

# Closing the Achievement Gap?

## 5 Questions Every School Should Ask

By Pat Romney

Mention the problem of the achievement gap to educators, and you may be greeted with nods, sighs of agreement and looks of frustration. Yet are we clear about what we mean when we speak about an "achievement gap"? Can we identify our specific concerns about academic achievement among Black and Latino students? Do we consider the implications of naming and framing these concerns in the language of an achievement gap?

A reported disparity in school achievement between White students and Black and Latino students has captured a great deal of attention in recent years. The perception of an "achievement gap" is supported by some hard data that documents differences in grades, test scores and courses taken. Jenks and Phillips, in their book *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, for example, wrote that "Blacks scored below three-quarters of their White counterparts on a whole range of standardized tests." Though differences in student performance by race narrowed in the years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, in its March 12, 2000 issue *Education Week* reported that the gains made by Black students between 1970 and the 1990s have come to a halt.

Research and writing about the reported achievement gap (Williams, (ed.), 1996; Johnson, 2002; Chubb and Loveless (eds.), 2002; Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri (2002) is ongoing and examines potential causes as wide ranging and complex as the role of poverty, peer pressure, parenting, teacher quality,

inadequate school resources, television, test bias, and genetics. Interventions to close the gap range from curricular reform, raising teacher expectations, smaller classroom sizes, and imitation of successful schools.

As with most soundbytes, however, the reality of the “achievement gap” assertion is rarely questioned. In 1999, my colleagues and I completed a study of achievement among Black and Latino high school students in a high achieving independent school, and our research led us to question the concept. After analyzing survey data from students and alumni and conducting interviews and focus groups with students, faculty, administrators, alumni and parents, several questions arose for us which we believe are crucial for all schools to consider.

**1. Are you sure that there is an academic performance gap in *your* school?**

Because there is a reported achievement gap does not mean that one necessarily exists in your school. In our study Black and Latino grade point averages were comparable to those of White and Asian students. There was no statistically significant difference in grade point averages between the racial and ethnic groups.

When we share this information with the faculty of independent schools, many of them quickly shift gears. They respond: “Well, what about advanced courses? Black and Latino students aren’t taking enough of them. They are not challenging themselves.”

There may, indeed, be an under-representation of Black and Latino students in advanced classes in your school, but make sure you carefully examine the data. Sometimes the small numbers of students of color in a school skew our

perceptions. In many independent schools Black and Latino students represent less than 10% of the student body. With a percentage this small, the perceived absence of Black and Latino students from upper level classes may be an artifact of scarcity, not underachievement.

If you still think there is a performance gap in your school – find out where. Be specific. Look at the numbers. Look at margins of error. Know where the gaps are – in standardized test scores, grade point averages, participation in honors courses, numbers of students who graduate with honors? We live in a world of myth and perception. If you buy blindly into the idea of an achievement gap, you may create or reinforce the “reality” you fear.

## **2. How do you define achievement?**

Achievement is usually defined in terms of a particular type of learning outcome, specifically performance on tests and grades achieved in courses taken. In our study, we found that Black and Latino students defined achievement in a more complex and comprehensive way than their peers. As with other students, college and career mattered to students of color, but other desired outcomes were also named. In addition to academic success, Black and Latino students in the study stressed the importance of making a contribution to their communities, keeping a connection to family, being happy, and learning about other cultures. They were less likely than their White and Asian classmates to stress high income or Ivy League colleges as desired outcomes, preferring instead to maintain a balance in their lives.

Our research revealed that Black and Latino students particularly focused on the tugs between pressure to achieve and other cultural interests and needs, like

relating to family and maintaining friendships. Black students were more likely than their peers to say that they set limits on study time so as to maintain some free time as a way of coping with the potential negative effects of pressure and stress.

Black and Latino students were also more likely to mention the goal of happiness than were White and Asian students (32% vs. 0%). In addition, they were more likely to report that they wanted to return to, and help, their racial or ethnic communities than were their White peers (25% vs. 0%). Conversely, White students were more likely than Black and Latino students to mention goals of fame or respect (38% vs. 4%).

The words of one Black student epitomize this perspective:

“I want to be like my parents...It’s weird - when you come to (this school)... everybody wants to be an engineer... make millions of dollars ...I don’t want to be a millionaire. I wouldn’t mind having a normal job, waking up every morning, taking a train into the city, coming home, cooking dinner for my family, checking (my kids’) homework. I don’t want to have a job ...where I can’t spend time with my family.”

