



The Achievement Gap Initiative  
at Harvard University

## GETTING IT DONE



RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND  
CLOSING GAPS IN WHOLE SCHOOL  
SYSTEMS: RECENT ADVANCES IN  
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

2008 Conference Report

The **Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University** is a University-wide endeavor based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Wiener Center for Social Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. Its purpose is to focus academic research, public education, and innovative outreach activities on a critically important national challenge.

The AGI is creating important new mechanisms for bridging between universities and schools, enabling greater communication and cooperation not only among concerned researchers, but also between researchers and education practitioners who grapple with this challenge every day in their classrooms. The Initiative also seeks to engage organizations that work directly with children and families outside school hours.

The AGI includes roughly two dozen researchers from Harvard and a network of colleagues from other institutions, who aim together to accelerate the accumulation of “usable knowledge” and to bring that knowledge to bear on raising achievement among children of *all* racial and ethnic backgrounds, with a special emphasis on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the U.S. One hundred presentations by AGI researchers and colleagues at events from 2005 through 2008 are available online in the AGI video library for public viewing at <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>.

Laboring in a multitude of roles, sharing our energies and insights, together we have an opportunity, indeed, a responsibility, to make a difference to many future generations of Americans. Our nation’s future can brighten even as its complexion darkens, but only if we accept this urgent responsibility to raise achievement levels among all children while also narrowing gaps.

We look forward to sharing this responsibility with you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) co-chairs Ronald Ferguson, Richard Murnane, and Charles Ogletree thank all of the conference presenters, discussants, and participants who took time to share their research and experience. We also thank the Montgomery County parents who watched conference presentations online and wrote us to share their perspectives.

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## PREFACE

Ronald F. Ferguson, AGI co-chair and director

Knowledgeable and inspired leadership in schools and districts—relentlessly focused on aligning all functions toward the goal of improving classroom instruction—is the key to raising achievement and closing gaps.

How can school boards, superintendents, and their staffs work toward excellence with equity in whole school systems, not just in a few exemplary schools? Teams of researchers and practitioners from universities, think tanks, and public school systems gave their answers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, on June 16 and 17, 2008.

The occasion was the fourth annual research-to-practice conference of the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University. Prominent researchers and practitioners discussed and debated strategies for raising achievement levels among all types of students while narrowing gaps between groups. Over 200 guests attended.

The central theme emerging from the conference was that knowledgeable and inspired leadership in schools and districts—relentlessly focused on aligning all functions toward the goal of improving classroom instruction—is the key to raising achievement and closing gaps. Presenters and discussants agreed not only about the central importance of instruction, but also about many of the key strategic conditions that leaders need to cultivate. Discussants emphasized that some aspects of the consensus have yet to be confirmed by the most rigorous research. In such instances, “collective best judgment,” informed by both research and experience, is the best that we can do.

Recent research reveals that most Americans consider school districts mainly as administrative units, with superintendents and principals as the managers who open the buildings and staff them with teachers. Many believe that if particular schools or districts are better than others are, it is mainly because the better ones attract “higher-quality families.” When it comes to producing learning, they believe that teachers differ mainly in how much they care about their students. According to this common perspective, students in some classrooms learn more mainly because their teachers care more, their parents demand more, and the students work harder. Under this scenario, school system administrators are relatively powerless to affect achievement levels or disparities.

In contrast, presenters at the AGI conference characterized American schooling in more nuanced ways. They described their work and distilled their best judgments—summarized here—for superintendents, school board members, school system administrators, and other key stakeholders.

## SEVEN STRATEGIC PROPOSITIONS FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The on-the-ground strategies the educators at the conference described had much in common with the research-based frameworks researchers at the conference promoted. All asserted the following as key aspects of effective change strategies.

1. **Leadership that Combines Passion with Competence.** Superintendents, principals, other administrators, and even lead teachers effectively cultivate not only a sense of urgency but also a sense of possibility, built on demonstrated expertise among people in key positions and their commitment to continuous improvement.
2. **Clear, Shared Conceptions of Effective Instruction.** The district identifies key ideas concerning effective instructional and supervisory practice, and works to establish them as a “common language” for approaching instructional improvement.
3. **Streamlined and Coherent Curriculum.** The district purposefully selects curriculum materials and places some restrictions on school and teacher autonomy in curriculum decisions. The district also provides tools (including technology) and professional development to support classroom-level delivery of specific curricula.
4. **Organizational Structures and Personnel that Embody Capacity to Teach and Motivate Adults.** The district maintains routines and structures within which adult educators (sometimes consultants) engage teachers and administrators in continuous improvement of instructional and supervisory practices. Coaching, observing, and sharing make it difficult for individuals to avoid the change process, and the push for adaptive change spurs resisters to leave their comfort zones or eventually depart from the district.
5. **Patient but Tough Accountability.** The district develops tools and routines for monitoring teaching practices and learning outcomes, targeting assistance where needed, and sometimes replacing teachers or administrators who fail to improve.
6. **Data-Driven Decision Making and Transparency.** Teachers and administrators analyze student performance for individuals and summarize data by grade level, special education status, English as a second language status, race/ethnicity, and gender. The district publicizes strategic goals for raising achievement levels and reducing gaps, and tracks progress in visible



ways. Administrators identify, examine, and often emulate practices from successful schools.

7. **Community Involvement and Resources.** The district engages a range of stakeholders, including school board members, local businesses, and parents, to do their part toward achieving well-formulated strategic goals.

Districts represented at the conference are further ahead than many at achieving these conditions.

### BUILDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT

The conference featured administrators with reputations for adapting abstract and conflicting principles in coherent ways to the very real circumstances of their schools and districts. Their presentations showed how both their predispositions and their capacities—their attitudes and their expertise—had combined to improve local support for instruction. In addition, neither their attitudes nor their expertise were static entities: both had been the focus of deliberate capacity building to improve professional practices in the featured districts.

Ms. Victoria Oakley, director of instruction in Richmond, Virginia, made this clear to conference participants when she said, “We walk the buildings. We model lessons for teachers. We work with grade-level teams to look at how to provide interventions as they look at their real-time data. We spend a great deal of time also training and working with principals to ensure that they understand what a great lesson should look like, what an effective instructional strategy would be in reading and math. Together the Department of Instruction has been working with schools to ensure that academic excellence takes place. But we had to look hard at ourselves first; we had to learn that we had to be retooled and retrained, and to understand that our customers are the schools, the teachers, and the children.”

Presenters also made clear that schools and districts vary widely in their approaches to revamping and aligning systems to close achievement gaps—even when they agree on basic principles. One source of such variation is simply that local circumstances are unique and warrant tailored responses. Another can be the absence of a clear, coherent, research-based consensus on particular practices among the experts to whom education professionals look for guidance.

Still, participants in this conference are among many whose studies and professional innovations are helping to build consensus on principles, and to fill gaps concerning specific policies and practices. In fact, progress in conceptualizing and implementing whole-district improvement over the past decade has been substantial, and is continuing. (See, for example, suggested readings at the end of this section.)

## STRATEGIC PLANNING AND “MOVEMENT BUILDING”

An important trend over the past decade has been the proliferation of district- and school-level strategic plans. Such plans record goals and new policies, programs, projects, and practices that framers hope to implement. However, the record shows that many plans sit on the shelf and make little or no difference to what teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders actually do to help children learn.

Conference participants agreed that whether strategic plans lead to progress in classrooms depends not only on their content, but also on what leaders say and do to achieve implementation. The ability to teach and inspire local stakeholders is critically important, because coercive control has limited potential. Experts agree that no matter how much formal authority a school board, superintendent, or school principal may have, no one can command and control the implementation of an ambitious strategic plan.

Accordingly, in each example of progress from the conference, especially Montgomery County (MD), Richmond (VA), and two Boston (MA) schools, inspirational and expert leaders balance the imposition of control with the cultivation of goal-directed autonomy. Certainly, the work in these places remains incomplete. Stakeholders complain that progress is too slow and there is debate over priorities—including concerns among some parents and teachers that striving for equity may undermine excellence. Nonetheless, leaders in each featured district are striving to build a collective sense of urgency and possibility. They are endeavoring to build local social movements for excellence with equity—movements in which large numbers of stakeholders will routinely seek ways to help implement the measures and achieve the goals that strategic plans articulate for helping ALL students to reach their potential.

## CLOSING REMAINING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Researchers applauded the work of the practitioners who presented at the conference, but cited knowledge gaps that remain for both researchers and practitioners. Researchers who were discussants argued that, at least from a research perspective, key aspects of change strategies discussed at the conference should be regarded as hypotheses, not proven propositions. The point was not that the researchers disagreed with the practitioner judgments. Instead, it was that the types of evidence researchers seek are difficult to assemble, and typically not available for some of the judgments participants were making.

Evaluation researchers, in particular, aspire to isolate the distinct contributions of individual causal factors to specific measurable outcomes. However, because most

natural settings are places where many influences combine to produce composite effects, it is seldom possible to know with confidence how much any one action contributes to a particular result.

The impacts of policies and practices at particular times and places can be known with relative certainty when they are tested with randomized experimental trials. Over the years, randomized trials have tested class-size effects, the impacts of ability grouping, after-school programs, and various instructional methods. However, most such experiments have not been repeated under enough alternative conditions to establish firmly that their findings are valid under a broad range of circumstances.

Even some of the most often repeated and likely-to-be-true propositions lack the amount and quality of research support that skeptical researchers would find persuasive. MDRC's Janet Quint pointed out that each of the frameworks presented and each of the districts that reported progress at the conference implicated a complex recipe within which it would be nearly impossible to discern the most active and important combinations of ingredients.

So, how seriously should research-based guidance be treated? Dr. Connell of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) argued that research-based judgments, incomplete as they may be, are nonetheless superior to what practitioners are likely to craft independently, without the benefit of research-based insights gleaned from systematic studies by professional researchers.

Researcher Dr. Richard Murnane, AGI co-chair and a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, highlighted three important issues upon which additional research could shed important new light:

First, some reforms—for example, provisions for extended days, common planning time, or assignments to troubled schools—require revisions in teachers' contracts. What contract reforms have proven most effective, and under what conditions?

Second, schools currently pay premiums for some things, such as master's degrees, that most studies suggest have little effect on student learning. This is not to say that training cannot help, just that the training typically reflected in contemporary master's degrees does not seem to add value. What forms of training, if any, add sufficient value to justify salary premiums?

Third, matching curricula to teachers' skills is not a simple matter. Curricula most likely to prepare students for rigorous college work may be beyond the skill of many teachers to deliver, because of deficits in their own preparation. What forms of professional development are most effective at preparing teachers to impart 21st-century reasoning skills to their students?

Research and dissemination on these issues can improve how well superintendents, school boards, and other stakeholders understand the pros and cons of key choices concerning contracts and curricula.

There was consensus at the conference that improving the instructional core is the ultimate purpose toward which all school district reform should be directed. Nonetheless, some participants expressed skepticism that our knowledge base for improving the instructional core is as clear and coherent as some say. Disagreements arose around issues of balance—such as balancing teacher autonomy with supervisory control, and pursuing remediation instead of removal of underperforming teachers and administrators. Similarly, there was disagreement about the appropriate division of labor between experts and practitioners in framing the work of school and district improvement.

Still, in each school district featured at the conference, leaders are working with others on strategic plans stipulating the policies, programs, projects, and practices they deem necessary for success. They are building what the AGI regards as local social movements for excellence with equity. They use coercion when necessary, but more often they aim to inspire and teach stakeholders to behave voluntarily in ways that support their strategic plans—plans that increasingly respect and model the types of focus, coherence, and alignment that experts at the AGI conference recommended.

## MOVING FORWARD

Presenters and discussants agreed that more financial resources and well-conceived strategic plans could be vital for helping school systems to make progress toward excellence with equity. They also agreed on the need for more research. However, the most important conclusion from the two days, reinforced throughout the conference, was that the paramount need is for knowledgeable, inspired, and courageous leaders to guide teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders in not only raising achievement levels, but also closing achievement gaps.

School systems across the nation need excellent administrators, especially superintendents and principals, who are willing and able to help others focus relentlessly on continuous improvement in teaching and learning for all students. This includes being actively and visibly involved “on the ground” in the district, with both people and ideas. Often, it means taking political risks in defense of progress. Some districts already have such leaders, but many do not. Recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining effective leaders in public education should be local, state, and national priorities.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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[http://www.stupski.org/documents/Defining%20CAIS\\_01-08.pdf](http://www.stupski.org/documents/Defining%20CAIS_01-08.pdf)

## 1. CONCEPTUALIZING WHOLE-DISTRICT STRATEGIC REFORM

### PRESENTERS

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Stacey Childress, Harvard Business School, Public Education Leadership Program  
Ellen Foley, Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
David Sigler, Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Nelson Gonzalez, Stupski Foundation  
June Rimmer, Stupski Foundation

### DISCUSSANTS

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Thomas Payzant, Harvard Graduate School of Education and Former Superintendent, Boston, MA  
Jason Snipes, Council of the Great City Schools  
Katherine Boles, Harvard Graduate School of Education

### MODERATOR

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Ronald Ferguson, Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Graduate School of Education, AGI co-chair and director

The PELP researchers worked with leadership teams from nine urban school districts to develop and apply models for district-wide excellence.

This session opened the conference. Presenters introduced frameworks they had developed for organizing whole districts to deliver high-quality instruction and to close achievement gaps.

### PUBLIC EDUCATION LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Dr. Stacey Childress of the Harvard Business School began her presentation by noting that the United States now spends \$450 billion annually on public education—double the amount of 30 years ago. Yet U.S. students, on average, perform poorly compared with peers in other industrialized countries. Achievement is especially low in high-poverty schools that serve mainly children of color.

Fortunately, Dr. Childress asserted, better outcomes are possible. A few high-performing schools exist even in low-income districts, and some great classrooms exist within otherwise low-performing schools. “How do we extend the record of these exemplary examples to others?” Dr. Childress asked. “How do we ensure that best practice becomes common practice?”

Developing and implementing district-wide strategies takes organizational learning involving all types of stakeholders.

In 2003 faculty members from Harvard Business School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education decided to tackle these questions by forming the Public Education Leadership Program (PELP), which aims to create and disseminate knowledge about how to manage urban school districts. The PELP researchers worked with leadership teams from nine urban school districts of various types and sizes across the country to develop and apply models for district-wide excellence.

At first, the researchers intended to apply insights about high-performing organizations from other fields, such as business. However, they found that schools and school districts have more differences than similarities when compared to other sectors of society. “It’s harder to manage urban schools and urban districts than it is to run a high-performing business,” Dr. Childress asserted.

Furthermore, initial visits to participating districts failed to reveal obvious common characteristics—such as mayoral control, autonomy for school principals, or an absence of teachers’ unions—that would explain the higher performance of some districts and schools compared with counterparts. For example, one highly touted approach to raising educational outcomes is to give power to principals, through charter schools or district decentralization. However, Dr. Childress pointed out that the results from such approaches have not led to district-wide improvement.

The PELP team decided to take a “course development approach to knowledge generation.” They studied the participating districts to identify and understand challenges, develop theories, produce conceptual notes and cases, teach the material to students and district leaders, modify the theories, and repeat the cycle.

There was consensus on the PELP team that a district-wide strategy for improvement, rather than uncoordinated activities across a district, could make a difference. The team resolved to build a better knowledge base about how systems and structures at the district and school levels can produce continuous improvement. The researchers focused on helping district and school leadership teams improve the instructional core—what happens between teachers and students as they interact around academic content.

The key, according to Dr. Childress, is to ask: “What is the set of high-level actions that can strengthen the work that goes on in the instructional core every day so that all kids throughout the system—regardless of what color their skin is, or how much money their family makes, or how long ago their families came here—actually have the opportunity to achieve at high levels?”

It is common in school districts to have numerous seemingly unrelated programs and rampant fragmentation of efforts; district-wide improvement may seem all but impossible. According to Dr. Childress, the PELP Coherence Framework suggests how



strategies for whole school districts “can guide the actions of people throughout the district in the pursuit of high levels of achievement for all students.”

The idea is that the district needs to align all of the following in a coherent strategy:

- **Structures** (formal and informal rules concerning responsibility, procedures, and accountability)
- **Cultures** (beliefs and behaviors accepted as normal)
- **Administrative systems** (logistics, accountability, and compensation arrangements)
- **Resource allocation patterns** (how much gets spent on what)
- **Stakeholder responsibilities** (who is assigned to perform what duties)

The PELP team believes that a district’s strategy should address each of these elements in ways deliberately adapted to local environments, which have their own contracts, funding patterns, political conditions, and laws.

Developing and implementing district-wide strategies takes organizational learning involving all types of stakeholders. For example, according to Dr. Childress, the PELP team encourages districts explicitly to enlist school boards and teachers’ unions on the inside as stakeholders, rather than keeping them at arm’s length. It is important for the entire organization—that is, all types of stakeholders—to work toward common goals inside a coherent educational strategy. In Dr. Childress’s view, a district should be able to “see that strategy in the heart of its systems and structures. If you can’t, you don’t have a strategy . . . you’ve got an organization that’s out of alignment.”

Dr. Childress emphasized that school autonomy should remain an important value. However, to solve performance problems effectively, school-level autonomy needs to be accompanied by system-level supports (and sometimes even restrictions) inside a coherent district-wide strategy.

According to Dr. Childress, the PELP Coherence Framework and associated writings do not prescribe specific strategies. Instead, they highlight the importance of purposeful strategic action, and they identify the key elements of district-wide improvement processes. They suggest that one (but not the only) approach involves “creating a mission, setting objectives, and developing a theory of action” about how to improve student outcomes. Mission, objectives, and theories of action, in turn, inform the design and alignment of district structures, cultures, administrative systems, resource allocation patterns, and stakeholder responsibilities.

Mission, objectives, and theories of action inform the design and alignment of district structures, cultures, administrative systems, resource allocation patterns, and stakeholder responsibilities.

### ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM

Like the PELP team, Brown University’s Annenberg Institute for School Reform has endeavored to learn from isolated islands of excellence to achieve excellence at scale; that is, to raise achievement levels and close achievement gaps district-wide. Toward that end, the Institute has developed the Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE), a framework for examining and then influencing how district administrators support teaching and learning. At the time of the AGI conference, Annenberg had implemented CORRE in eight school districts.

Annenberg researchers recognized that district-level stakeholders needed help understanding how to convert recommendations to action for district-wide improvement.

Under the CORRE approach, according to the institute’s Dr. David Sigler, Annenberg researchers convene teams of 20–24 people. They are comprised of participants from a district’s central office (including the superintendent’s office), schools (including principals and teachers), and the community (including leaders of civic organizations and parents). This team then takes three key steps to develop a reform agenda:

**Step 1: Inquiry**—Team members develop an “interview protocol,” which they use to talk with 300 to 500 stakeholders (in groups and one-on-one) about what and how the district needs to reform to do a better job of serving students.

**Step 2: Analysis**—Institute researchers then use qualitative analysis software to find patterns in the interview responses, distilling implications for where to focus new efforts to raise student achievement.

**Step 3: Report**—The researchers produce a report that includes recommendations based on interview responses and Institute research on how to apply best practices to address the district’s needs.

According to Dr. Sigler, districts that received such reports appreciated the recommendations, but did not generally use them. Instead, the reports tended to sit on shelves, unused. Therefore, the Institute resolved that it needed to do more.

The result was that Annenberg produced a more highly developed “Smart School District” framework rooted in three core concepts: results, equity, and community. Dr. Ellen Foley, also a conference presenter from Annenberg, explained the basic idea: Becoming a “smart school district” requires more than simply developing strong technical solutions. It also requires explicit attention to affecting culture, relationships, and ways of working. In other words, Annenberg researchers recognized that district-level stakeholders needed help understanding how to convert recommendations to action for district-wide improvement.

The Annenberg Institute's framework and associated data and processes aims to help drive reform by providing a structure within which stakeholders can investigate the allocation of time and resources and evaluate district performance.

Accordingly, the Institute prescribes a strategic-planning process to translate the Annenberg recommendations, resulting from the CORRE process, into a course of action. In this process, the district team of 20 to 24 people examines six core functions of the central district office:

- **Lead for results and equity**—Collaboration among key community stakeholders to develop an ambitious vision for results and equity, embedded in a strategic plan, embraced and acted upon by leadership cultivated across all levels of the community.
- **Focus on instruction**—Development of a common curricular framework and a range of activities aimed at improving the quality of instruction.
- **Provide strong supports for schools**—Developing and applying capacity for both professional development and accountability.
- **Use data for accountability**—Collecting and analyzing data in monitoring both processes and outcomes across a range of activities and roles.
- **Collaborate with and invest in the community**—Cultivating supports from entities outside the school system and seeking both assistance and feedback.
- **Align policy, management, and operations with strategic vision**—Establishing strategic leadership of district operations in ways that induce and enable strategic planning and implementation of the strategic vision.

Within each of these six core functions, the Institute has identified five to eight central office practices that warrant examination and monitoring. Understanding the status and trajectory of these functions and practices in a given district “tells the district’s story,” says Dr. Foley. Furthermore, implemented by a CORRE team of 20 to 24 people, she says that the Annenberg Institute’s framework and associated data and processes aim to help drive reform by providing a structure within which stakeholders can investigate the allocation of time and resources and evaluate district performance.

Annenberg researchers use their frameworks to make cross-district comparisons that help advance the ongoing work. The goal is to develop case studies that inform a common language on educational reform and enable districts to learn from their peers.

So far, according to Dr. Sigler, the overarching lesson from these case studies is that districts need to make “managing human capital”—that is, supporting people in every role to be competent and diligent—as central as building formal systems and disseminating professional knowledge.

