

## It Begins with Belief: Social Demography Is Not Destiny

**A**s one travels around this country working in support of principals, teachers, and the students they serve, a refrain often heard from educators is that “some” students are just not capable of learning sufficiently to meet state standards and to ultimately graduate high school prepared to enter a suitable college or university.

A few educators and pundits have written in national and local publications that it is impractical to claim that we can eliminate the achievement gap between rich and poor students; furthermore, they contend, it is impossible to eliminate the pervasive and persistent achievement gap between white (and, statistically, Asian) and nonwhite students, unless standards are lowered, thus keeping top-performing students from reaching their highest potential. The question is, then: Why raise the nonwhite student's expectations through social activist policies only to see them dashed by “innate” cognitive limitations? Charles Murray, as the Bradley Fellow for the American Enterprise Institute (a think tank associated with conservative views), went so far as to write in the highly influential neoconservative publication, *The Public Interest*, “It is time for policy analysts to stop avoiding the reality of natural inequality, a reality that neither equalization of opportunity nor a freer society will circumvent” (Murray, p. 8).

I stand in disagreement with Murray's limited understanding of human potential. I do recognize that of course people differ, as do their lives. Some seem to have a talent that does not emerge in oth-

ers; some seem outgoing and talkative and others more reserved and serious; some show an ambitious drive and others are distracted; for some, lessons are attractive and for others, first instruction may miss the mark. But virtually all children can learn the curriculum of American schools; they have the intellect to move on in school and life, perhaps with varied pace and on somewhat varied paths, with success and satisfaction.

A generous view of Murray's position is that he looked at persistent underachievement of African American and Latino students in American schools and confused institutional factors with innate characteristics, cultural or social misconnections of school with missing intellectual capacity. This is the long-running argument between the factions in “nurture versus nature.” Confusion of the two might be explained for some by general data that seems consistent and persistent, despite many efforts to make outcomes more alike for demographic groups. Whatever benign explanation for the confusion, neither educators nor the public can excuse the harm such specious arguments do when cited in support of policymaking that abandons the fundamental American value of equal opportunity or gives comfort to ineffective, if well-meaning, efforts to teach students who are underperforming. Sufficient evidence from around the nation shows that children can overcome the ravages of poverty and social confusion when they are nurtured in coherent, caring, and educationally skilled schools (see sidebar, p. 26).

Many educators cringe in reaction to statements that some children are just not capable of making it. To believe such a thing would be akin to accepting that the universe would create two



**EXAMPLES OF SCHOOLS THAT ARE CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

The table below is based on four-year data from the primarily African American and Hispanic American 15th Avenue School in Newark, New Jersey. It shows the percentage of students reaching state standards in the fourth grade over the course of four years.

School Year	Language Arts	Math
2000–2001	11.8%	5.9%
2001–2002	52.9%	20.5%
2002–2003	59.9%	59.2%
2003–2004	73.7%	76.3%

There are other examples. Dr. Duncan (Pat) Pritchett, immediate past superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools, wrote to me recently, “The progress is happening for our kids. Our African American students now in grades 3, 4, and 5 are above the average of African American students statewide, and approximately 20 of our schools are now performing above state average.

In Seattle, research conducted by the school system has found that African American students who have been part of the literacy training conducted by the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education for a two-year period or more, double the achievement of African American students not trained. In Minneapolis, Nell Collier, principal of Cityview Performing Magnet Middle School, has written: “Our students have definitely increased in achievement on a state assessment in reading and math. Our school went from the 33rd percentile to the 54th percentile in reading on the Minnesota Basic Skills Test (MBST) and from the 22nd to the 34th percentile in mathematics. We are an urban school with much diversity in our student body. We have a free and reduced lunch count that is at 91 percent.” And again in Minneapolis, the Northeast Middle School experienced an increase in the percentage of students passing the Minnesota Basic Skills Test from 56% in 2004 to 68% in 2005.

