

FINE Forum

Academic Achievement

Family Involvement Network of Educators

Harvard Family Research Project

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Questions & Answers (Addressing the Achievement Gap)

by Eric Cooper and Frankie Powell

About the Family Involvement Network of Educators: Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family-school-community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

From the Directors

We are at a turning point in the history of family involvement. Driven by the intersection of standards-based reform, the growing diversity of the student population, and the continuing gap in student achievement among different racial/ethnic and income groups, new forms of family involvement are emerging. While strategies differ, they share a common goal of expanding and deepening family and community roles to help students meet high standards. They also share a data-driven and research orientation, signaling the importance of information for decision making and taking action. With this in mind, we draw your attention to a special bibliography on family involvement and student achievement that we feature in *New & Noteworthy*.

We begin our *FINE Forum* with a Program Spotlight on The Education Trust, which uses state standards to create avenues of collaboration between parents and teachers around student achievement. Through its Standards in Practice and Parents as Standards Bearers training programs, parents and teachers gain a better understanding of the standards and the changes in instructional practice that can improve academic outcomes. The notion of leveling the playing field in educational matters is echoed in *Parent Perspective*, where Kelly Butler shares her ideas about authentic partnership between home and school.

In *Questions & Answers* we speak with Eric Cooper of the National Urban Alliance for effective education and Frankie Powell from the Maya Angelou Institute. They discuss two distinct approaches to address the achievement gap, Cooper focusing on aligning instructional practice with parental support in the home, and Powell with mobilizing community assets to enrich students' learning opportunities. In both cases, they urge action research as an invaluable tool for teacher practice as well as school-level strategic planning.

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Questions & Answers

The achievement gap connotes the wide disparities in school success among different racial/ethnic and income groups. African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians now account for one third of the 54 million children in the nation's K–12 classrooms. Students of color are more likely to drop out, have less access to advanced classes, and be taught by teachers uncertified in the discipline they are teaching. (NAACP National Education Department's "Call to Action")

Eric Cooper, Executive Director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, and Frankie Powell, Project Director of the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education, talked to FINE separately to discuss two distinct approaches to involving families to help close the achievement gap. We begin with Eric Cooper.

Q. What is the National Urban Alliance?

Eric Cooper: The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) is a network of consultants providing professional development for teachers through practical workshops and demonstration lessons. We had our first conference at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1991 and began to hire staff in 1993. NUA consultants go into schools and demonstrate lessons in math, science, reading, and writing with groups of students, then coach the instructional staff. We currently work in New York, Seattle, Maryland, Newark, and all of the schools in Indianapolis. Our professional development is based on the belief that all children are capable of attaining high educational standards. NUA consultants give teachers the latest knowledge, tools, and techniques to achieve this goal and also work to lift teacher morale, understanding the challenges faced by educators today. We also believe that all stakeholders in the community must participate in improving learning and teaching and addressing the social, cultural, and intellectual needs of children and youth. Consequently, our efforts are system wide, and often engage universities, the business sector, and other stakeholders. We work to support change at the instruction and institutional level by integrating structural interventions like capacity building, analysis of school climate, how parents are engaged, and school leadership with classroom-based support.

Q: What can schools and families do to eliminate the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Family involvement in the education of children and youth is critical to eliminating the achievement gap. Schools can no longer be isolated. Sadly, many parents in urban communities do not have the time to spend with their children on bridging the gap between school and home learning. The mother or grandmother is often holding two or three jobs and the kids return to the homes without supervision.

Yet the school community can reach out to students and their families by extending instruction from the school to the home. I know of this through personal experience as a teacher in Harlem. I would go into my students' homes to work with them and their parents, simultaneously modeling and demonstrating how to teach reading in the context of the home. Clearly those parents of school age children who are able to spend their time supporting the learning that occurs in the home see the benefits of this interaction with their children. As the parent of a second grader and kindergarten student, I personally am aware of the importance of the home-school partnership.

Q: What is NUA's strategy to close the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Any large-scale school effort to close the achievement gap must center on instructional and institutional change. Schools as presently constituted cannot and will not close the achievement gap. That is why they must forge partnerships with other interventions. For example, recently we formed a partnership with the International Reading Association (IRA). Our Urban Partnership for Literacy is a comprehensive new effort to improve instruction based on education reform focused on the classroom. The approach to instruction includes not only knowing how teachers should teach reading well, but also knowing how social issues impact each child's instruction and how meeting the needs of the entire child can effectively produce change.

Q: How can communities become involved in closing the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: To increase community involvement in and support for the nation's urban schools we need to create more public engagement activities. We must provide clear, accurate, and timely information about performance and practical ways of closing the achievement gaps while raising the levels for all children. There should be more movies, radio, and television spots that feature successful practices of urban education. And the entire community needs to understand that diversity helps all children develop the values and problem-solving and decision-making skills to support achievement. All parents need to embrace diversified learning communities.

Q: How should teacher education programs prepare teachers to support families to close the achievement gap?

Eric Cooper: Teacher preparation must come up with unique ways to better help teachers understand culture. Teachers need to be ethnographers. When teachers go into the home and learn something about the home lives of children they teach, they can bring their learning back to the classroom to aid instruction. [See Teacher Talk in this edition of *FINE Forum*.]

Teachers also have to learn how to be advocates for children. They must explain to parents and children the issues they face - whether it's testing or other areas of academics. Teachers must help raise expectations for students and demonstrate how belief systems and expectations have been manipulated historically. Then they must empower families and show them how they can address the issues that are of most concern to them.

While the National Urban Alliance focuses on developing teachers, classrooms, and communities through reforming the instructional core, the Maya Angelou Institute of Child and Family Education uses a university-community partnership to close the achievement gap by identifying community assets for children and youth. Frankie Powell shares her ideas.

Q. What is the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education?

Frankie Powell: The Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education is a community-based comprehensive center of child and family development located at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina.

Q: What is your perspective on closing the achievement gap?

Frankie Powell: Much of what has been done to close the achievement gap is done from a developmental and cognitive domain. Research tells us achievement is related not just to cognitive factors, but also to psychological and social ones. If we can assess how students, schools, and communities view themselves and their assets, we can use the data to drive decision making to help close the achievement gap. Respect for closing the gap really needs to begin as community-based action research where community and families are seen as partners - not as others. Families must be a part of this process from the beginning of program development.

Q: What is Partners for Academic and Social Success?

Frankie Powell: The Partners for Academic and Social Success (PASS) Project is a collaboration between the Maya Angelou Institute for the Improvement of Child and Family Education and the Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools. Our approach uses a community-based action research model of data collection, information sharing, discussion, and planning. We are conducting a survey of students' views of themselves and their assets and using the data to enhance family involvement in middle schools. We are integrating a curricular intervention into the schools and then generating data about the results to better inform the decision making of school administrators.

Q: How do you assess the developmental assets of children?

Frankie Powell: We have been using the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors survey. We took a profile of 200 7th graders and looked at what those students were saying about the community. The survey helps us to identify the assets of positive relationships, opportunities, skills, and values that enable young people to become physically, cognitively, and socially healthy adults. The survey measures four indicators: developmental assets, deficits, risky behavior, and thriving indicators. The survey brings the student voice to the forefront of the discussion.

We anticipate that the forthcoming discussion of the results of this study with families of the participants will promote a common framework for deepening the family-school relationships. Further discussion of the results of the external assets will enable the family-school partners to use data to set priorities and strategies for programs and services. In this way, the asset framework is linked to academic success.

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