edmonds. Part of this research looks at many schools that have scored above the national average. Kunjufu notes that, "The salient factor in all these schools is that the principal is the instructional leader. These principals have either designated someone else

to perform administrative functions or principals tax themselves to do that outside of the school day. When children are present, they are visiting classroom, observing teachers and making suggestions.” Kunjufu also notes that “The future of African American children lies in the hands of principals, who must monitor teachers.” In addition, part of being the instructional leader is being able to “know the strengths and weaknesses of their faculty but also recognize that teachers desire to be acknowledged and appreciated for a job well done” (Phillips).

When principals create a focus on the strengths of staff members, he begins to create teacher leaders. When given the opportunity to be a leader, many will emerge. In successful schools, “the principal is aware of the strengths of the staff and taps into each member’s expertise to improve teaching and learning in the school” (Mednick). Instead of the principal focusing on the weaknesses of staff members, they know how to encourage strengths. By having a school of leaders, from custodians to educational assistants to teachers, we can begin to transform the learning that goes on in order to raise achievement. One school that is a great example of that is Viers Mill. Viers Mill was able to “achieve a minimum proficiency rate of 76 percent for every racial and ethnic group in reading and mathematics in grades 3, 4, and 5. Members of the school’s staff identify the principal as playing an essential role in their success. There’s also a general recognition that every staff member has leadership responsibilities” (Thompson & Leverett).

Richard DuFour also took a look at the role of the principal in regards to student achievement in his article, *The Learning Centered Principal*. He would argue that it is not as important to be the “instructional leader as it is to be the learning leader.” Essentially, he believes that principals should not focus on how to help teachers improve their instruction, but yet focus on if students are learning what is intended. He states that “principals foster this

structural and cultural transformation when they shift their emphasis from helping individual teachers improve instruction to helping teams of teacher ensure that students achieve the intended outcomes of their school.” DuFour suggests that “when we ask the right questions, “To what extent are the students learning the intended outcomes of each course? and What steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time and support they need to improve learning?” student achievement goes up. If the principal focuses on making sure that students’ are learning what they are supposed to and does what it takes to make sure that it happens, we can begin to close the achievement gap.

These two ideas, instructional leader and learning leader, should be combined in order to effectively increase student achievement. It is critical to focus on students learning the desired outcomes, but it is just as important to ensure that teachers have the correct tools and are using best practice when it comes to instructional strategies. The National Association of Elementary School Principals agrees. They frame instructional leadership in terms of “leading learning communities”. They believe the “instructional leaders have six roles: making student and adult learning the priority; setting high expectations for performance; gearing content and instruction to standards; creating a culture of continuous learning for adults; using multiple sources of data to assess learning; and activating the community’s support for school success” (Lashway).

If it is evident that there has been a lot of research done that discusses the principals changing role in becoming the instructional or learning leader, why are so many principals not putting this into practice. Why are there still so many ineffective school leaders that continue to allow the achievement gap to widen? Principals are often not given the tools they need in order to be successful at creating a learning community. They are inundated with all administrative duties they must do and they are unaware of how to transform their role into becoming this new

type of leader. Thus, as long as they continue in the old role, the achievement gap will remain. We must give principals the tools they need in order to create this new environment that fosters teacher learning as well as student learning so that we can begin to increase student achievement and in return begin to close the achievement gap.

Students and families

We have analyzed what the role of the principal is in working with teachers to close the achievement gap, but what role do they have in working with students and families to help ensure that all students are successful.

If we are aware that the achievement gap “negatively impacts educational outcomes for poor children and children of color on a consistent basis” then we need to analyze what the major differences are between those students and white students.

An ineffective leader will have no interest in analyzing those differences and will allow socioeconomic status and racial differences to be the cause of the achievement gap, accepting that as an answer. Effective leaders will pay attention to all the other key components in education? Kunjufu notes in his book, “low expectations, poor time on task, incongruence between pedagogy and learning styles, irrelevant curricula, negative peer pressure, tracking and poor parent involvement” play more of a role than socioeconomic status does in ensuring that all students are successful, thus helping close the achievement gap. It is the principals’ job to figure out how to make a difference in these areas and not allow socioeconomic status and racial differences hold back students.

The first difference can be made by setting high expectations for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity or culture. Effective school leaders will ensure that high expectations for all students are set. In addition, they will provide the support necessary for students to be able to meet those expectations. Students will strive to live up to the expectations that are set for them. Thus putting them in remedial classes and labeling them as “low-achievers” will only perpetrate the problem. In return, “engaging low-achieving students in a challenging, speeded-up curriculum produces positive academic and social outcomes” (Benard). Instead of labeling students as ‘at risk’ and struggling learners, pick out students strengths and use those as a starting point for learning (Benard). Effective principals will be the ones that will set the tone for this expectation to occur in the building, and will model it. In addition, they will be the ones that will guarantee that the resources are there to support the teachers and students so the expectations can be met. If all students are held to high expectations and standards and the underlying value is that all students can learn, the achievement gap will begin to close.