### STUPSKI FOUNDATION

Since its founding in 1996, the Stupski Foundation has worked with more than 30 school districts across the country to help close the achievement gap for students of color, students living in poverty, and English language learners. According to the Foundation's Dr. June Rimmer, this work has revealed three drivers essential to district-wide reform:

- A district must be a high-performing and learning organization.
- All systems in the district must be aligned to support educational excellence.
- Leaders at all levels must have the capacity to both lead and manage change.

To ensure that districts develop these attributes, the Foundation has created two main tools:

#### **An organizational assessment tool.**

This "system diagnostic" encompasses seven components of effective organizations:

- Leadership
- Strategic planning and results
- Curriculum and teaching
- Stakeholder engagement
- Stellar people
- Effective and efficient processes
- Accountability

Within each of these components, the organizational assessment tool includes seven to ten indicators. A Stupski team ranks each participating district every year on each indicator on a scale of one to four, thereby measuring performance over time. Each district then uses the results in strategic planning for reform.

#### **A comprehensive alignment and instructional tool.**

This framework represents all the systems and departments in a district, as illustrated by Exhibit 1.1. The left half outlines the district's instructional system, whose goal is to ensure that every element is aligned to promote the district's educational standards. The right half represents the departments in the district that must align their work to support the instructional system.

A Stupski team ranks each participating district every year on each indicator on a scale of one to four, thereby measuring performance over time. Each district then uses the results in strategic planning for reform.

**Exhibit 1.1 Stupski Comprehensive Aligned Instructional Systems**

COMPREHENSIVE ALIGNED INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS	
INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS	SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT INSTRUCTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ rigorous standards</li> <li>▪ instructional strategies</li> <li>▪ curriculum &amp; materials</li> <li>▪ specialized instruction</li> <li>▪ assessment &amp; data</li> <li>▪ professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ accountability</li> <li>▪ planning</li> <li>▪ personnel</li> <li>▪ financing</li> <li>▪ special programs</li> <li>▪ operations (e.g., transportation &amp; food services)</li> </ul>

**Based on the Stupski presentation at the AGI conference**

*“Every department in the system should exist to do nothing but support teaching and learning.*

*The central office has to be accountable for providing timely, quality services to schools . . .”*

*—Dr. Rimmer*

According to Dr. Rimmer, “Every department in the system should exist to do nothing but support teaching and learning. Every teacher must have certain supports if he or she is to do the job of teaching all students and helping to close the gap . . . Every adult has to have a sense of ownership of the core business of teaching and learning . . . The central office has to be accountable for providing timely, quality services to schools, and have accountability for achievement.”

The Stupski Foundation’s case studies of the reform journeys of multiple districts reveal no single path to such alignment, but they do show that every district needs “some kind of road map” and “some kind of framework,” says Dr. Rimmer. To shed light on how districts can develop such a map, Dr. Nelson Gonzales, also from Stupski, offered hard-won lessons from the Foundation’s 10 years of work and \$100 million invested in collaborating districts:

- **Clarify your goals.** School districts and their advisors need “to be very specific about what [they] are trying to align systems around,” says Dr. Gonzales. The Foundation found that districts often lack a clear definition of success. Closing gaps in student performance on state achievement tests is one potential definition. However, he questions whether state standards are “really giving our students the transformative life options that they need upon graduation.” He maintains that districts need “a twenty-first-century set of college readiness standards” pegged to scores on advanced placement (AP) and the international baccalaureate (IB) tests, and that students also need a core set of “behavioral, cognitive, contextual, and agency skills.”

*“You can do great strategies around organizational effectiveness and at the end of the day, not reach the classroom.”*

—Dr. Gonzales

- **Create a compelling logic that links the work of a district’s central office to the classroom.** The Foundation discovered that districts often lack a logical connection between central office reforms and goals for student achievement, *despite a robust and complex strategic planning process.* “You can [create] great strategies around organizational effectiveness but at the end of the day not reach the classroom,” Gonzales noted.
- **Think about meaningful measures of results.** The Foundation found that even when districts engaged in strategic planning to track key indicators—such as the number of students who take AP and IB courses and pass standardized tests—building an adequate data infrastructure took three to five years. And when districts did gather data, the findings “did not actually change pedagogy,” Dr. Gonzales noted.

The Foundation first focused on helping districts implement best practices and improve leadership skills. However, Dr. Gonzales explained, “You can do great strategies around organizational effectiveness and at the end of the day, not reach the classroom.” What they discovered was a lack of “coherent, accessible, evidence-based knowledge of the foundational building blocks of what underperforming students need to accelerate their learning.”

Consequently, the Foundation is now developing a seven-point core instructional framework. And—noting that “most of the world’s public service systems spend 15 to 25 percent” of their annual budgets on innovation, while the United States spends 0.01 percent—the Foundation is also encouraging each district to devote some funding to R&D, to close the “huge gaps” in knowledge about instructional effectiveness.

The Foundation is also developing intelligent data systems that can measure what happens in the central office as well as in classrooms, and is creating online learning tools, simulation training, and adaptive assessments. These techniques can help teachers understand what great teaching looks like given their district’s standards, and help them differentiate their practice—that is, respond to the needs of individual students.

To build and disseminate such tools, the Foundation is establishing a “design collaborative” to aggregate what is known and not known about the instructional core, and creating an “innovation venture capital fund” to help launch entrepreneurs in the educational marketplace.

### COMMENTS AND Q&A

Discussant Dr. Tom Payzant, former superintendent of Boston Public Schools, began with three prescriptive propositions concerning high-performing districts:

- **Standards-based reform**—the once-radical idea that all students can meet high standards—“needs to drive the conversation” to ensure that districts will get “where they want to go.”
- **Going to scale** requires “working with the people you’ve got,” because districts cannot realistically expect to have “all new people.”
- **Strategic plans** need to “go deep in a few areas, rather than a mile wide. Too many strategic plans are laundry lists.”

One of the biggest challenges, he noted, is changing the culture in districts and schools to encourage collaboration among administrators and teachers, to ensure that they become professional learning communities.

He posed a challenge to the presenters: Does accountability precede autonomy? That is, must a teacher (or a school) show they can produce results before gaining the freedom to pursue their own instructional approaches? He deplored the notion that if a district has a standard curriculum, it is taking away teachers’ creativity. “That’s the wrong way to have the conversation. What other profession says creativity trumps best practice?”

Annenberg’s Dr. Foley agreed on the need to “invest in some capacity building at the outset,” so schools and teachers know how to use autonomy. She would award autonomy to “schools that have demonstrated that they do have higher levels of capacity.”

However, responding to Dr. Payzant and Dr. Foley, Harvard Business School’s Dr. Childress suggested that engaging teachers in instructional problem-solving work requires a substantial degree of autonomy from the outset. She countered that “people have to have some room to try new things within a district-wide strategy to improve performance,” as efforts to implement “a laundry list” of solutions handed down from the district level “just haven’t worked.” PELP’s tools are designed to help districts and schools become “diagnostic problem solvers and solution builders,” which suggests “some level of autonomy for people out in the field to take some risks.”

Discussant Dr. Jason Snipes of the Council of the Great City Schools suggested that much of the conversation hangs in a “zone of wishful thinking” that ignores capacity and knowledge limitations. He conjectured that neither top-down central office

directives nor bottom-up efforts with teachers and schools trying things on their own were likely to produce consistently high-quality instructional practice. He underscored the dearth of knowledge about “what it takes to actually dramatically change and improve what happens in classrooms.” He lamented the “surface-level implementation of a lot of core concepts,” and the lack of a “clearer theory of action regarding what we think we need to see in classrooms and what district- and school-level supports have to be in place to achieve those.”

Thus the question, he asserted, is not central-office control versus school and classroom autonomy, but rather how we can develop and disseminate firmly grounded knowledge of good instructional practice and embed it into standard practice. At the same time, he agreed with others that we need to ensure “a connection between the theory of action that drives the central office and what happens in the actual classroom. The hardest thing to change in education reform is the teacher/student interaction.”

In response, Dr. Payzant cited the need for different measures that might help accelerate knowledge development. He asserted that student scores on achievement tests now drive the accountability system. As a superintendent, he established instructional review teams to evaluate classroom teaching. The district then compared the results from these assessments of teaching with student scores on state achievement tests.

Discussant Dr. Katherine Boles of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education built on the idea that better systems—even different cultures—are needed for improving instructional practice. She noted that “teachers work alone in classrooms,” and that they need training to work in teams, and to become leaders who are responsible for improving instruction. She also noted that many teachers might be reluctant to critique the approaches of other teachers. “We need to teach them and empower them to have some decision-making ability.”

She also asserted that teachers need access to the latest research on classroom dynamics, and to learn how to connect theory to practice. Unfortunately, too often “we don’t think of teachers as the intellectual people they could be, and we don’t think about them knowing and learning.” In fact, she observed, the lack of high-quality professional development is one reason “we are losing [teachers] by the bucketful.”

Dr. Lee Ann Buntrock, of the University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, pointed out that schools of education “are not getting the job done”; they “haven’t changed their programs since No Child Left Behind, and probably long before that.” Dr. Snipes concurred that “a lot of evidence shows that



most people who come out of education schools don't feel prepared for some fundamental challenges they are going to face."

Dr. Payzant noted that the Boston school system started its own program to improve teacher preparation—a teacher residency and principal leadership development program. The goal was partly to ensure “cultural competence”; that is, to train teachers—who are often largely middle-class, white women—to negotiate challenges related to race and class.

*“The closer strategies or strategic plans focused on building what teachers could know and do in classrooms, and on skill and will and beliefs and behaviors, the more rapid progress we were seeing.”*

—Dr. Childress

Audience member Scott Lipton, a district-level administrator in Austin, Texas, asked how instructional need can drive structural changes in a district rather than the other way around. Dr. Sigler responded that the multi-stakeholder district-level teams that the Annenberg Institute supports need to focus on the issue that Lipton raised. Then, organizations such as the Annenberg Institute can assist the teams by brokering examples from other places.

Audience member John Lee of Harvard's Graduate School of Education asked the panelists, “What were the biggest barriers, obstacles, and challenges to taking what we saw on the PowerPoints today and actually bringing the recommendations to practice in these districts that you worked with? Is it a question of culture, knowledge, politics, policy, opposition from stakeholders, or surface implementation with teachers?”

Dr. Childress responded that two critical factors seemed to make a difference. One was the “superintendent's commitment to focusing on reform for longer than a month, pushing it through and being willing to adapt and change and iterate.” The second key factor was the reform strategy districts chose. The more that their chosen strategy focused on “what teachers could know and do in the classroom—their skill and will, and their beliefs and behaviors—the more rapid their progress.”

Dr. Sigler reminded the audience that the goal should be to build a district's capacity to sustain change over time. That, he suggested, entails enlisting parents, teachers, and principals in the inquiry process—not just superintendents, who might stay in place for only a few years.

Expressing ambivalence about such inquiry processes, Dr. Connell of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) expanded upon concerns about knowledge development and deployment that others had expressed. In particular, he worries that stakeholder teams and participatory inquiry processes might not make the best use of existing knowledge, and could produce misguided decisions. He resists “the notion that the best decision making goes on at the local level—that the more local you can get it, the better.” This idea, he suggested, “leads to a diaspora of views about what good teaching and learning is, which runs against the notion of having a

consistent theory” about how classrooms should function, and how teachers should build capacity and be assessed.

Dr. Gonzalez of the Stupski Foundation agreed, saying, “We spent a decade working in 31 districts looking at precisely these issues . . . I think a lot of the assumptions we had about best practices and leadership development just weren't true.” Gonzalez says the field needs a major R&D effort to develop measures and techniques “that actually enable the de-privatization of teaching and the tailoring of instruction, which is our dual bottom line.” This is because when it comes to the knowledge base, “a lot of what we thought was there just isn't.”

### RESOURCES

For videos and PowerPoint presentations from the conference, see <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/>

For more information on the Public Education Leadership Program, see <http://www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/pelp/>

For more information on the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, see <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/>

For more information on the Stupski Foundation, see <http://www.stupski.org/>

For more information on the Council of the Great City Schools, see <http://www.cgcs.org/about/executive.aspx>

## 2. SETTING DISTRICT-LEVEL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL TURNAROUNDS

### PRESENTERS

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LeAnn Buntrock, University of Virginia, Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education

Andrew Calkins, Mass Insight Education & Research Institute

### DISCUSSANTS

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Tony Wagner, Harvard Graduate School of Education

James Connell, Institute for Research and Reform in Education

### MODERATOR

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Richard Murnane, Harvard Graduate School of Education and AGI co-chair

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NEW LEADERSHIP

The Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education—a joint initiative of the Darden Graduate School of Business and the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia—formed several years ago to give educators the type of executive training typically reserved for top business leaders, says Dr. LeAnn Buntrock, assistant executive director. “We are not trying to make education a business,” she noted. “It’s probably much tougher to run a school district or a school than it is to run a business.”

Instead, the partnership focuses on merging “the best thinking” of both worlds. To that end, the partnership has created two initiatives: the Executive Leadership Program for Educators, and the School Turnaround Specialists Program. Dr. Buntrock focused her remarks on the latter, although both programs aim to “align leadership” from states to districts to schools and teachers. She and Andrew Calkins, the session’s second presenter, also examined the other half of the turnaround picture: creating a district environment in which effective leadership and reform can thrive.

The need for such turnarounds is urgent, Dr. Buntrock noted, given the thousands of schools that are “in or about to go into restructuring” because they fall short of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) benchmarks.

The Darden/Curry Partnership established its School Turnaround Specialists Program in 2004, in response to Virginia governor Mark Warner’s observation that turnaround specialists were prevalent in business, and could play a similar role in education. The partnership won funding from the U.S. Department of Education to train leaders to make “quick, dramatic improvements” in student achievement, and establish the “systems, processes, and leadership succession planning . . . to support the turnaround effort.”

*“We know that leadership is absolutely the catalyst for that turnaround. There are virtually no documented instances of a troubled school being turned around without the intervention of a powerful leader.”*

—Dr. Buntrock

In each of its first two years, the program worked with 10 principals from around the state. When Microsoft Partners in Learning offered Darden/Curry \$3 million to scale up the program, it opened its doors to participants from other states, including district administrators and teachers as well as principals.

Dr. Buntrock said she knows of “no documented instances of a troubled school being turned around without the intervention of a powerful leader.” However, any successful turnaround requires a team, not just an individual, she noted. “This is not a matter of the Lone Ranger coming in and fixing a school.”

What’s more, she reported, “Seventy percent of successful turnarounds include a visible change in leadership.” New leadership is often necessary because “good teachers will not work for bad principals.” Although existing principals of low-performing schools are not necessarily poor leaders, they are probably “not in the right school for them.” Leadership changes are especially important in low-performing high-poverty schools, she says, because such schools tend to have a culture of low expectations. Conversely, high-poverty, high-performing schools have created cultures of high expectations. “It is very hard for [an existing] leader to suddenly reverse course” and “instill a real sense of urgency.”

Myriad new initiatives are “thrown at [struggling] schools, at the teachers, at the community,” she points out. “A leadership change clearly conveys that ‘maybe this time things really are going to be different,’ ” and creates “pressure within the organization for real change.”

“What we don’t know for sure is how to find [good leaders],” Dr. Buntrock acknowledged. However, experience shows that successful turnaround specialists understand that they may need to deviate from district norms to achieve their goals. “If we hear a principal say, ‘Well, I’d really like to do this, but the district won’t let me,’ that person is probably not going to be a successful turnaround leader.”

She suggests that districts should seek turnaround leaders with teaching experience, a master’s degree in educational administration, and a willingness to emphasize

“competency-based human resource management.” She says the consulting firm Public Impact has developed effective questions for districts to use in interviewing potential turnaround principals, already applied by public schools in Chicago and Washington, D.C. “I can’t emphasize enough that school districts need to put more effort, resources, time, and energy into recruiting the right kinds of leaders.”

## CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT

*“I can’t emphasize enough that school districts need to put more effort, resources, time, and energy into recruiting the right kinds of leaders.”*

—Dr. Buntrock

“Heroic principals” of high-poverty, high-performing schools often succeed despite the context in which they work, observed Andrew Calkins, senior vice president of Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, a Boston-based nonprofit devoted to boosting student achievement. However, most districts and schools that hope to replicate or sustain success need the second piece of the puzzle: a blueprint for “effective change management.”

Ironically, he notes, “the worst-performing schools offer the greatest opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement.” That’s because schools that serve many high-needs students “must be in the business of reinvention more than improvement,” and might reach “consensus around the need for transformative change.”

He cited the first middle school in Massachusetts deemed “chronically underperforming.” According to Calkins, it exemplified the shortcomings of incremental change efforts in struggling schools. After seven years of marginal reform, the school managed to raise the share of students scoring “proficient” on state tests from 4 to 8 percent, he reported. The fundamental problem, he noted, is that the nation has never figured out how to take the exemplary results of a few outstanding schools serving students from low-income communities to scale.

To address that challenge, his organization spent two years studying high-performance, high-poverty schools through both original research and “meta” research; that is, collating results from other studies. They found that such districts and schools raise student achievement by cultivating three key attributes:

- **Teachers’ readiness to teach:** Educators have actually reached “a fair amount of consensus” about which components of teaching districts and schools need to stress in order to successfully serve high-needs students. Those components include mapping and aligning curricula, providing administrators and teachers with coaching and professional development, developing leaders, and using formative—or interim—assessment to track student progress.

Like-minded schools learn from each other and take change to scale by banding together to create a cohesive network, based on geographic region, student needs, or type of school.

- **Students' readiness to learn:** According to Mr. Calkins, the traditional contract between a school and its students says, "If you keep pace with our curriculum, you will be fine. If you fall off the conveyor belt, we'll try to make it up to you, but it's going to be tough for both of us." Mass Insight's research showed that high-performing, high-poverty schools "have flipped the question": Instead of emphasizing what's being taught, they emphasize what's being learned.
- **Readiness to act:** High-performing, high-poverty schools and their districts resolve that "every decision we make will be based on our core mission," according to Mr. Calkins. Districts such as Richmond have "hardwired" that attribute, he says, by creating favorable operating conditions.

Mr. Calkins concurred with other conferees that districts and schools serving high-needs students must set high expectations. However, he contended that educators must also "be very explicit about understanding and treating" the many challenges and problems that students from low-income families bring to school. Successful schools, he says, do not use "poverty impacts as an excuse," but rather as a "design parameter." That is, they commit to helping each student succeed.

Along with those three "readiness attributes," districts with successful change management strategies focus on the "three Cs":

- **Conditions:** Rather than working around the existing educational system—the approach of the charter school movement, says Mr. Calkins—successful districts and schools "create their own internal turnaround reform zone that gives them more control over people, time, money, and program." That is, they provide more time for students to learn and teachers to collaborate, give leaders the flexibility to shape school staff, and provide more pay and professional incentives for teachers.
- **Capacity:** The capacity for turnaround among administrators, principals, teachers, and external partners is intertwined with the three types of readiness noted above, and includes practical resources as well as human capacity.
- **Clusters:** Like-minded schools learn from each other and take change to scale by banding together to create a cohesive network, based on geographic region, student needs, or type of school. For example, clusters may comprise alternative high schools that serve students who have dropped out of traditional schools, middle schools that have broken up into smaller academies, or even an elementary, middle, and high school that have decided to collaborate. States or districts provide these clusters, if they are to be successful, with the new

conditions and professional capacity they need to achieve dramatic gains in student achievement.

## COMMENTS AND Q&A

### THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING NEW LEADERS

*“I think that we do know that if we have the right leaders and the right kinds of processes and systems in place that we’re going to get a lot further down the road, than if we just have one or the other.”*

—Dr. Buntrock

Discussant Dr. James Connell, president of the nonprofit Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), observed that districts do not always have the option of bringing in a new leader for every struggling school, given a shortage of skilled personnel, and the reluctance of some to move to more remote regions of the country.

Nor do most districts and schools have the option of making wholesale changes in their employees. Thus replicating the “brilliant practices” of a few outstanding districts usually requires “transforming typical practices” in other districts. That is, districts and schools intent on turnaround must focus on “bringing around” current staff—convincing their existing staff to “see the world differently and do things differently.” To do so, they must diagnose the “sources of resistance,” such as by fracturing the “unholy alliances between folks with principled objections” and “mischief makers and protectors of the status quo”—engaging the former and marginalizing or selectively removing the latter.

Dr. Connell said he has found districts that have replaced only 30 percent of their leaders have been able to move from mediocrity to moderate success. “We have to think about the mechanics, the training, the support, that good people who are not doing their job well need to do their job well.” Waiting for cadres of new people is impractical, he says, and “kids can’t wait.”

Dr. Buntrock acknowledged that no district has enough human resources to “change out every single principal,” adding that she “would never advocate [changing school leaders] as the sole response to education reform and turning around low-performing schools.” However, she reiterated that “some leaders just need to go . . . We’re talking about children’s lives here: we don’t have time to bring [leaders] along.”

She also contended that “we need to start looking differently at the ways in which we recruit and develop our leaders.” School districts in the Mid-Atlantic States now spend an average of \$3,500 to replace their principals, she said. The average business, in contrast, spends 20 to 30 percent of each middle manager’s salary to replace him or her. She acknowledged that “resources are a problem,” but pointed

out that districts can recoup the time and energy they spend recruiting new people, as “teacher retention goes up if they have good leaders.”

Dr. Buntrock argued that although “we know a lot about the practices that work in reforming schools,” those practices do not work in every school because some lack the requisite leaders. Richmond Public Schools has responded by partnering with businesses, looking in “new places and new ways to find leaders.”

