Helping Students Succeed

Communities Confront the Achievement Gap

BY FANNIE FLONO

To educators and policy makers, the words "achievement gap" have meaning and urgency. For years, the term has been widely used to describe differences in performance on academic tests between low-income and higher-income students and between minority and white students. The statistical—and anecdotal—impact of those differences is evident to those who deal with the issues on a daily basis.

Data show, for example, that of 1.2 million students who fail to graduate from high school each year, more than half are from minority groups and low-income families. Most have been failing academically for years, lagging well behind other students in test performance and grades.

The cost of such failures to families and all taxpayers is eye-popping. Billions of dollars are lost annually in tax revenues from those who don't have the skills or education for jobs that make them productive taxpaying citizens. Tax dollars are spent on soaring social services and on expanding criminal justice systems. Such failures undercut the United States' global competitiveness as far too many students lack the preparation needed for today's high-skill, technological jobs. Worse, the failures mean that the nation is failing to produce the engaged and productive citizens needed to sustain and support our democracy and maintain our country as a prosperous and thriving economy.

In 2007, the Kettering Foundation launched a nationwide, two-year research project to learn what people in communities across the nation think about the achievement gap—and what roles they see for themselves in helping young people succeed academically. The community forums, which drew more than 3,200 participants nationwide, spotlighted elements crucial to sparking public action to tackle the problem. The results of that research hold important implications for both professional educators and for ordinary citizens.

Using trained community facilitators and a policy guide Kettering developed, called *Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap*?, diverse participants talked openly and frankly about the issue. Most found common ground to work together on strategies for improvement.

Overall, the deliberations revealed three key findings:

First, the words "achievement gap" hold almost no meaning for the people with the most at stake: the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced. At the start of the forums, many participants didn't even know what those words meant, much less what could or should be done about the problem the term described.

Second, while educational experts see the achievement gap as a national problem, citizens see it as a local problem with particular solutions that reflect specific local factors.

Third, forum participants across the nation felt that responsibility for helping minority and low-income students succeed rested not just with educators and schools—the traditional focus of action on education matters—but also with parents and other adults, with local institutions other than schools, and with broad community involvement and individual commitment. Talking about the issue became an important first step toward encouraging and acting on such changes.

This is the story of those forums and their results.

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About the Forums

In each community, a core group of education leaders, activists, and organizations were invited to map out an initial process for dialogue and to recruit local moderators to lead the discussions. Kettering Foundation provided a kit of materials that included an issue guide and a starter video or DVD to help frame the discussions. The foundation also provided guidance with training community facilitators and organizing the forums.

Participants in the forums shared personal experiences, deliberated about the relative merits of various approaches to the problem, weighed the pros and cons of possible courses of action, considered various trade-offs, discussed ways to improve student performance, and considered actions they might take to deal with the problem.

While forums were held in many places around the country, eleven communities were selected for close scrutiny by Kettering researchers who examined how residents tackled the issue. Research sites included: Bolingbrook, IL; Bridgeport, CT; Cincinnati, OH; Corpus Christi, TX; Helena–West Helena, AR; Minneapolis; New Orleans; Panama City, FL; San Francisco; Washington, DC; and six central Texas towns or cities. Forum sites ranged from urban to suburban to rural; those who attended represented a diverse cross-section of age, ethnicity, and occupation.

How these communities moved forward after the forums depended on the needs of the communities and the individuals and organizations that sought action. Some forum participants generated suggestions for action that they shared with relevant officials or groups, such as school superintendents, courts, or churches. Some offered action options, such as mentoring, that individuals or groups could choose to carry out. Others generated community work plans with several agreed-upon initiatives.

Kettering research has shown that change can occur in the way people view an issue and in the way they act—individually and collectively—when they consider the issue in a deliberative manner. In many communities, change did occur as a result of the forums. The foundation's research also shows that such changes can influence policy direction and help ensure that actions by government officials and school systems are more in line with what people in

Minneapolis, Minnesota

On a frigid December night in 2008, two groups of parents sat in different rooms at Minneapolis's Ann Sullivan School to discuss the student achievement gap. In one group were twenty-two Somalis, natives of the East African country of Somalia who had relocated to Minneapolis. In another group sat twenty-four Native Americans and other English speakers. Achieve! Minneapolis, one of the most widely known and respected local education foundations in the country, had convened two of its eight forums on the achievement gap in one night, one of the coldest of the year. Fewer people showed up than expected. But that didn't hamper conversations that offered vital insight into issues that affected the achievement gap for these communities.