There are countless other numbers of schools and districts succeeding in our nation that have been cited in the literature. The Education Trust ([www2.edtrust.org](http://www2.edtrust.org)) has issued a series of reports on “unusually effective” schools that, while too often still at lower performance levels, have significantly outpaced their peer institutions. The Council of Great City Schools highlights urban school districts that are making significant progress in student achievement in *Beating the Odds V: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments* (available at [www.cgcs.org](http://www.cgcs.org)).

sets of children—some destined for rigorous academic programs and others for special education. Of course, there are those children who need and benefit from special education, but some students—too many—find themselves there for all the wrong reasons. If one were to explore more deeply these low expectations for children, one would find vestiges, if not actively virulent strains,

of individual and institutional racism that interdicts effective teaching, inhibits student engagement, and takes many off the track of achieving sufficiently to graduate from high school prepared for college. This form of racism can be fleeting, wrapped in a disparaging, off-handed word; or, it can be more pervasive, embedded in school academic tracking policies that lead to a dispropor-



tionate number of children of color placed in special education categories or limited in access to rigorous, stimulating, and relevant coursework. And, sadly, a consequence of such categorizations—perhaps intended to be transitional but much more often long lasting—is a lowering of the life trajectories for far too many of our nation's students.

President George W. Bush often makes reference to the pernicious impact of institutional racism on achievement. He has commented on the damaging effects of “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” Certainly teachers recoil defensively at times when this oft-quoted phrase is used to describe the education experience and opportunities of many students. They wonder, “Is the President talking about me?” Well, maybe not you, but it could be a colleague down the hall—someone who has, out of frustration, given up on a group of students who just don't seem to get the point of the teaching. The frustration I have heard from teachers goes something like this: “Well I once was a good teacher, but since I have had to deal with ‘these’ kids, I am not as effective anymore. If I had the kids I once taught, I would succeed, and I would be viewed as a good teacher again.” Others say: “I'm still a good teacher, as some of my kids show. The failures in my class are failures of society or failures of parents who send their children to school unprepared.” Sadly, such comments become the prevalent position when associated with schoolchildren challenged by poverty. The willingness to shift blame from self to others is understandable (not acceptable, merely understandable), but using students' life circumstances as the excuse for not changing school practices cannot be defended.

We all recognize the importance of good teaching. In fact, evidence gained from a large body of research suggests that the single most important school-based factor in student achievement is the teacher. Evidence also suggests that when children of color who are faced with challenging family and financial circumstances are connected with effective educational programs, they take advantage of them, succeed, and are pre-

pared to enter an institution of higher education. So why does the puzzle of the achievement gap persist in the face of such evidence? The oft-cited statement of Ronald Edmonds, the late, prominent researcher, provides both a reproach to us all, and a partial answer: “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose education is of importance to us.”

Dr. Edmonds's central point: to teach all children is first a matter of belief and will of teachers, of administrators, of students, parents, elected officials, business leaders, and community stakeholders. Many schoolchildren lack the financial support of their wealthier classmates as well as the prior knowl-

edge gained from broad exposure to the prerequisites of learning (e.g., good prenatal care, excellent preschools, parents whose financial standing enables them to remain at home during the early formative years and who are able to hire tutors for cognitive and noncognitive development). The community must inspire, support, and bridge the economic and preparation gaps for those students who are entirely dependent on the schools for learning. This has been, and continues to be, a great, historic mission of America's public schools, a challenge that encumbers and ennobles educators.

Ronald Edmonds's declaration is clear: If the child's education is important enough to us as a local community or entire nation, then we will find a way to educate that child. It's the corollary that causes us to cringe. And it's the corollary that causes many teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers to shout daily that the achievement gap must be eliminated because only then will we have embraced the foundation of this country: that all people are created equal. But is the elimination of this gap a realistic goal for any school community that, in spite of all best intentions, continues to see broad gaps in learning between

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and among student cohorts? My answer is a resounding yes!