### THE PITFALLS OF TARGETING AYP

Discussant Tony Wagner of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education asked the presenters: “How can we ensure that we are teaching and testing the skills that matter most?” He contended that “we are using the wrong yardstick to measure success, and even to set our goals . . . AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress, as defined by No Child Left Behind] and even Advanced Placement do not correlate with the kind of attainment that matters most for our kids.” That is, state and federal standards do not ensure that students have the skills to obtain jobs that pay more than minimum wage, and to become informed and active citizens.

Dr. Wagner noted, for example, that all elementary schools in his home district—a leader in reform—have made AYP. However, according to their results on a national test, one-third of their fifth graders are reading a year or more below grade level. Even more important, only 18 percent of the district’s high school graduates complete college. “Our graduates may make AYP, but they will not make life,” he contends. “We are succeeding at AYP while failing our children.”

He observed that when “school culture focuses on ensuring that all students are graduating and ready for college, careers and citizenship, three things happen.”

- First, test scores consistently rise, because the school is “teaching kids how to think, reason, analyze, hypothesize, communicate, and work with others.”
- Second, students “consistently do better in college and beyond.”
- Third, “both students and teachers are more motivated.”

AYP is “all about compliance” among both teachers and students. “When you instead focus on the mission of saving lives . . . giving kids a future as opposed to AYP, teachers and kids are dramatically motivated to succeed.”

Mr. Calkins of Mass Insight observed that all the high-performing, high-poverty high schools he has studied actually do set their sights on “college matriculation and



success in college, and most are tracking kids in college, to make sure that they have done the job well.”

### CULLING THE EVIDENCE ON WHAT WORKS

Dr. Jason Snipes of the Council of the Great City Schools lamented a lack of evidence for the essential ingredients of educational turnaround: One analysis for the federal government showed that the entire “reform literature” (predating recent work by Mass Insight) is based on the experiences of just 35 schools. “If you look at schools that have performed for about a year, you find a few,” he notes. “If you look at schools that have performed for more than one year and more than one grade, it’s an incredibly small number . . . We really haven’t identified schools that have set [out] on a new path and sustained it over time.” He asked the presenters how reformers can gather stronger evidence on what works in improving low-performing schools and sustaining that success over time.

*Both systemic change and leadership are essential. If a district does not reform its central-office systems and processes, it “might get some quick results,” but it will not maintain them.*

—Dr. Buntrock

Dr. Buntrock responded that despite the lack of extensive evidence, “we do have a pretty good idea that certain practices work,” and that both systemic change and leadership are essential. If a district does not reform its central-office systems and processes, it “might get some quick results,” but it will not maintain them. “If we have the right leaders and the right kinds of processes and systems in place, we’re going to get a lot further down the road.”

### RESOURCES

To view video and PowerPoint presentations from the session, see <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>

For more on the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, see <http://www.darden.virginia.edu/html/area.aspx?styleid=3&area=ple>

For more on Mass Insight Education & Research Institute and its reports on school turnarounds, see <http://www.buildingblocks.org/>

For more on the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, see <http://www.irre.org/>

### 3. RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING GAPS IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

#### PRESENTERS (ALL FROM MONTGOMERY COUNTY)

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Frieda K. Lacey, Deputy Superintendent of Schools  
Heath Morrison, Community Superintendent, Office of School Performance  
Adrian Talley, Community Superintendent, Office of School Performance  
Jamie Virga, Associate Superintendent, Office of Organizational Development  
Carole Working, Principal, Quince Orchard High School

#### DISCUSSANTS

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Mica Pollock, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
John Diamond, Harvard Graduate School of Education

#### MODERATOR

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Charles Ogletree, Founding Director of the Charles W. Houston Institute for Race and Justice, Harvard Law School, AGI co-chair

*“We are striving to create a school system, and indeed a community, where academic success is not predictable by race, ethnicity, disability, language proficiency, or poverty.”*

*—Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence The Strategic Plan for the Montgomery County Public Schools 2008–2013*

With a 2008–2009 enrollment of 139,000 students in 199 schools, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is the largest school district in Maryland, and the sixth largest in the country. Although the county is wealthy overall, it also has “a lot of poverty and a lot of diversity,” according to Dr. Frieda Lacey, deputy superintendent, and one of five MCPS leaders who presented at the conference.

Their presentations outlined the county’s achievement gap challenges, strategies for tackling them, and the ensuing results. In so doing, they emphasized:

- the critical role of open conversations about race;
- the value of setting specific targets for student achievement and using data-driven strategies to reach them;
- the need for skilled leadership and effective professional development at all levels; and
- the importance of collaboration and teamwork.

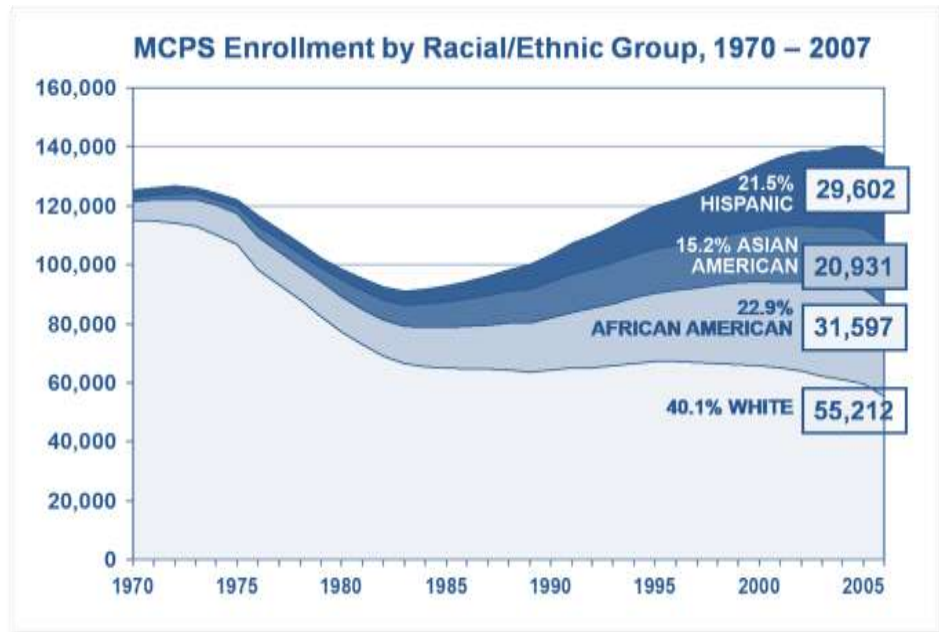
RESPONDING TO RAPIDLY CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

According to Dr. Lacey, student demographics have changed rapidly as rising numbers of African American and Hispanic students have entered the district during the past couple of decades (see Exhibit 3.1). For example, the number of students signing up for free and reduced-price meals more than doubled between 1990 and 2007, while the number of elementary-school students for whom English was a second language also rose sharply. Administrators realized that they had to “do something drastically different,” Dr. Lacey said.

*“There is no way you can close the achievement gap in the 21st century without talking about race; you can’t do it.”*

—Dr. Lacey

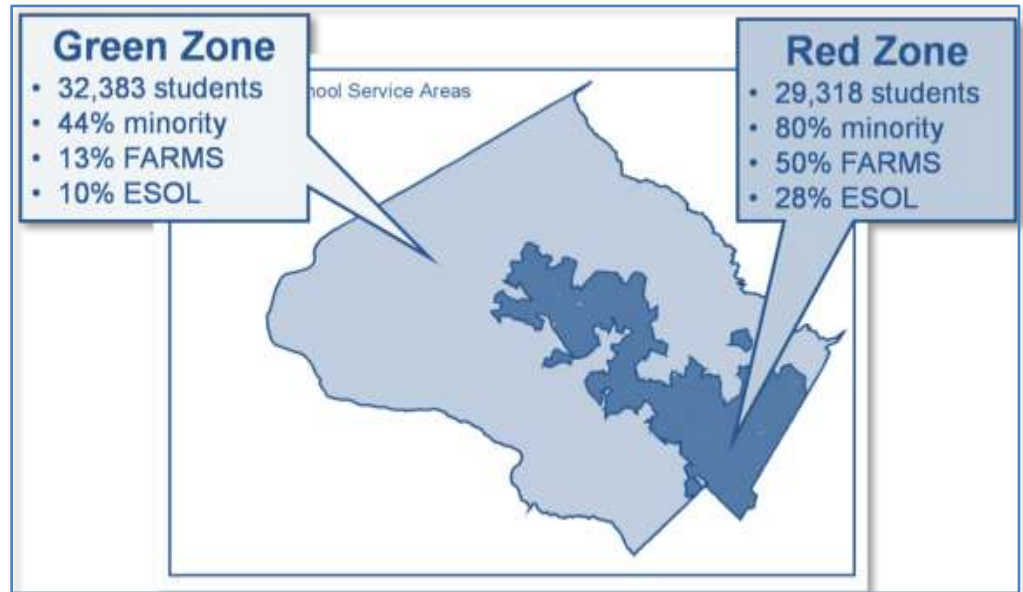
**Exhibit 3.1 MCPS Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Group**



**From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference**

Superintendent Dr. Jerry D. West spearheaded the response. He assigned schools to one of two zones: a red zone, where schools are 80 percent minority, 50 percent of students receive free and reduced-price meals (FARMs), and 28 percent have English as a second language (ESL); and a more affluent green zone of almost equal size, whose schools have significantly smaller minority populations (see Exhibit 3.2).

**Exhibit 3.2 MCPS Green and Red Zones**



*“You can't do the status quo; you have to do something drastically different.”*

*—Dr. Lacey*

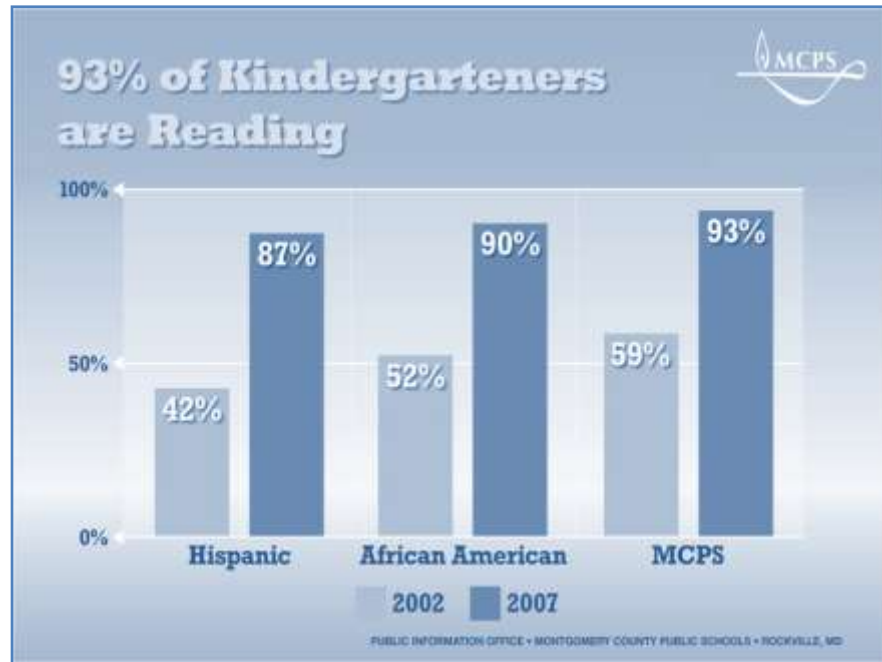
**From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference**

The district also created a strategic-planning process that sets specific goals and milestones for student achievement, analyzes key data points, and develops new initiatives—with a special focus on red-zone schools.

Early initiatives included moving from half-day to full-day kindergarten and cutting class sizes in red-zone schools by 50 percent—from 28 to 15 students. Key benchmarks included teaching kindergarten students to read—“unheard of in Montgomery County in 1999,” according to Dr. Lacey. That benchmark has made a difference: Today, 93 percent of the district’s kindergarteners read books, including 90 percent of African Americans and 87 percent of Hispanics (see Exhibit 3.3). She noted that the results have been so strong that the district has had to raise the benchmark.

The district has also aimed to sharply increase the number of fifth-grade students taking sixth-grade math. Again, the district recorded marked success: While a couple of years ago, 196 students took such math, today, close to 5,000 do, according to Dr. Lacey. “We had to train the teachers—they didn’t know how to do it,” she notes. A third benchmark: By 2010, 80 percent of eighth-grade students will enroll in and succeed at Algebra I. By 2007–2008, 68 percent of these students were taking that level of math or higher.

**Exhibit 3.3 MCPS Kindergarten Reading Scores**



**From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference**

*“What we look for are incremental gains over a period of time, and when we see them leveling off or starting to go down, what do we do? We have to do something different; we have to diagnose and problem-solve, we have to have a strategy.”*

—Dr. Lacey

A critical initiative has aimed to expand the participation of minority high school students in Advanced Placement classes, despite the feeling among teachers that “they can’t do it.” Today 60 percent of high school students take at least one AP class—more than double the national average, and significantly higher than the 35 percent state average.

The district achieved such results by “putting race on the table,” according to Dr. Lacey. “We have to talk about race, we have to disaggregate the data, we have to have initiatives, and we have to have tools.” For example, the district breaks out data by race and ethnicity, and by red and green zones. Yet despite some success, she asserted: “We have many, many challenges; we can never be satisfied.” For example, 6 of the district’s 25 high schools ranked among the nation’s top 100; the goal for next year is 8.

### USING DATA TO CREATE A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Dr. Heath Morrison, a community superintendent in the district’s Office of School Performance, posed this question to conference attendees: How do we sustain a culture of continuous improvement, and remain committed to “constantly look at data to inform our instructional practice and our professional development?” How

do we ensure that we are “deeply and fundamentally dedicated to the idea of eliminating the achievement gap?”

One central strategy has entailed working with researchers from Tufts and Harvard to develop M-Stat, a data-reporting system—modeled on the New York City Police Department’s COMSTAT—that allows the district to look at achievement patterns and trends in detail. According to Morrison, “M-Stat allows us to compare our data to our rigorous benchmarks and see where there is an achievement gap.”

During the M-Stat process, administrators, principals, and teachers conduct an intensive review of each school based on key data points broken down by students’ race, ethnicity, gender, English proficiency, and disability status.

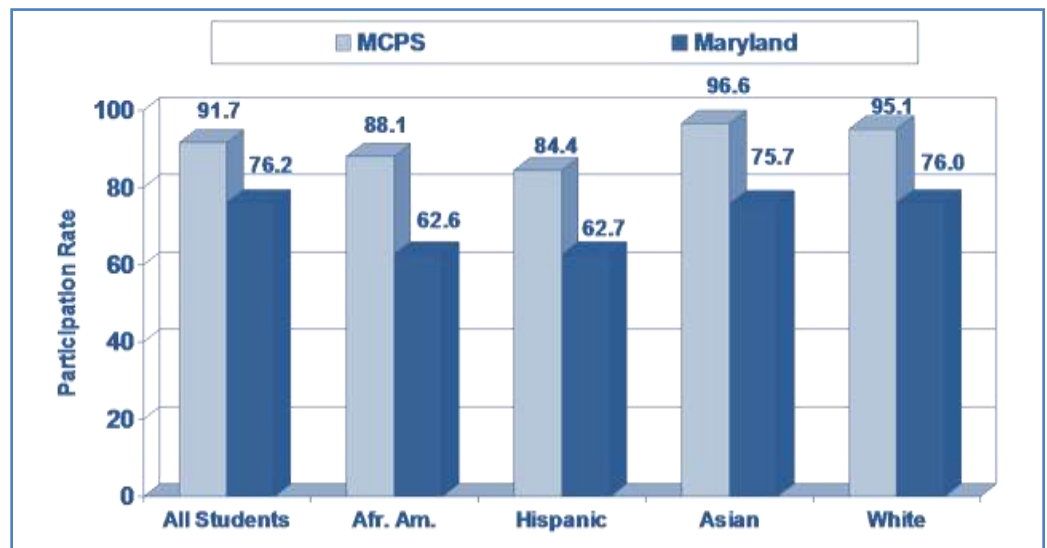
During the M-Stat process, administrators, principals, and teachers conduct an intensive review of each school based on key data points broken down by students’ race, ethnicity, gender, English proficiency, and disability status. Results for each school are color-coded to show whether it is meeting, exceeding, or falling short of the district’s benchmarks. According to Morrison, this process allows the district to:

- determine areas of success and areas for improvement;
- create opportunities for open and honest dialogue;
- use data as the entry point to the discussions about race and equity; and
- affect change within a school, a cluster, or the system.

For example, M-Stat showed that the district is doing “much better than all other districts in Maryland” in raising the percentage of African American and Latino students who take the PSAT (see Exhibit 3.4).

**Exhibit 3.4 PSAT Participation Rates 2007–2008**

**Tenth Graders in MCPS and Maryland**



From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference

*“We put the data out there and we put race on the table. And we say it’s only a success if all students are doing well; we are not going to hide behind averages.”*

—Dr. Morrison

However, the process also revealed that just 13 high schools had reached the 2007–2008 overall benchmark—that 93 percent of all students would take the test—and that only 7 schools had reached that goal for minority students. Still, four high schools targeted the previous year all showed “substantive improvement,” according to Dr. Morrison, with two moving from worst to among the best-performing.

“It’s a truism that many schools within a district don’t share” information, he noted, and “M-Stat is a way for us to really glean who has a story to tell” and then promote constructive sharing. It is not about “gotchas,” or “finding out who is to blame. It’s about revealing who to support,” and “who is getting results that can yield best practices” from which others can learn.

### CLOSING THE GAP IN HONORS AND AP ENROLLMENT

Adrian Talley, another community superintendent in the Office of School Performance, observed that M-Stat gives district administrators the “opportunity to have conversations with our principals.” Principals can compare their school against schools with similar numbers of minority students, and learn from those that are achieving better results (see Exhibit 3.5).

*“We are gathering all this information. How do we move from data, to information, to knowledge, and then to action that will produce results?”*

—Mr. Virga

**Exhibit 3.5 Sample M-Stat Report**

School Name	All Students			African American			Hispanic			Asian			White		
	Total Enrollment	Students Enrolled in at Least One H/AP	%	Total Enrollment	Students Enrolled in at Least One H/AP	%	Total Enrollment	Students Enrolled in at Least One H/AP	%	Total Enrollment	Students Enrolled in at Least One H/AP	%	Total Enrollment	Students Enrolled in at Least One H/AP	%
County	44043	39605	74.8	10329	6211	69.5	3535	4829	87.3	5502	5742	87.2	15227	16075	86.4
Bethesda-Cherry Chase	1722	1569	91.1	265	231	87.1	261	201	77.8	129	114	88.4	1047	1021	97.5
Blue	2730	1888	69.2	820	457	55.7	733	363	49.5	494	423	85.6	603	550	91.4
Bliss	1844	1339	72.6	721	464	64.4	261	173	66.3	173	141	81.5	609	521	85.6
Churchill	2090	1807	86.5	144	91	63.2	113	83	73.5	487	448	92.0	1356	1185	87.4
Clarksburg	1457	979	67.2	448	247	55.1	294	181	61.6	243	197	81.1	472	374	79.2
Damascus	1435	1106	77.1	104	63	60.6	186	96	51.6	56	50	89.3	1109	995	89.7
Edstein	1590	1024	64.4	365	226	61.9	663	347	52.3	194	150	77.3	348	301	86.5
Gaithersburg	2071	1390	67.1	550	291	52.9	641	295	46.0	208	159	76.4	673	535	79.4
Greenbelt	1438	910	63.3	850	385	45.3	464	254	54.7	148	119	80.4	176	152	86.4
Magruder	2070	1520	73.4	408	227	55.6	464	263	56.7	262	247	94.3	916	793	86.6
Northwest	2019	1515	75.0	802	369	46.0	328	218	66.5	350	318	90.9	741	615	83.1
Northwood	1273	814	64.0	448	256	57.1	428	222	52.1	82	64	78.0	319	271	85.0
ParkBranch	1736	1457	83.9	628	428	68.1	166	146	87.9	353	323	91.5	391	353	90.3
Roadside	999	907	90.8	52	43	82.7	36	31	86.1	127	126	99.2	704	703	99.9
GO	1748	1287	73.7	318	191	60.0	296	176	59.4	262	232	88.6	671	771	91.2
W Montgomery	1808	1514	83.8	337	202	59.9	261	166	63.6	408	420	103.0	782	718	91.9
RCA	90	0	0.0	20	1	5.0	3	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	54	0	0.0
Rockville	1232	910	73.9	233	144	61.8	302	188	62.3	187	136	72.7	540	442	81.7
SenecaValley	1332	832	62.5	423	209	49.4	269	147	54.7	159	120	75.5	451	366	81.2
Shenwood	2127	1585	74.5	363	187	51.5	228	121	53.1	244	189	77.5	1302	1085	83.3
Springbrook	1836	1363	74.3	857	535	62.4	410	239	58.3	305	251	82.3	264	234	88.6
Twin	88	0	0.0	25	0	0.0	6	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	7	0	0.0
W Johnson	1943	1638	84.3	173	111	64.2	259	187	72.2	264	244	92.4	1227	1098	89.5
WilburMill	1675	1021	61.0	600	325	54.2	527	285	54.1	178	132	74.2	370	283	76.5
Wharton	1303	796	61.1	312	203	65.1	696	367	52.7	154	122	79.2	141	104	73.8
Wilbur	1878	1613	85.9	83	37	44.6	126	103	81.8	234	206	88.0	1433	1264	88.2
Wootton	2469	2200	89.1	145	83	57.2	124	91	73.4	830	785	94.6	1362	1235	90.7

### From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference

For example, at an early M-Stat session on enrollment in honors and AP classes, participants found that only 12 of 25 schools had met the district’s targets for all

students; just 5 had met them for Hispanic students; and 1 had done so for African Americans. Principals talked about how to use strategies the successful schools had developed to enroll more children in advanced classes.

