



Published in Print: January 26, 2011, as The 'Fierce Urgency of Now'

Published Online: January 25, 2011

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# The 'Fierce Urgency of Now': It's Time to Close the Gap

*Narrowing Race and Culture Gaps Between Students and Teachers*

By Eric Cooper & Yvette Jackson

The recent national conversation about our K-12 schools has done a remarkable job of reducing complex issues to simple choices: Failed traditional public schools or successful charter schools? Ineffective union teachers or excellent nonunion teachers?

And the list goes on—though not for very long.

The truth is that these conversations are the easy ones and not the ones that will solve the real challenges in underperforming schools. Just below the surface are far more perplexing issues of race and culture that continue to leave students of color behind academically and economically.

To be sure, the nation has made the performance of students of color a priority, at least in terms of tracking and documenting student achievement so that schools can't hide behind top performers. But the focus on accountability that made closing academic achievement gaps a national priority has revealed another chasm that is harder to measure and equally pervasive.

Teachers in urban classrooms often feel unable to connect with students of color or students from cultures different from their own. This cultural and relationship gap is one of the biggest barriers to helping students of color reach their intellectual and

academic potential. The teacher's role is especially important for students who face daunting family circumstances and primarily depend on school for their intellectual and character development.

We know this because for 20 years teachers have been telling us so, asking for our help, and thanking us when they connect with students in ways that promote student growth and confidence. Students also know this. In survey after survey, students say they want caring adult relationships and teachers who understand them and their communities.

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Nearly a decade ago, the No Child Left Behind Act offered hope for pushing through such barriers by pressuring states to revamp teacher preparation, define quality teaching, and put a high-quality teacher in every classroom. But today, just as surely as NCLB remains on the books, its goals for teaching are more an aspiration than a reality—particularly for African-American and Latino students. That is because neither NCLB nor resulting professional development

has focused sufficiently on systemic ways to help teachers fully respond to the needs and identify the strengths of culturally and racially diverse students.

Today, far too many students of color sit in classrooms waiting for opportunities that will elicit and nurture their attention, creativity, and intellectual potential. We can end their waiting by acknowledging that teachers often do not feel qualified to bridge gaps in experience and background with students in ways that draw out students' strengths, make connections with them, and maximize their potential. This doesn't mean that these teachers are "bad" or can't succeed with some students, but instead that these educators need new strategies and ways of thinking.

There is a lot we can do right away, starting with how we as a nation approach professional development. We must:

- Shift the perspective of teachers and schools so they no longer see students primarily as test scores and put too much focus on their weaknesses. Teachers need practices that help identify, affirm, and build on student strengths, using "dynamic" assessments and observations on how learners approach rigorous content. When students and teachers learn that a relentless focus on increasingly complex content is ultimately more

important than the grades students receive, the more successful students become.

- Help teachers who feel unprepared to meet the needs of students of color or economically disadvantaged students. Classroom relationships are especially challenging for many of these teachers. Not knowing what is meaningful and relevant to students and misunderstanding reasons for their underperformance intensifies these challenges.

- Give teachers strategies that connect learning with the lives of their students. This will help students understand concepts and other classroom material and, just as importantly, allow them to demonstrate understanding and build their confidence.

- Design professional development that is part of long-term learning objectives that are embedded in curriculum, creates high expectations on a daily basis, engages students in the professional development with their teachers, and provides strategies and accountability measures to meet these expectations.

- Provide greater leadership. Too few principals are adequately involved in professional development, and the result is a gap between leadership, support, and lasting momentum.

We must be realistic about the challenges teachers face. It is not easy to believe that a 5th grader who is reading at the 2nd grade level and inattentive is going to be at grade level any time soon without extensive support. But the wrong assumption is that the student doesn't care or doesn't want to participate or learn. Instead, it may take a structured conversation with that student, a survey of personal interests, or a connection between learning and the real world. The barriers can be broken down.

If a teacher finds that the student was rarely read to outside of school, then someone should read to him. If that student loves exploration, then someone can read to him about exploration and the academics embedded in the texts. But don't stop there. Once he's interested, get him to talk about his interest and then expose him to virtual field trips to prepare a presentation on exploration using multimedia resources.

The next part of this journey unfolds when the students are assigned increasingly complex projects in which they mentor others. In this way, the goal is not the grade or a test score, but sustained effort. This kind of effort helps students and teachers get beyond "stereotype threats"—the destructive forces that encourage students to play down to lowest expectations, particularly widely held beliefs about their intelligence.

Re-evaluating how we address the needs of students of color is not an option. Today, on average, 55 percent of black and brown Americans graduate from high school, while the graduation rate for white Americans is approximately 78 percent. Sadly, many of those students who drop out end up going to prison. Nearly two-thirds of America's inmates are people of color.

We can do better if we recognize that wide-scale improvement cannot be boiled down to simple choices between options that promise pockets of excellence. There are some 3.5 million teachers in the United States. Real change will mean engaging all of them—and especially those in urban centers who are seeking help.

Only then will we begin to break down barriers to high intellectual achievement that otherwise will condemn another generation of brown and black children to poverty or worse. Unfortunately, for these children, society has created

circumstances where failure is an option. This will continue if that is the option we adults allow. We can do more, though we must do it now. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us of this when he spoke of the "fierce urgency of now." Collectively we can do it. We must do it. ♦

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