Why am I so optimistic? Prior to her recent death, Susan Sontag—novelist, screenwriter/producer, and activist for freedom of expression—responded in a C-SPAN interview with words borrowed from an Italian philosopher that the lives of people are often limited by the “pessimism of the intellect,” but are sustained and lifted by the “optimism of the will.” And increasingly, leaders such as recently elected Senator Barak Obama speak of the importance of “the audacity of hope,” the boldness of hope that, when sustained in education, can deepen and marshal the will of those who serve schoolchildren. (For an example of a program that grew from such optimism, see the sidebar on p. 29.)

It is exciting to have leaders throughout American communities pick up the challenge of eliminating the achievement gap. They recognize emphatically that the economic and social health of the community, the state, and the nation resides in how we enrich the lives of *all* members of our society—not just the wealthy, not just the middle class, but *all*. If school communities develop the will, dramatic improvements will be forthcoming.

What have schools and districts done to create a sustained pathway to eliminate the achievement gaps between racial/ethnic and economic groups? They have given sustained attention to five factors most clearly affecting school effectiveness:

- Instruction: high standards in content and pedagogy, delivered in a culturally relevant and respectful manner that allows differentiated student interventions
- Leadership: for some a cliché but nevertheless important, this holds beliefs together with mission, and creates an organizational environment that guides and supports people within and around the school to apply their will and skill to the success of every student
- Organization: school-based policies and

procedures that determine grouping, tracking, class and school size, administrative and organizational arrangements that serve or constrain accelerated and enriched instruction for all students

- Professional Development: a conscious choice to provide teachers with access to the tools of effective practices so that they can tailor them to their community, classroom, and kids, and to provide principals with insight and skills to guide and support the teachers in their building
- Community Engagement: cultivation of parental and stakeholder involvement and advocacy that enables improvements in the schools to occur and to be sustained

Attention to each is necessary if we are to help students accelerate their learning, but let me focus for a moment on professional development, a key in itself and a key to the other factors as well. Sustained and cohesive professional development provides the threads that bind within each teacher and within a faculty the complex weaving of effective school factors. It strengthens individuals while creating appreciation of and networks for collegiality that enables continuing development. This requires that districts rethink how they organize professional development. The record is rather dismal in too many places.

Traditional staff development often includes one-shot workshops, sporadic inservice training highlighted by a “superintendent’s day,” workshop-type presentations conducted during stolen moments of a faculty meeting, staff retreats with cluttered agendas, and after-school training that encounters—but often is unable to overcome—the fatigue of a long work day. Even the establishment of a district-based professional development center is more often a river of separate programs than a well of cumulative and coherent ideas, strategies, and assistance. There is little evidence that these centers foster widespread or long-term success; they chip away at problems but seldom are comprehensive and integrative.

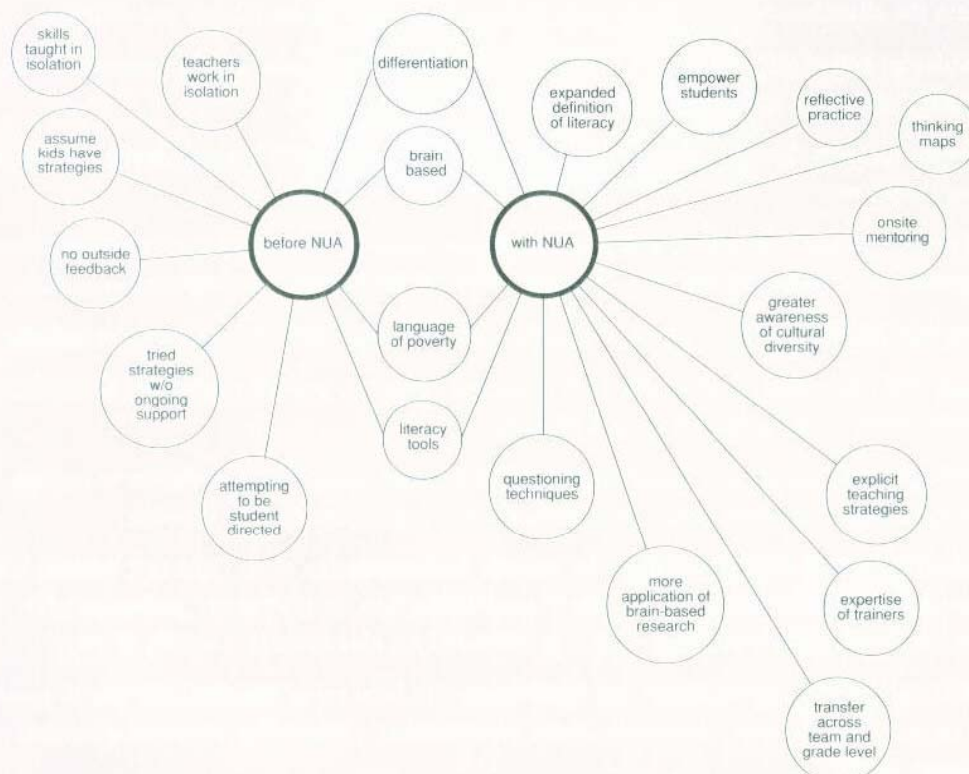
Current, and often traditional, approaches to



