

**NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP
STATUS REPORT**

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The Closing the Achievement Gap Committee, consisting of twenty members of NJASA met four times during the 2007-08 school year. The Committee reviewed a number of articles, evaluated submissions from superintendent membership relative to work being done to address achievement gap issues. Additionally, reports completed in school districts were considered in so far as they informed our consideration of important issues.

A consensus emerged in the fourth meeting that the Closing the Achievement Gap Committee would best address its charge by focusing on Promising Practices which would first be shared with the entire membership in a series of presentations at the October, 2007 School Board Convention and then second, a status report would be provided based on investigations/visitations that a sub committee chaired by William Librera did with districts who had unusually positive results. This report is the status report and it will likely be available to the membership prior to the October, 2007 convention. The focus on Promising Practices as opposed to Best Practices was a consensus decision because it relieved us from making evaluations of what district's work was better than others. Further with all humility, the entire committee recognizes that despite the good work being done in districts, there is no example of a district that has found the approach which has eliminated the gaps in achievement that are evident throughout our public education system.

Although the direction for the status report was to include Promising Practices as well as Research and Related Literature, the major focus of this status report is a summary of unusually positive results that three districts have achieved which can be instructive as all of us search for ways to accelerate the closing of the achievement gap. At the conclusion of this

status report there will be a brief summary of relevant research and valuable sources for members to consider further.

The visitations occurred in June, 2007. These followed a careful review of the achievement data provided. Although class visitations would have been preferred, the data was substantial enough to allow for essential people in the district to speak at length about their work and to also respond to questions.

We visited the Clifton School District and the South Plainfield School District to discuss their programs and results in mathematics. Both of those districts brought a system wide approach to gaps in achievement largely through a primary focus on specific grades. Although the emphasis was on a number of grades, there certainly was attention on other grades as well. Not surprisingly those discussions involved the superintendents and members of their staff. The third district we visited was Haddon Heights. Here the emphasis was on High School Language Arts Literacy. Our discussion in that district was predominately with the High School principal and members of his staff as well as the Director of Curriculum.

Immediately apparent to the Sub Committee were the common threads that characterized the work of these very effective school districts in raising levels of achievement among students that have historically not performed well. This report will delineate these threads first, before turning to important differences reflecting the context, culture and strengths of each district. Context clearly matters, and the reader will see how each district constructed their work in response to local context and in ways that shaped that context.

One overarching theme arises from these three very positive stories. At no time, did these educators do anything to imply that their work was complete. Instead they were riveted on what they still had to do and what they would see as the next steps. Initial success heightened aspirations and galvanized further effort. Each of these districts and all of these educators sought to create even better results.

Common Threads

1. As proud as these educators were of their accomplishments in getting unusually positive results, they quickly talked about what still needed

- to be done and how they were thinking about how to marshal resources for the continued challenge.
2. Superintendent Michael Rice in Clifton, Superintendent Robert Rosado in South Plainfield, and Principal David Sandowich in Haddon Heights High School were the obvious driving forces in their respective districts. As they spoke of the work and as they responded to our questions, they were to a person very quick and most profuse in their praise of the work and commitment of others even as they underreported their involvement. Interestingly, others in the interview were quick to correct that modesty. It was obvious that district leadership and passion were important components.
 3. All three leaders and districts made extensive use of data but it was always presented as information that not only guided work but established a common focus for the work of the district. Data was used in the beginning of the work and throughout the work to assess continuous improvement.
 4. Each district had very clear operating premises even though they were not always written. Instead they were embedded in the work. Basically we were told: "we know we can get our students to perform better. We need to find that way and help everyone get there".
 5. Context matters. These districts build on their strengths but they do not continue doing what does not work.
 6. Effective results and successes are measured exclusively in terms of student achievement. It will take a number of years to sustain success.
 7. Although these districts were not low performing districts, they did have at the outset of their work a significant number of low performing students
 8. These districts were not resource poor. Generally they had what we would consider "average" material and fiscal resources.
 9. These districts had justifiable pride in getting results beyond what similar districts attained. Also, pride in accomplishment was widespread including, but not limited to, Board of Education Members.