Mr. Talley shared the questions district administrators posed to principals participating in that meeting and their responses:

### QUESTIONS

- What strategies are used to recruit and influence African American and Hispanic students to enroll in honors/AP courses?
- What actions or steps are you taking to ensure that students with ability are enrolled in honors courses in grades 9 and 10 to prepare them for AP courses?
- How are you supporting students once they are enrolled?
- What barriers exist in enrolling more students in honors/AP courses? How are you trying to overcome these barriers, and what supports do you need?
- How are you dialoguing with middle and elementary school principals about your vision for enrollment in honors/AP courses at the high school level?

### EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES

- Review how staffs recruit students to honors/AP.
- Have minority honors/AP parents call other minority parents.
- Align non-AP course instruction with AP standards.
- Ask National Honor Society to provide after-school tutoring.
- Provide AP professional development opportunities.
- Ask all students in grade 11 to identify an AP course they would like to take.
- Have counselors monitor the progress of all AP students.

Currently, 15 schools have met the district's overall targets for enrolling students in honors and AP—with 12 recording double-digit increases in the number of African Americans enrolled, and 8 seeing double-digit increases in Hispanic enrollees.

The district has also established goals for the number of students taking AP *exams*, not just classes, and for the number who score well. Talley noted that an upcoming M-Stat meeting would focus on the fact that while many schools had met targets for the number of students taking the tests, fewer had met test score targets. Leadership teams in each school would use meetings during the summer to devise strategies to address those gaps.

*“The power of M-Stat is that it leads to reflection on instructional practices”*

—Mr. Talley



The power of M-Stat is that “it leads to reflection on instructional practices,” says Mr. Talley, and on professional development, with the aim of changing teachers’ expectations and behaviors.

### TACKLING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Virga, associate superintendent in the district’s Office of Organizational Development, tackled the topic of professional development. The district’s strategy, he noted, “must be based on compelling student data and the needs of staff, and we have to be very strategic. We can’t do everything; we have to focus.”

To that end, when Dr. Weast became superintendent, he quickly “put a full-time staff development teacher in every school.” According to Mr. Virga, a principal at the time, this new resource “changed [his] life,” as it enabled him to better respond to the divergent needs of different students and teachers.

Dr. Weast also noticed that three very different elementary schools had achieved results and sustained them over time. He created a case study based on those schools as a professional development tool. That, in turn, spawned the district’s Professional Learning Communities Institute, in which school leadership teams of 15 to 18 people use a case-study approach to create and implement a two-year plan to close their achievement gaps.

To support each school’s plan, district leaders meet with school staff; support interventions for students; set aside collaborative planning and training time for teachers; provide staff development specialists; and make presentations to parents. “We believe if we build the capacity of the staff, the teams, and the entire school, that’s going to lead to increased student achievement,” Mr. Virga noted. Does that process work? The 11 schools participating in the first two-year cohort began with a 22-point achievement gap between African American and Hispanic students on the one hand, and Asian and white students on the other (see Exhibit 3.6). The schools narrowed that gap in both reading and math, Mr. Virga said, even as scores for Asian and white students also rose. “The work tells us that if you empower school teams, they can make a difference in student achievement.”

According to Virga, during the two-year program, “teacher leadership really emerges. Through the time and the training we give the teams, we really see teachers empowered, and then they go back and make things happen in their schools.”

To ensure that the district develops a system-wide strategy for continuous improvement and professional development, he noted, the superintendent meets with all administrators and principals five times a year. For the past three years,

*“Through the time and the training we give the teams, we really see teachers empowered.”*

—Mr. Virga

*“We believe if we build the capacity of staff and the teams, and the entire school, that’s going to lead to increased student achievement.”*

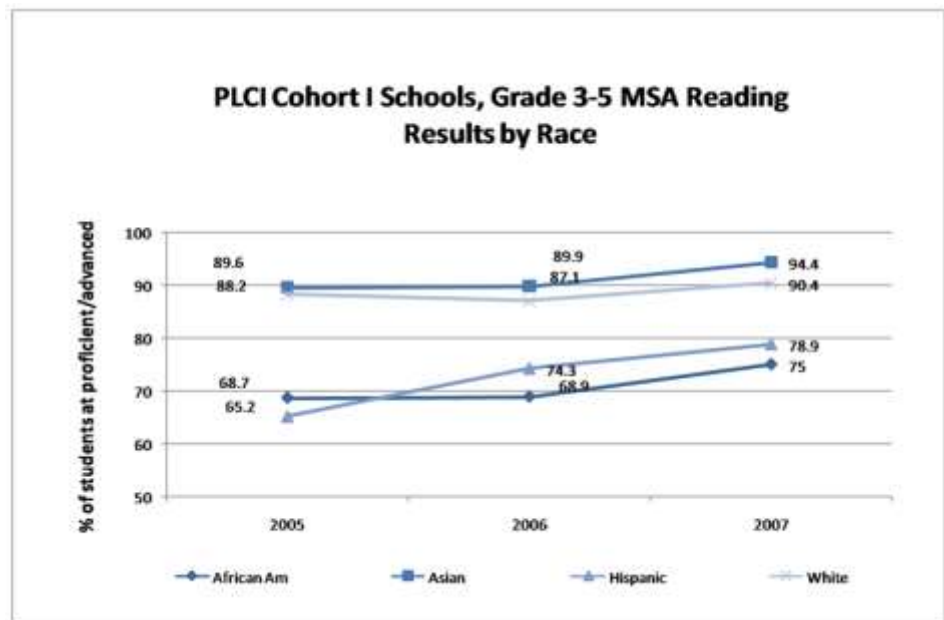
—Mr. Virga

those meetings have focused on “courageous conversations” about race and equity—reflecting the notion that “you can’t lead where you haven’t been.” That is, district leaders must undergo their own transformations before they can expect fundamental changes to occur in individual schools.

*“We’ve really focused on courageous conversations because we believe we have to get the leaders to do it first. You can’t lead where you haven’t been, so we are working on individual transformation of those leaders.”*

—Mr. Virga

**Exhibit 3.6 Reading Results by Race Grades 3–5**



From the MCPS presentation at the AGI Conference

### MAKING DATA PERSONAL

Carole Working, principal of Montgomery County’s Quince Orchard High School, explained how “we at the school level get our teachers to really embrace with their hearts and minds” the effort to close the achievement gap. At Ms. Working’s first meeting with her school’s leadership team, participants concluded—based on the data she displayed—that the school was “a walking advertisement for the achievement gap . . . We needed to examine our belief system, we needed to examine our decision-making process, we needed to examine the way we work.”

The team concluded that it had to ask teachers to examine the data in a way that was “understandable to them.” So the team began by personalizing the information: Ms. Working reported, “Whenever we talked about data . . . we used pictures of our students . . . we are not talking about numbers, we are talking about the success of our students.”

At the time, only 28 percent of African American and Hispanic students were enrolled in honors and AP classes. The leadership team identified another 150 minority students to enroll, and after one semester found that 80 percent had adapted well without “heavy intervention.” That experience motivated school leaders to enroll numerous students whose indicators showed that they were capable of more rigorous work in honors and AP classes—including 59 percent of Quince Orchard’s African Americans, and 57 percent of its Hispanics.

*“The thing that we want our teachers to know is that when we work together, when we work in a targeted way, when we use the data to inform our decisions, we can create a better school and help make our students successful.”*

—Ms. Working

When the school found that it was failing to meet other targets for students of color, the team again posted “pictures of students who needed our help to get to graduation . . . a very powerful tool.” At every training session, teachers searched for photos of their own students, according to Ms. Working. The ability to visualize who needed assistance “drove how we created our intervention programs, and the school was able to make great gains.”

She noted that the leadership team has “worked very hard” on the adaptive leadership challenge; that is, “to make a safe place where we can look at data on individual teachers” and recognize that “we are all engaged in helping our colleagues . . . identify what’s not going right in a class.” For example, one teacher was clearly struggling with low-income, African American, and special education students. The team helped the teacher restructure her class and improve the way she was delivering instruction.

Ms. Working also realized that the leadership team needed to do “more than order textbooks and administer tests,” so she brought team members together to read books on how to create professional learning communities and structure school-wide interventions. The team has learned to work with data more effectively and to “improve thinking” among teachers and school staff.

For example, the team introduced Equitable Instructional Practices, a curriculum that focuses on culturally competent teaching. After learning about the practices, teachers began observing each other to determine whether they were using them to strengthen their relationships with students. Both teachers and staff found that they “weren’t nearly as affirming and friendly as they thought.”

The goal of the entire process, says Working, is to let teachers “know that when we work together, when we work in a targeted way, when we use data to inform our decisions, we can create a better school and help make our students successful.”

## COMMENTS AND Q&A

### OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

Discussant Dr. Mica Pollack of Harvard's Graduate School of Education asked the presenters whether the district had encountered any resistance when it asked staff in each school to focus on their everyday interactions with students. In her experience, when race is on the table, people feel blamed for denying children of color opportunity, and respond by asserting that they are not racists, that their intentions are good, and that the "everyday things teachers do really don't matter that much," given poverty and other external factors.

Professionals also tend to resist outside remedies, she observed. The district seems to have devised "remedies from the inside, which might mitigate that tension. It seems that you have managed to inspire people and I want to hear how."

Deputy Superintendent Lacey responded that Dr. Weast drives the district's approach: "He is not afraid to be honest; he is not afraid to disclose data." He informed political leaders from the outset that the district was changing fast, and that it would have to respond by investing resources. His use of red and green school zones to push for full-day kindergarten produced results, which in turn yielded more funding.

"He just kept chipping away" at the resistance, according to Dr. Lacey. For example, he held up a *Newsweek* cover about Katrina while highlighting troubling data on the district's achievement gaps, and asserted: "We will have a Katrina if we don't do something differently." And "when you use data, how can you argue?" Dr. Lacey asked.

To overcome resistance among principals and help them close their schools' achievement gaps, district administrators also provide books on the best instructional practices. The result is that our district has "a common language . . . we all talk the same talk and walk the same walk," she says.

### QUESTIONING THE WISDOM OF "COLOR BLINDNESS"

Ms. Working confirmed that central-office staff actively support principals such as herself. She also noted that her leadership team tries to make the school's efforts to address its challenges "doable and inviting." For example, her staff began discussing whiteness, and "the first time we did that the dialogue was almost explosive . . . I now have faculty saying to me that we need to know more about whiteness because they are beginning to recognize that they need to learn how to communicate, how to provide education to everyone, no matter what."

*"There is a common language in our district. We all talk the same talk, walk the same walk."*

—Dr. Lacey

Panels of peers decide whether to support or dismiss staff members who are not reaching six research-based standards.

Mr. Virga underscored that the district is asking teachers to reconsider “the whole concept of color blindness”—the belief that they should “treat everybody the same . . . If you are expecting all kids to act like you, that’s a disconnect, which leads to office referrals and poor student achievement.”

Mr. Morrison noted that the district’s administrators and principals need to ask and answer the same questions concerning race and equity. For example, rather than simply trying to reduce the number of students who are suspended, a school needs to “create a better learning and teaching environment so that students aren’t engaging in the kind of behaviors that are resulting in suspensions.”

### SUPPORTING GOOD TEACHING

Discussant Dr. John Diamond of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education posed several key questions:

- How do we think about and ensure that teachers actually change their instructional practices?
- How do we know if they have done so?
- Are the changes we want to see in classrooms based on a certain model of effective instruction, or are we empowering teachers to teach in ways that work for them?

Dr. Lacey responded that the district identifies exemplary teachers who are making a difference with students of color in each grade and subject, and showcases their approach. For example, after three elementary teachers had success in teaching advanced math to children of color, the district found that all three had read books such as *Research for Better Teaching*, by Jon Saphier. All teachers entering the district now study Saphier’s work. The staff development specialists in each school also work with staff development teachers, to ensure that all staff “have a common language about what good teaching looks like,” says Mr. Virga.

Dr. Lacey noted that the district no longer has a teacher evaluation system. Instead, in cooperation with several unions, it has created a professional growth system based on six research-based standards for administrators, principals, teachers, and support staff alike. Panels of peers decide whether to support or dismiss staff members who are not reaching the standards.

Teachers are dismissed only after two years of targeted support, according to Dr. Morrison. “Every new teacher is assigned a consulting teacher, whose job it is to help them through that first year.” And every new principal has a consulting principal. The district also posts video of successful teachers on its website, to allow teachers to observe their peers.

Mr. Talley noted that his Office of Organizational Development has also created “look-fors”—equitable practices that “you should find when you go into any classroom.” If, as a community superintendent, he observes a math lesson and the “teacher is spending 30 minutes on the warm-up, we know something is wrong.”

Session moderator Dr. Charles Ogletree, a professor at the Harvard Law School and co-chair of the AGI, asked whether all AP classes are comparably rigorous, and whether the district has accounted for dropouts in tallying its overall progress. Dr. Morrison responded by noting that the county’s retention and graduation rates are among the highest in the country. However, Dr. Lacey observed that children of color often end up in AP Psychology, which may be less rigorous than AP classes in other subjects, underscoring the need “to be unrelenting about the work that we do.”

*“Our very first M-Stat, were people somewhat apprehensive? Yes; but they left energized and really quite excited about the process.”*

—Mr. Talley

### OVERCOMING DISCOMFORT

AGI co-chair and director Dr. Ronald Ferguson asked the presenters whether the M-Stat process made participants uncomfortable, as it “held them accountable for the numbers.” Mr. Talley responded that although people at the district’s first M-Stat session did find the process intimidating, “they left energized and really quite excited.” Dr. Lacey noted that state and county political leaders attended the first M-Stat session to observe how to implement a similar process, underscoring its importance for participants.

The M-Stat process also creates results, she noted, which in turn spur higher funding for the schools. For example, teachers won a 5 percent salary increase after school officials insisted on rewarding them for rising achievement. Dr. Morrison agreed that as different schools participate in the M-Stat process, they see that underperforming ones receive district support and become “success stories.”

### THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER TEAMS

Paul Ash, superintendent of schools in Lexington, Massachusetts, asked presenters to describe the role of teacher teams in each school. Ms. Working responded that her high school has created two such teams: one to gather and distribute data, the other to find out “what really goes on in classrooms.” Department chairs also meet with her monthly to choose which of 15 data points on which to focus, and to evaluate progress on the school’s improvement plan.

The latter team has recently focused on cases in which formative assessments—interim tests and teachers’ observations of student learning—do not predict results on summative assessments: final exams, state and national exams, and SATs. Working says she encourages teachers to grade students at least weekly, so the teachers can modify their instruction before students take standardized tests.

### ARE THE GIFTED AND TALENTED SHORTCHANGED?

Montgomery County’s emphasis on increasing access to higher-level courses and curricula has raised concern among some parents. A Montgomery County parent who watched the conference online contacted the AGI to express his belief that the focus on “lifting all boats” has been unfair to the gifted and talented. He wrote, “It should be clear that intentionally depriving red-zone higher-ability students (including its African American, Hispanic and FARMS higher-ability students) and red-zone middle-class and educated parents creates another instance of the ‘institutional racism’ that the [red-zone/green-zone] strategy was intended to remove. The strategy has reduced the red/green proficiency gap, in part by intentionally shortchanging red-zone higher-ability students . . . It is now time that MCPS, at the demand of red-zone parents, transcend the redlining effect of dichotomy-based strategy through red-zone programming in service of high-ability students.”

One teacher predicted that enrolling more students of color in advanced classes would water down expectations and standards. That same teacher later attested that she “couldn’t be prouder” of her school’s efforts.

Montgomery County officials do not agree that they have deprived any child—intentionally or otherwise. They also acknowledge the issue. During the conference, Dr. Morrison observed that one teacher predicted that enrolling more students of color in advanced classes would water down expectations and standards for all students. However, that same teacher later attested that she “couldn’t be prouder” of her school’s efforts to expand participation in honors and AP—it reminded her that “a rising tide lifts all ships.” According to the teacher, “That’s really what’s happening in our school, and in Montgomery County Public Schools.”

The question of whether high-ability students require separate programming to achieve their potential—as opposed to having teachers that are trained to effectively differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classes—is an important matter on which opinions are strong, but for which research provides no simple answer. It was not discussed at the conference, and few studies over the past several decades have addressed it in a rigorous manner.

### RESOURCES

To view video and PowerPoint presentations from the session, see <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>

For more on the Montgomery County Public Schools and their Strategic Plan, see <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org>

For cases on Montgomery County and other districts, see Stacey Childress, Richard F. Elmore, Allen S. Grossman, and Susan Moore Johnson., eds. (2007). *Cases in Public*



## GETTING IT DONE

*Education Leadership: Managing School Districts for High Performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

For the book by Jon Saphier referenced in this section, see: Jon Saphier, Mary Ann Haley-Speca, and Robert Gower. (2008). *The Skillful Teacher: Building Your Teaching Skills* (6th ed.). Acton, MA: Research for Better Teaching, Inc.



## 4. RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND NARROWING GAPS IN RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

### PRESENTERS

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Deborah Jewell-Sherman, Superintendent  
 Yvonne Brandon, Deputy Superintendent  
 Victoria Oakley, Director of Instruction  
 Michael Kight, Principal, Albert Hill Middle School

### DISCUSSANTS

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Robert Peterkin, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
 Seth Reynolds, The Parthenon Group

### MODERATOR

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Richard Murnane, Harvard Graduate School of Education and AGI co-chair

*“We believe that the survival of public schooling as we have known it is truly at stake. If public schools are to survive, leaders are going to have to look very different than they have historically, and we’re going to have to do things that are different from what we have traditionally done.”*

—Dr. Jewell-Sherman

Richmond Public Schools have not “historically been the school district of choice,” observed Superintendent Deborah Jewell-Sherman during the first session of the conference’s second day, especially since the 1970s, given “busing and [white] flight.” Today the district is overwhelmingly African American (see Exhibit 4.1), although Latino students are the fastest-growing racial/ethnic group, and the percentage of white students is also rising. She and three other presenters from the district talked about the tools the district has developed to tackle its formidable challenges.

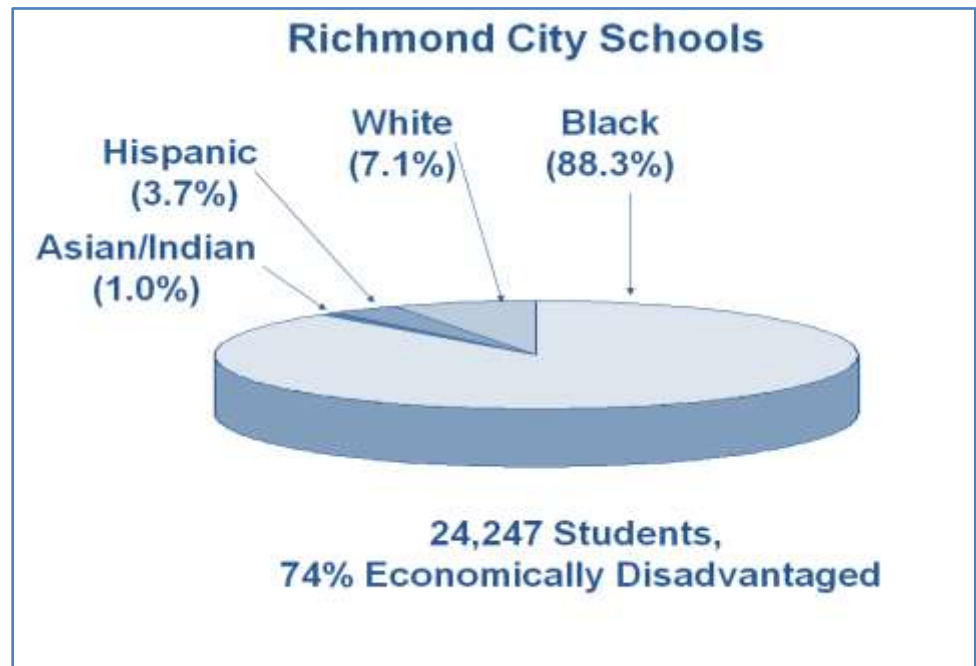
When Dr. Jewell-Sherman became superintendent in 2002, Richmond Public Schools “had to acknowledge the brutal facts,” she says. The district was considered “the second-lowest performing in the Commonwealth.” Only one school in the district had initially won accreditation after Virginia established its accountability system—known as Standards of Learning (SOL)—in 1998, and just a handful of district schools had done so since. (For a school to gain accreditation, 70 percent of its students must pass state assessments in reading, language arts, math, science, and social science. High schoolers must also pass six end-of-course tests to graduate.)

What’s more, according to Dr. Jewell-Sherman, the district was “making decisions intuitively—we weren’t using data.” The school system was also highly decentralized and lacked accountability. And because each school was choosing its own curricula,

“we had 12 reading programs going on simultaneously,” putting roadblocks in front of the many students who moved within the district.

Despite this record, however, “we had to manufacture a sense of urgency . . . as this is a city that does not like to change,” she noted. She resolved that the district would “move rapidly, and no longer be satisfied with slow, incremental gains.”

**Exhibit 4.1 Richmond City Schools Student Demographics**



**From Richmond’s presentation to the AGI conference**

*“Our first action was to request an instructional audit by the Council of Great City Schools. They sent a scalding report, which we had to embrace, because it really allowed us to look in the mirror.”*

—Dr. Brandon

### CHARTING THE COURSE

According to Deputy Superintendent Dr. Yvonne Brandon, “Our first action was to request an instructional audit by the Council of Great City Schools . . . They sent a scalding report, which we had to embrace, because it really allowed us to look in the mirror.” The report also provided “outside validation” of the need for fundamental reform.