**TEACHERS' IN WAYZATA, MINNESOTA, EVALUATE THE RESULTS OF NUA'S INTERVENTION**

An initiative to suggest hope: Wayzata, Minnesota, a very wealthy township in metropolitan Minneapolis, is collaborating on a voluntary desegregation initiative with the West Metro Education Program (WMEP). Rather than engage in a costly court case, Wayzata and nine other inner ring towns agreed to engage in a process to bus students from Minneapolis to these targeted districts. In an attempt to enable the incoming "underperforming" students to succeed in their new school environments, it was felt that *all* teachers would need to learn new skills in, among others, differentiated instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the use of new cognitive tools that foster improved reading comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, problem-solving and inferential thinking.

WMEP decided that the best way to facilitate a new way of learning and teaching for the participating districts and schools was to engage the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) as the prime delivery mechanism. After two years, the results are encouraging, not only in the two schools cited earlier, but across the districts. Many educators in the participating districts have come to realize that not only were they preparing for the incoming students who they felt were underperforming, but their non-bussed student body were also underperforming. What follows is a double-bubble map developed by David Hyerle who partners with the NUA. The map is used to identify comparisons and contrasts on a topic. Please note that what follows are the words and thoughts solely of participating teachers at Wayzata's Central Middle School. They presented this map during an end-of-the-school-year 2005 celebration. It illustrates attitudes and teaching styles before and after NUA interventions. For me, it should illustrate for the reader the hope that is being generated by the educators who are ably serving *all* their students.





professional development are doomed to continue the treadmill of new initiatives and the swinging pendulum of so-called reform. Sustained and compelling educational change begins with, among other things, a dialogue and a careful review of the various reform practices chosen by central and school-based educators. When working with school districts, the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) uses the ten points described in the sidebar below as a starting point for conversations on school reform. We need to ask ourselves what the broad theoretical and pedagogical principles under consideration have in common with our current practices. We need to examine how “change overload” for participating schools can be avoided. All too often, this process is controlled by what some would call “change

junkies”—educators who utilize a checklist approach to school change and who feel that, as long as they are able to point to reform programs underway in their district or school, they are doing what is necessary for improved academic achievement.

To offset the immutable and frustrating obstacles to sustained improvements, educators and community stakeholders must:

- Develop and maintain an irrefutable belief in the capacity of all students to succeed at high levels. Create collaborations with universities, community-based organizations (including, if the community chooses, faith-based institutions), parent groups, businesses, the media, and outside advocacy

#### GOALS OF THE NATIONAL URBAN ALLIANCE FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

The NUA works to:

1. Advocate for children. National and local advocacy that affirms that all children have the ability and deserve the opportunity to strive for the highest levels of achievement.
2. Assess the situation. An on-location instructional assessment of the schools and districts.
3. Provides an action plan. An action plan for higher achievement based on the assessment, tailored to each district and school. A course of study is also implemented.
4. Motivate teachers. Systemic support and respect for a highly qualified, highly motivated teacher in every classroom.
5. Use proven products, programs, and tools. Focus on strategies for using proven products, tools, and programs, which then become skills in use by teachers and students for improved outcomes.
6. Align with standards. Alignment of instruction with state standards for student achievement.
7. Engage the community. Engagement with principals, teachers, and the community to reinforce and animate belief in the potential of each student.
8. Eliminate achievement gaps. Modeling of success-oriented instructional strategies to engage culturally diverse students and to accelerate, enrich, and sustain student learning.
9. Succeed with NCLB. Practical support for realistic implementation of No Child Left Behind, which does not allow testing to get in the way of good instruction, or of students' enthusiasm for learning and for eagerly showing what they know and are able to do in a variety of ways.
10. Build local capacity. Development and reinforcement of local capacities and networks to carry on the course of action, e.g., community-based organizations, universities, nonprofit education advocacy groups.



groups to build a critical mass in support of a renewed belief in student capacity. Build these coalitions and belief systems with exuberance and deep commitment.

- Conduct instructional assessments for all schools to ascertain school climate and to determine how the school prepares and conducts differentiated instruction while attending to common local and state standards. This means each school must maintain what I'll call an "instructional impact assessment" when
  - a. budgeting, structuring, and staffing,
  - b. creating policy and operating procedures, and
  - c. designing the assessment system so that instruction can be informed in time for constructive action.
- Provide cohesive and continuing district-wide professional development that demonstrates and models effective interventions with students, so that the skeptics can see that indeed *all* students can succeed with rigorous content. Accomplishing this means the following practices must be implemented:
  - a. Administrators must hire trained literacy coaches to deepen, individualize, and sustain professional development.
  - b. Administrators, literacy coaches, and district-level support staff must model for teachers how to use informative test data to adjust instruction.
- Develop a coherent and articulated, if not centralized, curriculum and instruction plan across a district so that the deleterious effects of student mobility are reduced while maintaining the value of teacher creativity and professional judgment. Embed the use of cognitive strategies into the curriculum so that essential skills become skills-in-use by the students. Use universal themes in instruction so that students activate their

prior knowledge, enabling them to bridge the gap between what they know and do not know, and between their lives and the necessarily larger world of the curriculum.

- a. Use instructional tools such as "thinking maps" that help students organize what they know and what they are learning.
  - b. Avoid piling on "best practices" that do not fit together, fit the standards and curriculum, or fit the situation. Effectiveness should be the watchword.
  - c. Coordinate classroom, district, and outside assessments so that, to the degree possible, teachers are informed in ways and at times that help them do a better job without delay.
- Provide extra support for the lowest performing schools, support that is tuned to specific needs and is disciplined to get results.
  - Create parent workshops that provide participants with strategies for improving home learning after school and during the summer.

Is this task doable on a broad scale? Michael Fullan, an internationally respected researcher, has eloquently pointed out that successful change requires dealing continuously with countless dilemmas involving issues such as the appropriate emphasis on "top-down" direction and "bottom-up" participation, including adaptation of programs and instructional strategies by each local school. The emphasis on adaptation, or tailoring, is critical. Middle school teachers know so well that planning and implementation of change demands that groups of people interact and make choices, with particular involvement by those who have so much at stake when it comes to individual and collective choices about the ends and means of education change—the teachers.

Albert Einstein is purported to have said 60 years ago: "The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking



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that created them.” This is true today. Education, when applied consistently and equally, remains the bedrock of our American culture. Seemingly, most Americans tend to believe in the foundations of American traditions such as fairness, freedom, human dignity, and full equality under law. Despite some critics, education remains the only pathway that leads people out of poverty, despair, and hopelessness. If an excellent education is not

important, why do wealthy families embrace the time-worn concept of meritocracy, whereby no means are out-of-bounds to enable their children to attend the best preschool, K-12, and university programs? Indeed, education is recognized as the primary vehicle for enabling ones’ dreams of success to become a reality. Yet a new process of education reform for all will require an enormous commitment, leadership (both in and out of schools), and sufficient time for successful interventions to take hold at the school level and throughout the district<sup>1</sup>.