Clifton

With 10,600 students, Clifton is a large (by New Jersey standards) suburban community, designated as District Factor Group DE. This community, bordered by the two Abbott School Districts of Paterson and Passaic, has retained its suburban characteristics, but has seen in the past two decades a

huge increase in children (60%) that have English as a Second language. There are sixty eight languages spoken in the homes, making this district one of the most linguistically diverse school communities in the State of New Jersey.

In 2002, the district hired a new superintendent, Michael Rice from the mid-west. At that point the district had endured a number of defeated budgets and achievement was at the low end of average in the state of New Jersey. Because of budget defeats and enrollment growth, most of the infrastructure in the district focused on supervising teaching, learning, and curriculum had been removed. Class size varied very significantly with a number of classes exceeding 30.

Superintendent Rice made clear to the board that the district was not organized well to improve student achievement. This meant increases in the often defeated annual budget. He also arranged for a curriculum audit to be completed by the highly respected and very independent Phi Delta Kappan. The audit starkly emphasized similar conclusions to the Board and the community that paved the way for a series of well organized presentations and sensible advocacy efforts. As a result, budgets began to be passed and additional funds became available to improve the conditions for teaching and learning. Staff confronted student achievement deficits in relation to state curriculum standards and participated in the purchase of new mathematics textbooks and materials. Class size became stabilized in the mid twenties and a Strategic Planning process with the board and the community began the plan to go to full day kindergarten.

A rebuilt central office structure for Curriculum and Instruction led the district in establishing achievement pacing charts and benchmarks for all teachers. Professional development focused more sharply on effective practices --- e.g., differentiated instruction and lesson study -- to address low achievement through a variety of strategies that permitted students to reach common ends. All of these efforts were accompanied by the publication of achievement data that demonstrated progress every year. Although the primary area of growth was in grades 4-8, collateral benefits were realized in the high school where the number of students taking AP courses doubled in a four year period. A vigorous English as a Second Language program provided further impetus for improved math achievement: growing facility in English enabled students to read word problems with greater accuracy, to name but one way in which language and math skills are intertwined.

The brief summary of Math improvement from 2003 to 2006 is:

	<u>YR</u>	<u>Partially Proficient</u>	<u>Proficient</u>	<u>Advanced</u>
<u>NJASK 4</u>	2003	23.3%	48.1%	28.6%
	2006	12.0%	50.2 %	37.8%
<u>GEPA</u>	2003	53.9%	36.6%	9.5%
	2006	35.4%	51.2%	13.4%

The four year pattern of reducing the percentage of students who were partially proficient to increasing the number of students who were advanced proficient was also evident in the 11th Grade HSPA results. Huge gains in achievement occurred with students who were either children of color or economically disadvantaged.

South Plainfield

South Plainfield is a suburban community in the middle of the state with a District Factor Group of FG. The student population is approximately 3800.

A new superintendent, Robert Rosado, hired in the last months of the 2002-03 school year, examined state achievement test data as one of his first actions in the new district. Working with Director of Curriculum Ms. Kaye Crown, he found reasonably good achievement levels in language arts literacy, but low levels in mathematics.

Strategically, he first established the inadequacy of these results through comparisons with other districts similar to South Plainfield. The strategy further targeted grades 5-8 (two schools one with grades 5 and 6 and the other a middle school with grades 7 & 8) primarily, with related work in K-4 and the high school. Data was used extensively to establish both a baseline as well as clear deficit areas. Where appropriate, curriculum was modified and aligned with state standards. Pacing charts and quarterly tests developed by Ms. Crown were used so each teacher would get results quickly and there would be the means for the district to monitor progress. With assistance from Rutgers University math experts, monthly Math Institutes were held in which all math teachers worked with central office administrators to analyze student test and grade data.

Extended summer school for struggling students was provided as well as additional support measures during the day, before school and after school. Additionally, baseline pre-tests were given to all fourth, sixth and eighth graders in June and then repeated in September to ascertain the degree of knowledge decay during the summer so teachers could begin the year with appropriate re-teaching and reinforcement. Four years of math institutes and monthly meetings increased opportunities for collegial exchange and collaborative learning. Enhanced instructional expertise underlies the data demonstrating student learning gains, as well as growing enrollment in more advanced math courses. The changes in high school enrollment in particular were dramatic as were the number of students in the middle school taking Algebra.

