

# Closing Achievement Gaps in Diverse and Low-Poverty Schools:

*An Action Guide for District Leaders*

By Public Impact



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# Executive Summary

**Diverse schools still have large, persistent racial and economic achievement gaps.** Lower-income, African-American, and Latino students lag behind their higher-income and white peers on nearly every measure of educational success. Students who attend low- and moderate-poverty or more diverse schools do better than those in high-poverty, racially homogeneous schools. But even in these diverse settings, achievement gaps are large and persistent, deeply rooted in the systemic racism and perpetual economic disadvantages that are so embedded in our nation’s institutions, including schools.

**It doesn’t have to be that way.** Researchers have deep knowledge about the causes of achievement gaps and approaches that help close them. Oak Foundation commissioned Public Impact to review more than 150 such studies conducted over the past 10 years. We examined approaches that had evidence of boosting outcomes for disadvantaged students without reducing availability of advanced instruction, for two reasons. First, when all students have help to leap ahead, all will need what schools today consider “advanced” instruction. Second, schools that serve all students well, regardless of background, build strong family and community support for and commitment to public education.

The causes of achievement gaps are multidimensional, and thus the solutions are, too: tackling the instructional, emotional, and practical needs of students, their families, and educators. **Districts serious about closing achievement gaps in diverse schools need an approach that includes both *what* strategies to pursue and *how* to put those strategies into action.** While research points to numerous strategies to help close achievement gaps in diverse schools (the “what”), districts must also attend to the “how”:

- **Committing publicly** to closing gaps and achieving equity, with clear, measurable goals
- **Engaging communities** actively in the effort, including families and students
- **Acting on commitments** by assigning responsibility and resources, setting clear timelines, and monitoring and adjusting to stay on track
- **Embracing accountability** for progress, both through internal systems and via public scrutiny

**We recommend that district leaders use a package of research-based strategies centered on three complementary goals:**

- **Outstanding learning for all**
  - *Guaranteeing excellent teachers and principals*, including redesigning schools to enable the district’s excellent teachers and principals to reach all students, not just a fraction.
  - *Ensuring access to high-standards materials* and learning opportunities.
  - *Using teaching methods and school practices that work*, including screening for and addressing learning differences, personalizing instruction, and responding to trauma.
- **Secure and healthy learners**
  - *Meeting basic needs*, including meals and reducing school transitions from housing changes.
  - *Fostering wellness and joy* via school-based health clinics, social-emotional learning, and other building blocks of academic success, and addressing mental health challenges.
  - *Supporting families* by understanding and responding to individual and collective needs.
- **Culture of equity**
  - *Addressing key equity challenges in schools*, including teachers matching their racial and other identities, access to advanced opportunities, culturally relevant assignments, and research-based, non-discriminatory disciplinary policies.
  - *Fostering community accountability* via shared leadership that truly empowers.
  - *Equipping individuals to act* by developing leadership and addressing implicit bias via consistent, ongoing anti-bias training.

If district leaders and their communities pursue these approaches, they can help equip low-income students and students of color to close gaps and succeed in large numbers.

# Reflections

By Millie Brobston, Programme Officer, Oak Foundation

More than 85 percent of African-American males in eighth grade in North Carolina’s Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools district did not pass the end-of-grade reading test, according to a report released by the Campaign for Racial Equity in Our Schools (CORE) in October 2015. After an article ran in the local newspaper with this statistic, an Oak Foundation trustee came into my office asking, “Why isn’t anyone outraged about this?”

Actually, there *are* people outraged about the “achievement gap,” in which children of color have significantly worse outcomes than their white peers in schools across the country. A few months later, *The New York Times* ran a story titled, “[Money, Race and Success: How Your School District Compares.](#)” The authors wrote: “Children in the school districts with the highest concentrations of poverty score an average of more than four grade levels below children in the richest districts. Even more sobering, the analysis shows that the largest gaps between white children and their minority classmates emerge in some of the wealthiest communities, such as Berkeley, Calif.; Chapel Hill, N.C.; and Evanston, Ill.”

Since Oak’s U.S. office is based in Chapel Hill, this got our attention, and we wanted to learn more. Oak contracted with Public Impact, a nationally respected education research firm, to conduct a scan of the research in this field, culminating in the report [Closing Achievement Gaps in Diverse and Low-Poverty Schools: An Action Guide for District Leaders](#). We wanted to know what efforts have been effective in addressing achievement gaps in other low-poverty, diverse districts such as Chapel Hill.

Oak also wanted to ensure that we included a broad set of perspectives to shape the recommendations. We assembled an advisory committee made up of local and national academics, community representatives, foundation staff, school district staff, and other practitioners. (See Appendix A, page 23 of the report, for a listing of their names.) This group met twice in 2017 to provide Public Impact and Oak staff with helpful insights and analysis about what is driving the achievement gap and how to address it. We are grateful for their contributions, and some of their comments are integrated throughout the report.

The sobering news from this research is that Public Impact could not find a low-poverty, diverse district in the country that has been successful in closing or significantly narrowing the gaps between white students and students of color. The researchers did find some bright spots that are promising approaches, which we will share in this document.