Another way to ensure that high expectations are set for all students is to ensure that you “infuse multicultural content throughout the curriculum” (Benard). Ana Maria Villegas and Tamora Lucas wrote a book *Educating Culturally Responsive Teachers*. In that they recommend some key strategies that will help set high expectations for students. A few of them are “gain social cultural consciousness, develop an affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds, develop the commitment and skills to act as agents of change, learn about students and their communities and cultivate culturally responsive teaching practices” (Kunjufu).

Effective school leaders will engage all staff in learning about the culture of the students and the community that you serve. It is important to have an understanding about various cultures in order to begin to understand a bigger picture for student learning. One detail of the

bigger picture is that different learning styles may be present in different cultures. Kunjufu says “Learning style is not dictated by race, income, or marital status. Culture is the driving force.” If we want to increase the success levels of our students, “we can no longer assume that all of them learn from written materials”(Kunjufu). It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure that teachers are using multiple learning styles in their classrooms and if they are not, offer suggestions of how to incorporate them. In addition, principals should ensure that there are various co-curricular activities available before and after school in order to tap into the various learning styles. If students are given the opportunity to learn in ways that best meet their needs, achievement will rise among these students.

Offering various co-curricular and extracurricular activities can help students overcome negative peer pressure. Principals should ensure that there is a lot of positive pressure around students. Students of color will often times feel most confident at athletics or extracurricular activities so effective school leaders will keep these activities a priority. Unfortunately, students of color may succumb to negative peer pressure with academics because they are afraid that it is not okay to be smart. They often times feel that they “cannot adopt any of the ways of the majority without giving up parts of their culture” (Kunjufu). Being smart is one such thing minority students may feel is for white students. An effective leader will be able to model that academics is for everyone. They can do this by making sure that students of color have role models. In order to ensure that students of color have role models, principals should be conscious about hiring staff members of color, inviting in guest speakers who are successful from various cultural backgrounds, and fostering the school environment to be culturally responsive. One way to create a culturally responsive environment would be to hang up flags of student’s home country around the school to allow students to feel welcome and special.

Lastly, not only should students feel welcome and special, effective school leaders know that they need to extend that outreach to parents. Parents should feel that school is a place they can come for support with their child and that they are not always there because their student is in trouble. Effective principals know how to reach out to parents, “providing training and support to parents to enhance their communication with their children about school, their supervision of their children, and their ability to communicate expectations to their children within the context of an effective parenting style” (Marzano). In addition, principals should think about offering support groups to parents on key topics that are culturally responsive, provide transportation to school activities (including parent-teacher conferences), and provide meals and child care at school events. By making small steps in this direction, parents will know that you care about them and are there to truly meet the needs of their student.

Some parents are unaware of the importance of education continuing at home. The only way to ensure that they understand this is to offer the support to them. Kunjufu states that “we could close the achievement gap if African American families would turn off the television for two hours each weekday night in favor of reading.” Despite the fact that school leaders and teachers are not at home to have influence over this, they can provide the knowledge and resources to get our parents on this track.

In a nutshell, there are many ways that an effective school leader is able to work with students and families to ensure success for all students. Baruti Kafele, a principal at Newark Tech High School, which has been successful in closing the achievement gap says, “If we’re going to be effective in closing this achievement gap, then we have to be in the classrooms all day long. We have to be in the hallways in between classes, in the cafeteria, at a table with our students, engaged in interactions with our students.” and let’s not leave out our families.

Bringing it all together

After analyzing the role the effective school leader plays in becoming the instructional and learning leader, as well as working with students and families, we can see that they will enhance teaching and learning and are a key component to the success of a school and the achievement of students. It is clear that through the research, not one particular thing causes the achievement gap.

Larry Leverett, Executive Director of Panasonic Foundation sums up the best way to close the achievement gap in a systematic way. He says “This story involves many people: a passionate and gifted superintendent, a school board that views its role as stewardship of equity and excellence for *all*, union leaders who work collaboratively with the board and administration on school system improvement, a central office staff that provides resources to schools in ways that build capacity and add value, principals who are unwilling to accept race and class as explanations for low performance, teachers who use data in powerful ways to plan and deliver instruction, students who see themselves capable of higher performance, and a community willing to support equity by weighted funding that is intended to wipe out the impact and influence of disadvantage. Most of all, it is a story of courageous conversations that feed courageous actions every day.”

What a better place to start then with our leaders who can begin to have those courageous conversations and put action into effect in order to really begin to make a difference in closing the achievement gap and making sure that “No Child is Left Behind.”

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