

POLICY BRIEF

Organizational Strategies for Addressing California's Educational Achievement Gap

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Overview

This policy brief provides an overview of organizational strategies, resources and opportunities that promise to have a substantial impact on improving student learning and closing achievement gaps in California schools. It focuses on the organizational and operational characteristics of schools and classrooms and does not address in any detail questions regarding instructional alternatives. A framework for addressing policy issues is grounded in three preliminary ideas: 1) many different factors in children's social and cultural backgrounds influence student achievement as much or more than their

school experiences; 2) the achievement gaps separating rich and poor, English speakers and English learners (ELs), majority and minority children are deep and persistent, and require changes that reorganize achievement within as well as between classrooms; and 3) there are no "silver bullet" policies, and no universal answers—schools have to respond to very local conditions and do so in a myriad of complex and subtle ways. Thus the organizational and policy reforms needed must emphasize deregulation, local initiative, leadership, and continuous program and policy improvements.

Major Conclusions of the Research on Organization and Policy

California public schools are not just failing to generate comparable educational outcomes for our diverse racial, ethnic, social, economic, and linguistic student subgroups. They are underperforming for a substantial majority of all children in the state. They are under staffed, over regulated, and inadequately organized. Resources are unstable and inadequate, judicial and political interventions are too heavy-handed

and too intermittent to be effective, bureaucratic processes are Byzantine, and the legacy of more than half a century of persistent and often dramatic reform efforts have generated a substantial amount of cynicism that threatens staff motivation, and confusion that disables families and local citizens. A spate of statewide reports have documented these and other failings so extensively that they hardly need repeating

here [1,2,3]. In the unpredictable post-Proposition 13 climate of state budget limitations accompanied by persistent partisan disagreements over taxes and the proper use of the limited revenues that are available, however, it is important to focus attention on modest reforms across a broad range of organizational and policy domains

No Single Policy Can Hope to Close the Achievement Gap

The academic gap in the public schools is not only very large; it is persistent and, except for the moderate progress made during the Great Society's War on Poverty programs, has repeatedly resisted manifold policy and program changes adopted over the last half century. Of course one can find examples of powerful achievement gap closing policies working in specific locations, for some populations, or for short periods of time. But locally successful programs have not been reliably "taken to scale." Changes in leadership or participant groups typically disrupt otherwise successful interventions, and repeated implementations of nominally identical programs do not have comparable effects. Thus we must conclude that for schools, like most other complex organizations, improvements will only emerge through many, generally small, changes produced through persistent, well supported, and energetically pursued efforts. In short, overcoming the achievement gap will not arise from, "doing the right thing," but will require "doing everything right."

To get things right requires intense engagement, an emphasis on problem-solving and a dedication to team building. Successful schools spend extra hours in quality instruction, they offer supplementary after school and summer instruction, and they include enriching instruction in art, music, foreign languages, trips and sports.

Redistributing Educational Outcomes

Organizational and policy changes need to reach inside the school classroom to redistribute educational outcomes at the classroom level. More than two-thirds of the variance in student achievement is found *within* classrooms—less than one-third *between* classrooms and schools. For this reason, school and district level changes can effectively ameliorate achievement differences only if they are designed to reach into the classrooms and reorganize the teaching and learning processes that occur there.

Improvement in Classroom Performance

Sustained improvement in classroom performance rests on three factors: 1) improved professional capacity among teachers, 2) leadership capacity among school and district level administrators, and 3) the student composition of the school. Several promising strategies for improving teacher professionalism can be identified in the literature, not just better training but also reorganizing how school staff work together. Recent research studies have also suggested that the basic parameters of effective administrative leadership include such moral imperatives as trustworthiness, interpersonal authority, the boldness that springs from deep personal commitment to a vision of social justice and thoroughly grounded professional competence. As Coleman [4] long ago documented, the social composition of the student body—who you sit next to in class—is a very potent factor affecting student achievement, more important than teacher characteristics or school facilities.

Educational Success for All Students

Human and social capital formation is at the heart of educational success for all students, and attention to its development is especially important for children who fall behind in the development of academic achievement.

Overcoming the achievement gap does not necessarily mean developing educational systems that produce equality of achievement test scores. Provided with appropriate educational opportunities and given adequate social and psychic support, students can reach superior life successes without above average achievement test scores. Moreover, the powerful influence of family and community factors in determining student academic performance means that academic achievement is a cultural as well as an intellectual accomplishment.