Digging through the research has been a learning experience for our foundation and for me. It has been a bit like peeling back layers of an onion—each time I read a new article or story, it brings a sting to my eyes. It has also jump-started my own learning journey, including attending two racial equity trainings. One framework for undertaking this work, developed by OpenSource Leadership Strategies, was particularly helpful to my thinking. Simply put, to analyze structural racism, we should look to history, rules, stories, resources, and people.

## 1) History

How is what we see today a reflection or continuation of historical events and patterns? To understand where we are today in education, we must explore the history of structural racism in this field.

Years ago, when I was working at the Public Welfare Foundation, I visited a school system in Mississippi. When the town was forced to integrate the schools, the school system literally stripped the public school of all resources, including textbooks, science materials, and even the bleachers in the stadium. The system’s leaders set up a private school to re-create segregation in the schools. Decades later, the local churches were providing scholarships to poor white kids to attend these private schools to help enforce the segregation.

In North Carolina, government leaders took a different path to resist integration. They admitted a few black students to white schools and continued to sanction segregation throughout most of the public education system, according to John E. Batchelor in his book *Race and Education in North Carolina*. North Carolina policymakers quietly resisted racial integration of schools until the 1970s, 20 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Bringing this to the present, we must ask ourselves how this legacy is continuing to contribute to racial inequity today.

## **2) Rules**

What policies and practices may be contributing to the racial inequity?

I once had the opportunity to visit Positive Action Committee in Sylvania, Ga., a group led by African-American parents who questioned why their children were being placed in lower-achievement classes, regardless of test scores. This group's efforts led to a federal order to end tracking in the Screven County School District. The leader of the group, Karen Watson, stated in an article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, "Society still carries the baggage of classism and racism and that baggage will flow into the school system."

I cite these examples from my personal experience to illustrate how racism is embedded within the structures of education and upheld by the rules and decisions of those in power. As people who care about this issue, we can begin by examining how inequity has become woven into our educational system. Then we'll understand where to begin unraveling this tangled dysfunction that keeps all of our children from being successful.

## **3) Stories**

What are the coded images, myths, and assumptions that are used to rationalize this inequity?

Many well-meaning efforts aimed at addressing the achievement gap are focused on deficits in children. There are efforts to "empower" students, improve self-esteem, encourage greater motivation, and so on. Some of these efforts are premised on the view that students are not motivated or aren't trying hard enough. Angel L. Harris, in her book *Kids Don't Want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap*, debunks the idea that black students underperform in secondary schools because of a group culture that devalues learning. How can we change the narrative that blames the victim? I suggest that the focus shift from blaming the students to addressing the school systems themselves and the decisions around tracking, hiring practices, investment in infrastructure, discipline, and many other choices that administrators make every day.

## **4) Resources**

How are resources distributed along lines of race? Who is controlling the resources? Whose needs are being fulfilled by these resources?

Recently I attended a training with the Racial Equity Institute of Greensboro, N.C. The trainers shared an analogy of finding a dead fish in a pond. We want to focus on the fish and find out what is wrong. If there are other sick fish, we want to help heal those fish. Too often, we do not ask what is wrong with the water.

As one example of this approach, the CORE report discusses the issue of gifted programs in schools. Students of color across the country are underrepresented in gifted classes. These programs can result in segregation by race within the school. Some schools start to address the gap by increasing access to gifted programs. While this may be an important first step, we can envision a future in which enrichment activities are available to all students. For me, that would be improving the health of the water.

## **5) People**

Finally, any analysis should start and end with the people. How are the people most affected by these issues being engaged in making decisions?

Members of our advisory committee pointed out that we need to focus on the communities of color being adversely affected and how we are engaging the community, parents, and students in holding the school systems accountable for decisions that affect them.

Dorian Burton, assistant executive director at The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, recently co-authored an article with Brian C.B. Barnes, “Shifting Philanthropy from Charity to Justice.” They wrote: “Historical injustices—perpetuated by racial and cultural conflicts, and exacerbated by a lack of empathy—are at the heart of America’s growing economic, social, and political inequalities. Nowhere is this gap of authentic empathy and justice more pronounced than in the American philanthropic sector, where often well-intentioned people make decisions for communities they do not come from, may not understand, rarely interact with, and almost never step foot into.”

If we are to have any chance at being successful in addressing structural racism in our public schools, we must start with the people.

### ***Final thoughts***

During one of our advisory committee meetings, the facilitator, Althea Gonzalez, invited us to visualize the “gold standard” of where we were headed. She asked us to envision an imaginary school district that had been effective in developing positive educational outcomes for all of its students and had achieved stellar performance in measurements of student self-esteem, sense of belonging, and well-being. Widespread community engagement and partnership efforts had been sustained and leveraged, resulting in completely transforming the community, spreading a sense of pride and unity throughout.

I encourage all of us to envision such a world. Let’s work together to make it so.

# Introduction

U.S. education leaders have spent decades highlighting and attempting to close “achievement gaps”—differing academic outcomes among demographic groups. The gaps between African-American and Latino students compared to their white and Asian peers, as well as the gaps between low-income students and others, are among the most pernicious.

