

# Gaining on the Gap

**One district's successful strategy:  
Encourage the most rigorous classes for all students**

BY ROBERT G. SMITH

**A**bout three-quarters of the 2009 graduates of the highly diverse Arlington, Va., Public Schools completed one or more Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses during their high school careers. That figure serves as one indicator of a decade-long initiative to eliminate achievement gaps while raising achievement for all students.

More than 20,000 students attend this inner-ring, suburban school district outside Washington, D.C., where no race/ethnicity holds majority status (48 percent white, 27 percent Latino, 13 percent African American, 11 percent Asian). About a third of the students receive free or reduced price meals; 42 percent speak a first language other than English. Families represent 128 different nations of origin and 95 different first languages.

To narrow the achievement gaps in such a diverse community, we had to create conditions in the organization that would propel solutions and help ensure access to and success in rigorous high school classes for all students.

## **Right Conditions**

Our experiences, along with what I've observed in other school districts, suggest that for school systems to succeed in closing achievement gaps (and to increase enrollment of all students in advanced classes) they must:

- ▶ Admit they have a problem and put the data that demonstrate the problem front and center in a form that can be understood easily.
- ▶ Measure and report progress consistently.
- ▶ Set for everyone in the organization

the priority of eliminating or narrowing gaps.

- ▶ Distribute equitably resources directed toward achieving the goal.

- ▶ Implement measures that focus on key variables early and consistently.

During my 12 years as superintendent in Arlington, we reported at least annually on our progress across a series of indicators. Those indicators were tied to the objectives which, in turn, supported the four goals of the school board's strategic plan. One set of indicators measured increases in enrollment and success in rigorous courses for all students, and one set treated those same measures for black and Latino students.

While reporting represents a necessary and crucial measure in eliminating achievement gaps, it is not a sufficient step. If the data are not used by all of the

players, then the likelihood of the data changing is small.

I occasionally joke that because of our proximity to the nation's capital, we share with the federal government an "inside the Beltway" tendency to define a problem, create a program and an office or organizational unit to address the problem, and then leave it up to that program and set of people to solve the problem, leaving the rest of the organization free of either responsibility or accountability. While that approach may work with some problems, given the breadth and depth of the achievement gap issue, finding and working on the solution must be the responsibility of *all* members of the organization.

I often heard the claim that "priorities that are the responsibility of everyone become the responsibility of no one." That may be true in some situations but is less likely to occur if the leadership of the organization commits to maintaining accountability for keeping the goal paramount and monitoring the accomplishment of results across all of the individuals who share particular responsibilities that contribute to reaching the general goal.

We tried to do just that by creating a planning and management system featuring related and linked school plans, department plans, administrator work plans and teacher professional development plans all focused on objectives most important to the system, as well as program and personnel evaluations that assessed progress on those same objectives.

In addition to making the goal of eliminating achievement gaps the business of everyone in the organization, it is important that the budget allocation follows the priorities to ensure the goal receives sufficient material and personnel support. In the case of working on the achievement gap, equitable allocation means granting greater support to interventions focused on removing gaps. Thus, schools with greater proportions of students experiencing the gaps received greater resources than schools with smaller proportions of such students. In Arlington, examples of greater resources delivered to schools with greater needs included additional staff for English



**Robert Smith increased minority participation in high-level courses as superintendent in Arlington County, Va.**

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for Speakers of Other Languages services and additional reading teachers and services in schools with greater proportions of students eligible for subsidized meals. The final element in creating the organizational conditions to shrink achievement gaps lies in a common understanding of the key variables that must be treated to make progress, to make certain that interventions designed for that purpose address those variables, and to assure that consistency characterizes the implementation of those interventions.

Our experience suggests at least four key variables should drive the development and implementation of interventions. Those variables include (1) expecta-

tions, (2) quality of instructional interactions, (3) access to opportunities and (4) parent and community involvement. Each of these variables comes into play in the examples cited below regarding our work on expanding access to and success in rigorous high school classes.

### **Expanding Rigor**

One major barrier to expanding access to and success in rigorous high school classes and one important remedy to underrepresentation of students in advanced classes resides in the expectations held by teachers, parents and the students themselves. These expectations play out in the rigor of courses offered and in the quality of instruction experienced in the various levels of courses. In Arlington, we

maintained a well-defined separation of academic experiences for students based on those expectations with three or more levels for most high school subjects and with little movement among the levels.