What may not be understood by those who argue for relentless attention to basic skills instruction and academic tracking for students who differ in socioeconomic and racial status in America is that white and nonwhite children challenged by poverty are like all children and youth in this country. They start life wanting to be happy, to be people they themselves respect, to be loved by their families and cared about in their communities. They want to prosper as much as anyone. They

want to be viewed by the world as good and aspiring people. But in the underdeveloped areas of our country, in our rundown neighborhoods, shadows of poverty, off the highways of prosperity, the distance from aspiration to achievement is strewn with social policies and obstacles whose number, intensity, and complexity is disheartening and debilitating. Children of color and white children who live in poverty, like all children, want to learn and read good stories. Given that America is founded on fairness and tolerance, can’t we as a nation write them more promising stories? If the American community develops the political will, the answer is a resounding yes! But if America does not, then we may continue to witness increasing numbers of urban students who drop out of school, are unemployed, in despair, or incarcerated, and, as a consequence, develop nihilistic behaviors: “Many of [America’s] young black males believe that manhood is defined by the ability to injure or damage another man, rather than helping another man” (Herbert, 2003). Alarming, a striking majority of American youth and adults who are in prisons, on parole, or part of the juvenile court system are individuals of color, e.g., in Connecticut, 72% of the state’s prisoners are Latino and Black Americans. This dead end in their lives is exacerbated by school policies, which make assumptions about their “genetic” capacities. Put off by culturally different behaviors, all too often educators make the wrong assumptions about student capacity and relegate the students by well-meaning, but often pernicious, categorizations that can lock a child into a pathway from low school classification to penal lock-up. We can’t just say, “That’s the way it is.” There is always a better way.

If we are to eliminate the achievement gap and adopt a pervasive institutionalization of American fairness for all, nothing less than a total, long-term commitment to this goal by all stakeholders—in communities, in school communities, state departments of education, and the federal government—will suffice. Additionally, American education must come to terms with the conflict between what parents want for their own children and what they are willing to accept for American children in gen-

<sup>1</sup> The successful education reform stories taking hold in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Seattle, Boston, Charlotte, Newark, and elsewhere show us what can happen when districts make a firm commitment to helping all students achieve. These reform stories stand in contrast to those who have argued that children who are challenged by poverty and who lack European ancestral gene pools, do not have the capacity for the level of learning that might lead to “rich and powerful” careers. See Charles Murray, 2003, “Measuring achievement: The West and the rest.” *Public Interest*, 152, 65–80.



eral. Given the shifting demographics in America, all of us will have to rely on the academic success of other people's nonwhite and white children, now mired in poverty. We have to understand fully that this is more than rhetoric, more than an ideal. It is a truth for which we must extend our reach and our collective efforts.

Advocates must speak to their constituents, as well as to bastions of institutional control. Practitioners must be rigorous in making use of resources at hand while making the case for yet more resources. Parents must believe in their children's aspirations, demand opportunities for them, and do all they can at home and in support of their schools. Students must develop the perseverance

in the face of obstacles to rise to the demands of the classroom and workplace. Leaders must come out from around their desks, hold professionals accountable (including themselves) while offering a helping hand to those who falter. And America must reassert its irrefutable belief that all of us can strive, can succeed, and can share in our nation's creed of fairness and a future of unlimited prospects, propelled by our own rich diversity.

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## Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or positions you would like to support, and you think NCTE should take a stand, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention. If passed at the Annual Business Meeting for the Board of Directors and Other Members of the Council, proposed resolutions become part of the Council's position/philosophy on questions related to the teaching of English and can assist the Council in developing action programs.

For further details on submitting a resolution, or to see resolutions already passed by Council members, visit the NCTE Web site (<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/107214.htm>) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters. Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2005**.

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