While students from all groups mentioned the value of diversity, as compared to White students, Black, Latino and Asian students, valued and placed greater emphasis on the learning that came from studying and living with a diverse student body. They often mentioned how much they appreciated social interaction with students of different backgrounds, and they emphasized the merits of learning about different cultures. They valued diversity both for its intrinsic worth *and* because they

believed the multicultural competence they acquired at their school would contribute to their ability to perform well in their future work lives.

Latino students were likely to mention their school's diversity (86%), even more frequently than they praised courses, educational opportunities, and school activities (57%). One Latino male noted, "You don't just learn from books and from textbooks. You learn from experience... You learn how to get along with people or how to negotiate, compromise... This school gives you that too." Latino (86%) and Black students (43%) praised their school's training in diversity more frequently than White or Asians students (38%; 29%).

As one African American girl stated:

"I am able to mingle with different ethnic groups and different cultures and lifestyles ... You get people here from all different countries and you have to learn how to share with people, you can't just be like, 'well I want to do this because it's my way.'"

The same trend appeared in the results of our research with the school's alumni. Black and Latino alumni more than White alumni in our study stated that they believed their attendance at the independent school had helped them to work with people of diverse backgrounds, to work cooperatively, and to adapt to change.

In sum, Black and Latino students offer us the opportunity to redefine the parameters of the purported achievement gap, expanding the notion of achievement beyond high grades and Ivy League colleges to include attention to family, service to community, an appreciation of intercultural learning and the pursuit of happiness without trade-offs in academic excellence.

Independent schools can benefit by asking: “Are there differences in how diverse populations at my school define achievement? Whose definitions of achievement does school promote?”

### **3. What impact does the idea of an achievement gap have on the performance of Black and Latino students in your school?**

The history of reported findings of cognitive and social deficits among people of color is long. From the nineteenth century, when skulls were measured in the vain hope of uncovering essential differences in intelligence by race, to the research of Shockley during the middle of the twentieth century, to the *Bell Curve* theories of the 1990s, and the current emphasis on the “achievement gap,” (sometimes even called an “academic gulf”) attributions of lower intelligence persist, particularly with regard to assumptions about Black intelligence. Discussion of these presumed deficits still dominates our social discourse in schools, as well as at the national level.

Is it possible that preoccupation with what Michael Cole and Jerome Bruner (1972) have called “the deficit hypothesis” contributes to underperformance among students of color? According to psychologist Claude Steele (1998): “The finger-pointing debate over the underperformance of Black undergraduates has missed one big culprit – ‘stereotype threat.’ This is the threat of “being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype (p.46).” Stereotype threat, as described by Steele, is “a threat in the air that can affect any group about whom a negative stereotype exists...if the threat is experienced in the midst of a domain

performance - classroom presentation or test-taking, for example - the emotional reaction it causes could directly interfere with performance” (p.204). Does the repeated assertion of an achievement gap constitute a stereotype threat undermining the performance of students of color while striving to improve it?

Speaking of women’s education, Belenky et.al. (1996) make clear that teaching styles can empower or cripple students. They assert “every woman, regardless of age, social class, ethnicity and academic achievement, needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away.” (p. 193)

Negative assessments directed toward the intellectual capabilities of people of color have had a similar dampening effect on the achievement of Black and Latino students, who are described as underachieving and lacking in academic ability. Historically the result is students who feel diminished.

Taking into account the effect of this negative perception, one could say that the so-called “achievement gap” is maintained by a vicious cycle. Describing children who are scapegoated in their families, family therapist Lynn Hoffman puts it this way, - “No one can change, grow or leave the field under a negative connotation” (Hoffman, 1981). In the same way, assertions of inferiority about students of color may prevent them from achieving. Furthermore, the assertion of the strengths or superiority of privileged groups can become a social construct that maintains that sense of privilege. For example, although Asians as a group have a fifteen point lead in IQ scores compared to Whites, and score higher than white students on achievement tests, we do not hear much reported anxiety about the “White

achievement gap”. In fact, many educators do not even know that this Asian-White gap exists.

Research on academic achievement is complex, and no single theory of achievement entirely explains why some students succeed in school while others do not. We do know from years of studies on the “Pygmalion Effect” that expectations impact profoundly on achievement. In independent schools, “higher level” and “lower level” classes and calls to “work harder” may interfere with achievement among Black and Latino students and intensify stereotype threat. Treisman’s research at the University of California at Berkeley revealed that “remedial” classes are not the solution to Black and Latino achievement.