Lower-income students lag behind their higher-income peers on nearly every important measure of educational success. African-American and Latino students fall behind white students in a similar pattern. Lower-income African-American and Latino students are much less likely to be “proficient” or “on grade level” in the core subjects. They are much less likely to graduate from high school. And they are much less likely to meet the benchmarks of more advanced success, such as college readiness, attendance, and completion. Despite slight improvements over four decades of a substantial focus on policy and practice to boost math and reading achievement, our country has failed to close the gaps. The multi-generational shortfall has perpetuated numerous challenges—economic, social, emotional, and political—that prevent many students of color and low-income students from thriving.

Much attention has been given to the poor results that extremely high-poverty schools—those with more than 75 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—have delivered for students.<sup>1</sup>

Yet 55 percent of African-American students and 54 percent of Latino students attend low- and moderate-poverty schools. Average academic outcomes of students of color and low-income students are better in these more diverse schools,<sup>2</sup> but they still face large achievement gaps.<sup>3</sup> A recent Stanford study found some of the nation’s widest achievement gaps in low-poverty, diverse districts such as Chapel Hill- Carrboro City Schools in North Carolina and Berkeley Unified School District in California.<sup>4</sup>

It’s not that districts have ignored the problem: Multiple decades of effort in low-poverty and diverse schools, sometimes in concert nationally, have simply failed to achieve sufficient results, despite the extra funding these schools often have. For example, in schools with a moderate percentage of African-American students (26–50 percent), white 12<sup>th</sup>-graders outscored African-American 12<sup>th</sup>-graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ math exam by 17 percent in 2005. Ten years later, white students outscored African-American students by 18 percent.<sup>5</sup> Most communities have, over time, pursued a choppy approach to improvement—try one effort this year, and another next when that one fails. Over time, this combination of piecemeal effort and weak results has often built frustration, and even a belief that achievement gaps are inevitable.

**To close achievement gaps nationally, education leaders must seek dramatically different and more complete approaches in low- and moderate-poverty schools.**

In 2017, Oak Foundation commissioned Public Impact to develop this report as a resource for district leaders nationwide facing such achievement gaps, based on a review of more than 150 studies conducted over the past 10 years. The report reviews the causes of achievement gaps and highlights research-based approaches to closing them. Importantly, we examined approaches that had evidence of boosting outcomes for disadvantaged students without reducing availability of advanced instruction, for two reasons. First, when all students have help to leap ahead, all need what today is considered “advanced” instruction. Second, schools that serve all students well, regardless of background, build strong family and community support for and commitment to public education.

The research reveals that change is possible. Despite this discouraging history, the many efforts have provided researchers with a deep knowledge base about the causes of persistent achievement gaps and the approaches that achieve partial progress. The causes are multidimensional, and thus the solutions are, as well—tackling the instructional, emotional, and practical needs of students, their families, and the educators who serve them.

This report builds on those decades of research about what works to present a fresh view: If district leaders and their communities **commit** to close gaps, act on a **combination of research-based approaches** to address achievement gaps, **engage their communities** actively in the effort, and allow themselves to be held **accountable** for progress, district leaders can equip low-income students and students of color to close gaps and succeed in large numbers.



