

Closing the Minority Student Achievement Gap in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia

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Abstract

The presentation provides examples of Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) and U.S. national data illustrating that FCPS' student achievement gaps are a local reflection of a nationwide concern. The research cited discusses the origins of this gap and outlines the economic, moral, and societal reasons for intervening. A resulting district objective is to eliminate gaps between the highest performing subgroups (white and Asian) and those lowest performing (black and Hispanic).

FCPS has developed a plan specifying three major strategies to close the gap: Best Practices for Teaching and Learning; Needs-Based Staffing; and Professional Learning Communities. A division-wide formative assessment system – eCART – aids in determining what content students know (and don't know) throughout the school year. In addition, FCPS implemented this year a Priority Schools Initiative to identify and provide focused support to schools requiring further assistance to close the achievement gap. Measures of success include formative (eCART) assessments of student performance, state reading and mathematics test data, and reductions in the overall achievement gap.

1. BACKGROUND:

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is the 12th largest school district in the U.S., enrolling about 175,000 students in 196 schools. Its current year operating budget is \$2.2 billion, with an annual capital budget of \$155 million. Fairfax County is located adjacent to Washington, DC – the nation's capital. Many of its 1.1 million residents work for either the federal government or firms that do business with it. It is one of the wealthiest counties in the U.S., with a median 2010 household income estimated at \$105,241.00.¹¹ Its residents are highly educated – 91.4% of those 25 years or older are high school graduates. Almost 60% have Bachelor's or higher degrees.¹²

¹¹ 2010 Estimates, Fairfax County Department of Systems Management for Human Services

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey

However, the county also has its challenges. The incomes of 4.9% of its residents are below the federal poverty guideline, and about 33% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.¹³

FCPS has a diverse student body. The racial breakdown for the 2009-2010 school year was 45.3% white, 18.9% Asian, 18.8% Hispanic, 10.4% black, and 6.6% others. Students on fee waiver for free or reduced-price meals comprised 23.3% of membership.¹⁴

FCPS also is a highly successful school district. More than 91% of its students graduate on time, and nearly 95% of those graduates advance into post-secondary education. The average SAT score for the Class of 2010 exceeds the national average by 155 points and the Virginia average by 143 points.¹⁵ The number of AP/IB exams taken by students during the 2010 school year exceeded 35,000.¹⁶

Despite its high achievement, FCPS is challenged by academic performance gaps among several of its racial/ethnic groups. White and Asian students generally outperform black and Hispanic students. The 2007-2008 through 2009-2010 pass rates on Virginia's Standards of Learning tests in reading and mathematics show a steady increase for all student groups, but they also reveal achievement gaps of 16 to 12 percentage points in reading and 19 to 12 percentage points in mathematics. SAT test scores for the Class of 2010 reflect gaps in the range of 200-300 points out of a possible total of 2,400 points. These gaps, however, generally are narrowing.

Although these gaps are a serious FCPS concern, they are the local reflection of a nationwide issue. Year 2009 U.S. national average scaled scores for Grade 4 reading revealed a gap of 25 points out of 500 comparing white with black and Hispanic students. The scores for 8th grade math showed a similar gap.¹⁷

Research indicates that the achievement gap is associated with limited language proficiency, low family income, and insufficient exposure to a variety of background experiences such as books, art, music, people, places, situations, etc.¹⁸ These factors result in students lacking the background

¹³ 2010 Estimates, Fairfax County Department of Systems Management for Human Services

¹⁴ Fairfax County Public Schools, Department of Information Technology

¹⁵ A Profile of SAT Program Test Takers and the District Profile Report by the College Board

¹⁶ Fairfax County Public Schools, Department of Information Technology

¹⁷ National Center for Educational Statistics

¹⁸ Murphy, J. (2010), *Understanding and Closing Achievement Gaps*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, pp. 83-203; Magnuson, K.A. & Duncan, G.J. (2006). The role of family socio-economic resources in the Black-White test score gap among young children. *Developmental Review*, 26 (4), 365-399; Brooks-Gunn, J., Klebanov, P.K., Smith, J., Duncan, C.J., & Lee, L. (2003). The Black-White test score gap in young children: Contributions of test and family characteristics. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7 (4), 239-252;

context for properly interpreting and integrating new knowledge. Without intervention, many such students will never catch up, and there will be a high cost to society if students are not all educated appropriately.

The remedy requires targeted, consistent action by schools. An objective of utmost importance to FCPS is to reduce the achievement gap to a point where there are no significant differences in the academic accomplishment of the highest and lowest performing subgroups. FCPS wants all groups of students to meet the School Board's high performance goals, but the current focus is on assisting the lowest achieving subgroups (black and Hispanic students.) With large numbers of FCPS students on fee waiver or with limited English proficiency, FCPS has implemented several focused initiatives to help these students overcome their barriers.

2. FCPS STRATEGIES:

In order to tackle the achievement gap issue, FCPS has developed a plan specifying three major strategies to close the gap: Best Practices for Teaching and Learning; Needs-Based Staffing; and Professional Learning Communities. Best Practices include immediate intervention during the school year when students are not learning, access to advanced academics, and parent engagement. Supplemental Needs-Based Staffing is provided to schools with high incidences of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Strong Professional Learning Communities in schools is a philosophy that promotes both collective responsibility for every student and collaboration among teachers to best remedy student learning deficits.