The brief summary of Math achievement gains are:

	<u>Year</u>	<u>Partially Proficient</u>	<u>Proficient</u>	<u>Advanced</u>
<u>NJASK 4</u>	2003	18.2%	48.1%	33.7%
	2006	3.8%	40.6%	55.6%
<u>GEPA</u>	2003	49.9%	41.1%	9.0%
	2006	25.9%	56.0%	18.0%

The same pattern of improvement in a reduction in the lowest strata of performance and an increase in highest level of achievement is evident in the district's HSPA 11th grade test. The highest increase in all grades within this overall improvement has been with children of color and economically disadvantaged.

Haddon Heights

Haddon Heights is a district that has a sending-receiving relationship in their high school with the two communities of Barrington and Lawnside, both of which have District Factor Group designations lower than Haddon Heights. Haddon Heights is regarded as a relatively affluent community with a District Factor Group of GH. Also the two sending districts constitute a majority of the students in the high school. Unlike many of the sending-receiving relationships in the state of New Jersey, the relationship between the three districts has been consistently positive over a period of more than eight decades.

Although the relationship among the three districts has been both stable and positive, students with low performance on the eighth grade test, the GEPA, are always more likely to have come from the sending districts and more likely from Lawnside which has a relatively low socioeconomic status of DFG B. The results from Lawnside, in particular reinforce the national correlations between income and achievement. The positive results in achievement in this high school are evident in the historical pattern of improving the performance of students from the GEPA to the HSPA.

David Sandowich has been the Principal of this High School for seventeen years and an administrator for many years previous to his appointment as Principal. As a graduate of this high school, David clearly understands this school community and its challenges as well as its strengths. Because of his tenure as principal, David has been actively involved in the hiring of most teachers in the school. Continuity of leadership is clearly a great strength of this high school where turnover among staff is also very low.

The overall pattern of teaching and learning in this high school is informed by Roland Barth's thinking about how to build a learning community. Principal Sandowich does this by supporting what teachers think would be the best way to organize instruction so long as he can support their rationale and so long as teachers persist with their approaches and examine the effects of their instruction over time.

Instructional continuity and staff stability have clearly established a high school culture of achievement. Specifically, it does not matter very much what school you attended in the eighth grade: at this high school you will achieve. The Honors program, as an example, has clear criteria but also a flexible parental appeal process supported by data amassed over a number of years. Parents can see the probability of their children succeeding based on that data. This reinforces the culture that students will succeed and the teachers will find the way to get students to reach high standards.

One of the components of the team teaching throughout the English department is the monthly calendar of topics and student responsibilities. This calendar is shared with parents as well as students, removing excuses about what students as well as teachers are responsible to do. Support, usually from a grade level teacher, is available to students during their free or unassigned period. Shared teacher understanding of curriculum and shared knowledge of students reinforce the value of such support even if the

primary teacher is not the provider. The Team-Teaching structure has other advantages which include the tenth grade teachers talking to the ninth grade teachers about curriculum and the learning needs of the student. Not surprisingly, data about student performance is shared appropriately and positively among teaching staff members. If at the conclusion of the tenth grade, students who are still performing below the established standard in the school, are then enrolled in an eleventh grade English class which is a support class with intensive emphasis on their deficits. This class satisfies their English requirement for grade eleven.

Results of Improvement among students who performed as Partially Proficient on the GEPA are as follows:

		Partially Proficient (PP)			<u>PP</u>
2002	GEPA	33%	2005	HSPA	10%
2003	GEPA	40%	2006	HSPA	15%
2004	GEPA	45%	2007	HSPA	8%

In each of these three testing years, the improvement among low income students has ranged from 20% to 55% as measured by moving from Partially Proficient on the GEPA to Proficient on the HSPA.

Other Promising Practices in neighboring states and in New Jersey- Related References in Research and Literature.

Rockville Centre School District (NY)

The Rockville Centre School District is an economically diverse school district with 3700 students. The student population is 77% Caucasian, 12% Hispanic, 3% Asian American with 16% of the student population on free and reduced lunch. Four members of our committee, including Co-Chair Robert Copeland, visited the school district on October 12, 2008. The Superintendent of Schools, William H. Johnson also presented at the most recent annual School Boards/School Administrators Convention about their work in reducing the Achievement Gap.