Somali participants gasped when they heard that only 15 percent of their students were passing state exams while almost 70 percent of white students were passing. The Somali group required a translator, and some of the conversation was conducted in the Somali language. Participants took note of issues unique to their community in tackling the problem. Among them:

- Assumptions in school that because Somali students didn't speak English fluently, the students were ignorant—and they were treated as though they were.
- Not enough sensitivity and respect from teachers for aspects of the Somali culture.
- A sense that students were being passed on to the next grade without a good grasp of the material, while teachers failed to alert parents that their children weren't doing well.

The Native Americans voiced their own specific problems. Many felt Native American students were overlooked in classrooms—"treated as though they were invisible," noted Rose McGee, parents and community connections manager for Achieve! Minneapolis. Schools had nothing geared toward them culturally, participants said.

Among the eleven research communities, Minneapolis held forums for the most diverse group of participants. More than 300 people ranging from Hmong and Hispanic residents to African Americans and upper middle-class whites attended the forums. A common theme resonated throughout. The dialogue was welcome and participants found it very exciting. Now, they say, they want to couple talk with action for the future.

communities are willing to support. This, too, was apparent as an outcome of the forums.

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Inside the Deliberations

The value of these conversations was clear from the outset. People were able to discuss a complex issue, which has often sparked anger and tension, in a way that encouraged understanding and tolerance of different points of view. Participants learned a great deal about their local situations as many shared personal stories to illuminate the issue. And, in the end, they were able to find shared values and concerns amid contentious issues so they could work on strategies for improvement, assessing what needed to be done and by whom.

Because most people had never heard of the achievement gap or didn't have a clear understanding of what it was, the Kettering issue guide, titled *Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap*?, was a useful tool for stimulating discussion by offering three options for tackling the problems posed by the achievement gap: Approach One—raise expectations and demand accountability; Approach Two—close the spending gap; and Approach Three—address the root causes.

Three more findings emerged quite clearly from deliberations about these options:

- Deliberations involving Approach One revealed a wide consensus throughout the forums that expectations for students need to be raised and maintained. Participants also supported higher expectations for teachers, administrators, parents, and community members.
- Deliberations on Approach Two showed that, whether or not participants supported additional funding, they were not willing to wait for new money to see changes made and progress achieved.
- Deliberating on Approach Three, most participants agreed that social issues, such as poverty, racism, violence, drug abuse, and jobs, have a direct and real impact on children and the achievement gap, but they did not believe the school district, parents, or the community can wait until solutions for these issues are found before working together to reduce the local education gaps.

Highlights of the Discussions

Outcomes of this research provide insights into two significant elements of the deliberative discussions on the achievement gap: *how* people talk about the issue and *what* they said about it. Both have implications for educators and citizens seeking answers to the problem.

Researchers were surprised to find that many people were unfamiliar with the term "achievement gap" and knew little or nothing about it. But participants were quick to grasp the concept and, often, shocked to discover what it meant about children in their community. In Bridgeport, for example, a PowerPoint slide show with test results for students at their high school revealed that their students were not only faring much worse than their peers at a suburban high school but also worse than students in high schools in cities like Hartford and New Haven. The room hummed with reactions. In Minneapolis, Somali immigrants were stunned to discover the poor scores their children had received by comparison with others.

As they deliberated, in Bridgeport, Minneapolis, and elsewhere, participants moved from the narrow discussion of the achievement gap to a broader, more expansive discussion of educational achievement. Some participants wanted to concentrate attention and resources on students identified by lower test scores. They said that students needed and deserved special assistance to advance and that schools needed to adapt their teaching methods to better serve these students. Others wanted to expand the conversation to consider what was needed to help *all* students succeed. Still others were concerned that test scores were a poor indicator of achievement, especially for those students whose abilities and interests lay outside traditional academic areas.

Testing was a hot topic in many forums. There was a great deal of agreement that testing does not fully measure the educational advancement of students or—for that matter—the performance of teachers. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with current forms of testing and the way the results are used to judge performance. And they were concerned that, too often, teachers "teach to the test" rather than working to prepare children for careers and life after school. Many of the same people also suggested that teachers and schools should tailor their teaching styles and class content to better address individual needs, particularly those of minority students.

At the same time, a number of people who attended forums felt that it is vital to have one comparative standard for all children. They see this kind of external measure as a way to benchmark the performance of their own schools and of their children. "We need to measure performance and hold people accountable."