An important initiative supporting Best Practices has been the development and implementation of eCART (Electronic Curriculum Assessment Resource Tool). A major component of eCart is support for the "formative" (or "real-time") assessment of current student academic accomplishment. It aids in identifying throughout the school year what content students know (and don't know), providing a roadmap for individualized instruction as needed. It also is a repository for FCPS-developed and owned curriculum materials which any teacher or administrator can use. Teachers can also post their own best practices to share with other teachers. Finally eCART produces a variety of reports, both standard and custom, enabling teachers and administrators to track the performance of each student and student group. FCPS seeks to eliminate achievement gaps by helping each individual child reach his/her full potential.

A second strategy FCPS has implemented is allocating supplemental Needs-Based Staffing. Needs-based staffing is provided to schools with high incidences of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals (FRM) and those who are ESOL students (English for Speakers of Other Languages). FCPS is investing more than \$32 million in Needs-Based Staffing for school year 2010-2011. To exemplify: one elementary school of 571 students, with 2.5% of students on

DuBois, D.L. (2001). Family disadvantage, the self, and academic achievement. In B.J. Biddle (Ed), *Social class, poverty, and education: Policy and Practice*(pp. 133-174). New York, Rutledge.

FRM and 1.8% in ESOL classes, received 22.5 classroom teachers; whereas, another elementary school of 570 students, but with 70% of its students on FRM and 38% in ESOL instruction, received 35.5 classroom teachers. Schools that are allocated additional staffing generally reduce class size or provide special resource teachers (e.g., reading specialists) to address a specific area of need or a special project.

A note to add about Needs-Based Staffing is that the allocation formula FCPS uses is not linear. The weight assigned to a student on FRM or in ESOL classes is not constant. FCPS firmly believes that the degree of challenge facing a school with large percentages of students on FRM or in ESOL classes grows exponentially rather than in a linear progression. Formula weighting reflects this belief.

The third FCPS strategy is the district-wide implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs embrace a philosophy promoting both collective responsibility for every student and collaboration among teachers to best remedy student learning deficits. They seek to: (1) achieve shared understanding of individual student needs using eCART assessment data and other information; (2) have all teachers use consistent instructional approaches best suited to individual student needs, applying recognized best practices and aligned curriculum; and (3) jointly monitor individual student and subgroup progress, making shared decisions to adjust instruction as needed. PLCs cultivate collaborative cultures through the development of high-performing teams. The approach results in individuals, teams, and schools that seek relevant data to promote continuous improvement.

FCPS' PLC implementation is not limited to just schools. Among central departments it promotes active intra- and inter-departmental collaboration to mobilize, direct, and coordinate delivery of the resources most needed by schools to address achievement gaps. Among resources included are talent, required supplemental materials, and facilities adjustments. "The PLC process plays a vital role in improving schools across a district. People who work collaboratively in PLCs go beyond mere support groups. They require group members to reflect honestly and openly about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better."¹⁹

Finally, FCPS has implemented a *Priority* Schools initiative to identify and support schools requiring further assistance to close the achievement gap. This is a new three-year pilot involving 30 low-performing schools selected on the basis of improvement in SOL results (or a lack thereof), meeting "Adequate Yearly Progress" requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act, and results of a newly created School Support Composite Index (SSCI). The SSCI consists of two components: the school's student achievement "Gap", and "Student Need". The Gap component is the percentage point difference between the white and Asian SOL pass rates on reading and mathematics SOL tests, versus those of black and Hispanic students. The Student Need component considers the number of reading and mathematics SOL tests not passed by students in a school.

¹⁹ Annenberg Institute for School Reform

The School Board has allocated \$4.3 million this school year for this initiative. These funds will be used to: provide leadership training for administrators and team leaders; marshal and focus resources from the district's departments; provide extended teacher contracts; deploy added instructional coaches; and provide before- and after-school programming. Additional support also includes funding supplemental "jump start" instruction during summer vacations, priority staffing when Priority Schools can recruit experienced and highly qualified teachers, and first preference for early teacher hiring and professional development. Assistance in developing parent and community partnership will be also provided, as will partnerships with institutions of higher education and appropriate agencies of county government.

3. MEASURES OF SUCCESS:

The success of FCPS' strategies to close the minority student achievement gap will be measured by: monitoring individual student progress according to formative assessments and other test results delivered through eCART; annual review of each school's achievement gap data provided in conjunction with the SSCI; and annual reporting of overall student performance relative to the School Board's current Student Achievement Goals.

4. SUMMARY:

FCPS strategies to close the minority student achievement gap are based on three emphases: focus, equity, and teamwork. Focus on individual student needs is being achieved through continual assessment and intervention. Equity is accomplished by providing additional resources to those schools and students having the greatest socio-economic and academic challenges. Teamwork is being established and maintained through PLCs, ensuring collaboration in sharing information and best practices toward the realization of common goals.