

teaching our way to success

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Of one thing I am absolutely certain: it's seldom the kids. Success or failure with diverse populations is the direct result of the learning environments, level of instruction, effort and focus. The more strategic and responsive we are to our students, the more congruent our outcomes will be with equity goals.

Equal outcomes in education are non-negotiable; it is the student's civil right. Every statistic bandied about in the name of educational reform represents a child's life. When we talk about the achievement gap, we are telling a child's story about failure to thrive in school.

There are many reasons students fail. The stories that teachers confront regularly include abuse, neglect and a chronic absence of care-giving. The social emotional conditions in a child's life may contribute to his/her academic difficulties, but they are not the reason for the child's failure. Many factors contribute: the teacher's inability to reach the child, limited background knowledge, or the lack of literate role models.

In spite of personal circumstances, current legislation requires that we educate every child. No law makes it happen; NCLB can't make people choose to do the right thing. We have to attract people into "right" actions; mandates are not sufficient.

How California compares

Here are some examples of children in California's schools. Will we succeed with them? Can we change the trajectory of their current experience?

Sixth grader Jorge has always attended California schools. He is an English learner and is currently three years below grade level in English reading fluency and comprehension. Nearly 60 percent of the English learners in California are stuck at the intermediate level on the California English Language Development Test.

Eddie's parents are not literate; he is currently in eighth grade and has been socially promoted. He is a non-reader. Almost every

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state does significantly better in reading than California (NCES, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2007).

Maria is in eighth grade. She currently performs behind her Latino peers in other states (NCES, 2007). Her African American friend, Aisha, also lags behind black students in other states in reading performance (The Education Trust-West, 2007). Economically disadvantaged youth in other states perform better than our students. White students in California trail behind white students in other states (Betlach, 2009).

Mind the gap

Closing the achievement gap is viewed as the primary task of school reform throughout the country. The U.S. Department of Education states, "The achievement gap is the difference in academic performance between ethnic groups."

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell broadens the definition, maintaining that the gap "is the disparity between white students and other ethnic groups, between English learners and native English speakers, the economically disadvantaged and the non-disadvantaged, and students with disabilities as compared to students without."

Using our 2007 California Standards Test fourth-grade English language arts data as an index, it is clear that not all fourth graders have the same learning experience. Of our black and Latino students, approximately 38 percent met proficiency objectives in 2007 (California Department of Education) while about 70 percent of the Asian and white students scored proficient. Economically disadvantaged youth are 50 percent less likely to be proficient than their more advantaged peers (The Education Trust-West, 2007).

The achievement-expectation gap signals compromised future opportunities for students and looks biased against certain demographic groups. The gap is often the consequence of non-differentiated teaching, limited expectations, and problems in continuity of curriculum delivery.

Since we are in a new phase of educational expectations, equal access no longer suffices as the goal; diverse groups deserve equal outcomes. The achievement gap is not a mystery

to be solved; it is a choice to be made and realized. In many ways, we have to dream it possible.

I have had the pleasure of working with faculties that have achieved balanced grade-level outcomes in culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse schools. Closing the achievement gap in these schools



started with a shared dream and belief that the work could be done. Teachers believed it and then created the conditions for student achievement and helped them believe it possible.

In Alcoholics Anonymous there is an adage that if you do what you have always done you will get what you have always gotten. In the name of "reform," many schools and districts move the chairs around on the Titanic, but they don't get off the ship!

Inventing new ways of doing school

We have to act differently to get different results. We must recognize that what we focus on will expand. What we focus on matters. Sometimes we affirm a reality that the kids can't do the work. Other times we call out barriers that become excuses: the district's poor commitment to certain student demographic groups, the lack of flexibility in the negotiated contract, ineffectual management, inadequate faculty or disconnected parents.

All of these are absolutely accurate descriptors of why schools fail to accelerate

achievement for all youth. So change these dampening effects and invent a new way of doing school. Another AA mantra is, "You cannot think your way into a new way of living, but you can live your way into a new way of thinking." We must "teach our way" into being successful.

I work with one district where the union



failed to sign off on an application for the Race to the Top stimulus funds. The stimulus criteria require districts to negotiate ways to meet proficiency objectives using accountability measures; the union decided not to sign off on the application because it did not like the language that included teachers being held accountable for achievement results. The district literally lost access to millions of dollars for reform funding.

This choice has framed, limited and dampened the possibilities of an entire district of needy students. The conflict between labor contracts and the district's responsibility to educate every child can fail to make the dream of school improvement a reality. This is a time ripe for collaboration and cooperation.

There are other examples: Human resource departments that transfer the least capable teachers and administrators to the most impacted schools or move successful principals, teachers and staff out of their roles on the front lines to district roles. The enticement for the move is often status, money and contracts not offered to site

personnel. Students and families would be much better off if we kept the best personnel working in direct service to our students; let's pay and give status to site roles.

"We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (Edmonds, 1982). If we know what it takes to educate every child, and I believe we do, what is taking so long? I think one of the reasons is our systemic ANT infestation!

Automatic negative thoughts

The ANTs, or automatic negative thoughts, interrupt or distract people from fully embracing their work, their dream or their vision. Look at the ANTs listed below and reflect upon a time when you allowed that particular ANT to impact your work with a child, a colleague, or your personal life.

The ANTs say:

The absolutes: "I can't ..."

Tunnel vision: "It can only work this one way ..."

Focus on the negative: "I failed ..."

Blaming: "His family didn't ..."

Fortune telling: "I know this reform won't work ..."

