



# Guest Column

## Citizenship Matters

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### The Achievement Gap VS the Empowerment Gap

By Sheldon Berman

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Nationally, there has been a great deal of discussion about closing the achievement gaps between African-American and white students, between Hispanic and white students, and between students living in poverty who access free or reduced-price meals in school and students who are ineligible for subsidized meals. These gaps have persisted over a very long period of time.

Although districts have attempted to address these gaps by applying various strategies from additional reading and math instruction to extended school days, minority students and students living in poverty still lag far behind other students. The typical response to achievement gap issues has been to narrow the curriculum for struggling students and to concentrate on the basic skills of reading and math.

Like other major urban school districts, Jefferson County (Louisville, Kentucky) has struggled with this issue for many years. On deeper examination, however, we discovered that a good deal of this gap is attributable to the students' socio-economic status. We have found there is almost as large a gap between middle-class African-American students living in suburban areas of the county and their African-American counterparts living in poverty in the inner city as there is between black and white students overall.

We, too, have attempted the typical response to the achievement gap. Although we have been able to improve test scores modestly for minority and poor children, the gap continues to present a puzzling challenge. So we have embarked upon a more fundamental approach to this long-standing problem. Instead of simply narrowing the curriculum, we have elected to address what we believe are some of the underlying causes that create this gap. Racism and generational poverty leave a long legacy of powerlessness and hopelessness in their wake that significantly impacts children as they develop. Too often, young people come to believe that they cannot make a difference in their own lives or in the life of their community. One central element in the achievement gap, then, is an empowerment gap — a sense of inability to effect change in one's circumstances and to improve the quality of life within one's community.

Reframing the achievement gap as an empowerment gap provides a different perspective on the problem. Rather than viewing the gap as simply a deficit in knowledge and skills or as issues of social deprivation to be remediated, the gap is seen as an opportunity to engage students in learning experiences that give them a sense of their own power and ability to effect change for themselves and others around them. Rather than narrowing the curriculum, the provision of empowering experiences requires us to ensure these students have the broadest access to the full curriculum. This reframing has enabled us to provide a very different form of intervention focused on personalization, engagement and authentic forms of service.

Addressing the empowerment gap requires that we think about three levels of intervention:

- Do our classrooms provide students with a sense of community in which they have voice, experience connection to others, and understand their impact on others and the classroom as a whole?
- Does our curriculum engage students in questioning and exploration so they develop a sense of mastery in thinking through problems and in producing high-quality work?
- Does our instruction provide opportunities for students to apply their new knowledge and skills for the benefit of others and the community?

In order to close the empowerment gap, we need to think carefully about the social-emotional culture and climate of the classroom and school. We need to create caring communities in which students feel safe to take risks and experience that their voice, choice and actions make a difference to others and to the class as a whole. We also need to implement inquiry-oriented curricula that provide students with active experiences to engage in meaningful questions and own their own learning. But most important, we need to connect that learning with service opportunities that bring to life the powerful impact one can have on the lives of others and the well-being of the community. In this way, students experience empowerment through the community in their classroom, the curricula they are engaged with, and authentic experiences of using their knowledge and abilities to effect change.

In Jefferson County we have been pursuing all three avenues of empowerment. Our CARE for Kids initiative is a social skill development program in grades pre-K through 8 that focuses on developing a sense of group identity in the classroom through a series of daily class meetings and community-building activities. Not only has CARE for Kids proven to create a more positive social-behavioral environment for learning, it also has enhanced academic performance in those schools that engage in high levels of program implementation. In addition, our systemic application of inquiry-based math and science curricula and our initiation of readers' and writers' workshops provide students with opportunities to openly investigate problems and concepts, think through challenges, and gain deeper levels of understanding. However, the most important aspect of these curricula is that they allow students to take responsibility for their own learning and to gain a sense of empowerment and respect for their abilities.

We have also begun to embed service-learning experiences deeply into our curriculum. We are developing an elementary social studies curriculum that focuses on community, culture and civics and that engages students in service-learning as a central component. For example, working closely with Metro United Way, each class of 3rd graders selects one or more local organizations that are working to address a community need. After studying the mission of each organization and the strategies it uses to effect change, the classrooms partner with the organization to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Building on their research and work with each organization, students sponsor a service fair that educates parents and the public about these organizations, cultivates understanding of the issues the organizations are addressing, and encourages people to volunteer with or donate to the groups. However, the core understanding students derive from this experience is that they, too, can apply the diversity of strategies that individuals and organizations use to effect change and address community needs.

The 5th grade continues this study through the essential question: "How can we realize the democratic vision of all people participating in governmental decisionmaking?" Students study the formation of the Constitution and the evolution of participatory democracy in the United States. The year culminates with their participation in *Project Citizen*, a curriculum developed by the Center for Civic Education that engages students in identifying, understanding and making a difference on a local or state public policy issue.

In 9th-grade social studies, we also focus on civics, using a profound curriculum entitled *Facing History and Ourselves* that explores the issue of intolerance through case studies of the Holocaust and Armenian genocide. By exploring the essential question of how genocide can become state policy, students learn a great deal about history — but also about the conditions that lead to prejudice and social injustice and about the role of the individual in society. As part of the curriculum, students design a service-learning project to address a significant community need.

As we actively promote community engagement within the school and service outside the school, students begin to understand that their voices and their actions truly make a difference. Service-learning can be part of every subject, not simply in social studies. In fact, incremental and consistent experience across school years nurtures an attitude of service, engagement and empowerment.

Closing the achievement gap requires that we ensure students have the necessary academic skills in reading and math; but it also requires that we provide them with a sense of empowerment through classroom culture, inquiry-oriented curricula, and service-learning opportunities. It is through that sense of empowerment that students can overcome the generational wake of poverty and racism that limits their motivation and compromises their attitudes about themselves as competent individuals. The awakening of students' awareness of, and belief in, their own inner strength and their capability to effect meaningful change transforms self-defeating attitudes into a positive perception of themselves as individuals who can take control of their own lives, and make a contribution to the life of their community, through the knowledge and skills they gain in their school experience.

As educators, we have a responsibility to imbue students of all ages with an unshakeable belief in their own capability to set and reach high goals. If we succeed in that mission, we will no longer have to focus so much time, attention and energy on closing the achievement gap; the students will close it for us — or, better yet, they will close it for themselves and for their future.

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