

MIND THE GAPS: MEANINGFUL SOLUTIONS TO MULTIPLE GAPS

The Achievement Gap

"We must close the achievement gap" has become a familiar phrase among educators and politicians involved in current school reform efforts. While the U.S. Department of Education defines the achievement gap as the difference in academic performance between different ethnic groups, there are multiple working definitions. Some definitions address the discrepancy of academic performance between groups distinguished by gender or socioeconomic status. Yet another may focus on the difference between what a student is capable of achieving and his or her actual level of performance.

Just as there are multiple definitions of the achievement gap, there are various means of measuring it. The achievement gap is evident in measures such as standardized test scores, grades, level of educational attainment, and dropout rates. While there are several ways to define and measure an achievement gap, the goal among educators is singular – to eliminate it.

In order to accomplish this goal, we must consider three underlying gaps in students' education and their impact on student achievement.

The Relationship Gap

There is an unacceptable difference between students whose personal connections at school foster their self-worth and those who do not feel such an affirming connection. A key component of developing self-worth is the relationship students have with their teachers. Effective teaching involves knowing your students and ensuring they trust in your unwavering support and belief in them.

Based on survey results from over 400,000 students, the Aspirations Research Center's 2008 [My Voice™ Student National Report](#) reveals an urgent need to address the relationship gap. Only slightly more than half of the students surveyed (54%) agreed with the statement "Teachers respect students." Less than half (48%) agreed with the statement "Teachers care about me as an individual." Perhaps most startling is that only forty-five percent (45%) of students believe their teachers care if they are absent from school. How is it that more than half of the students surveyed do not believe their teachers care if they show up? Educators must develop relationships with students and change these outcomes. Doing so will foster students' feeling of connectedness at school – an undeniable catalyst for increasing students' investment in learning and narrowing the achievement gap.

The Participation Gap

Put simply, some students are meaningfully connected to their learning and others are not. Closing the participation gap requires students to be actively engaged in their classes and in the life of the school. Students should be enthusiastic, encouraged to ask questions and feel comfortable taking risks. Learning should be an adventure rather than a chore.

Further data from the Aspirations Research Center's report reflects the urgency of addressing factors in school environments that contribute to the participation gap. Nearly half of the students (47%) agreed with the statement "School is boring." Only three out of five students (64%) said they learn new things that are interesting to them at school, and a mere 38% of students agreed with the statement "My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life." Only 54% of students enjoy participating in their classes, and fewer, forty-nine percent (49%), even enjoy being at school. How can this be acceptable? Schools must cultivate an atmosphere that encourages students to actively participate and become meaningfully connected to their learning. When students are fully engaged in learning for its own sake, achievement follows.

The Expectation Gap

A critical component of engaging students in their learning is teacher and student expectations. The expectation gap is the difference between students' expectations of themselves and what they perceive their teachers' expectations of them to be. Teachers must let students know that they believe in their abilities and expect them to become confident students who take responsibility for their own learning and lives. When this expectation is absent, students have a more difficult time believing in themselves and achieving.

The Aspirations Research Center found that while 91% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "I believe I can be successful," only 70% agreed that "Teachers think I can be successful." It is a sad situation in today's schools when teachers' expectations of students are perceived to be lower than students' expectations of themselves. This discrepancy should not exist; all students should know, with certainty, that their teachers believe in them and expect them to succeed. Students will then be more confident and motivated to achieve.

Eliminating the Gaps

Just as the physical structure of a school must be built upon a solid foundation, so it is with students' learning. When the environment in which students learn is solidly and intentionally developed to help them succeed, then educators can legitimately – and confidently – expect students to achieve. Based on over two decades of Aspirations research, the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations has identified three [Guiding Principles](#) – Self-Worth, Active Engagement, and Purpose – that foster high aspirations and lead to improved academic achievement.

ELIMINATING THE RELATIONSHIP GAP: DEVELOP SELF-WORTH

Educators help students develop Self-Worth by building positive relationships with them. Students need to believe their teachers care about them. By taking the time to get to know

students, educators give students the message that they are an important part of the school community, that they have someone who believes in them, and that they are fully supported in their efforts to achieve. When educators foster relationships and genuinely get to know students, there is a mutual benefit – students feel more encouraged and capable of achieving, and educators better learn how to inspire their students.

ELIMINATING THE PARTICIPATION GAP: FOSTER ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

With Active Engagement, learning – and therefore participation in learning – becomes important in and of itself. Educators must ensure that students become excited about learning and so intrigued that they are inspired to learn more. Students should be curious about the world around them, encouraged to inquire “Why?” and “Why not?”, and be willing to take risks without fear of failure or success. With Active Engagement, participation becomes natural. When students are fully engaged in the learning process, they are able to challenge themselves to achieve.

ELIMINATING THE EXPECTATION GAP: DEVELOP A SENSE OF PURPOSE

When teachers help students see the Purpose in their learning and let them know they are expected to succeed, then students find meaning in achieving. Teachers must help students learn to set goals, make plans for accomplishing them, and help them see the purpose of their efforts. Students need to know they can make a difference in this world. There should be nothing subtle or ambiguous about this message. When students clearly recognize the purpose of their learning and are expected to achieve their goals, then they can envision all that is possible for themselves and are motivated to achieve.

Concluding Thoughts

Education is all about the students – helping them achieve in and outside of school and be confident, responsible members of society. It is now time to ensure that education is not only “all about the students,” but about all students. We must ensure that each and every student has the opportunity to achieve and reach his or her fullest potential.

No matter which gap you look at, or how you measure it, the achievement gap will narrow when teachers develop positive relationships with students, help them become active participants in their learning, and let students know that they expect them to achieve. Such an approach holds much greater promise than trying to bridge the achievement gap with more academic programs. When students are expected and encouraged to reach their fullest potential in an environment that supports their development of Self-Worth, Active Engagement, and sense of Purpose, the result will be increased academic achievement and a narrowing of all gaps – any way you measure it.