Overall, considerable tension arose between these two sets of viewpoints when the idea of dropping testing altogether was considered. Nevertheless, there was significant agreement that the current form of testing should be studied and modified to better fit the interests of students, teachers, and the community.

Each community had its own take on the issue and renamed or reframed it to reflect local realities. Most saw more than one "gap" that affected student success or revealed student failure. In some school systems, gaps were between African American and white students, whereas in other communities concern was for Hispanic students or other immigrant populations. In still others they were found within racial or ethnic groups and divided by gender and socioeconomic status. In Central Texas, New Orleans, and Helena, so-called minority students represent the vast majority of children in the school system. In those communities, gaps were defined differently; low test scores for African American males were compared to overall school performance, for example, or local achievement scores were compared to state outcomes. In some communities, the focus narrowed to talk about very specific groups of students, such as Hispanic students studying English as a Second Language or students who were not scheduled to graduate on time.

Student scores on standardized tests were not the only discrepancies that occupied the attention of participants in the forums. Some were also concerned with which students, and how many, graduated from high school or went to college. And in Corpus Christi, many people who attended the forums arrived at the conclusion that academic testing produced a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that simply identified students with academic leanings and, ultimately, caused students with other interests and skills to be left behind.

In some communities, such as Bolingbrook and Panama City, conveners adapted the Kettering issue guide to more closely match the perspectives of young people in the forums. Altogether, renaming and reframing was an important step for communities in accepting greater ownership of the issue and spurring them to work toward potential solutions.

Closing the achievement gap is not just a school problem. We are all responsible for helping students succeed. The way the general public talks about the problem is very different from the way professional educators, politicians, and the media frame the issue. Professionals typically refer to the achievement gap as a "school issue," which requires school administrators and staff—and in some cases, parents—to come up with solutions. Most of the participants in the deliberative discussions saw the problem very differently. More than 90 percent of those who answered questionnaires after attending the forums agreed that "ordinary citizens need to take this issue seriously and participate in efforts to reduce the achievement gap." For many forum participants, the existence of achievement gaps was a reflection of the difficult challenges within local communities themselves.

Some participants talked about earlier times when they knew their neighbors and everyone in the neighborhood looked out for their neighbors' children. But people in communities are much less connected now, they said, and are often hesitant to get involved. The perceived consequences of this reduced sense of community responsibility is the lack of support for school levies, reduced

support for youth programming, sports leagues, after-school programs, and supportive community programming.

In varying ways, people expressed the view that the learning process does not start each time a child walks into a school building and stop when he or she walks out. Learning, most people agreed, continues at home and in the community. And it means that solutions to the problem lie there as well as in the schools.

Forum participants agreed that parents have considerable responsibility in boosting academic achievement. Many participants said parents have ultimate authority over their children and should be educators, advocates, discipliners, partners, and mentors to them. They should be preparing their children to learn and should teach them values, support school system efforts, and make major decisions about their futures. Others felt that was unrealistic for some families, especially for single mothers without a college degree and living in poverty. In those situations, schools need to supplement parenting, some participants said. The general consensus was that school districts and communities needed to do more to support children in difficult situations and to help struggling parents succeed. But parents need to step up and do their jobs too.

Participants questioned the expectation of academic success for children who come from communities rife with drugs, violence, hopelessness, undereducated parents, and poor nutrition. They said children in economically disadvantaged communities often don't have access to what contributes to success: resources at home, such as computers, school supplies, or space to study. "People, we need to take responsibility for these children. We need to get involved with these kids outside of school," a participant from Bolingbrook said. Even those who don't have children in the schools can do a lot to help.

Approach One in the Kettering issue guide suggests that one promising strategy for closing this achievement gap was to establish the expectation that virtually all students can meet higher academic standards. Participants in the forums widely agreed. And no group felt more strongly about this point than minority students who took part in the forums. They sent a strong message: "We want high expectations." They want people to see the best within them, and they want to feel a sense of respect from teachers, school administrators, parents, and community members.

Many adults in the forums were also convinced that low expectations for students are important factors in explaining why some students succeed and others do not. Participants often talked about teachers' bias toward minority students or students who looked, dressed, and spoke differently. The belief was that teachers see such students and assume they don't have the ability to learn or an interest in academic challenges. Many students talked about the negative impact this has on their interactions with teachers and overall classroom performance. They believe they work harder in classrooms with teachers who respect them and challenge them to learn.

But students are not the only ones from whom we must expect more, participants said. We must have higher expectations for parents, teachers, and community members as well. In particular, many of those attending forums talked about higher expectations for teacher performance. While people sympathize with the many challenges teachers face in doing their jobs, they are not willing to accept lower standards for teacher performance. In one community, the high school principal shared stories about the challenges he has faced in getting teachers to accept responsibility for minority student failure.