We collapsed those levels, although maintaining in most subjects a separation between Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes and other classes. However, we then focused on increasing the proportion of students enrolled in the AP and IB classes, and moving toward a larger representation of students of color. We more than doubled that representation for both Latino and African-American students, yet continued to register unacceptably large gaps, and in some cases, because of big upsurges in the proportion of white students registered for these classes, the enrollment gaps increased.

One theme played out over the years has been reserving for white middle-class students the opportunity to engage in rigorous courses. In the time shortly after the school board's 1999 adoption of the goal of eliminating achievement gaps, a complex network of prerequisites, including teacher recommendations, governed whether students could enroll in rigorous classes.

Following many conversations with African-American and Latino parents who recounted stories of pressuring teachers and administrators to allow their children

# The Importance of Allies

If school districts expect to make major inroads on achievement gaps and ensure rigorous course work for all students, they need allies in the work. As scholars Richard Rothstein and David Berliner have pointed out, schools working in isolation are unlikely to eliminate entirely the powerful influence of race/ethnicity, income or dominant language in forecasting student achievement.

I found it helpful to identify allies who can provide moral, political, social and intellectual support to the effort. Included among those allies are school system advisory groups, community groups, social service agencies, other school district representatives and university scholars.

One organization particularly helpful to the Arlington Public Schools is the Minority Student Achievement Network ([www.msanetwork.org](http://www.msanetwork.org)), an organization of 25 school districts working together to eliminate achievement gaps. The organization formed in 1999 when Allan Alson, then superintendent of the Evanston Township High School District in Evanston, Ill., contacted superintendents of 14 other diverse, mostly inner-ring suburban school districts, inviting us to attend a meeting during the AASA annual conference.

A number of the contacts were known to Alson, while others (as was the case for Arlington) were suggested by Paul Houston, AASA executive director at that time. Fourteen of the 15 superintendents attended the session facilitated by Bob Peterkin of Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

## Common Bonds

All of the districts shared a goal of eliminating achievement gaps before this became a popular objective. We also generally shared small- to moderate-sized enrollments, a suburban location, diverse populations, recognized achievement gaps by race and ethnicity,

good financial resources and support, and strong relations with one or more institutions of higher education. Many of the districts were located in university communities, such as Amherst, Mass., Ann Arbor, Mich., Berkeley, Calif., Cambridge, Mass., Chapel Hill, N.C., Evanston, Ill., and Madison, Wis. All 14 superintendents agreed to jointly form the Minority Student Achievement Network. The network now has 25 member districts assisted by an executive director who works from the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The organization's major purpose was to investigate, discover and implement principles and practices likely to reduce the predictability of student achievement on the basis of race and ethnicity. The thinking of the superintendents was that their organization should set a research agenda and then collaborate with scholars who shared those interests. Given superintendents' commitments and their resources and the help of renowned scholars, if they could not make substantial progress, what school district could?

Edmund Gordon, then with the College Board, assembled an initial advisory committee of scholars. While that committee did not last, it provided an initial forum for the cultivation of university scholar allies who have advanced the research agenda, the professional development efforts and the student development initiatives of member districts. Among the scholars supporting the network's mission have been Peterkin and Ronald Ferguson of Harvard University; Gloria Ladson Billings of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Wade Boykin of Howard University; and Pedro Noguera of New York University.

The network's governing board consists of superintendents, and a research-practitioner council consists of two or three educators from each district. The council is charged with carrying out the research agenda, currently focusing on

mathematics, literacy, teacher-student relationships and conversations about race.

In addition to conducting annual conferences, teacher research sessions and professional development mini-conferences on selected topics, the organization has sponsored an annual student conference, where students of color come together to discuss barriers to achievement for minority students and develop plans to help reduce achievement gaps to take back to their school districts.

## Community Backing

In Arlington, we found further allies among school advisory committees such as the Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Eliminating the Achievement Gap, a group including parents and staff that over the past decade has provided constructive advice. That advice and the committee's advocacy made a considerable difference in interventions to improve staff development, student counseling and education planning, parent involvement and student discipline.

Among community groups, we received support as well as challenges from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Civic Coalition for Minority Affairs and the county government's Commission on Human Relations.

Working with these allies helps cement the importance of the goals and assists the school district in working through sometimes contentious dealings. I believe we learned we could make substantial progress in narrowing achievement gaps through interventions that intentionally focus on specified variables such as expectations, quality of interactions, access to opportunity, and engagement with parents and the community.

