Closing the Achievement Gap at East Kentwood High School

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East Kentwood High School is a large, extremely diverse, suburban high school southeast of Grand Rapids. It is home to nearly 2,000 students in grades 10 through 12. Its student population is so diverse that its test results are broken into eleven subgroups, including white, African American, Asian, Hispanic, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged. The entire Kentwood community celebrates this type of diversity as it helps teach students how to empathize with many different kinds of people. However, diversity of this kind brings with it certain challenges, especially in regards to standardized testing requirements.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) stipulated that adequate yearly progress (AYP), as defined by each state, must be made by all subgroups of students. The act also charged each state with developing a system of interventions for public schools that do not achieve AYP. In Michigan, such interventions could include removal of administration or other types of restructuring or corrective action (Michigan Department of Education, 2012). Therefore, the narrowing of achievement gaps is an essential element of any public school improvement plan due to the possible ramifications of failing to show adequate yearly progress. Moreover, educational attainment is a critical indicator of social mobility and equality of opportunity (Breen, 2010). Thus, the reduction of achievement gaps provides greater opportunities for additional students.

**Summary of the Controversial Policy**

Due to the large number of official subgroups that exist at East Kentwood High School, many achievement gaps exist. This paper will focus on the gap between African American and white students, not only because it offers a stark contrast, but also because it serves as an example of all other achievement gaps.

In 2011-2012, the MME (Michigan Merit Exam) showed a gap in proficiency between African American and white 11th graders at East Kentwood High School of 31 percentage points in mathematics and 37 percentage points in reading (MDE, 2012). In addition, there exists a gap in proficiency of 27 percentage points in science, 32 percentage points in social studies, and 33 percentage points in writing.

Everyone at East Kentwood High School understands that these gaps exist and agrees that the collective goal should be to work toward closing them. The controversy here is two-fold. First, there is a lack of research, cohesion, and coherence with policies regarding closing achievement gaps. Before this year, the school improvement process was not taken seriously and few teachers even knew what was in the school improvement plan. There is an extreme lack of communication between the East Kentwood Freshmen Campus, the middle schools, and East Kentwood High School. Therefore, strategies used in those buildings may or may not be continued at the high school level. Additionally, little attention is being paid to research about what works in closing achievement gaps.

Second, any focus that does exist over-emphasizes teaching strategies. East Kentwood High School has officially adopted the gradual release model of instruction. Gradual release is one of many teaching strategies that is being used around the country with success. Other teaching methods include differentiation, project-based learning, and direct instruction. All of these strategies have data backing up their potential for success. Therefore, if all of them can work, none of them represent a magic elixir for educational achievement. There must be some other underlying factor impacting achievement along with (or more important than) the teaching strategy being used.

**Analysis of Issue from Multiple Views**

Everyone agrees that the goal should be offering a quality education for all students. Using Fowler (2013), one could assume that East Kentwood agrees on the principals of quality and equality. However, the divide comes when discussing the values of fraternity versus order. Fowler (2013) defines fraternity as having a sense of responsibility toward others and order as feeling safe and secure. These values need not be in conflict. However, some at East Kentwood believe cultivating fraternity causes erosion in order. The following highlights some of the potential benefits of a school-wide focus on fraternity.

**Collective Identity**

The idea of a “collective identity” as a variable that impacts student achievement has been given much attention. Ogbu (2004) argues that the collective identity of blacks is that of an oppressed minority, which contributes to black students feeling oppositional toward school as a “white” practice, and ultimately negatively impacts their achievement. Other research has indicated that black students view high achievement in school as a “white” goal (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Further evidence suggesting that black collective identity is oppositional toward high achievement is revealed through research conducted by Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, and Hart-Johnson (2003). They concluded that black students perform best in school when they display in-group and larger society self-schemas as opposed to in-group only self-schemas. Therefore, black students perform better when they can remove themselves from their in-group collective identity and assimilate into a larger society collective identity. Research has also shown that black students perform better at non-white schools or when they have many minority teachers (Goldsmith, 2004, Davis & Jordan, 1994). This would indicate that the collective oppositional identity toward achievement subsides when successful performance in school is no longer seen as a “white” goal. Additional research has shown other ways of improving the collective identity of black students and removing the thought of success as for “whites” only. A study of extracurricular activities concluded that, even when adjusting for background characteristics, participation in inter-scholastic athletics correlates in a significant positive way with academic achievement (Broh, 2002). This could indicate another way to improve the outlook of the collective identity of black students toward achievement. Similarly, school-wide differentiation and enrichment programs have helped reduce achievement gaps through establishing positive outlooks toward school and achievement (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008).