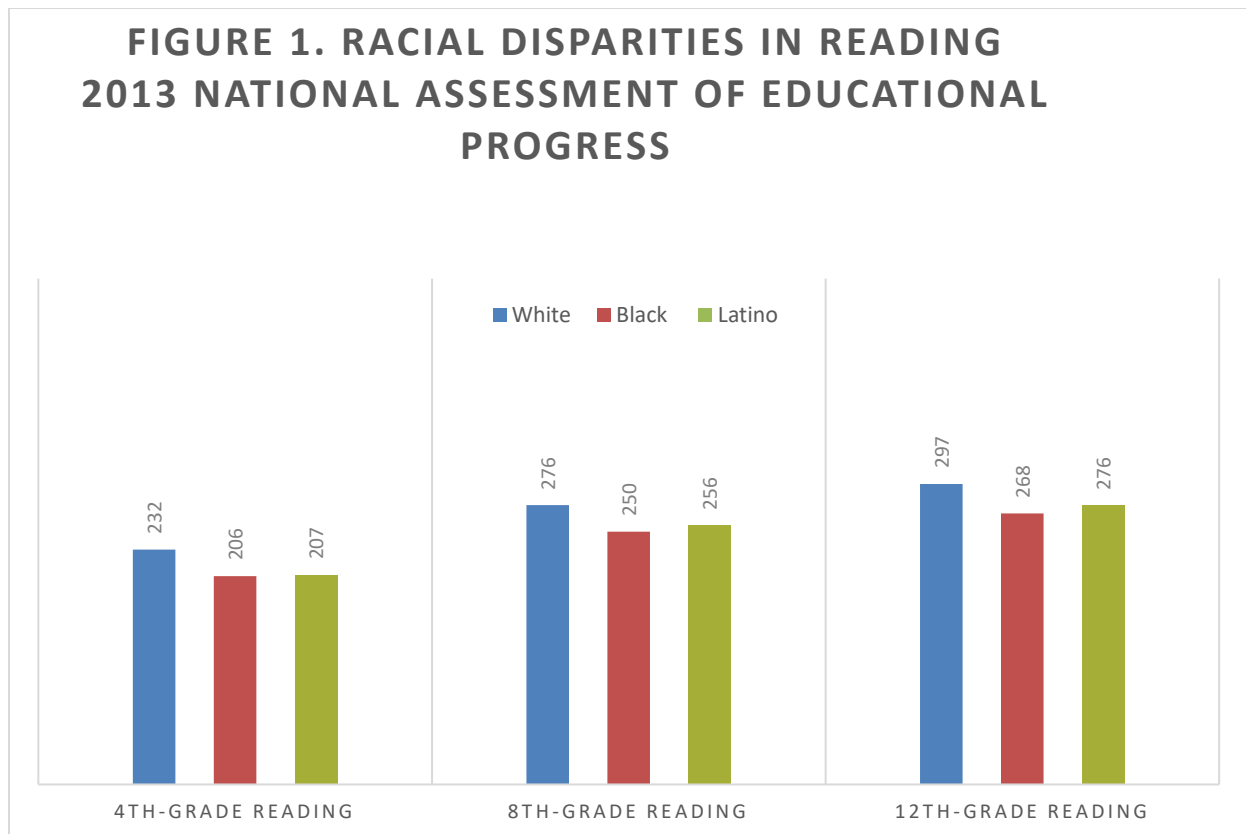
# The Current State of Achievement Gaps

## Racial Disparities

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), wide achievement gaps separate white students from their African-American and Latino peers (see Figure 1, page 6). By fourth grade, the white–African-American and white–Latino reading gaps are already apparent. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the average African-American and Latino student perform at about the same level as the average white student performed in *eighth* grade. Since 1992, the nation has made very little progress closing these gaps, which in some cases have actually grown.<sup>6</sup>

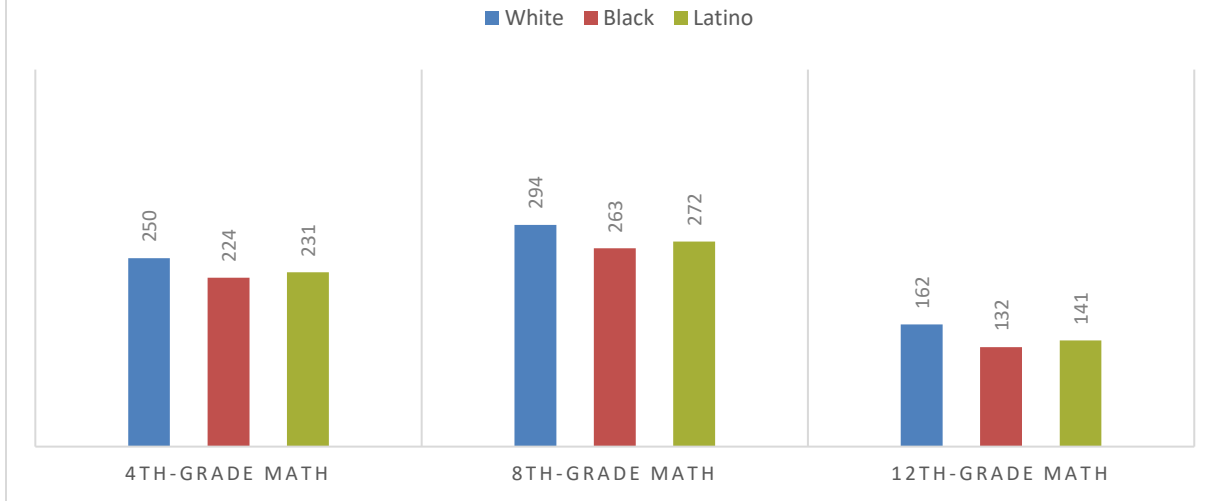
In math, the statistics are similar (see Figure 2, page 7). Gaps emerge in fourth grade and are even larger by the time students reach the end of their K–12 careers. Each of these subgroups saw some increases in scores from 1990 (for fourth and eighth grades) and 2005 (12<sup>th</sup> grade) to 2013, but large gaps remain.

Gaps are also wide when it comes to advanced outcomes, such as college readiness, college attendance, and college success. For example, Asian students participate in AP (Advanced Placement) classes at more than twice the national average,<sup>7</sup> while African-American and American Indian students participate at about half the rate of the national average.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, white and Asian students earn Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate credits at much higher percentages (40 percent and 72 percent, respectively) than their African-American and Latino peers (23 percent and 34 percent, respectively).<sup>9</sup>