Many schools require underprepared or underachieving Black and Latino students to participate in remedial programs. Essentially, the intense remediation of students of color sends the implicit message that they are deficient (Ford, 1996; Speede-Franklin, 1988) and may deepen stereotype threat. The striking success of Steele’s 21st century program at The University of Michigan, to which students are recruited honorifically, mixed with other students of different ethnicities, and meet in study groups and rap groups is notable.

#### **4. What value do Black and Latino students bring to your school?**

The questions we ask often determine the answers, and looking for the negative often reveals it. In our research we asked the following question: What do Black and Latino students contribute to the environment at your school? In business terms, what is the value added by having Black and Latino students as members of your academic community?

We were told that Blacks and Latinos brought a deeper sense of spirituality and stronger family ties. Is this equally true in other independent schools? Asking this question during our research was not intended to create negative perceptions about other groups nor to idealize students of color. As with academic ability, moral, spiritual and family values vary among individuals. Yet culture and context do matter.

Why doesn't the moral accomplishment independent schools see in Black and Latino students get written about and celebrated? This is particularly important because independent schools traditionally pride themselves on character development. The *Phillips Academy Constitution of 1778*, for example, states "goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble; yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous." More recently an emphasis has also been placed on service in the public sphere. (*Independent School*, Fall 2000). At the Winsor School in Boston, for example, "students are expected to pursue academic and personal excellence and to show concern and respect for others, for the community of the School, and for the world in which they live."

If, at your school, you were to stop and look at the school's mission, what other dimensions of achievement would be implicit there? Does the mission statement of your school speak to achievement of character development, service to others, or the common good? If so, then you may be missing the point by only measuring achievement in terms of grades.

## 5. What in your school supports a positive outcome for all students?

Our own research revealed no statistical differences in the grade point averages of Black, White, Asian and Latino students. The most interesting and useful question that follows may be: “What in that academic environment supports this positive outcome?”

The literature on the “achievement gap” suggests that there is something inherently problematic about being Black or Latino that is the cause of poor outcomes. What is often missing is the realization that achievement, like any other behavior, is context dependent. It does not sit inside a student like a fortune in a fortune cookie, foretelling a good or bad future.

One way to avoid this trap is to ask: “What in the school context might be telling students that they’re not worth it.” Discussing achievement in the *Black-White Test Score Gap*, Ron Ferguson of Harvard University writes: “My bottom-line conclusion is that teachers’ perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand, the Black-White test score gap.”

One major documented factor that impacts on student performance is the Pygmalion Effect. It has been shown repeatedly that teachers’ expectation of their students dramatically affects student performance. Where teachers believe that they are teaching a highly capable group of students, the students perform as such. Where teachers believe that they have a less capable class, the students’ performance matches these lowered expectations.

The power of positive connotation and possibility thinking are conveyed in a story from the 2000 Summer Olympics in Australia: Eric M, from Equatorial Guinea, entered in the trials for the 100-meter freestyle. He entered as what was called a “wild card entry” by invitation of the Olympic committee. These invitations were given to countries whose lack of resources and economic development made it impossible to enter on their own. Because the other two competitors in his heat, jumped the gun and were eliminated, Eric swam the race alone. He was described as swimming the race without grace, without style, but with guts. He had been swimming for only nine months when he entered the Olympics; this was the longest distance he’d ever swum. Eric said, “I was thinking that I cannot finish the race, but when I see a lot of persons applauding, I get power and I finish the race.” His time was one minute slower than the qualifier, but it was none-the-less defined by the media as a winning time. “That’s the spirit of the Olympics,” said one woman. “You don’t have to be the fastest swimmer to be a hero here.”

Rather than focusing on the “achievement gap,” schools might better ask, “What is the spirit of learning and the climate for learning in our school?” Attention to the five questions raised here can help independent schools fulfill their missions and reveal the key importance of their place in the American educational landscape. Grades, enrollment in challenging classes, and achieving honors *are* important, when connected to an expanded definition of achievement that recognizes character, value added, and the range of positive outcomes that result from enrollment in independent schools.

*Patricia Romney, Ph.D. is a psychologist consulting for equity and excellence in independent schools. More information is available at [www.romneyassociates.com](http://www.romneyassociates.com).*

*This article was published in the Summer 2003 edition of Independent School.*