Success is importantly dependent upon intentionally designing social support systems—networks of people who link home and school so as to produce a *countervailing* force in the lives of at-risk youth. From earliest childhood students are embedded in inter-connected networks of family, peers, and neighborhoods and eventually school personnel. Efforts to reduce gaps must build on these networks, enlarging them; training and mobilizing network participants to work together on behalf of the students.

Locally Driven Improvements

There are a number of promising starting points for locally driven improvements in the effectiveness and equality of student learning. It is doubtful that state policy-makers can formulate, mandate and secure implementation of the kind of comprehensive and detailed program and policy changes needed to overcome student achievement gaps. Professional educator communities have to become engaged in

teamwork and continuous improvement in order for schools to achieve the level of performance needed to significantly reduce the achievement differences that are already substantial when children first enter the school yard gates. The basic building blocks of such a system are: professional capacity building, organizational leadership, and the development of a “can do” spirit of teamwork and trust at the classroom and school levels. At the higher levels of organization—intermediate units, state and federal support systems—it is important to remember that replication of “what works” and scaling up from pilot programs with large effects have proven weak and unreliable mechanisms for reliable program improvement. Articulating goals, maintaining and interpreting performance data, assuring adequate resources, insisting on professional competence and capacity building are all important elements to be provided from centralized policy systems. Monitoring and documenting local program effects with the intent of helping local agencies to understand why and how improvement takes place is important. But it is probably quite important for central policy authorities to lower the pressure for standardization of practices. The quasi-market pressures brought about through vouchers, charter schools, home-schooling and private schools are important, but they probably work best by threatening established school systems rather than by actually replacing them.

Local education agencies need to be encouraged to take responsibility for local program design and to be provided with resources and assistance in pursuing such program initiatives as:

- Targeted High Quality Preschool. Numerous studies of small-scale, intensive early education programs identify a variety of long-term benefits for participating children and their

families ranging from lower high school dropout rates to decreased criminal activity. While preschool programs provide excellent opportunities for teamwork, community engagement, and developing educator leadership, resources, especially in tight budget times, have proven hard to secure.

- Targeted School-Community Clinics. Millions of Californians are uninsured, and impoverished children suffer disproportionately from a lack of dental/vision/health care (Rothstein, 2004). Community health clinics housed within schools serving our most impoverished students also represent promising mechanisms for reducing one of the major causes of achievement gaps.
- Targeted After School and Summer Programs. Effective schools often offer additional tutoring after school as well as classes on Saturday mornings, and their summer vacations usually last only about a month. Within these beefed-up school programs, educators try to leaven those long hours with music classes, foreign languages, trips and sports, but they spend a whole lot of time going over the basics: reading and math.
- Targeted (and more substantial) Class Size reduction. California's average student/teacher ratio is 21.4, more than five students per teacher above the national average. Clearly California cannot afford across-the-board class size reduction that would give most or all children the benefits of more intimate and closely monitored instruction, but it might be possible to develop targeted reductions addressing the needs of children who will otherwise not keep up with their peers.
- Targeted School Integration. Academic ambitions are contagious and the accumulation and exchange of social

capital is proscribed, in good measure, by social proximity. The social composition of the student body—who sits next to whom—is one of the most important factors affecting student achievement.

- Targeted “de-categorical” funding. California's system of school finance does not support the exchange of increased local program and staffing flexibility for improved student outcomes. Instead, about 35 cents of each education dollar is restricted by one or more of a multitude of categorical programs. Dismantling categorical control of budgets carries some risks, of course; you cannot have serious innovation without encountering some judgment errors and occasions when opportunism and unethical professional conduct abuse flexibility and deflect vital resources. At present, however, it looks like the efforts to prevent errors and malfeasance are also preventing creativity and innovation. Processes need to be transparent and leaders accountable, but within these boundaries it seems likely that much more local flexibility is needed.

In sum, exploration of the organizational and policy options available for addressing continuing achievement gaps in California's public schools makes it abundantly clear that leadership, flexibility, creativity and multi-dimensional systems of action are urgently needed. The goal of producing educational equality has been almost completely overrun by relentless demands for the production of standardized adequacy in recent years. We may be marginally increasing average student performance, but the cost for doing so has been to institutionalize glaring gaps and leave them virtually untouched for two full generations of school children.

References

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