In response, the district created *Charting the Course*, a comprehensive road map for using “attendance data, test data, [and] discipline data” to track student performance, drive instructional decisions, and ensure accountability. Under this approach, the district examines three-year trends in school performance on state and federal assessments and also disaggregates results by year and student

subgroup. That information, in turn, allows administrators to set objectives for each school and develop an instructional plan for the academic year.

The district then administers tests every nine weeks throughout the academic year, to provide real-time feedback so schools can “remediate or accelerate learning.” The district relies on the EdgeSoft Management System to scan test results and provide scores the next day, to enable administrators, principals, and teachers “to hold the instructional conversations that are critical to success.” The district also trains administrators and principals in how to conduct those conversations.

District teams visit each school throughout the academic year to examine biweekly data developed by teachers, grade-level teams, or content-area teams, and to observe classroom teaching.

Teams from the district office visit every school in October, to help principals and teachers analyze the *Charting the Course* information. Smaller district teams then visit each school throughout the academic year to examine biweekly data “developed by teachers, grade-level teams, or content-area teams,” and to observe classroom teaching.

### ON THE GROUND AT ALBERT HILL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Mr. Michael Kight, principal of Richmond’s 500-student Albert Hill Middle School, admitted that the *Charting the Course* process was nerve-wracking at first, as district teams pored over the performance of his students from the previous year. However, he quickly realized that he could ask for district support based on those results. He, in turn, uses data on individual students to “provide support for my teachers” and “put them on the right path.”

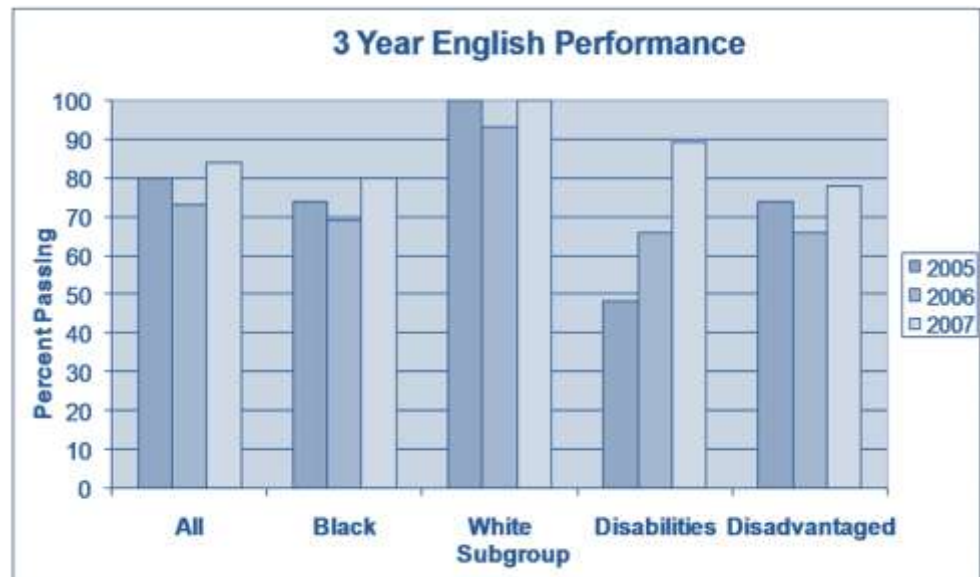
For example, a recent three-year district analysis of his school’s performance in English revealed that it had met state accreditation standards from 2005 through 2007. The school’s performance dropped somewhat in 2006 after the state test became more rigorous, but then rebounded (see Exhibit 4.2). A closer look revealed that the school’s economically disadvantaged students had fallen short in 2006, as fewer than 70 percent had passed the state test.

In response, Mr. Kight began analyzing data on each student, including not only test scores but also work habits, attendance, and conduct, along with economic, disability, and special education status. At first, he admits, “teachers were really afraid” of the resulting spreadsheet of information, and “didn’t want to use it.” However, they quickly found that they could rely on the data to “identify students who needed additional help,” and to convince parents of the need for such intervention.

As proof of the merits of that approach, he recounted the story of one Latina student who had scored well on every state test except math. He realized from looking at the data that she did not have the vocabulary she needed to succeed at

math. “In the past,” he notes, “we would have put her in a remedial math class” for a semester, rather than simply helping her expand her math vocabulary. In fact, after receiving such help, she nearly doubled her score on the district’s benchmark math test in just nine weeks. “Once the teachers started seeing [results such as] this, they really started buying in,” he says.

**Exhibit 4.2 Albert Hill Middle School English Performance by Subgroup**



**From Richmond’s presentation to the AGI conference**

Mr. Kight also relied on the *Charting the Course* approach to collecting data to enroll an incoming student in advanced classes, over the objections of the student’s fifth-grade teacher, who felt that “he couldn’t do [the work].” In defense of his decision, the principal pointed out to the teacher that the student had posted “advanced scores in every class but yours.” After the student passed all his state achievement tests, Mr. Kight concluded that “fifth-grade teachers were recommending students based on their feelings” rather than on more objective information.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT “RPS UNIVERSITY”

To create a research-based curriculum aligned from grades K–12 and provide targeted professional development, the district built a program known as *RPS University*, which spearheads a three-pronged approach:

- The Curriculum Compass
- The Curriculum Treasure Chest
- A Balanced Scorecard

The Curriculum Compass tool “unpacks” the district’s academic standards, to clarify the core knowledge that each standard requires, and provides “spiraling objectives” for learning in successive grades, according to Deputy Superintendent Brandon.

*“We went to the schools and took out every old textbook. We also supplied teachers with everything that they needed, because we wanted to give them a kit, an excuse-free instructional kit. “*

*—Dr. Brandon*

The second tool, the Curriculum Treasure Chest, provides lesson plans for “every objective and grade level” to support the district’s instructional model, although teachers may add their own lessons to the mix, says Victoria Oakley, director of instruction. The treasure chest encompasses “everything you ever wanted to do in a classroom,” noted Dr. Brandon. The goal is to give teachers an “excuse-free instructional kit.”

The treasure chest suggests test questions, vocabulary lists, field trips, websites, homework, and resources, so teachers do not have to “search through three, four, or five different teacher guides,” or excavate file cabinets for “antiquated lesson plans,” says Ms. Oakley. The treasure chest also suggests “acceleration activities for students who ‘got it,’ and activities to push students who didn’t.” To ensure the success of this approach, the district removed every textbook that no longer meshed with its newly aligned curricula. It also offers this material on CD-ROM to everyone it trains, produced in-house to cut costs.

Training for principals and teachers initially focused on “using student data for instructional decisions.” They needed change because their standard approaches often did not work. “We had to ask schools to come out of their ‘comfort zones,’ ” said Dr. Brandon, telling principals and teachers that some existing methods and curricula are “not working for you. Here are the numbers.”

The district then trained principals, lead teachers, coaches, and mentors in each content area in each school. New teachers attend a weeklong training on the district’s curriculum framework and toolkit, and participate in monthly workshops based on their specific needs.

Dr. Brandon notes, “Anybody who had anything to do with instruction got the same training, so they could speak the same language.” The district “decided this investment was essential to build capacity in each classroom, and also to hold teachers accountable”—which it could not do “if we did not train them in what they needed to do.”

The district felt it was important to “train principals and assistant principals right along with the teachers,” Dr. Brandon noted, to ensure that they know when

teaching “is done correctly.” Principals view videotapes of good instructional practices together, forming “their own little learning communities.” Ms. Oakley concurs that “we spend a great deal of time training and working with principals, to ensure that they understand what a great lesson should look like; what an effective instructional strategy would be in reading and math.”

*“We spend a great deal of time training and working with principals, to ensure that they understand what a great lesson should look like; what an effective instructional strategy would be in reading and math.”*

—Ms. Oakley

In implementing these supports, Ms. Oakley said that specialists in her department initially “blamed the schools” for instructional problems, while teachers, principals, and administrators did not see her district-level department “as credible.” She responded by spending “a great deal of time training the instructional staff,” teaching them how to write curricula based on the district’s instructional objectives, and to “own” the instructional process. “We had to be retooled and retrained, and to understand that our customers are the schools, the teachers, and the children.”

According to Ms. Oakley, team members now spend 80 percent of their time in classrooms, training teachers, and “they are held accountable for the results in the schools they serve, and at the district level.” Before going into individual schools, instructional specialists critique each other’s presentations to ensure that they are complementary. They even began dressing alike when they visited schools together, so “people could see that we were a team.”

The district relied on a grant with a local university to develop its own math specialists, “because we knew that elementary math teachers were not as proficient as they needed to be,” according to Dr. Brandon. The district also trains special education teachers in specific content areas, rather than simply complying with state regulations. Even staff members such as bus drivers and food service workers receive targeted training to ensure that all employees understand that “everything they do plays into our number-one goal, which is student achievement.”

The district’s third key tool, the Balanced Scorecard, is a “systematic accountability model,” according to Dr. Brandon. The scorecard tracks the district’s progress in fulfilling six core goals it sets for each academic year. Every central-office department completes a scorecard to provide feedback on “internal operations as well as instruction.”

However, the scorecard focuses mainly on instruction, tracking PSAT and SAT participation rates and scores; enrollment in honors, Advanced Placement, and community college courses; and certifications earned by career, technical education, and special education students. According to Dr. Brandon, this information informs each school’s improvement plan. The district posts the scorecard on its website, so “anyone can see what we are doing,” and schools vie for recognition as “trailblazers,” “flagships,” and “lighthouse leaders.” The district relied on training at

Schools vie for recognition as “trailblazers,” “flagships,” and “lighthouse leaders.” The district relied on training at the University of Virginia to learn the Balanced Scoreboard approach.

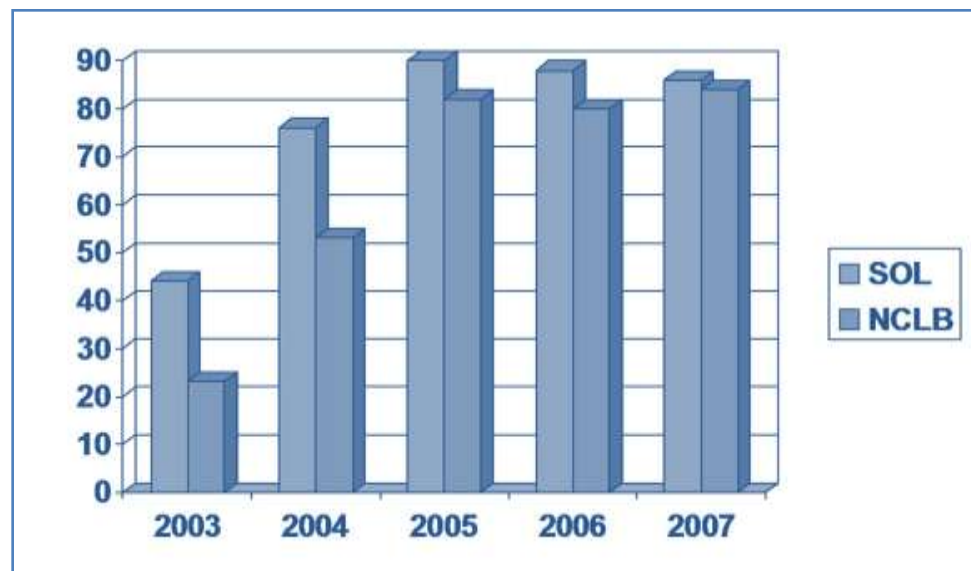
the University of Virginia to learn how to use this approach to aligning its “vision, mission, and goals with strategic objectives.”

### DISTRICT-WIDE RESULTS

To support the drive for improvement, the Richmond School Board signed a memorandum of understanding with the state’s Department of Education based on the initial audit from the Council on Great City Schools. The Board also endorsed the district’s educational strategies. In addition, the business community has partnered with the district to promote higher achievement, according to Dr. Jewell-Sherman. For example, the business community flies administrators around the country to recruit the “best and brightest” teachers, and funds housing assistance for new teachers.

The district’s reform efforts since 2002 have spurred progress, according to Dr. Brandon. In 2007, 86 percent of the district’s schools—including every high school and 93 percent of its elementary schools—won state accreditation (see Exhibit 4.3). She also noted that 84 percent of kindergarteners and 80 percent of third graders are reading above the Phonemic Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS) benchmark.

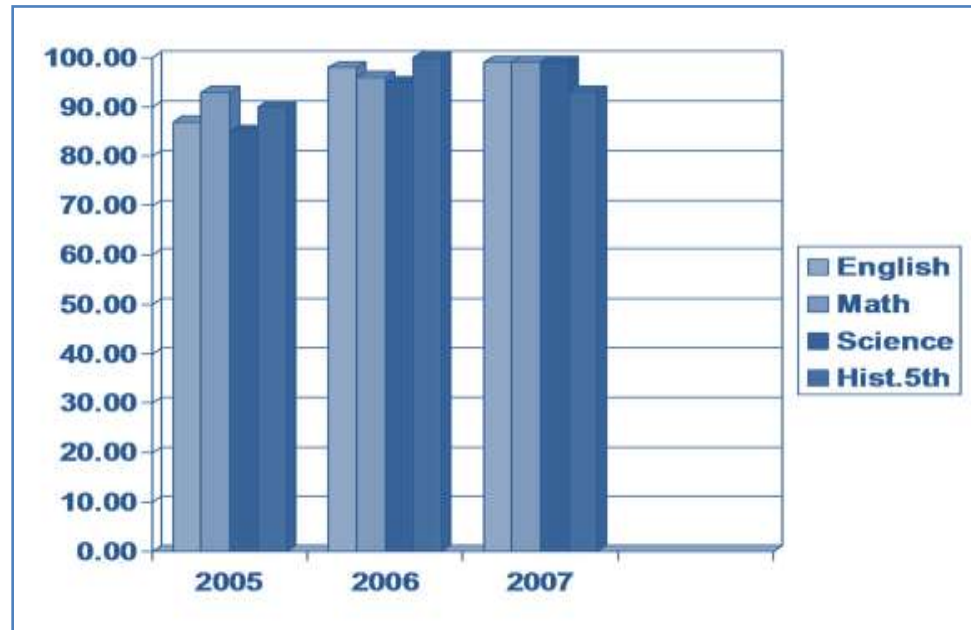
**Exhibit 4.3 Percentage of Schools Meeting Federal & State Benchmarks**



From Richmond’s presentation to the AGI conference

Fairfield Elementary School—which sits in a “crime-infested” housing project where a 14-year-old was recently murdered—provides concrete evidence of the district’s progress, according to Dr. Jewell-Sherman. Despite the fact that 100 percent of Fairfield students receive free or reduced-price lunch, the school recently recorded the “highest achievement in Richmond City Public Schools” (see Exhibit 4.4).

**Exhibit 4.4 Proficiency Rates at Fairfield Elementary School**



From Richmond’s presentation to the AGI conference

## COMMENTS AND Q&A

### ENSURING FOLLOW-THROUGH

Discussant Mr. Seth Reynolds from The Parthenon Group, a consulting company that runs its own Education Center of Excellence, noted that many districts fall short in actually implementing reform. Although they may launch some initial elements, they often find themselves veering “off to the next crisis.” He speculates that “cross-currents” of pressure from myriad stakeholders such as parents and teachers also undermine efforts to follow through.

He asked what enabled Richmond Public Schools to make mid-course corrections and to sustain its efforts. “How did you get the alchemy right to actually make [reform] happen?” Dr. Jewell-Sherman responded that her contract specified that



the Richmond school board could terminate her for cause if 20 schools did not receive state certification the first year after reform. “The sense of urgency on my part was very real.”

However, beyond her personal risk, she notes, “everyone in the city and the region understood the stakes.” They knew that “if by some miracle . . . we could pull it off, it meant we were a different kind of school district.” She points to the balanced scorecard, in particular, as enabling the district to converge on the most important steps: That tool “allowed us to say no to other things and stay really focused on the work.”

Getting the “right people on the bus” to support reform is critical. Aside from trying to hire the best and the brightest, the district helped quite a few people make alternative career decisions.

Getting the “right people on the bus” to support reform was also critical, she says. Aside from trying to hire the best and the brightest, the district helped “quite a few people . . . make alternative career decisions.”

According to Dr. Brandon, data enabled the district to sustain “that sense of urgency.” For example, she pointed out to a middle-school math teacher—who had balked at instructional innovations—that only 23 percent of his students had passed the state achievement test. Principal Kight noted that pressure on weaker teachers to buy into the system now comes from colleagues who “see that we’re moving, and they want to keep [progressing] in that direction.”

Discussant Dr. Robert Peterkin of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education observed that “intentionality” is the key to effective implementation of reform; that is, being “very careful about understanding exactly what you’re implementing,” and getting “rid of stuff that doesn’t work for kids.” He also highlighted the “in-time support” that the district offers to principals and teachers as providing a yearlong “no-blame zone” in which they can pursue reform.

*“Your task as leaders is to make the people under your watch believe that this work can be done.”*

—Dr. Jewell-Sherman

However, he pointed to the active hostility of Richmond’s mayor—who cut \$18 million each year for the past three years from the district’s budget—as a daunting challenge. He asked the presenters how they sustained their focus in the face of such political obstacles, and avoided becoming “consumed by that environment, which prevails in most urban districts.”

Dr. Jewell-Sherman responded that she has worked in the district since 1995—“long enough to understand Richmond and its culture”—but that she is not a Richmond native. That mixed background gave her “multiple lenses” through which to envision reform. She also used levers such as No Child Left Behind, which, although “highly flawed,” kept the “momentum going.”

“On a daily basis, my number-one job” is to protect other district employees from political pressure, she says. That is, she must maintain a “face that says, in the midst

of the storm, we are going to get through it, we are going to be successful.” She believes “strongly that your task as leaders is to make the people under your watch believe that this work can be done.”

Mr. Reynolds asked how the district continually “raises the [achievement] bar.” Dr. Jewell-Sherman responded that the school system is now “embracing a new direction”: a commitment to the “whole child.” That approach includes ensuring each child’s health and wellness, and providing access to “differentiated learning opportunities.” It also aims to ensure that every child participates in community service, and that all graduating students are bilingual, starting with the class of 2015.

*“We have benchmarks that everyone has to meet, and we provide additional support. So sometimes the trajectory for growth is very, very steep in an individual school, and we pour resources in there.”*

—Dr. Jewell-Sherman

### SETTING “STRETCH TARGETS”

AGI co-chair and director Dr. Ferguson asked the presenters how they “go about setting goals.” Dr. Jewell-Sherman responded that the district uses the Balanced Scorecard to set “stretch targets” beyond state and federal standards, including some targets that the district may not be able to meet.

She admitted that “sometimes the trajectory for growth is very, very steep for an individual school.” However, the district does negotiate goals with individual schools, and then “we pour resources” into those facing the stiffest challenges.

### CHOOSING THE RIGHT CURRICULA

Session moderator Dr. Richard Murnane, a professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, asked how the district chose which curricula to implement. He noted that scripted approaches to reading and math can produce initial gains, but may be less effective in enabling students to reach beyond a low achievement ceiling. Yet less-skilled teachers may find more-challenging curricula, such as Math Trek, difficult to use.

According to Dr. Brandon, “a lot of data supported the fact that some of our elementary teachers didn’t know how to teach reading,” especially to struggling students. The district therefore selected two scripted approaches to reading that include “embedded professional development and assessments,” to allow administrators to quickly respond to the quality of the instruction and student outcomes. However, Ms. Oakley noted, the district also builds teachers’ capacity to move beyond the scripts.

To ensure a more consistent approach to teaching, the district “shut down” curriculum vendors’ access to individual schools, she says, with Ms. Oakley herself acting as “gatekeeper.” In the past, schools had often relied on friendships between vendors and teachers to choose courses of instruction. If a particular curriculum does not align with the district’s goals and students’ needs, administrators do not

To ensure a more consistent approach to teaching, the district shut down curriculum vendors’ access to individual schools.

consider it, she says. The bottom line is to ensure that the district gets the biggest “bang for the buck with respect to student outcomes.”

### RESOURCES

The Richmond City presentation video and PowerPoint are available on the AGI website at <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>

The Richmond Public Schools website is <http://www.richmond.k12.va.us/>

For *Charting a New Course for the Richmond Public Schools* by the Council of Great City Schools, see <http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/RichmondReportFinal.pdf>

Robert Kaplan of Harvard Business School and David Norton developed the Balanced Scorecard as an approach to strategic management.

## 5. USING DATA TO CHANGE DISTRICT CULTURE IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

### PRESENTERS

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Elizabeth City, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Mary Russo, Principal, Murphy Elementary School

Mary Skipper, Principal, TechBoston Academy High School

### DISCUSSANTS

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Duncan Chaplin, Mathematica Policy Research

Thomas Payzant, Harvard Graduate School of Education

*“We have this tendency to rush to action in education, before we really identify what the problem is and what the roots of it are.”*

—Dr. City

In this session, a researcher from Harvard and two principals from the Boston Public Schools talked about how the district uses data to zero in on “the school level, the classroom level, the individual student level,” according to Dr. Elizabeth City, of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. She was the first speaker in the session and described a system for “continuous improvement” based on the effective use of data. It emerged from a two-year collaboration between the university and the Boston Public Schools. The eight-step Data Wise system is “essentially a problem-solving process” that “is really about having conversations,” she said.