After two years of implementing the new expectations, he said, a third of the teachers were gone, but the new and remaining teachers have embraced the challenge with solid results in reduced dropout rates, reduced incidences of fighting, and higher test scores.

Approach One also calls for "making teachers and school administrators accountable for how their students do." But, in fact, participants were clear that schools could not be made wholly accountable for educational outcomes. They did not want to let educators off the hook for past and current results. But they wanted to expand the pool of people who are responsible for taking action to close the achievement gap. In a word, they wanted to increase accountability across the gamut to students; parents;

average citizens; and local governmental, business, and civic institutions.

If we expect to close the achievement gap, we must first close the resource gap, according to Approach Two. Funding and resources should be more equitably distributed. Participants were generally skeptical about the potential effectiveness of an infusion of money into existing school systems unless other significant changes were made. While they held different views about the need for more money, there was common ground around the belief that money alone will not close the achievement gap. And, in any case, people were not prepared to wait for increasingly scarce funding to deal with the problem at hand.

The central element of the conversation about closing the spending gap was the need to close a perceived gap in access to quality teachers. There was shared agreement that *all* students should have equal access to quality instruction. At the same time, most participants understood that suburban and private schools attract the best teachers over time and public school districts in economically disadvantaged communities often end up with less accomplished teachers. Many believed that the inequitable distribution of successful educators partially explains the existence of the local achievement gaps.

Approach Three suggests that we can only close the achievement gap if we address the socioeconomic problems that handicap children long before they get to school. Most participants agreed that society's larger problems—poverty, racism, joblessness, and others have a critical impact on children. But, once again, they were not prepared to wait for the solution of those seemingly intractable problems before working on the more manageable problem of improving educational outcomes for their children.

Three points of consensus emerged from discussions of this approach:

- Social issues are large and persistent. The money, time, and work needed to make real progress in these areas would be too great to provide a satisfactory solution to reducing the achievement gap.

Helena–West Helena, Arkansas

Discussing the achievement gap based on racial or economic differences within the school district was not really an option for organizers of nine forums in Helena–West Helena. For one thing, the city is one of the poorest in the state. For another, 95 percent of the students in the public schools are African American. A small population of children from low-income white families make up the balance, while middle- and upper-income families who live in the district send their children to private schools.

If there were going to be discussions about gaps in academic achievement, it would have to be by comparison to achievement levels of children in the state's other school districts or to national statistics reflecting gaps between black and white students. Many public school students in Arkansas were doing considerably better than they had been, thanks to recent initiatives taken by the state to implement rigorous curriculum standards, institute quality preschool programs, and provide increased funding for schools. Schools needed to do better, they said. But so did parents, children, and the entire community. The problem is fixable, they agreed, and they had the power to fix it. Here's what they decided to work on:

- Mentoring and role modeling
- Parent training
- Community service projects to build self-esteem in children and parents
- Providing healthier foods and exercise opportunities for our children
- Starting a leadership program

- When connections between large social issues and the achievement gap are clear and doable, the community, schools, parents, and students should act.
- Improving the quality of education may be an important part of the solution to other social issues.

Lessons Learned

Student participation improved the deliberative dialogue. One of the most powerful lessons learned in conducting this research was the important contribution students made to the deliberative process. The usual way people talk about closing the achievement gap is to examine what adults need to do for students. The discussions typically involve adults talking to adults. But forums with student participation highlighted the importance of student

involvement and substantially altered the deliberative dialogues.

Students in the forums offered a reality check for adults. They exposed an often-unacknowledged problem in tackling education issues: Many adults are out of touch with student life in schools today and oblivious to the challenges students face at home and on the streets of their communities. When adults talked after a forum that included student participants, it was common to hear them express surprise about how articulate and thoughtful the students were.

In several communities, students were given significant roles in the public dialogue. They were forum moderators, recorders, participants, reporters, and delegates to regional planning meetings. Two communities even adapted their deliberation process to center around students. One changed the language and approaches to the issue to attract students and put them at the core of deliberations. Another created a student version of the issue book and generated a forum planned and attended by students and (silently) observed by teachers, school leaders, and civic and political leaders.

Students responded well to these responsibilities. Several said it was one of the rare times they had been listened to by adults they didn't know. It boosted their interest in civic engagement and in learning more about the public deliberative process.