**Peer Influence**

Perhaps a more specific iteration of collective identity would be that of peer influence. Research has shown repeatedly that peer influence can have a significant positive impact on student achievement and help close the black-white achievement gap. Research by Horvat and Lewis (2003) followed academically successful black students in school. One of the common threads that came through for each successful black student is that they had a peer group that valued their success. Broh’s (2002) work studying the value of inter-scholastic athletics would also indicate the positive impact of a peer group that values academic success. The peer influence works the other way for black students as well. Research shows that black students display a significantly larger reduction in academic achievement when members of their peer group drop out of school than do white students (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Steingberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992) concluded that the absence of a positive peer group for black students undermined any positive impact black cultural parenting styles may have had. These studies highlight the impact of peers on black student achievement.

**Concrete Attitudes**

Research has also shown that concrete attitudes of black students, whether influenced by peer groups or not, has a measureable positive impact on achievement scores. Mickelson (1990) concluded that while many black students generally have positive abstract attitudes toward school (i.e. education is important), their concrete attitudes are much more negative and correlate more significantly with achievement than the abstract attitudes do. Concrete attitudes in this case refer to attitudes based on experiential evidence (i.e. black students drop out of school more than whites, have lower achievement scores, etc.). Herman’s (2009) research reached much the same conclusion, that black students’ concrete attitudes correlate much more significantly with achievement scores than do abstract attitudes. Beecher and Sweeny (2008) concluded that positive attitudes toward school from students improved student achievement and helped close achievement gaps. Literature on ethnic group attitudes toward education reveal that black students are less likely to believe that academic success comes from working hard than other ethnic groups (Steinberg et al., 1992). Taking together, the literature indicates that attitudes from black students significantly impact their achievement scores.

**Recommendations for Decision Makers**

The following analysis gives a couple of examples for strategies that would build fraternity among students and teachers at East Kentwood High School and build on research that has significantly reduced achievement gaps.

**Challenge Day**

The Challenge Day program is one that is designed to improve relationships among students. One of its lasting impacts is that it helps students create positive peer groups. Over 89% of students say that they are more supportive of others after going through the Challenge Day program (*Challenge Day*, 2002). In addition, over 86% of students say that they are more accepting of other students after going through Challenge Day (*Challenge Day*, 2002). Furthermore, nearly 77% of schools say that school climate is more positive after implementing the Challenge Day program (*Challenge Day*, 2002). Therefore it is believed that Challenge Day will create positive peer groups for students at East Kentwood High School and foster positive concrete attitudes among students.

Implementing Challenge Day would be an example of distributive policy (Fowler, 2013). Funds would need to be procured in order to pay for the valuable program. In the past, the Kentwood Education Foundation has helped pay for such endeavors.

**Empowerment Programs**

Baruti Kafele (2009) has extensive experience working with black students and raising their achievement scores. He recommends implementing empowerment programs. These programs take place during school hours. They allow students to talk about their obstacles, their goals, and their paths. They involve bringing in successful black (or any other race or ethnicity) adults to share their own personal stories. These programs ultimately serve as an important way of improving the collective identity of black students, establishing positive peer groups for students, and cultivating positive concrete attitudes.

Initially, empowerment programs could be hortatory in nature. East Kentwood could provide extensive information on Kafele’s empowerment programs or even offer the opportunity to the staff to do a book study on his work. Then, teachers could opt into the empowerment programs if they wanted to. Ideally, success would be shown and more teachers would opt in. Otherwise, the empowerment programs could become regulatory in nature once success was shown.

**Communication/Advocacy Plan**

Implementing programs like Challenge Day and Baruti Kafele’s empowerment programs would take time. To implement them correctly, great care must be taken to ensure buy-in from all constituents (Fowler, 2013). It would be ideal to include staff, parents, school board members, and students in the information-gathering part of the process. That way, all constituents would understand the importance of focusing on fraternity in closing achievement gaps.

Then, allow staff members to opt into the programs. By not mandating all staff participate in the programs, East Kentwood can avoid staff negativity while also essentially setting up action research. Careful analysis would then be done comparing the test scores of students that participated in the programs to students that did not against their baseline data (controlling for teachers and subgroups). Surveys would be given asking students about their collective identity, peer groups, and attitudes.

Finally, establishing teams of staff, students, and parents would be essential.

Some teams could be in charge of problem solving, while others could handle program

promotion, fund raising, and data analysis.

**Conclusion**

Closing achievement gaps is critical to the future success of East Kentwood High

School. It is important that productive, research-based policies are implemented with

fidelity. Leaders at East Kentwood High School should take this problem seriously, and

begin the process slowly to ensure buy-in. Attacking a problem half-heartedly ensures

that the problem will only get worse .

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