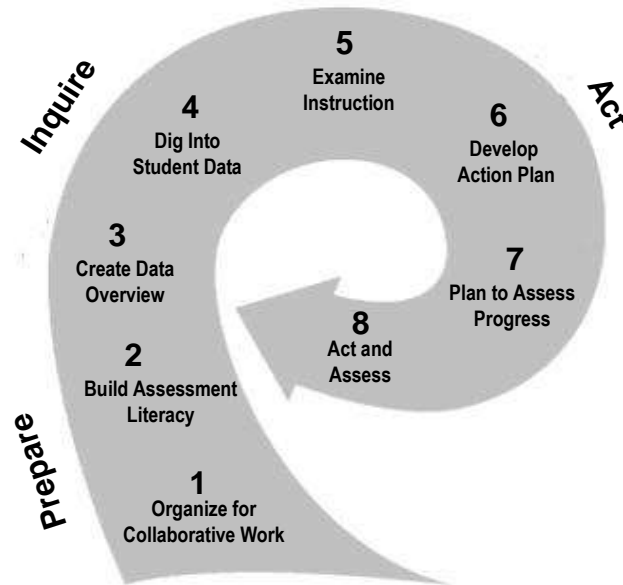
### HOW DATA WISE WORKS

Dr. City outlined the eight steps of the Data Wise process (see Exhibit 5.1).

**Step 1—Organize for collaborative work:** The first step is for a district or school to decide on the overall process it will use to spur improvement. It then forms a data team and sets aside time for its members to take stock of existing information, assessments, and initiatives. “We have this tendency to rush to action in education, before we really identify what the problem is and what the roots of it are,” Dr. City observed.

Exhibit 5.1 Data Wise Eight Steps

The Data Wise system is essentially a problem-solving process that is really about having conversations.



From Liz City’s presentation to the AGI conference

**Step 2—Build assessment literacy:** In the second step, participants become familiar with the testing instruments in use, and learn how to interpret the resulting data, as test reports can be “very confusing.” Team members also evaluate whether the district or school is using “the right assessments for the right things,” and “using assessment language accurately.”

**Step 3—Create a data overview:** The team then “chooses a focus” within the myriad data, and figures out “what the story is.” Dr. City recounted the experience of a district whose administrators looked at 40 slides of data but had no compelling narrative about what they showed. Part of the challenge is “figuring out how to display the data,” she noted. The goal is to plan a district-wide or school-wide meeting to talk about the information, and to determine ahead of time “what that conversation is going to look like.”

**Step 4—Dig into data:** In this step, Data Wise participants ask: What does the experience of individual students reveal about “what’s going on more broadly in our district?” The goal is to converge on a “learner-centered problem”: a core challenge that the district or school needs to confront.

**Step 5—Examine instruction:** Data Wise participants then focus on individual classrooms, to find out “what’s going on within instruction” around the learner-centered problem. This can entail asking teachers to bring in lesson plans or examples of student work, and even videotaping them in action, to enable participants to identify a “problem with practice” and develop a “shared understanding of effective practice.”

**Step 6—Develop an action plan:** Participants then choose instructional strategies to address the learner-centered problem, agree on what those strategies will look like in individual classrooms, and put the plan on paper. For example, years of test results might show that students typically struggle with certain math concepts at specific points in the academic year. Rather than waiting for test results in a given year, a school could ask teachers to use certain techniques to head off the problem.

**Step 7—Plan to assess progress:** In this step, participants set concrete goals for student achievement and determine how to measure progress toward those goals.

**Step 8—Act and assess:** Finally, participants integrate the improvement plan into the work of individual schools, visit classrooms, review results, and adjust the plan.

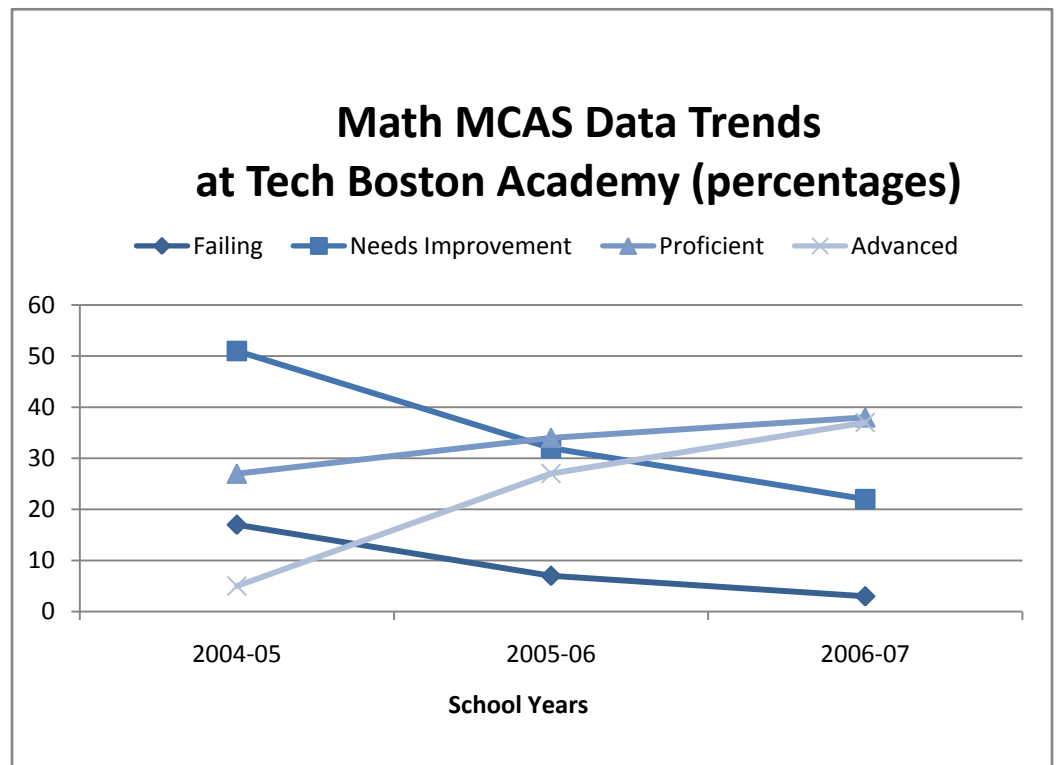
- Converge on a “learner-centered problem”
- Focus on individual classrooms
- Put the plan on paper
- Set concrete goals
- Visit classrooms, review results, and adjust the plan

### HOW ONE HIGH SCHOOL PUTS DATA TO WORK

Mary Skipper, headmaster of TechBoston Academy, outlined how her small high school harnesses data to promote the success of every student. The academy uses a lottery system to admit its 375 students—65 to 70 percent of whom are male. Three-quarters of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches, and more than half of entering students have not met a benchmark on state achievement tests; many are one or two grade levels behind in English and math.

Ms. Skipper noted that the school—launched in 2002—aimed to quickly boost the number of students who score “proficient” or “advanced” on state achievement tests, and lower the number ranked as “failing.” And it did so: The percentage of students scoring as advanced or proficient on reading tests rose from 46 percent in 2004–2005 to 63 percent in 2005–2006, while the number ranked as failing fell from 3 percent to zero. Math achievement scores climbed even more dramatically (see Exhibit 5.2). In math, the school outperformed both the district and the state.

Exhibit 5.2 TechBoston Academy Math Scores



#### From Mary Skipper's presentation to the AGI conference

However, the academy has “a pretty big dropout problem,” Ms. Skipper acknowledged. In response, TechBoston Academy now creates a “transition report card” for each incoming ninth grader. The report cards rank students on 10 risk factors, including age, middle-school attendance and behavior, historical and current grades, and involvement with the Department of Youth Services. The information also includes “reflections” on each student by middle-school teachers, and interviews with both students and parents.

Based on these indicators, the school assigns each student to an overall risk category of one to four; a caseworker monitors the progress of students in the higher two categories. All incoming students also receive a customized schedule, to ensure that they will have the academic, social, and emotional supports they will need. School staff members gain access to information on each student on the Web. The school has faced several challenges in creating the report cards, according to Ms. Skipper:

- The needed information is “very difficult to collect,” as it does not reside in one place.
- Teachers’ and parents’ voices are often absent from a student’s record.

- Education plans for special education students and English language learners are often out-of-date.
- Results on the previous year's state achievement tests do not appear until October/November, "when the schedule is already built and the kids are already floundering."
- Educators at all levels lack training in using data.
- The district and school often lack systems for analyzing data and determining appropriate interventions.

However, according to Ms. Skipper, the school has also found that the challenges can be overcome by using specific techniques and attributes:

- High-quality staff must work long and hard. "If people are not willing to make that commitment, they shouldn't be in education."
- Schools must have the autonomy to determine the resources, curricula, and staffing they need. TechBoston has such autonomy—which Ms. Russo admits other schools may not—because it is a district "pilot school."
- Schools and districts must have "coherent systems and structures" for analyzing data; identifying the needs of students, teachers, and administrators; and mapping resources.
- Strong professional learning communities need time to "plan, reflect, and actually do something with the data."
- All teachers need training in race, gender, and cultural diversity. "We have to talk the same language." If the staff does not, any interventions "are not going to work."
- Schools need "clear lines of accountability" and strong systems for evaluating teachers.
- The school and district must have a "global commitment to building relationships."
- Schools need curricula that are "rigorous and challenging," rather than simply offering students remedial help.
- All instruction should reflect educational research and professional development.



- Schools need to provide information to all stakeholders, including parents and students. For example, TechBoston teachers now post their assignments and grades on the Web every day.

## HOW AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROMOTES POWERFUL TEACHING

*“The only time that I saw real change [in teaching] was when teachers engaged in collaborative coaching and learning.”*

—Ms. Russo

Mary Russo, principal of the 900-student Richard Murphy School, asserted that any of her teachers would answer a question on how to improve results with three words: instruction, instruction, and instruction. The elementary school has focused on three strategies to make teaching more powerful, with the third especially data-rich:

- Create clear expectations about what good teaching looks like.
- With the district’s help, provide deep and focused professional development.
- Build a robust system of “formative,” or interim, assessment.

To implement the first strategy, the school convened teachers from each grade, along with math and literacy coaches, to talk about four key aspects of education: “what classrooms should look like, what teachers should be doing, what students should be doing, and what student work should look like.”

After converging on preliminary answers, the team discussed them with other teachers during formal planning time. The teams then collated the findings into a “Clear Expectations” document for each subject. For example, the math manual asks and answers the question: “If we are really teaching math with an investigative approach, what should instruction look like?” The school created these documents in four months, and Ms. Russo believes that the same process would be “very doable at the district level.” She uses the teaching standards “every time [she does] a performance evaluation.”

To advance its second strategy—to provide strong professional development—the school asked literacy and math coaches to “go right into classrooms” and look over teachers’ shoulders, “coaching, modeling, demonstrating lessons.” That approach “evolved into a system that we call *collaborative coaching and learning*,” based on the medical rounds model, she says. That is, the school frees up all teachers in a grade to observe a coach model good teaching in one classroom, while tapping a small budget to pay substitute teachers to cover the other classrooms.

The teachers take 15 minutes to prepare for the observation, 30 minutes to observe the lesson, and 15 minutes to debrief, at which point they return to their classrooms. During the debriefing, the teaching coach asks: “What did you see

students hear? What did you hear them say? What did you see them being able to do?" The school repeats this process twice each week with various grades. Substitute teachers know they will have steady work, and students become accustomed to having teachers leave for short periods, so classroom learning can continue.

*"The heart of the work of education is to create more powerful systems for delivering instruction, for monitoring instruction, for making sure that it happens for every kid, no exceptions, no excuses."*

—Ms. Russo

The approach has enabled the school to train teachers in "the Murphy way to teach reading, the Murphy way to teach math, the Murphy way to manage student behavior," says Ms. Russo. In fact, she asserts, "The only time that I saw real change" in teaching was when teachers "engaged in this [process of] collaborative coaching and learning."

### "LEARNING WALKS" AND "MOTHER BOOKS"

To bolster its formative assessment—the third key strategy—the Murphy School tests students in writing and math early in the academic year. Teachers use the resulting baseline data to predict the proficiency of individual students at mid-year, tests them again in January, and then compares predictions with results. The school then repeats that process, predicting students' proficiency in June.

Teachers chart the predictions and performance for each child, and then choose specific actions in response to each student who does not meet expectations. "Every statistic has a name and a face," according to Ms. Russo. The process revealed that teachers' expectations were too low, but they rose once teachers began thinking about "what causes problems in student achievement."

To bolster the school's formative assessment, administrators take "learning walks" through each classroom, asking students to explain what they are doing and why, to ensure that teachers have properly conveyed their lessons. Administrators then talk with teachers about any gaps in the learning process.

Teachers also create a "mother book" on each child, which includes notes from teacher-student conferences and all other data on that student. The books are a "powerful" tool for conveying to parents that "this school has a pulse on student learning," Ms. Russo says. The overarching aim is to "create more powerful systems for delivering instruction, for monitoring instruction, for making sure that it happens . . . for every kid, with no exceptions and no excuses."

### COMMENTS AND Q&A

In commenting on the presentations, discussant Dr. Duncan Chaplin of Mathematica Policy Research observed that No Child Left Behind has focused "education reform efforts on very clear goals." However, he asked whether good teachers might be

reluctant to teach in schools or classrooms where many students begin with low test scores. Administrators may contribute to that reluctance by overlooking “value-added modeling,” which measures how much students improve rather than simply whether they reach rigid benchmarks for proficiency.

Dr. City supported the notion of measuring value-added as well as absolute proficiency. She recalled that when she was a teacher and principal in Durham, North Carolina, staff won bonuses for both “absolute performance and improvement . . . If we had just looked at proficiency,” the results “would have looked awful, but we were taking the kids several grade levels in a year.” Focusing on value-added is important because “we all want to feel some success.” However, she reminded conferees that “we are here to talk about the achievement gap,” and that even if African American students are improving faster than white students, “if they are still at 56 percent proficiency, that’s not good enough.”

### TACKLING TEACHER TURNOVER AND EXPANDING THE PIPELINE

Discussant Dr. Tom Payzant observed that one challenge in extending the Murphy School’s collaborative model of coaching and learning across the district was teacher turnover, because “in most urban school districts, 50 percent of the teachers turn over every five years.” Ms. Russo responded: “We need to take teachers the minute they come to us, without making any assumptions about what they are getting in pre-service training, which may be very little, and really begin to work with them, particularly in the area of mathematics . . . Our schools need to be professional development organizations.”

For example, “every teacher who is hired at Murphy School understands that we have to start our work on professional development in the summer. You have to get on this train; you have to take part in these offerings. We were lucky in that our district provided a menu of offerings, so you could take the courses after school, at night, on Saturdays, in the summer . . . So there really is no way to escape being brought into the culture of the school . . . Your colleagues help you along the way.”

According to Ms. Skipper, TechBoston extends professional development to all employees, including support staff and technology specialists. She agrees that “it’s about creating a different culture in the school.” In fact, because the school “invests so much in human capital,” she tries “never to lose a teacher.” And turnover at TechBoston has been just 4 percent—about one teacher per year—for the last three years. However, when teachers do leave, she notes, “it’s important to identify why . . . so administrators can keep a finger on the pulse of the health of the school.”

She has found that such teachers stay “as long as they are getting what they need professionally,” which enables them “to feel called to the mission,” and that good

teachers leave when they “don’t feel support . . .” Administrators need to create “conditions in the school that attract teachers who want to teach.”

To expand the pipeline of effective teachers and entice them to her school, she created a partnership with the University of Massachusetts. In that program, undergraduate education majors work with her and tutor students, which helps the high school students realize that “the hard work actually will pay off.”

The Boston Teacher Residency Program similarly tries to expand the teacher pipeline by encouraging adults with bachelor’s degrees to make a mid-career switch to teaching. Tuition for the 18-month program at UMass is free, and participants work four days with a lead teacher in the district while taking classes on the fifth day to obtain a teaching degree. The program provides a talent pool of people who “tend to be very rooted” and “known within the school community, by the kids, parents, and other teachers,” and who understand “how we manage student behavior and teach literacy and math.”

### THE DISTRICT’S ROLE IN THE USE OF DATA AND INTERIM TESTS

In response to a question about the role of the district in supporting Data Wise, Dr. City emphasized the importance of forming a cross-functional team to scale up the data process a district has chosen and address both technical and human capital questions. In Boston, a team led by deputy superintendent Dr. Janet Williams met for several years with Dr. City and her Harvard colleagues to identify schools most capable of implementing Data Wise. According to Dr. Payzant, the district’s Web portal—MyBPS—was critical in “sending the message that we were going to bring all the data together and give teachers, principals, and central office folks access to it.” A district must also ensure that every teacher understands the data process, and that “every single meeting [involves] putting some evidence on the table and having a hard conversation about it,” according to Dr. City.

Another key question is the district’s role in formative assessment, she says. In some districts, individual schools design their own assessments, but that can create confusion: Are the tests for use by principals and teachers, or by the district in supporting individual schools? That question becomes especially tricky if districts use the same assessments to both improve instruction and hold staff accountable.

Dr. Payzant admitted that on his watch, Boston had not yet “figured out how to do interim or benchmark assessments at a systemic level.” Some schools use “off-the-shelf commercial assessments for interim benchmarks.” But the challenge comes in aligning such tests with state guidelines for what students need to know. For example, using “quick, snapshot, multiple-choice tests” will not prepare students for

the state's more rigorous standardized tests, where 40 percent of questions are "open response."

### SHOULD REFORM BE TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP?

One questioner asked whether the key to closing persistent achievement gaps is always top-down leadership, or whether teachers working collaboratively can spearhead school reform from the bottom up. Dr. Payzant responded that "second only to the quality of instruction is the quality of leadership," and that "the key is the principal." In implementing Data Wise, he and deputy superintendent Dr. Janice Jackson worked directly with principals for 18 months, after which they decided to non-renew six of them—"which had never been done in Boston, and sent the message that we are really serious about this position." He and his colleagues then focused on professional development, because "you've got to provide support and position people to deliver on the accountability side."

*"Second only to the quality of instruction is the quality of leadership. The key is the principal at the school."*

—Dr. Payzant

However, Ms. Russo stressed the importance of enabling teachers to become leaders within a school, and observed that she is not sure principals know how to do that. She noted that Dr. Payzant asked principals to "go back to your schools and find the leadership that is there within your teachers." Such teachers are not necessarily the "most knowledgeable or brilliant people," but they "really understand the work and know how to do it, and are empowered by their principals." In her experience, such teachers are "powerful change agents within a school."

Ms. Skipper noted that principals might be reluctant to recommend teachers as leaders because such teachers often want to be principals themselves, and principals "don't want to lose them." Her response was to again partner with University of Massachusetts to allow such teachers to intern with herself for two years as they became certified to be principals. Such a program can "keep the talent pool in the schools" and prevent "brain drain."

### RESOURCES

For videos and PowerPoint presentations from the conference, see <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/>

For more information on Boston Public Schools, see <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/>

For more information on the Data Wise process, see <http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/decisions/DD2-4.html>

Also see:

Kathryn Boudett, Elizabeth City, Richard Murnane. (2005). *Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Kathryn Boudett and Jennifer Steele, eds. (2007). *Data Wise in Action: Stories of Schools Using Data to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

For more information on Mathematica Policy Research, see <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/>

## 6. CURRENT EFFORTS IN SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

### PRESENTERS FROM LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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Paul Ash, Superintendent, Lexington

Vito A. LaMura, Past President, Lexington Education Association

Steven Flynn, Principal, Jonas Clarke Middle School

### PRESENTERS FROM BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

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William Lupini, Superintendent

Jennifer Fischer-Mueller, Assistant Superintendent

David Summergrad, Principal, Runkle Elementary School

### DISCUSSANTS

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Stacey Childress, Harvard Business School, Public Education Leadership Program

Yvonne Allen, District Project Coordinator for Achievement Initiatives, Shaker Heights, Ohio

### MODERATOR

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Ronald Ferguson, Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Graduate School of Education, and AGI co-chair and director

*“What we learned was that at our high school level, 50 percent of our African American students were in special ed. That for me raised the level of urgency.”*

—Dr. Ash

What steps have two high-performing suburban school districts in metropolitan Boston taken to close their achievement gaps? Teams of speakers from each district outlined their approaches to analyzing the problem and creating a plan to tackle it.

### LEXINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Serving an affluent community of 32,000 residents, Lexington Public Schools are 65 percent white, 25 percent Asian, 4.5 percent African American, and 4.5 percent Latino. “Although we do receive some Title 1 funds [for free and reduced-price lunch students], Lexington performs at an extremely high level,” noted superintendent Paul Ash. “Last year the district had “the highest average SAT score in the state for non-exam schools.”

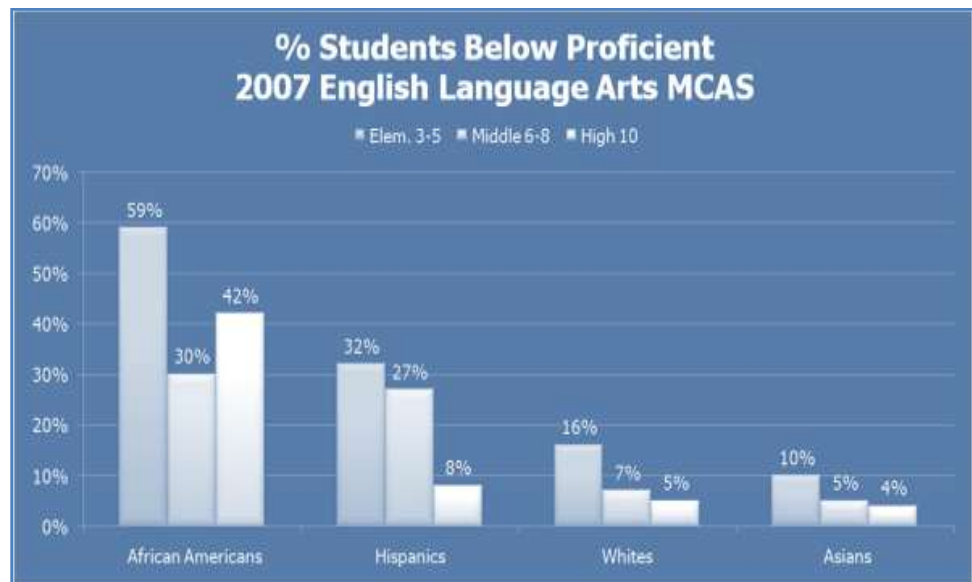
Soon after his arrival three years ago, Mr. Ash asked his principals what percentage of the district’s African American students was enrolled in special education classes. “Nobody knew the answer,” he says. He discovered that the figure was 50 percent.