The process was flexible, allowing goals to change. Without exception, participants at each study site reached a different destination from the one to which the initial plan would have led them. The primary reason for these course corrections was the learning that took place within the deliberations. In the discussions, residents found better ways to reach their goal of making real improvements in closing the achievement gap. Interested groups and residents who had not been included in the initial dialogue were added as their interest and their critical roles in tackling the achievement gaps became known. For example:

- Panama City organizers began with a traditional forum seeking the views of adults. But they changed course to focus on dialogue with young people as students expressed a need to be involved and offered pertinent suggestions for boosting student achievement.
- Conveners in Cincinnati set out to work with top-level community leadership groups on "civic engagement" after the forum talks. When that didn't work, organizers shifted to a grassroots approach in partnerships with teachers, students, parents, and a local university.
- In Helena–West Helena, conveners conducted additional forums as new segments of the community took responsibility for the issue and wanted to get involved.

More Hispanic and other immigrant voices are needed in tackling the problem. In communities nationwide, one of the biggest challenges was outreach to, and involvement of, significant numbers of new residents, particularly Hispanics, in the deliberative process. Challenges to be overcome included:

- *Language barriers.* Translators provided some support, but lack of English-language proficiency from residents who spoke primarily Spanish or other languages was a huge barrier that was not sufficiently addressed.
- *Cultural differences.* Social norms in Hispanic and other groups hindered their participation in open community dialogue with people they didn't know.
- *Institutional intimidation.* Forums located in schools or other institutions were settings some groups were wary of because of a traditional distrust of government.
- *Inadequate information sharing.* Some potential participants never got information about the forums because it wasn't provided in the channels through which they normally receive information.

Conclusion

The parents, students, educators, and other citizens who participated in the deliberative public forums on the achievement gap found the experience to be informative and energizing. But the results of the forums also reveal a number of things that policy makers and elected officials at all levels need to know and incorporate in ongoing efforts to attack the achievement gap.

The first of those lessons is that many citizens remain unaware that the problem exists or how serious it is. Many policy makers and experts are apt to wonder how this can be, given all the media attention and rhetoric about the achievement gap in recent years.

A big part of the answer lies in a simple fact: The language of professional educators and researchers rings no bells for ordinary citizens. In forum after forum, citizens revealed that the term "achievement gap" simply didn't mean anything to them. But that changed once they received information on the nature of the problem in their communities—in local schools, affecting local children. Then parents, students, and concerned citizens began to name the problem in their own terms, to link it to other problems, to set priorities, and to outline solutions, involving both professionals and ordinary citizens. This process of naming problems reveals a deep reservoir of energy that can and should be tapped in the effort to improve the education of students. The forums show that when parents, students, and citizens have the opportunity to deliberate about the achievement gap, they begin to see ways that they can act.

The forums demonstrate both that this public energy exists in community after community and that it can be brought to the surface. Both should be welcome news to policy makers and educators.

A second lesson lies in the fact that forum participants universally tended to see the problem in particular local terms. This finding has deep implications when the government contemplates new national education standards. Anyone surveying the results of these forums is likely to conclude that local communities need at least a measure of flexibility to attack local problems with local solutions.

Another key lesson from the forums is that students are ready to be key actors in efforts to improve achievement. Like most adults, students were not aware of the achievement gap. However, forum dialogues enabled them to examine patterns of behavior that impede learning and to consider what it means to be responsible for their own learning, even when the circumstances are less than ideal. And although participants were unwilling to let parents, teachers, and administrators off the hook insofar as their accountability is concerned, they realized that the problem of low achievement is not merely a school problem.

The forums also offered guidance for professionals who must set priorities while confronting an array of daunting problems. Participants recognized that there are seemingly intractable social problems that interfere with learning—poverty, homelessness, poor health, fear of violence, and lack of security in schools and neighborhoods—but they were not willing to accept these circumstances as excuses. They felt that such obstacles should be viewed as challenges that needed to be overcome.

Perhaps more important, they did not believe that the education of students could wait until these problems had been solved. In fact, many participants viewed education as a way out of poverty and as a way to have an impact on the problems communities are confronting. They generally felt that working to encourage students and improve schools were more practical ways of helping students succeed.

These forums demonstrate that, given the opportunity to fully understand the academic achievement gap and deliberate on its causes and potential solutions, parents, students, and other concerned citizens are eager to be constructive partners in solving the problems of real children in the schools of real communities. That is a hopeful message. Policy makers, educators, and other professionals should embrace both the message and these public partners in the effort to give all children the education they deserve.

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