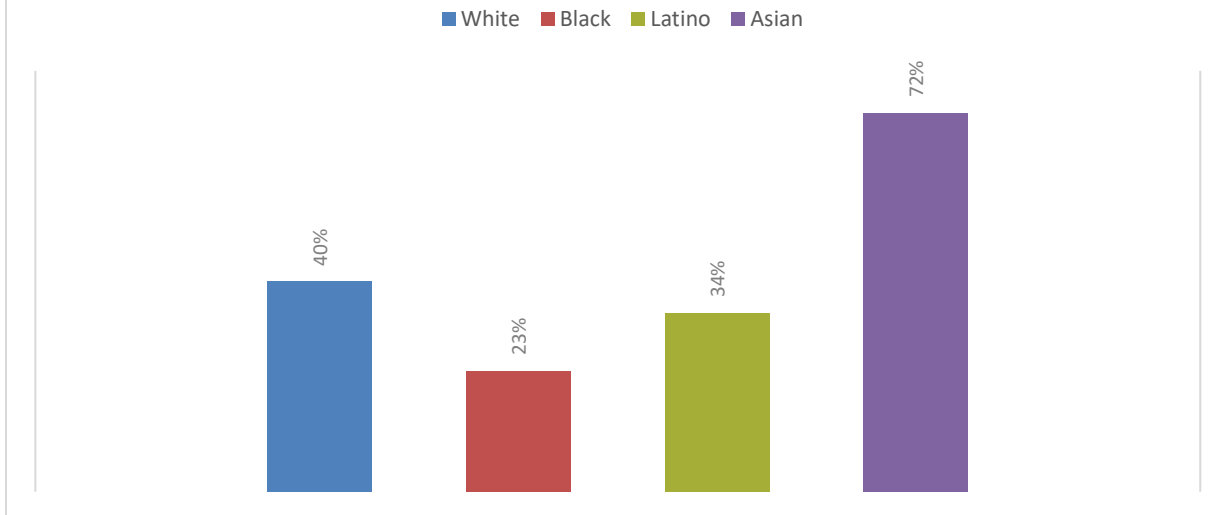
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, “NAEP Data Explorer,” <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/naeptools.aspx>.

**FIGURE 2. RACIAL DISPARITIES IN MATH 2013 NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS**



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, “NAEP Data Explorer,” <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/naeptools.aspx>.

**FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF 2009 9TH-GRADERS WHO EARNED CREDIT IN AP OR IB COURSES**



Source: AP and IB Coursetaking. (2016, August). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

African-American and Latino students are also far less likely to meet ACT benchmarks for “college readiness.”<sup>10</sup> In 2016, 49 percent of white high school graduates met three or more ACT college readiness benchmarks. Only 11 percent of African-American graduates and 23 percent of Latino graduates met that bar.<sup>11</sup> And these disparities continue into higher education, with only 34 percent of African-American and Latino young adults enrolled in college compared with their white peers at 42 percent.<sup>12</sup> White students also complete college at a higher rate. Of students starting college in 2007, 61 percent of whites completed a degree within six years, compared with only 41 percent of African-American students and 53 percent of Latino.<sup>13</sup>

## Income Disparities

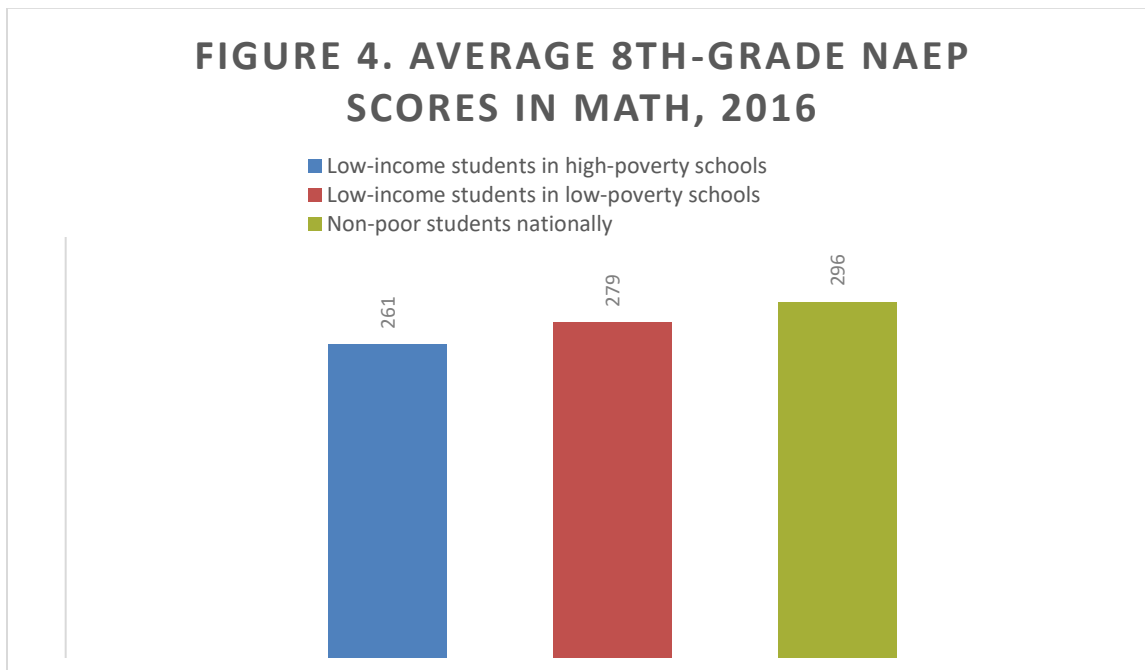
Today, the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers is approximately twice as large as the racial achievement gap between white and African-American children.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the income achievement gap for reading between children born in the mid-1990s to late 1990s is nearly 40 percent larger than the gap among children born in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

Low-income students who attend schools that offer AP classes are one-third as likely to enroll in those classes as their more-affluent peers.<sup>16</sup> Just 14 percent of students from families of bottom-quartile socioeconomic status nationwide attain a post-secondary degree within six years, compared with 60 percent of students from top-quartile families.<sup>17</sup>

## Gaps in Low-Poverty and Diverse Schools

If these gaps affected only students attending schools with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color, the nation would face a major hurdle to educational equity. The hurdle is even higher, though, because students in low- to mid-poverty schools also experience large gaps. Of the 24 million African-American and Latino students in the U.S., over half attend low- and moderate-poverty schools.<sup>18</sup>

Research shows that African-American, Latino, and low-income students tend to achieve at higher rates in racially and economically integrated schools, as compared to their peers who attend schools with high concentrations of students of color and low-income students.<sup>19</sup> But their performance still falls far below their white and more affluent peers. For example, on the 2015 NAEP mathematics exam, low-income eighth-graders in low-poverty schools (those with 11–25 percent low-income students) scored an average of 279, much higher than their peers in high-poverty (76–99 percent) schools, who averaged 261. But these low-income students in low-poverty schools still scored far-below the non-poor national average of 296 (see Figure 4).