Mr. Ash responded by forming a task force to investigate that and other aspects of Lexington’s record in educating students of color. When that task force made little progress, he asked Vito LaMura, then stepping down as president of the local teachers’ union, to perform a three-part “comprehensive study.” That effort would document the town’s achievement gap, compare its record with that of surrounding communities, and uncover the most effective practices for closing the gap.

The study showed that the district’s results in educating students of color “were appalling,” says Dr. Ash, although other nearby affluent districts were doing little better (see Exhibit 6.1 and Exhibit 6.2). According to Mr. LaMura, “It’s not that [such students] were failing . . . but they were not achieving at the high levels of the majority of students in Lexington.” Lagging scores on MCAS—the state’s high-stakes achievement tests—were one clear indicator. He found that even many teachers “didn’t believe that our African American and Hispanic kids were doing as badly as the data showed.”

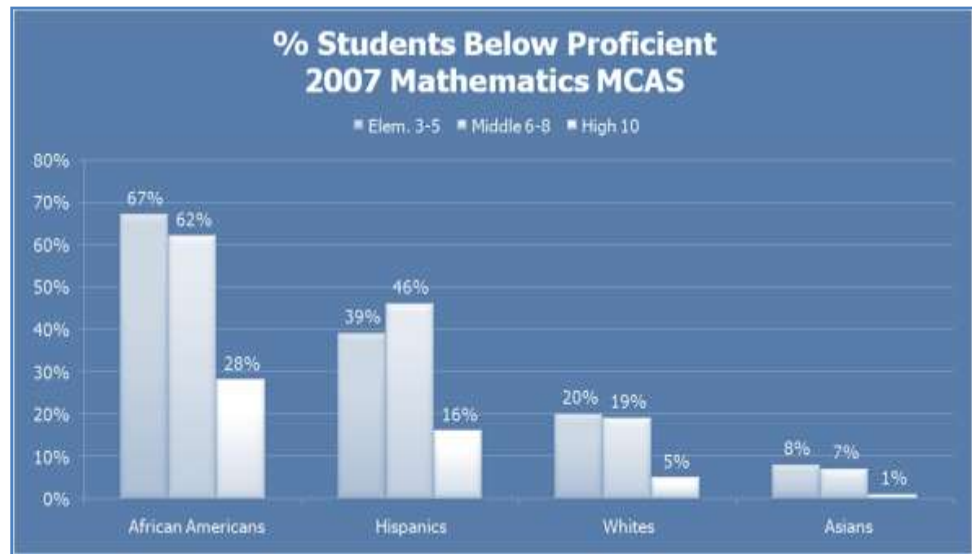
Mr. LaMura noted that Lexington is a Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) community. Under that voluntary desegregation program, parents of color in Boston enroll their children in public schools in participating suburban communities. Of Lexington’s 6,000 students, some 260 are METCO students. Being such a small percentage, “It was very easy for METCO kids to be lost in the town’s incredibly high-achieving” schools, Mr. LaMura observed.

**Exhibit 6.1 Students Below Proficient in English Language Arts**



From Lexington’s presentation to the AGI conference



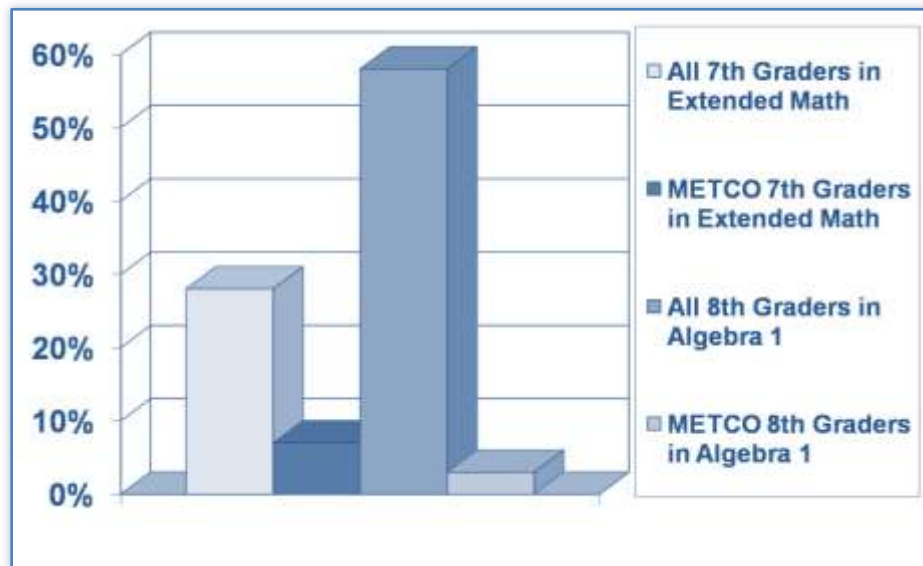
**Exhibit 6.2 Students Below Proficient in Mathematics****From Lexington's presentation to the AGI conference**

To complete his study, he “interviewed in depth virtually every administrator in the system” about the reasons for the achievement gap, and what they would do to close it. He asked Lexington teachers, METCO students and parents, and students of color who lived in the town the same questions. He unveiled the report, completed in January 2008, for METCO parents in an African American church in Boston, and also presented it to the district’s teachers and Lexington-based parents. The report showed, among other findings, that “far too few African American and Hispanic kids were in advanced math” and other honors courses (see Exhibit 6.3).

“To create a sense of urgency—in fact, to create a moral imperative—we pointed out that we’ve been a METCO community for 41 years,” and that “we’ve tried many different things to close the achievement gap, with very little success,” he said.

Although he found few high-performing suburban schools and districts with a better record, Mr. LaMura did discover “lots of urban districts” that were making significant progress in closing the achievement gap. He distilled their characteristics, which included becoming a professional learning community, in the report.

**Exhibit 6.3 7th and 8th Graders Taking Advanced Math  
Lexington, Comparing METCO with the District**



**Based on data in Lexington's presentation to the AGI conference**

Some examples of what he found include:

- focused, deep implementation of a limited number of achievable goals;
- accountability defined in terms of student learning;
- frequent, common assessment of underachievers as drivers of academic interventions;
- teachers using data to understand skill gaps of low-achieving students; and
- teachers receiving professional development on linking low-performing student data to instructional strategies.

Finally, the report “charted a course for the future” by recommending administrative, curricular, teaching, and learning steps for the district. Those included forming a task force, creating an action plan, instituting full-day kindergarten, forming data teams to inform the practices of each school, and using professional development to teach faculty how to do formative (or interim) assessments of student achievement. Dr. Ash noted that the district is not “solely focused on math scores or English scores”; it also plans to “look at the whole child,” including his or her “resilience, perseverance, creativity, and health.”

Steve Flynn, principal of Lexington's Clarke Middle School, co-chairs the new task force. Composed of teachers and parents of both METCO and non-METCO students, the group publishes quarterly reports to ensure that "everything is transparent—we're not doing things behind closed doors," he said.

*"As soon as you begin to initiate change, and try to transform an organization, there will be significant pushback. You're going to have a whole lot of people who are angry at you."*

—Dr. Ash

In spearheading the achievement gap effort, says Dr. Ash, he must consider four domains. The first three include what's best for kids, what the state requires and union contracts prohibit, and the financial implications of reform. "But the toughest one of all is the human side," he says. "Because as soon as you begin to initiate change and try to transform an organization, there will be significant pushback. And so a year into this, you're going to have a whole lot of people who are angry at you."

Like presenters at other sessions, Dr. Ash emphasized the importance of school-level leaders; people who are "incredibly committed to these causes and willing to put their reputation out there and drive the mission." Such leaders are critical because "change is about loss. People lose autonomy, they lose self-efficacy, they lose a sense of power, they lose confidence, they lose the courses that they've taught," he says.

## BROOKLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Like Lexington Public Schools, the Public Schools of Brookline educate some 6,000 students, with similar demographics: 62 percent are white, 18 percent are Asian, 8 percent are African American, and 8 percent are Latino. The district's students "are in the top tier" in scoring on the state's achievement tests, according to assistant superintendent Jennifer Fischer-Mueller, and they also perform well on SATs and Advanced Placement tests. Some 90 percent of Brookline's high school graduates attend four-year colleges.

*"Our data shouted at us that we have this gap far beyond MCAS, AP, and SAT. The discipline reports show you such dramatic over-representation of black males; there's a strong message there."*

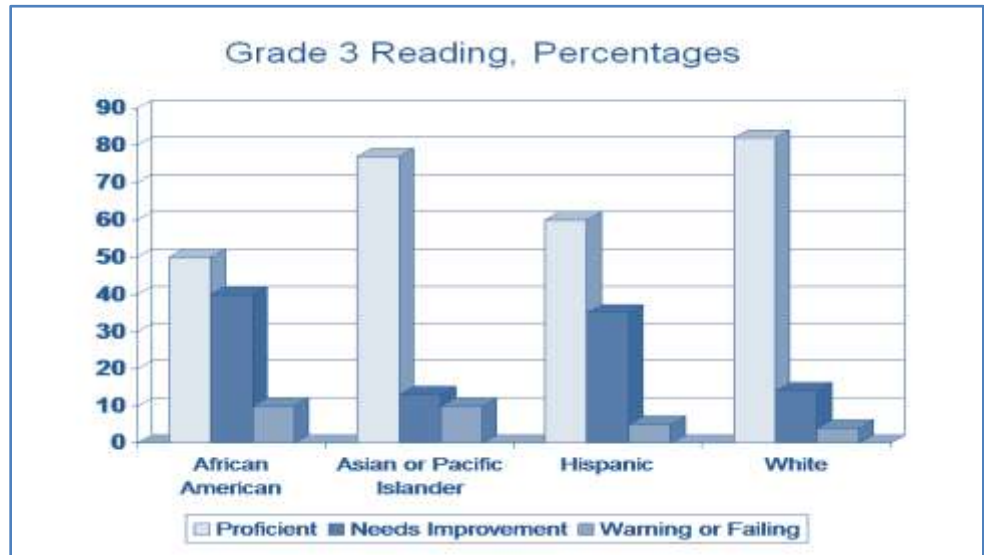
—Dr. Fischer-Mueller

When Dr. Fischer-Mueller joined the district in 2002, it had been trying to close its achievement gap for more than a decade. Yet, she said, "our data shouted at us," revealing continued dramatic differences between white and Asian students on the one hand, and black and Latino students on the other. Those diverging results included grades, scores on state achievement tests, enrollment in advanced classes, the percentage of students attending and succeeding in college, and discipline records. The latter—in other words, discipline records—revealed a "dramatic overrepresentation of black males."

On state reading tests, 80 percent of third-grade, white students scored either "advanced" or "proficient," while just 50 percent of black students did, with the other half ranked as "needs improvement" or "warning or failing." And 80 percent of

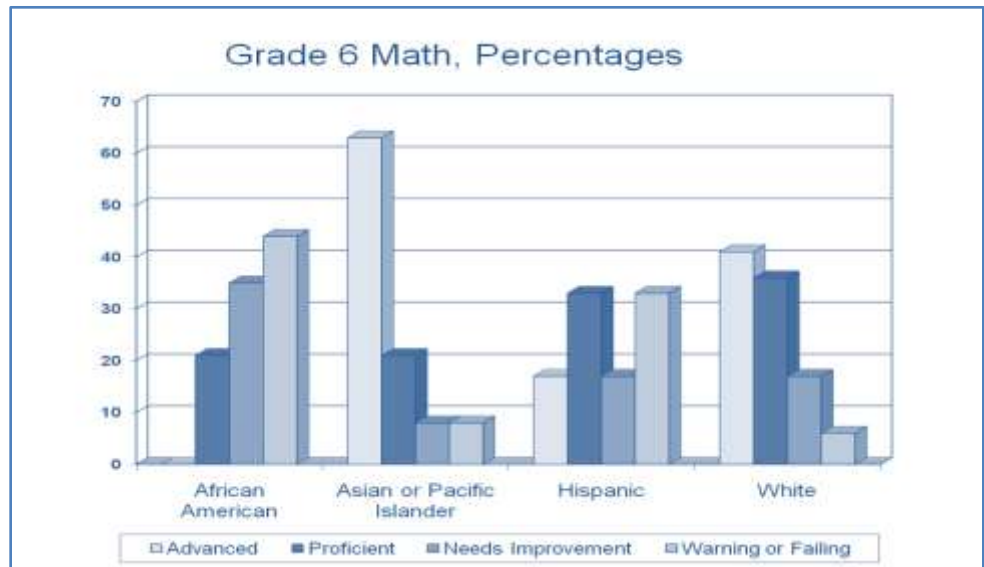
sixth-grade, white students scored in the top two categories on state math tests, compared with just 21 percent of African American students (see Exhibit 6.4 and Exhibit 6.5).

**Exhibit 6.4 Brookline Reading Disparities in 2003**



From Brookline’s presentation to the AGI conference

**Exhibit 6.5 Brookline Math Disparities in 2003**



From Brookline’s presentation to the AGI conference

Black students were also “twice as likely” as white students to end up in separate special education classes, noted Dr. Fischer-Mueller. To her, that statistic represented “misguided love”: Teachers wanted “to give students of color every resource possible to help them succeed,” so they concluded, “you should be in special ed; you must have learning disabilities.”

*“We have to train our teachers to work together.”*

—Dr. Fischer-Mueller

In response, Brookline has developed the Equity Project, a “comprehensive, long-term, system-wide plan” for closing the district’s achievement gap. Dr. Fischer-Mueller notes that the district “didn’t just dive in.” To make progress and sustain it over time—and to offset people’s tendency to say “Yeah, been there, done that, didn’t work”—the central administration felt it had to “get buy-in.” That meant convening 35 representatives from various stakeholder groups, including parents, to drive the project, and training them in “facilitative leadership” and collaboration skills, such as giving and receiving feedback and asking “really tough questions.”

Such training is especially important for teachers, Dr. Fischer-Mueller notes. “We have to train our teachers to work together,” because “a great classroom teacher does not equal a great facilitator of adult learning.”

The project has gained momentum because Dr. Fischer-Mueller herself and several principals only just arrived in the district before initiating the project, and the current superintendent is fairly new. She also emphasized that “context matters.” That is, when a district applies tested concepts and practices for closing the achievement gap, such as creating a professional learning community, it must consider “what that might look like” given its unique milieu.

*“To say we need to redistribute some of our resources, we need to do things differently, we need to take on a challenge, takes some guts.”*

—Mr. Summergrad

To do so, the district took two years to analyze data, create a research bank, determine how best to respond, and define success. David Summergrad, principal of Brookline’s Runkle Elementary School, described this approach as “urgently taking our time.” That is, the district acknowledged “right up front that this was a 10- to 15-year project.” It adopted that tactic partly because saying that “we need to do things differently takes some guts,” given the district’s many affluent and “demanding” parents.

The Equity Project developed seven core beliefs to guide its work and eliminate “shadow beliefs” among teachers and others, such as the idea that if students of color do not do as well as white and Asian students, “that’s probably the way it’s supposed to be.” To illustrate the fallacy of that belief, Mr. Summergrad described a hypothetical first-grade teacher who takes a class of 20 students on a field trip and returns with 19 and claims success because that is 95 percent, or an “A.” According

to Mr. Summergrad, “In truth, we’re leaving behind one or two students every year, in every class.”

### STRUGGLING FOR EQUITY

Brookline superintendent Dr. Bill Lupini noted that the Equity Project is “about sustainability, not about charismatic leadership,” given the district’s previous record of achieving only short-term gains. He recalled that when he arrived in Brookline, a prominent school official counseled him to “ ‘abandon this work of the Equity Project, because it’s a loser.’ . . . This is a system that said, ‘Don’t look under the hood . . . Everything looks fine when you just pay attention to the big broad numbers.’ ”

Dr. Lupini admitted that he felt the district was “tinkering around the edges”—laying groundwork for the project but not “actually addressing what went on in the classroom.” Still, he recognized that the effort had to begin at the district level, because “there was no motivation for it to start at the building or classroom level.”

After building a foundation, the district felt it had the capacity to take the project to schools and classrooms. He agreed with Mr. Summergrad, that this is “dangerous work,” because staff and parents in affluent communities such as Brookline “really buy into [equity] goals until it goes their ox.” Pushback occurs when the district insists that teachers “take ownership of all the kids in their classroom.” They “begin to say, ‘Now you’re really trying to change what I do in my classroom every day. I didn’t think this Equity Project was about that.’ ”

“It’s very hard to change culture in the classroom,” Mr. Summergrad admits. The district and schools can overcome resistance by taking steps that don’t necessarily require charismatic leadership, he contends. For example, principals can include an equity-related goal in every teacher’s evaluation, and administrators can ensure that the Equity Project is the number-one item on the agenda of every meeting, “so that it doesn’t leave people’s screens or minds.”

According to Dr. Lupini, this work entails “challenging assumptions about how students get placed,” and integrating high-needs students into regular classrooms—tactics that have not been the norm in high-performing Brookline. To “really get at the heart” of what teachers and parents believe about the “importance of this to their school district and community . . . will take years of sustained effort.”

Brookline it is making meaningful progress. Exhibits that the team did not have time to show during their talk demonstrate several areas where African American

*“A prominent school official said to me, within the first two months, ‘The one thing you’ve got to do is abandon this work of the Equity Project, because it’s a loser. You can’t win this fight.’ ”*

—Dr. Lupini

students have improved their performance since 2003—during the years of the Equity Project.

## COMMENTS AND Q&A

Discussant Dr. Stacey Childress of Harvard Business School observed that Brookline seems to perceive that it has “a lot of time” to decipher its achievement gap and reach its targets for closing it. That view might actually be realistic, she noted, given the need for “adaptive change.” However, that stance may also contrast markedly with the challenges facing urban districts such as Richmond, which do not have the luxury of time.

A long time frame for closing the achievement gap might also undermine pressure for results, and encourage new leaders to suspend a project because “it just isn’t working; it’s a distraction.” Finally, a long-term approach might “reinforce inaccurate or widely held assumptions . . . about what kids can do . . . People can say ‘See, we were right; these kids just can’t do it.’ ”

In both Lexington and Brookline, Dr. Childress observed, “The closer you get to real classroom practice, the more threatening it is to individuals.” Discussant Dr. Yvonne Allen of the school district in Shaker Heights, Ohio, noted that efforts to target the achievement gap inevitably create “disequilibrium.” The question, she says, is “How do we make disequilibrium work for us?” Lexington’s intention to begin each meeting by talking about equity is an example of how to do just that, she maintained. She suggested that districts add students to their achievement gap task forces. She also proposed that superintendents should shadow individual students to observe their experiences during typical school days, and hold follow-up forums to enable students to share their concerns.

Dr. Ash concurred that fostering change requires creating disequilibrium, but noted that “time is our enemy, for two reasons.” First, “I can’t wait around a generation and watch kids go through the school system and not move forward and get the skills that they need.” Second, “Eventually people lose interest . . . It’s incredibly hard to sustain forward movement unless you begin to get real success. Early results energize people and build confidence . . . Success gets people to want to collaborate more, and look at data, because they actually see the impact that it has on students.”

Responding to concerns about the risks of moving too slowly, Dr. Lupini of Brookline reiterated the need to build an approach in a “process-oriented community” that is sustainable beyond current leaders. Mr. Summergrad agreed that “the worst enemy

*“Time is our enemy, for two reasons. First, I can’t wait around a generation and watch kids go through the school system and not move forward. Second, eventually people lose interest.”*

—Dr. Ash

*“Nothing is going to be broken, but if the perception is that something is not going to work for other entities in the system, there is disequilibrium. How do we make that disequilibrium work for us?”*

—Dr. Allen

of successful implementation is poor implementation . . . the risk of quick action is that it's not well thought out." He cited the example of the district's use of elementary world language instruction, which it had introduced ineffectively. "It took six long years to bring it back and try it again."

### DEALING WITH PARENTAL PRESSURE

*"The worst enemy of successful implementation is poor implementation. The risk of doing a quick action is that it's not well thought out."*

—Mr. Summergrad

A questioner noted that teachers may be reluctant to focus on the achievement gap because "they know they're going to 'get it' from parents if they do not give the top third of the class the kind of attention that those parents move to Brookline to get." Dr. Fischer-Mueller responded that Brookline includes parents—black, Latino, and white—on Equity Project steering committees for that very reason. Those parental participants share with their friends "what it is that we're doing," and also hold the district accountable for the impact of changes in teaching on all students.

AGI co-chair and director Dr. Ferguson asked if the two districts had experienced pushback from parents who were concerned that admitting more students of color into Advanced Placement and honors classes would slow the pace of learning. Dr. Lupini responded that Brookline has recently been enforcing its policy of opening advanced classes to all students, and that some parents do believe that "when we devote resources to these issues, that it's going to take away from AP courses." To head off discontent, he conducts an evening talk at every school at least once a year to inform parents about the Equity Project.

*"We are convinced that improving teaching practices in the classroom for our underachieving students, improves education for all students in a classroom."*

—Dr. Ash

Dr. Ash said he is convinced that "improving teaching practices in the classroom for our underachieving students" and developing data-driven professional learning communities "improves education for all students." However, he acknowledged that the district "would have to prove that over time," and that parental pressure can be intense. When he proposed diverting just \$60,000 of the district's \$70 million budget to all-day kindergarten, some Lexington officials voted to oppose the idea. Yet 95 percent of parents ultimately signed up for full-day kindergarten, and the town recently voted to pay higher taxes to fund it.

