

Improving the Achievement of Minority Students

Spurred by the gap in standardized test scores between black and white students, one Maryland school system has developed ways to foster the achievement of minority students.

Dodge Park Elementary School in Prince George's County, Maryland, perches atop a hill overlooking one of the area's most notorious drug havens. The student body is 96 percent black, largely from single-parent families; all but 10 percent come from low-income homes.

Given the enormous pressures facing the students at such a school, most educational experts would expect them to score far below the norm on standardized tests. Yet, in the 1987-88 school year, the 3rd graders at Dodge Park scored at the 99th percentile in math on the California Achievement Test (CAT). The 3rd graders' overall score (including reading, language, spelling, and math) was at the 94th percentile, up from the 44th percentile just four years earlier. Dodge Park's students surpassed the average of their white counterparts in the county by 11 points and outperformed other black youngsters by 28 points.

Nor is Dodge Park an isolated example of success. Students throughout Prince George's County have made statistically significant gains on the CATs and have shown steady improvement on other pertinent achievement measures. At all grade levels, overall CAT scores increased nine points in just three years, and the gap between black and white students' test scores decreased substantially during the same period. For example, 3rd grade black students trailed white students by 25 points in 1984, but by only 17 points in 1987. Even more recently, the number of black 9th graders in Prince George's County who passed the Maryland Functional Writing Test

(an exam required for graduation) has risen dramatically. These results shatter the myth that minority youngsters are not as bright as other children.

Raising Expectations

How did Prince George's County achieve all this? Higher expectations, added resources, and a stronger core curriculum have helped to produce the overall improvement.

First, in 1984, we went public with our standardized test scores, breaking down the results by race: black students trailed white students by 25 points. Alarmed by this news, the community united to confront the problem. The "gap" became a catalyst for change.

A task force of community leaders and educational experts was convened by the superintendent to study the problem. The task force examined students' test scores, grades, attendance, and participation in extracurricular activities. They found that the root cause of the gap was negative attitudes about the potential of black students.

Consequently, the task force drafted an action plan to create higher expectations for all minority students, from kindergarten through 12th grade. In implementing the action plan, we made sure that every curriculum document, staff development program, and instructional proposal in our school system emphasized the academic achievement of black students. We altered existing efforts in reading, mathematics, and writing to foster the participation and performance of minority students. We initiated a program to increase black and Hispanic

students' participation and achievement in mathematics and science. A special inservice program for elementary teachers targeted minority student participation in science. Other specialized staff training was conducted through the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement program (Kerman 1979), as well as through the Improving Minority Student Achievement program from American University's Equity Center.

In 1985, the school system also launched an Effective Schools Process in all 171 schools, with the rallying cry, "All students can learn," regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. At each school, the principal directs the process by heading the School Improvement Team, which includes representatives of all components of the staff. The team conducts a needs assessment, then establishes school improvement goals that address one or more of the effective school correlates, such as "a clear and focused mission" or "strong instructional leadership."

Supporting Programs

Two other programs in Prince George's County have supported our progress toward enabling all students to succeed: the Milliken II Program and Project SUCCESS.

The Milliken II Program was initiated in 1985 as part of a desegregation program. It focused on 15 schools that could not be desegregated without causing undue hardships (for example, long bus rides) for the students themselves. The program is based on the work of James Comer, Director of

the School Development Program at the Yale Child Study Center. Milliken II combines classroom, school, and home elements in a coordinated attempt at improvement. The program fosters high expectations for all children; it also builds in parental involvement, team planning, a positive social and academic environment, and the adaptation of the school system's curriculum to specific needs of students. In addition to the Comer organizational and management process, the program includes reduced staff-to-student ratios, extra instructional materials, and computer labs, provided through our local school budget.

So far the results have been dramatic. From 1985 to 1987, Milliken II schools' gains on the California Achievement Test have outdistanced district gains by almost two to one.

Project SUCCESS operates in high schools, focusing on at-risk students in grades 9 and 10. The program is designed to strengthen the self-esteem and the academic performance of students with chronic poor attendance, a history of discipline referrals, and poor grades. Identified students are placed in a special 9th grade program covering the four basic academic areas: English, mathematics, social studies, and science. In small classes, these students work with highly trained teachers to improve their academic achievement, attendance, and attitudes about the value of education. Students in the SUCCESS program rejoin the regular student body for electives, lunch, physical education, and all special school activities. Staff are careful to avoid stigmatizing SUCCESS students; they do not identify them as part of a special program.

Early results from the past two years document the following gains: on average, students improved their grade point average from 1.46 to 1.85 on a 4.0 scale, and 12 percent of the students achieved honor roll status. Their attendance rate climbed from 78 percent to 89 percent, and their suspension rate dropped from 54 percent to 19 percent. Parents and teachers of SUCCESS students have noted marked improvement in self-esteem and academic achievement.

Strong Core Curriculum

Along with a strong accountability system that holds individual schools responsible for student achievement, we have tried to strengthen curriculums and emphasize the fundamentals. The Traditional/Classical Academy magnet program (K-8), for example, offers a highly structured program in an environment emphasizing disciplined behavior, dress codes, and punctuality. Rigorous teaching of spelling, listening skills, and study skills complements offerings in classical literature, Latin, music, and art. Black students who attend this program have realized substantial gains on the California Achievement Test. Test scores of these students increased 30 percent in one year.

Providing Equal Opportunities

To realize the goal of equal opportunity in society, we must provide our students with equal intellectual opportunities in school. After all, education is the way to success in adult life and

one of the surest paths out of poverty.

The gains we have seen in minority achievement in Prince George's County are proof that youngsters will excel when provided with the proper environment and support. High expectations, motivated teachers, and resources allowing for more individualized attention are necessary to achieve those gains. Our challenge as educators is to continue to strengthen those elements within our school system that foster the academic achievement of students who have so often been disenfranchised by traditional programs. □

Reference

Kerman, Sam. "Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement." *Pbi Delta Kappan* 60 (June 1979): 716-718.

John A. Murphy is Superintendent of Schools, Prince George's County Public Schools, 14201 School La., Upper Marlboro, MD 20772.

Required Reading

- In **Report Card on School Reform** more than 13,500 teachers grade the impact of school reform in their classrooms. Includes *state-by-state data* on such key issues as the working conditions of teachers and school climate and resources. Features an analysis by Carnegie Foundation President Ernest L. Boyer of national data and reform activities over the past five years.

Price: \$5.00

- **An Imperiled Generation** proposes a comprehensive action plan for rescuing our nation's inner city schools. Features specific recommendations for school-based reforms and a National Urban Schools Program focusing on child nutrition, early education and improved facilities.

Price: \$7.50

Both new Carnegie reports available from:

Princeton University Press, 3175 Princeton Pike, Lawrenceville, N.J. 08648; (609) 896-1344. (add \$2.00 on orders billed)



For a complete list of Carnegie publications and videotapes, write: Publications, The Carnegie Foundation, 5 Ivy Lane, Princeton, NJ 08540

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.