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, “NAEP Data Explorer,” <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/naeptools.aspx>.

## Why Achievement Gaps Persist

It has been more than six decades since the Supreme Court declared as unconstitutional state laws establishing “separate but equal” schools for African-American and white students, and more than five decades since Congress first authorized federal spending to support low-income students’ education. So why do inequalities within education persist?

Making changes to address racial and economic achievement gaps is especially challenging due to the structural/systemic racism and perpetual economic disadvantages that are deeply embedded in our nation’s institutions, including our schools. For example, many school systems continue to operate discipline systems that suspend and expel students of color at higher rates than white students. Large-scale studies have shown that this cannot be explained by differential rates of serious infractions.<sup>20</sup> Year after year, these systems keep students of color out of classrooms, perpetuating inequities.

Another example shows the way the history of poverty can exacerbate and sustain gaps. College costs are unaffordable for many, and academic performance in college can be compromised for students who must also work full time to support themselves and their families; thus, college attendance and completion remain stubborn gaps between higher- and lower-income families. When individuals who do not attend or complete college become parents, they have (on average) lower incomes, less money, and often less time to invest in their own children’s development outside of school. These parents may have to work multiple jobs, possibly without health and other benefits. The emotional strains of financial insecurity and long work hours in low-status jobs add to family stress, negatively affecting the next generation’s school performance. A shortfall in early school performance may result in less-advanced work in later grades. Some teachers and community members may begin to see some students as less capable, when in fact economics and social-emotional context hold these students back, not their capability. An inaccurate view of “lower capability” may reduce political will to invest in such students, again reinforcing the status quo, and *more so for students whose race correlates with low income*.

This is one example of how the cycle of “structural” or “systemic” racism perpetuates economic disadvantages. It could be arrested at any point in the cycle, but without concrete, intentional action, the cycle continues for most people.

Over time, persistent poverty has resulted in many people of color, and low-income people of all races, being left out of wealth creation, home ownership, college education, and political power. The cycle of poverty is highly correlated with race in our country, allowing differences in attainment to be associated with race—the basis of a “racialized society.” Policies and practices that perpetuate these disparities, even when inadvertent, are embedded in all our institutions, including schools.

Though overt personal discrimination is widely seen as socially unacceptable, structural or systemic racism remains a major force.

In low-poverty and diverse schools, this may perpetuate achievement gaps in several ways:

- A sense of urgency is needed for change, but it can be hard to muster. When dominant groups are satisfied, those with power might be willing to voice a need for change, but are unlikely to take sufficient action to ensure that change is achieved.
- Resources are limited. School districts and schools face competing priorities, and the needs of dominant groups tend to get the most attention in schools. Efforts to shift resources to disadvantaged populations are often adopted as add-ons for small amounts of instructional time (such as an hour with a specialist twice weekly), rather than as fundamental changes in daily instruction that affect dozens of hours of instruction weekly.
- Even if districts manage to shift resources to disadvantaged populations, parents of advantaged students may respond by providing advanced instruction and other opportunities outside of school, maintaining achievement gaps. This out-of-school dynamic may inadvertently perpetuate bias by reinforcing the myth that students of color and low-income students cannot learn at the same level as their white, Asian, or more advantaged peers.

The result is that school systems' practices and policies, even if not overtly biased, can contribute to and exacerbate the continued existence of inequalities. Without mechanisms for evaluating and changing school-based practices and policies to overcome existing inequities, the momentum of the status quo is likely to continue.

On top of these system challenges, school systems face technical barriers to change. Even when interventions and treatments show positive effects on student outcomes, and researchers can identify what works to close gaps, school systems face challenges in taking these steps. Some of the reasons:

- *It matters enormously who implements interventions, but this is often ignored in efforts to scale up successful interventions.* Decades of research establishes that teachers are the most important school-based factor affecting student learning, followed by school principals.<sup>21</sup> When developers test new interventions, they often do so with committed, highly capable principals and teachers. When scaled up, the intervention must be carried out by the full corps of teachers and principals, who (as in any profession) differ in effectiveness, interest, and commitment. What works at a small scale with hand-picked educators loses power when scaled up.<sup>22</sup>
- *An intervention that worked in one context may face challenges in others.* Interventions implemented one way in a controlled environment can produce different effects when carried out even slightly differently or in a different context. Efforts to scale up interventions may not take account of all the factors that influence how well the practice is likely to work, leading to disappointing results.<sup>23</sup>
- *Schools, like organizations generally, have limited capacity for change.* With a constant flow of reforms coming from policymakers and district leaders, school personnel face limits in attention and energy. Especially when needed changes are demanding—as they would be if districts were truly aiming to close persistent achievement gaps—systems may have trouble mobilizing the level of effort needed to get the job done well. Significant, sustained guidance and coaching for educators implementing changes are rare.<sup>24</sup>

## Why Achievement Gaps Continue to Matter

Though these factors present challenges, they are not insurmountable if leaders anticipate and address them. Our recommendations that follow are designed to help school systems address the challenges they face, both systemic and technical.