In response to a question from Dr. Ferguson about how Brookline is changing classroom practice, Dr. Fischer-Mueller noted that the district had emphasized collaborative teaching by bringing math and reading specialists into classrooms, rather than having teachers refer students to outside specialists. To address the problem of over-referral of students of color to special education, Brookline is also considering implementing the "child-study team model." She quoted a description of that model: "Adaptations to teaching and learning styles and classroom climates can



and should be designed and implemented before making an assumption that a student's lack of progress can only be ameliorated by special education.”

### RESOURCES

To view the video and PowerPoint presentations from this session, see <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>

For more information on Lexington Public Schools and the district's achievement gap report, see <http://lps.lexingtonma.org/>

For more information on the Public Schools of Brookline, see <http://www.brookline.k12.ma.us/>

## 7. WRAP-UP: WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE FIELD?

### PANELISTS

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Janet Quint, MDRC

James Connell, Institute for Research and Reform in Education

Jason Snipes, Council of the Great City Schools

Richard Murnane, Harvard Graduate School of Education

### MODERATOR

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Ronald Ferguson, Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Graduate School of Education, and AGI co-chair and director

AGI director Dr. Ronald Ferguson posed four questions for panelists and participants to consider during the conference's final session: What do we know about reforming schools and districts to close the achievement gap? What do we still need to know? What useful tools do we have to assist in that effort? And what tools do we still need to develop?

### GIVING TEACHERS EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

In response to Dr. Ferguson's first question—"What do we know about reforming schools and districts to close the achievement gap?"—Dr. Janet Quint of MDRC, a nonprofit education and public policy research organization, pointed to a 2002 MDRC report by Dr. Jason Snipes and colleagues, *Foundations for Success*. To write that report, the authors visited "a number of school districts throughout the country that had not only narrowed the achievement gap but had increased achievement for students of all backgrounds," she said. The investigators found that those districts shared a number of features, including:

- a strong clear mission;
- standards used to guide instruction;
- uniform reading and math curricula, aligned with the standards (uniformity helps offset student mobility);
- assessment aligned with the curricula; and
- professional development for teachers also aligned with the curricula.

What this conference revealed, she maintained, was that many districts have consolidated those elements into their thinking as “the way to improve their low-performing schools.” However, MDRC had “advanced those ideas as hypotheses to be tested,” she noted. “And I don’t think we’ve come very far in . . . rigorously looking at them to see how important they are, and how to refine them to improve practice.”

As an example of the needed research, she cited a prominent New England school district that had engaged a nonprofit agency to coach elementary teachers in using formative assessment to guide reading instruction. “The people at this agency are smart, articulate, and thoughtful,” she noted, “and they have developed well-designed short assessment instruments that are administered periodically and that are modeled after the state’s high-stakes achievement test. This organization provides teachers with quick-turnaround, color-coded, individualized student information, as well as professional development on how to use that information to guide and individualize instruction.”

MDRC researchers studying the district found rising reading scores at schools that had adopted that approach. However, scores at similar schools that had *not* adopted the intervention rose by exactly the same amount. A majority of teachers at both groups of schools reported having received just three and a half hours of professional development on using formative assessments. Dr. Quint concluded that perhaps teachers need more time to learn and use new techniques, and also that researchers investigating the impact of instructional innovations must compare two or more sets of initially similar schools, rather than simply looking at results in one set.

She sees the records of districts such as Montgomery County and Richmond as “existence proofs,” showing that some low-performing schools and entire districts can begin to close achievement gaps. However, many urban districts include both high-performing and low-performing schools, she notes, and “the question arises about why it’s hard to move” low performers.

Conferees had suggested funding, governance, politics, and union contracts as factors, but Dr. Quint postulated that “social barriers in the school culture to making change” are also important. For example, Dr. Charles Payne “has done a tremendous amount of qualitative research inside schools.” In his new book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, he identifies a number of barriers that may limit the effectiveness of professional learning communities in schools, including:

- a lack of social comfort among parents, teachers, and administrators;
- low mutual expectations;
- a predisposition to believe that programs will fail;
- distrust of colleagues;
- racial and ethnic tensions;
- generalized anger;
- a tendency to put the best face on everything;
- ego fragility and emotional fatigue; and
- suspicion of outside reform agents.

*“How do we take and replicate brilliant practices by transforming typical practices, or how do we replicate brilliant people who are doing wonderful things by transforming typical people?”*

—Dr. Connell

Dr. Quint noted that Payne “is talking about the emotional conditions of teachers in low-performing schools,” and that “we haven’t heard a lot about attending to teachers’ social and emotional needs . . . We know that students need a combination of high academic standards and emotional and social support to achieve well . . . We might assume that teachers need the same thing.”

She suggested two potential solutions. One is Richmond’s approach of “taking away the old textbooks and providing teachers with the material they needed and wanted in their classrooms—sending them a signal that their needs were being met.” The second solution is “exposing teachers to the idea that change is possible; not with data, but by having students from schools where reform has taken place come to talk with them, so that teachers can see that students who look like the students who they themselves teach can in fact make progress.”

### TRANSPLANTING BRILLIANT REFORMS TO TYPICAL SCHOOLS

Dr. James Connell of the nonprofit Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) reiterated the question he posed earlier in the conference: How do we replicate brilliant practices and people by transforming typical practices and people? He sees that as the “major challenge” in closing the achievement gap for the “hundreds of thousands if not millions of kids who need that work done.”

To help meet that challenge, IRRE has developed a framework called *First Things First*, which districts have implemented in 65 to 70 elementary, middle, and high schools across the country. He pointed to Kansas City, Kansas, as one school system that has used the framework to pursue district-wide reform for seven years.

*First Things First* includes four core strategies:

- Assigning students to small learning communities that stay together from year to year within each school;
- providing every student with an on-site adult advocate who works with that student the entire time he or she attends a school;
- using a common set of instructional goals to guide all the work in every classroom every day; and
- ensuring the rigor of both pedagogy and academic content in classrooms.

According to Dr. Connell, an annual survey found a sharp decline since 2000—the first year of district-wide reform—in the percentage of students who said they were disaffected with school. The percentage with low reading scores also declined during the period, while the percentage with high scores rose. Most strikingly, the reading scores of white students increased, but so did those of students of color. This meant that “the gap is closing as all boats are rising,” he says, with dramatic improvements among all students, but accelerated improvement among children of color and economically disadvantaged children.

However, only recently has the district seen dramatic reductions in the percentage of kids who are struggling in math, and increases in the percentage deemed “proficient” or “highly skilled.” These gains resulted from a math benchmarking process introduced at all high schools, on top of the comprehensive school reform model already in place. The benchmarking process includes comprehensive structural and instructional reform that required years to take hold.

The district achieved such results through a “long, intensive, and productive partnership with IRRE,” according to Dr. Connell. He concludes that if a district resolves to make reform a priority and establishes the right systemic conditions, “it can make a big difference real fast, in terms of double-digit gains each year.”

### GETTING MORE PRESCRIPTIVE

To develop *First Things First*, IRRE studied small and outstanding schools throughout the world, especially in Germany and New York City. The organization focused particularly on Central Park East, a “legendary” secondary school headed in the late eighties and early nineties by Deborah Meier—“a certified genius,” according to Dr. Connell.

From that research, IRRE concluded that “it is much harder to transform the typical than it is to replicate the brilliant . . . You have to figure out what to do that gets you to the same results” when working with many more children, and with adults who are more diverse in their commitment and talent, as well as more transient.

The core issue, according to Dr. Connell, is how to create more-effective small learning communities in hundreds more schools. To what extent should districts directly apply—with training and support—a framework such as *First Things First*, and to what extent do they need to “re-create the intellectual capital”? Part of what makes a new approach brilliant may be the fact that participants helped create it, he points out. However, if districts modify a framework to avoid “getting people too upset in a local setting” and to create buy-in, they risk “taking the juice out” of reform.

He contends that districts and schools should “directly transfer some of what’s been learned about what good teaching and learning look like, and how you measure it, and then bring people on board to that vision rather than have every school create its own.” That is, districts and schools must “get more prescriptive.”

## REVAMPING TEACHERS’ CONTRACTS AND CHOOSING CURRICULA

Dr. Richard Murnane of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education noted that the conference had focused on the design and implementation of strategies for continuous improvement. However, he turned to two other important decisions that “school districts have to face.”

The first is modifying teachers’ contracts to accommodate reform. For example, “it’s very, very hard to have the kind of coordination that really leads to improvement in instruction” without common planning time for teachers, which may require contract changes. Districts also need to change contract rules to allow them to transfer experienced teachers to “schools serving high concentrations of poor kids,” rather than assigning “very junior teachers with high turnover” to such schools.

A related concern is aligning teachers’ compensation with what “we want schools to learn to do more effectively.” A “lot of money goes to pay for master’s degrees among public school teachers all over the country,” he notes. Yet “the vast majority of the evidence indicates that teachers with master’s degrees are no more effective than those without them.” Of course, “that doesn’t mean professional development and training don’t matter.” But those supports have the strongest impact when “they address how to teach the core curriculum better.”

Districts' second critical decision is choosing a core curriculum. "One thing we know for sure," Dr. Murnane says, is that districts need "a common curriculum, for at least two reasons. One is that it's very hard to organize professional development effectively if schools are using different curricula. And second, most urban school districts have very mobile student populations, and most of that mobility is from school to school within the district."

*"If you choose fairly scripted curricula, it has the advantage that it's easier to implement, particularly if you have teachers that don't have many skills. On the other hand, if you do that, many people argue there are ceilings in terms of what that can accomplish."*

—Dr. Murnane

However, which curriculum should a district with struggling schools choose? If it selects a "structured curriculum because it's easier to get people started, how hard is it . . . to build capacity to move from that to a curriculum that is more demanding to both teach and learn?" For example, how can districts enable students to progress from "learning to read to reading to learn," to prepare for the "content-heavy" work they will do in middle school and high school?

Dr. Murnane says the dilemma is that scripted curricula can get kids "doing something positively" very quickly. However, more challenging curricula such as constructivist math are "very difficult to teach well, and in my view, when they're taught poorly it's a real disaster for all concerned." Thus districts with a stable, highly educated teaching force may find it easier to choose a curriculum than districts with "very high teacher turnover and a great deal of difficulty acquiring well-educated teachers."

The curricula districts choose also "depend critically on what **outcome** measures they're using," he contends. Urban districts typically focus on "getting kids to pass state exit exams so they can get their high school diplomas" which "makes enormous sense, because kids need that as a baseline." However, students then often cannot pass exams at community colleges, and end up in remedial reading and math courses, where "they typically struggle for a while and never get out." He maintains that "it's important to really look at the outcome measures we are using to see whether we are preparing kids not only to pass standardized tests, but [also] to acquire the skills they need to function in a changing society and economy."

*"It's important that we really look at the outcome measures we are using to see whether we really are preparing kids not only to pass standardized tests, but also to acquire the skills they need to function in a changing society and economy."*

—Dr. Murnane

## GAINING CONSENSUS ON THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF REFORM

Dr. Jason Snipes of the Council of the Great City Schools concurred with Dr. Murnane that we "haven't thought a lot about how to teach [high-needs students] more advanced skills." As proof, he cites the fact that achievement in reading among African American high school students "hasn't really changed in a couple of decades," he says. That, in turn, undermines their preparation for the "challenges they will face in their postsecondary lives."

Dr. Snipes contends that districts need to “get more specific about what we actually want to see at the classroom level, and what needs to be in place to actually achieve that . . . How can we generate some consensus, or at least a clear set of questions, around what those types of supports ought to be, and how can we fill in the gaps in frameworks for systemic reform?” At “the top of the list is the basic question of how to connect system-level reforms to school-level reforms; in particular, the role of intermediate staff.” Another overlooked challenge is how best to address the needs of English language learners, he notes.

*“We need to get more specific about what we actually want to see in terms of reform at the classroom level, and what needs to be in place in order to actually achieve it.”*

—Dr. Snipes

Dr. Snipes pointed out that the 100 largest school systems in the country educate 25 percent of the nation’s children, and 40 percent of its minority students. “These are tremendous leverage points [for] developing some sort of consensus around . . . the most important aspects of systemic reform.”

Gaining consensus is especially important, he notes, because successors to charismatic leaders such as Richmond superintendent Deborah Jewell-Sherman may have trained in a different reform framework. A common approach would allow new leaders to build on earlier reforms rather than “reinventing the wheel.”

Research to identify common elements of effective curriculum and instruction, professional development, and data, is also critical. “We’re often surprised to find that the things we think will work . . . don’t generate the types of effects that we want to see . . . which means we need to be humble and persistent about trying to generate answers to the questions.”

## COMMENTS AND Q&A

### BRINGING TEACHERS ON BOARD

*“They [successful districts] had some ideas not only about how kids learn, but also about how adults learn . . . about how to instruct and motivate grown-ups.”*

—Dr. Ferguson

In districts that have made significant progress in closing the achievement gap, leaders focus on “both the emotional work and the cognitive work,” Dr. Ferguson observed. For example, in Montgomery County, leaders “were not only emotional and inspirational. They also understood instruction and had a vision for what kind of instruction . . . they wanted to see. They had some ideas not only about how kids learn, but also about how adults learn . . . about how to instruct and motivate grown-ups.”

Mona Harris of the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership asked: How do we help teachers “find their will to change? . . . And how do we help teachers understand that [reform] is here to stay, so you can’t just lie low . . . under the radar,” assuming that it “will be gone next week or next month?”



Administrators in every district or school that devotes “sustained, intensive attention” to closing the achievement gap “reinforce reform by actually showing up at schools,” and by providing a supporting human infrastructure, such as instructional coaches.

Dr. Connell, himself a psychologist, noted the need for “a more sophisticated psychological analysis of why people do not want to do something that the evidence suggests is good for all kids.” Do some individuals not yet believe the evidence, he asked; or are they “afraid they can’t do the work . . . and they would rather keep doing what they’re doing even though it is not successful?” Perhaps they “fear retribution from their peers if they take the lead,” he suggests. “Or do they have a vested interest in the status quo, and they’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure that it doesn’t change?” With answers to those questions, he notes, we “can start thinking about a differentiated response to pockets of resistance.”

Dr. Snipes observed that administrators in every district or school that devotes “sustained, intensive attention” to closing the achievement gap “reinforce reform by actually showing up at schools,” and by providing a supporting human infrastructure, such as instructional coaches. Those emissaries can inform administrators if the work “isn’t really going according to spec.” However, they also attest that “it is serious . . . and we’re going to be here, seeing whether you do it.” According to Dr. Snipes, some districts have revisited the collective bargaining agreement, while others have used existing channels to pressure ineffective teachers. In either case, the districts were “serious about pursuing the options they did have.” Even if contracts allow few repercussions for non-compliance with reform, teachers do not want to have a “conversation for the third time about why they’re not doing the program,” he notes.

Dr. Connell urged reform leaders to “use the pedagogical strategies . . . you want to see in a classroom,” such as by “modeling active engagement.” In Kansas City, Kansas, for example, leaders encourage “high-quality teaching and learning among adults” at every meeting, and evaluate themselves on the alignment, rigor, and effectiveness of professional training.

Dr. Ferguson noted that in his recent book, *Toward Excellence with Equity*, he outlined five challenges to effective professional development for teachers:

- Establishing teachers’ trust and interest in reform
- Balancing administrator control and teacher autonomy
- Inspiring teacher commitment to ambitious goals
- Sustaining commitment in the face of setbacks
- Achieving mastery and consolidation of new ideas and practices

Failure on these was implicated when he asked teachers why professional development sometimes “makes no difference.” They responded:

- The new approach to teaching wasn't introduced in a way that inspired me to try it.
- We weren't being held accountable to do it.
- We didn't receive enough training.
- It was too much on top of everything else.

*"I think the evidence is pretty overwhelming that most schools of education are failing miserably to prepare most classroom teachers for some of the fundamental challenges they can expect to face in schools today."*

—Dr. Snipes

The teachers had often ignored the new approaches. They rarely said they had tried a new approach and "it just didn't work," he observed. Teachers often have "zero expectation that anybody is ever going to come around and ask you what happened when you tried to use" new instructional approaches. "So just a little bit of follow-up might make a difference."

### IMPROVING SCHOOLS OF EDUCATION

A questioner asked about the role of universities in training teachers, especially teachers of color, and teachers who may not know much about teaching students of color. Dr. Snipes asserted that "the evidence is pretty overwhelming that most schools of education are failing miserably to prepare most classroom teachers for some of the fundamental challenges they can expect to face."

Graduate schools of education need to "construct curriculum around new approaches to teaching," Dr. Connell agreed. Universities have to "take seriously the idea that we're going to be asking people in our classrooms to change their practice [and] become innovative in our practice." However, universities "can't do that without some kind of shared notion of what high-quality teaching and learning look like in classrooms that serve diverse populations of students."

*"Can we close the achievement gap without teaching parents how to enrich home life and make it intellectually challenging?"*

—Nancy Jones, Shaker Heights School District (Ohio)

Referring to Dr. Ferguson's work, Nancy Jones from Shaker Heights School District noted that high-achieving students tend to come from homes with "a very rich vocabulary and lots and lots of books." Her question was, "Can we close the achievement gap without teaching parents how to enrich home life and make it intellectually challenging?"

Dr. Snipes responded that "the fundamental job of schools . . . is to actually deal with the fact that kids arrive at school with different levels of opportunity." However, he noted, it is "unrealistic" for districts to overlook the need to support literacy in the homes of low-income and minority parents. He suggests engaging organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League to tackle "not just the achievement gap but also literacy." Dr. Ferguson noted that one entrepreneur has collaborated with PBS to create a new national Spanish-language TV network that emphasizes early childhood education in Spanish.

According to Dr. Connell, “Here’s a case where we know about effective practices that are advantageous for kids from economically disadvantaged homes.” However, “the question is how to hook up all kids who need those practices.” Such “difficult work doesn’t occur simply by saying we know what a parent needs to do.” In its work with districts and schools, IRRE has tried to personalize relationships and communication with low-resource families, and to suggest “one or two things they could do to help their kids be more successful.” That, in turn, requires creating structures and expectations that support “mutually respectful and mutually accountable” relationships.

### AIDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

One conference participant observed that Dr. Connell had offered data showing “an amazing jump among your ELL population in Kansas City, Kansas . . . How did that happen?”

Figuring out the answer “will take some serious research,” he said. However, he hypothesized that a key ingredient was the family and student advocacy system noted above, wherein “every single parent and every single child had an individual in the school . . . who they could talk to about the expectations” for that child, and “what they could do to contribute.”

Hispanic families in Kansas City “highly value education, and look to folks to be clear about what it is that [parents] need to do.” Once the advocacy system was in place, he says, “they took to it very powerfully.” As the advocacy system scaled up the number of kids it served from a few hundred to a few thousand, and then to 20,000, the aggregate achievement gap between Hispanic and white students gradually narrowed.

A second factor in that success was the district’s commitment to “engaging every student in active learning in the classroom . . . and learning how to do that in a way that differentiated between students . . . from different cultural backgrounds.” Dr. Connell noted that “we’re not sure whether the key factor was the instructional change or the personalization,” but together they exerted a marked impact.

Dr. Ferguson acknowledged that research is “probably more extensive” on the achievement gap among African American students than among Hispanic students and English language learners. We need to “find more young researchers who are Latinos to go into this line of work,” he said, and also push “those of us who are not Latino” to become “more inclusive in the work we do.”

## CONVERGING ON PRINCIPLES AND ENSURING COMMITMENT

Audience member Ann Ifekwunigwe, a doctoral student, asked how long families must wait before districts close the achievement gap completely. Dr. Connell responded that districts should aim for 100 percent proficiency among students who have been in the system for two or three years. “We don’t want to set up false expectations” for highly mobile students who have resided in a district for less time, given the difficulty of reaching such students, he maintained.

*“We would all like to see big quick wins, but the best evidence suggests that that’s not realistic, and what we need to see is gradual but steady progress along the right trajectory,”*

—Dr. Quint

Dr. Quint noted that meta analyses suggest that comprehensive school reforms in place for five years have a significantly greater impact than those in place for less time. “We would all like to see big quick wins, but the best evidence suggests that that’s not realistic, and that what we need to see is gradual but steady progress along the right trajectory,” she asserted.

Audience member Stacey Luster, human resources manager for the Worcester (MA) Public Schools, said she was “intrigued” by the idea of “compensating teachers for engaging in effective professional development that leads to improved instruction.” However, she noted that her high-needs district has been “struggling with what effective instruction should look like for more than a year.”

After combing the literature and investigating the experiences of districts and teachers that use best practices, Dr. Connell said, IRRE concluded that reform must focus on “engagement, alignment, and rigor, with specific indicators of what we mean by that, and what it looks like when you walk into a classroom.” Once everyone in a district converges around those core ideas, the next step is building capacity, accountability, and common assessments. He cautioned against relying solely on students’ grades to ensure accountability, because teachers can “game” grades. He favors basing merit pay for teachers on the extent to which they implement practices that best help kids learn. Dr. Snipes maintained, “[T]here just isn’t evidence that says . . . one point of view on what good instruction looks like is right . . . That doesn’t mean you don’t have to act.” It just means that districts must choose one approach and “gather some evidence along the way.”

Leaders from each district who recounted their experiences during the conference took responsibility for developing a set of guiding ideas about effective instruction, Dr. Ferguson observed. However, the challenge for districts and schools, he said, goes beyond simply identifying state-of-the-art ideas about instruction. The greatest challenge is to “implement them in a way that is serious and sustained, and shows the commitment” to deliver high-quality instruction routinely across whole districts, not just in a few exemplary schools or classrooms.