Over-generalization: "If I am happy, something happens ..."

Mind reading: "I bet he thinks ..."

Black and white: "It's never right ..."

Personalization: "She's sad; it must be me ..."

It is impossible to hold two opposing thoughts at the same time. You can't believe that all kids can meet standards and also believe that certain children can't be successful. As Lisa Delpit (1995) says, "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs."

Closing the gap with the ACES

State Superintendent Jack O'Connell believes that four discrete practices will close the achievement gap. The acronym is ACES (CDE, 2008):

• **Access** – Do all students have access to what they need to meet their grade-level

standards? For equal outcomes to occur, every school needs rigorous curriculum and instruction, highly effective teachers, counselors, and learning options that supplement the education, including health and social services.

• **Culture and climate** – Does the school climate and culture offer a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students? Is there culturally relevant and responsive instruction? Do school-family partnerships exist?

• **Expectations** – Are high expectations for students and teachers evident in the curric-

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ulum, instructional practices, and in public communication? Does using data change instructional decisions?

• **Strategies** – Does the faculty know and understand how to utilize practices that are proven effective (or are promising)? Strategies should improve instruction, differentiate, increase instructional and collaboration time, and demonstrate responsive interventions.

The ACES model offers guidance, but will it make reform happen more quickly? Probably not. Reform takes so long because we are asking individuals to change beliefs and people to stop blaming and externalizing failure. Finally, alignment between the intended, delivered and attained curriculum is imperative.

Change beliefs and biases

• Help faculties discover how their collective beliefs can expand or limit how students are taught.

• Look for patterns and trends in data that reflect bias and confront them. For example at one site, 76 percent of all students referred

to the principal were black, even though black students only comprised 30 percent of the whole student population.

• Give teachers the information and training they need. We are striving to educate all children to common standards and outcomes, which has never been done.

• We cannot expect the practices that sustained the achievement gap to correct it. Teaching has to become more content-driven and data-supported.

Stop blaming or externalizing results

• Declare the truth of results to all stakeholders, especially the students. Give students an active role in taking responsibility for their learning.

• Develop an understanding of what the data means and how it becomes information or knowledge from which decisions need to be made.

• Validate learning attempts and use reinforcement for progress.

• Embrace the life of the child and mitigate those circumstances that limit success. For example, provide homework clubs after school when you know that a large group of students lack adult supervision from 3 to 6 p.m. or that some students have no space at home to do their school work.

Change the instructional venue

• Check student understanding of the content standards with the materials being used. Do the materials explicitly and intentionally support standards acquisition?

• Constantly assess the quality of first instruction and the effective use of time through classroom observations.

• Administrators need to dedicate a part of every day as "sacred time" set aside to ensure that observations occur. Give feedback to promote changes in what is being delivered to improve what is attained.

• Time matters. The more that students are asked to help monitor time and personal progress, the better the students will achieve.

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• The skills needed to match the cognitive process include: check for similarities and differences; facilitate summarization skills; and use non-linguistic means to describe, organize, define and depict concepts, content and the complex relationships between prior knowledge and current lessons.

Couple these strategies with the following professional challenges and I guarantee that you will create conditions congruent with teaching all students successfully.

Step one: Check your language

The term “subgroups” refers to a statistical construct, but when it is used as a descriptor of a group it too often implies that one group is “less than” the other. Every time California publishes data on its “low-performing subgroups” I think about how something so simple perpetuates the idea of privilege and under-privilege. Kids have enough to deal with without a whole system decreeing them “sub.”

Step two: Establish a culture of inclusion, collaboration and celebration

Simple things matter when developing a culture of success:

1. Know every child by name.
2. Acknowledge the personal story of every child before you communicate in data descriptors.
3. Affirm culture by asking questions of students rather than operating from assumptions and allow for completion of assignments in cultural, racial or language learner terms.
4. Don't use the past to experience the student today.
5. Facilitate student productivity through collaborative projects or assignments that have a specific standards outcomes.
6. Celebrate all learning milestones. One teacher makes “smarty pants” for tracking new skill acquisition. On a pair of jeans, all student names are placed on the left pant leg. As students acquire a specific standards-based objective, their names are moved from the left leg to the right. Then students who have made it help a peer get to the other leg. The classroom norm is to invest in one

another's success, competing with self and time, not each other. When everyone makes it, they celebrate.

Step three: Become strategic

Dennis Parker, a California educational consultant, has designed a Strategic Schooling model that includes four elements: target, feedback, know-how and context. Parker has facilitated accelerated gains in math and language arts for literally hundreds of schools and districts. He calls for educators to be relentless in seeking “the right things



to do;” setting clear, ambitious achievement, content and student targets; and celebrating high scores as well as gains.

Believing in the children we serve

My work in turnaround schools began in Oklahoma in 1992, in a middle school with a 20-year history of failure that met state objectives after 18 months of intensive instructional intervention.

I have seen a high school go from decile 1 to a California Distinguished School in less than two years, 15 elementary schools get out of Program Improvement, five schools achieve “Distinguished” status after years of low performance, four schools close “the gap,” and literally hundreds of teachers achieve 70-80 percent proficiency regardless of the level of performance the children had historically achieved. We have come to call these educators “lighthouse teachers,” beacons of hope for all others.

All of these experiences with school reform have taught me to believe in the magic that happens when groups of dedicated lead-

ers, teachers and parents choose to believe in themselves and the children they serve. These professionals did not help their students beat the odds by doing the impossible; they were just doing their job well – very well! ■

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