Research indicates that **tackling these tough challenges will yield quality of life benefits far beyond academic success.** In addition to educational disparities, people of color, including students, also face income gaps, wealth gaps, disproportionate police brutality, and other manifestations of personal and structural racism.

Closing achievement gaps would not singlehandedly erase these inequalities. Yet education can and does make an enormous contribution to closing those other gaps. Research shows that students with lower educational attainment are more likely to be unemployed or on public assistance, spend time in prison, earn less, have poorer health, and be less engaged in civic life.<sup>25</sup> And achievement gaps translate into weaker economic growth, a lower tax base, more crime, and inflated social and health costs.<sup>26</sup>

We can liken the quest for a more equitable society to a wide canyon that must be crossed.<sup>27</sup> We stand across the canyon from a world where students not only achieve their potential academically, but also thrive in a world free of racism, bias, and oppression. We won't traverse the canyon in a single leap. But school districts hold the power to propel our society to a first major landing point, where achievement gaps are narrowed substantially and all students stand on strong educational footing.

# What the Research Tells Us About Causes of Achievement Gaps

Our analysis identified multiple factors that seem to impact achievement gaps the most, organized into three types of factors that require attention:

- School-based factors that contribute to a child’s academic growth and experience as a learner.
  - The psychological and emotional effects of racism and oppression.
  - Out-of-school factors that contribute to a child’s health, well-being, and academic readiness and success.
- **School-based factors that contribute to a child’s academic growth and experience as a learner.** Examples of contributing factors include:
- **Teacher Effectiveness**
    - Unequal access to excellent teachers: Research suggests that, among school-related factors, teachers matter the most. When it comes to student performance in reading and math, teachers are estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor, including wraparound services, facilities, and school leadership.<sup>28</sup> Studies also show that students of color in low-income schools are three to 10 times more likely to have ineffective and/or unqualified teachers compared with their peers in predominantly white schools.<sup>29</sup>
    - Teacher bias and low expectations: Children of color and low-income students face a vicious cycle—they start kindergarten behind and have less access to boosters outside of school. Teachers may see such gaps and just assume that is “the way it is.” Without understanding the effects of poverty and trauma, they lower their expectations for such students.<sup>30</sup>
    - Cultural mismatch: The teaching force in the U.S. is disproportionately white.<sup>31</sup> Due to a combination of cultural differences and racial bias (even when unintentional), white teachers tend to treat students of color differently, leading to negative effects.<sup>32</sup>
  - **School Policies**
    - Lack of access to advanced instruction in elementary schools: African-American students, Latino students, low-income students, English language learners, and girls are all significantly under-referred in the traditional parent/teacher referral system for gifted and talented programs, even when controlling for how students perform on assessments of readiness for advanced instruction.<sup>33</sup>
    - Rigid tracking and differential access to advanced courses and other academic opportunities in secondary schools: Students of color and low-income students are less likely to enroll in honors-level courses and AP and other advanced programs, even after controlling for their aptitude and prior achievement.<sup>34</sup>
    - Large, negative impacts of discipline bias: African-American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended than white and Asian students within the same school. For example, while African-American children make up just 16 percent of the U.S. student population, they represent 32 percent of all school suspensions and 42 percent of school expulsions. This is especially problematic since students who have been suspended score substantially lower on standardized tests than those who have not. School suspensions account for approximately one-fifth of African-American–white differences in school performance.<sup>35</sup>
    - Absence of subgroup-level metrics and accountability focused on closing gaps: Until the federal government began mandating it, very few districts collected academic data for racial subgroups and therefore were not focused on improving outcomes for students in struggling subgroups. Similarly, not all school districts collect and make easily available data across non-academic metrics, such as discipline rates and enrollment in advanced courses, that may inequitably affect certain subgroups.
  - **Learning Differences<sup>36</sup>**
    - Disproportionate diagnoses: Students of color and low-income students are disproportionately likely to face significant learning challenges in school, whether due to diagnosed learning disabilities or other learning differences that create challenges in the typical school. The U.S. Department of Education has identified

disproportionate minority representation in special education as a critical problem for decades, impacting African-American boys most. While African-American students represent only 16 percent of students in the U.S., they make up 21 percent of total enrollments in special education.<sup>37</sup>

- Access to supplemental services: Students in poverty have little means to pay for supplemental services to help them through the challenges of having a learning difference. For students of color in particular, teachers will often attribute behaviors associated with learning differences and trauma to misbehavior or lack of academic capacity.<sup>38</sup>
- Teacher training and support: Many teachers do not have training to recognize or address learning differences and the consequences of trauma.<sup>39</sup>