— Robert Smith

to try Algebra 1 in grade 8 (an important gatekeeping course for advanced high school classes) or to enter other so-called advanced or intensified classes, I became convinced we needed to make major changes in our gatekeeping procedures for advanced courses if we hoped to change their composition from mostly white to a mosaic more representative of our total student population.

Generally, according to the stories I heard, the teacher, counselor or principal would suggest that the student had not performed on prerequisite course work to a level that would portend success in algebra in grade 8 and that the school would not want to set the student up for failure or force the teacher to water down the class. In several instances, persistent badgering by the parents led to the students' entry

into Algebra 1 despite the prerequisites. Typically, those students succeeded.

As a result of some of these early experiences, procedures for entry into advanced classes appearing in programs of studies and school handbooks were revised with the help of central staff, principals and teachers. Parents were told if they wanted their children to try an advanced class they could do so with the understanding

that the standards for those classes would be maintained. White, as well as minority, parents had complained about the barriers to enrollment in advanced classes, but the perception among minority parents was that when white parents protested, they tended to be heard.

There also was a prevailing belief that white parents were more likely to raise objections to the course-entry procedures. Thus, while the changes designed to allow students the opportunity to engage in rigorous course work may have been motivated by achievement gap issues, they were embraced by many parents, minority and majority. Over a 10-year period, the proportion of students completing Algebra 1 or higher by the close of 8th grade doubled from 26 percent to 52 percent and the proportion of African-American and Latino students reaching that goal more than doubled.

### Shifting Conversations

These changes were augmented by overt attempts by principals, counselors and teachers to encourage students of color, while soliciting support and cooperation of their parents, to enroll in rigorous middle and high school courses.

One high school principal asked teachers to identify students of color not enrolled in advanced classes whom teachers believed could be successful in such courses. The principal accumulated a robust list and met with every student identified to encourage him or her to attempt at least one Advanced Placement class. The personalized effort paid off in a marked increase in minority student enrollments in advanced classes by the following semester.

Even with large increases in the proportion of minority students entering advanced classes, student achievement in the advanced classes overall remained about the same, and the achievement gap, as measured by the proportion of students passing the advanced courses, was barely evident.

As more students who previously would not have been involved in advanced classes participated in more rigorous course work, the nature of the conversation among Arlington educators shifted. Rather than expressing concerns

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regarding lowering of standards, teachers reported to colleagues the successes that students experienced and the ways they and counselors would identify students not engaged in advanced course work they believed could be successful; they encouraged those students to try such classes. As reports of student success mounted, the feasibility of the procedure and of the more general goal became increasingly credible. In short, success bred more success.

Sharing such progress became a centerpiece of the collaborative professional development among teachers, both within school faculties, within subject/level meetings and across the entire school district. In one high school, teacher study teams developed what became a successful initiative to increase the enrollment and support the success of minority males in Advanced Placement classes. Students were identified and invited to join a cohort of like students that met weekly with two or three faculty members to prepare for enrolling in Advanced Placement classes.

The emphasis on working with a cohort was expanded to a schoolwide emphasis on preparation for rigorous courses. When this approach began in 1999-2000, 15 males of color were represented in 21 AP classes. By 2008-09, 85 males of color in the cohort were taking 161 AP courses. Black students, representing 29 percent of the school's enrollment, made up about 20 percent of the AP enrollment. Latino students, constituting 44 percent of the school's enrollment, were 40 percent of the Advanced Placement enrollment.

In addition to providing group support, various initiatives were developed or adopted by school and central-office staff to ensure success in the rigorous classes. These initiatives included the Early Identification Program, a joint venture with

George Mason University and other local school districts to provide summer booster classes; school year seminars and parent support; summer Advanced Placement preparation; an Advanced Placement seminar during the school day; and special programs to foster a smoother transition to high school.

### A New Mantra

Expectations also affect the quality of instructional interactions, by which I mean both the quality of teaching and the quality of the relationships between instructors and students. The quality of instruction to which we subscribe is reflected in a commitment to ensuring all students are taught for meaning, rather than subjected to instruction of discrete, isolated, basic skills or repeated rounds of remediation directed to passing state tests. Teaching for meaning became a mantra of principals, instructional supervisors and teachers.

The common-sense notion that if some students do not receive instruction focused on meaning or understanding, they are unlikely to learn well is reinforced by a considerable amount of research reported by scholars Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University, Michael Knapp of the University of Washington and Stephanie Knight of Penn State.

I believe that combining the right organizational conditions with high expectations and support for participating students and their parents, teaching for meaning, and enabling access to rigorous course work will ensure that achievement gaps disappear as all student achievement grows. ■

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