Superintendent Johnson has been in his current position for two decades during which time the District “came to learn how to learn and how to make change.” At the conclusion of the first decade, the Superintendent and

members of his district and school staff examined the results of student achievement from that decade for the express purpose of identifying factors contributing to the Achievement Gap among the student population in the Rockville Centre School District. From that analysis came the plan and the commitment to a district wide approach which over a ten year period has reduced significantly the achievement gap between students of color (who are predominately from low income homes) and their Caucasian counterparts (who are generally from middle to high income homes).

The plan rests on these representative approaches to teaching and learning which has the goal that all students will graduate from college.

- From the elementary grades through 10th grade, there is no tracking or ability grouping (ability is largely absent from their discussions about grouping.) After 10th grade, students participate in either International Baccalaureate or New York Regents level courses.
- With the intent of removing any impediment to academic challenge for all students, pre requisites have been removed as criteria for course enrollment. With the intent of putting impediments in front of students who want to opt out of academically challenging courses, the Superintendent long ago reserved for himself the final decision on such student placement decisions. He has not been required to exercise this authority.
- Detracking at Rockville Centre means that all students take honors level courses. As an example, all students take Calculus which means eighth graders take Algebra.
- Thirty to forty minutes every day before school begins in the middle and high school are devoted to support sessions which are customized to the specific needs of students
- New staff members must participate in 20 hours of after school professional development each year; veteran teachers must participate in 16 hours of PD. The District offers a menu of after school courses, many of which are taught by District teachers. Many courses focus recursively upon differentiating instruction and upon collaborative lesson study.

- As part of the IB program, all students must submit a 4000 word interdisciplinary essay as a requirement for graduation. Virtually all students take IB English.
- Regents Diploma Results (highest standard in New York)

97% of all the high school students

90% of the students of color graduate

80% of the special needs students

The District believes that it is instruction that must be differentiated not curriculum. Doing so allows for “the early preparation that enables students to make better decisions later on about their academic options.” This commitment has produced significant achievement gains in the past decade.

Delaware

The State of Delaware is engaged in a very interesting and potentially very powerful effort to address achievement gaps. Delaware has made very significant progress in constructing a state wide student data base that has been available to districts for more than twenty years. Because of this impressive data infrastructure, the Delaware Department of Education along with the State Board of Education are now working in partnership with the University of Delaware Education Research and Development Center, Delaware’s Achievement Gap Action Group, and the Delaware Academy for School Leadership on an integrated and coordinated project called the Correlates of Achievement: A Data-Based Indicator System for Delaware’s Schools. This effort is largely informed by the ETS document Parsing the Achievement Gap and it has these partners discussing the data provided by the Delaware Department of Education which is then utilized in a research framework by the University of Delaware. Now in the beginning stages, this partnership is defining measures of academic rigor along with longitudinal information about how well students have been taught and learned. This will be the first example in our estimation in the country of a unified relationship between a State Department, a State university and advocacy groups all working with data to inform and change policy.

Rutgers University

In the state of New Jersey, there are examples where Rutgers New Brunswick has worked with districts in literacy and mathematics to improve

achievement. Information about these varied but impressive programs are available through the Graduate School of Education Website. Additionally Dr. Roberta Schorr at Rutgers Newark has been working very successfully and impressively with the Newark Board of Education to improve student achievement in mathematics. There are certainly other efforts underway that are too numerous to list. One outcome from the Achievement Gap Committee could be an exhaustive list of all such resources.

Literature and Research

In the area of Literature and Research, there is also much work underway. Two such examples are the work of Professor Pedro Noguera at New York University and the work of Dr. Ronald Ferguson at the Harvard Center for Closing the Achievement Gap. Teachers College at Columbia University has also made a contribution through The Campaign for Educational Equity and their recent document titled Examining America's Commitment to Closing Achievement Gaps: NCLB and Its Alternatives.

In summary there are Promising Practices in terms of Closing the Achievement Gap but there is limited evidence of large scale breakthroughs in terms of dramatic and sustained change with positive evidence. Until we do find or get such information, we need to continue to catalogue those Promising Practices so districts may build their own hybrid response largely informed by the context of their district in terms of strengths and student needs.