- **Student Experience**

- Peer and teacher discrimination: When students perceive they have experienced racial discrimination, it hurts their self-esteem,<sup>40</sup> results in higher levels of stress,<sup>41</sup> and can lead to lower interest in academics, as well as decreases in academic achievement.<sup>42</sup>
- In-school segregation: Even when schools are diverse in their overall composition, individual classes are often more homogeneous. Students of color who have experienced being the only minority or one of a very few minorities in a class or program have shared that the experience can be isolating, intimidating, and/or frustrating.<sup>43</sup>

➤ **Psychological Effects of Racism and Oppression.** Systemic racism and the perpetual disadvantages of poverty have more than academic, economic, and political impact: The damage is deeply personal and strongly negative. Decades of research show that people who perceive racial bias against them—whether personal or systemic/structural—are far more likely to suffer significant mental and physical health challenges. Many studies indicate a co-correlation with stress, harmful for any individual but even greater when racial bias is felt in concert with practical stresses of life without enough money to cover practical needs.<sup>44</sup>

➤ **Out-of-school factors that contribute to a child’s health, well-being, and academic readiness and success.** Some examples of contributing factors are listed here, all of which affect academic success, and are unevenly distributed by race and income:

- **Parents and Families**

- Parental engagement: Activities such as reading with one’s children, checking their homework, and setting high expectations for academic success have been shown to be positively related to academic achievement.<sup>45</sup>
- Exposure to vocabulary and language: Early language skills are associated with children’s kindergarten verbal ability. In fact, the quantity of a child’s exposure to print (books, magazines, written words and letters) explains 30 percent of the differences in high school students’ language skills.<sup>46</sup> Almost half of low-income toddlers know no more than 50 words.<sup>47</sup>

- **Health and Well-being**

- Physical health: Physical health and academic achievement are positively related. One study measured 14 health indicators, including obesity, daily consumption of fruit and vegetables, and sleep quality. On average, students with the most health assets were more than twice as likely to pass their state’s standardized tests.<sup>48</sup>
- Mental health, including exposure to trauma: Being exposed to violence and experiencing trauma can actually lead to a decrease in IQ, and trauma has also been shown to have a direct link to lower reading achievement.<sup>49</sup>
- Housing: On average, students who move from highly segregated cities to more integrated cities perform better on the SAT.<sup>50</sup> And when students live in overcrowded homes, it can decrease the chances that they will graduate from high school.<sup>51</sup>

- **Access to “Boosters”**

- Enrichment programs, such as tutoring: Low-income families spend much less on child enrichment activities than do high-income families.<sup>52</sup> The gaps in parental investment, such as the amount spent on books, computers, summer camps, and tutoring, are linked to achievement gaps, especially among young children.
- Identification of developmental delays early and seeking interventions: Early interventions for children with developmental delays and diagnosed disabilities can significantly improve later outcomes. For example, in one study, researchers found that children with autism who participated in a behavioral therapy intervention at the age of 18 months on average had an 18-point increase in their IQ scores (compared with only a four-point average increase for the control group).<sup>53</sup>

Addressing the achievement gaps in low-poverty and diverse schools entails institutions and individuals tackling the vicious cycle of racism to end perpetual economic disadvantage on all fronts. Learning more, at higher levels, in school is only one part of the solution. Community members and their elected leaders must address the practical gaps created by income inequality, and the emotional and physical gaps created by racism of all kinds.

To review a table of selected research that Public Impact reviewed on the causes of achievement gaps, please see Appendix B, page 24.



# Recommendations

## Overall District Approach

Given the deep roots of achievement gaps, districts will not find a quick fix or a simple checklist of policies and practices that will close them. Instead, addressing achievement gaps successfully requires committing deeply to equity, engaging with the community to understand its needs and perspectives, taking persistent and complete action steps to change, and being accountable to the community for equitable outcomes. Only within a context of commitment, engagement, action, and accountability can districts expect the research-based policies and practices we outline below to have a meaningful and lasting impact.

### *Commit to Equity*

Commitment often begins with a statement but becomes real only if constantly demonstrated through meaningful and goal-oriented actions. A district can make its commitment visible in its policies and practices, on its website, and in the words and actions of leadership and staff. This commitment means being willing to have open dialogues about tough issues, such as race, and considering equity in every policy the district enacts and in the actions all district staff take. Using an equity lens means asking such questions as, “How will this impact students of color—intentionally or unintentionally?” and “Will this action increase access and opportunity for underrepresented students?”

### *Engage with the Community*

Engagement means reaching out to those the district serves, particularly those whose voices have historically gone unheard and whose needs have gone unmet. It means seeking understanding of the community’s needs and perspectives to genuinely commit to and engage in ending inequities within the system. This is especially important in diverse and low-poverty districts, to overcome the reality that dominant groups make up the majority of the student and parent population. For other voices to have power, district leaders need to go the extra mile on engagement.

### *Act on Commitments*

Districts need strong systems to turn commitments and plans into action. Plans to take action on achievement gaps are common in districts across the country, including low-poverty and diverse districts. Yet good intentions are not enough. Moving beyond “plans” means assigning responsibilities and resources, setting clear timelines, monitoring progress continuously, and adjusting to keep efforts on track. For any significant initiative that is part of this work, it means naming a point person with the capability, authority, and team to accomplish the initiative’s goals. And it means devoting the financial resources needed to get the job done.

### *Embrace Accountability for Progress*

Districts need a “magnifying glass” by which they can examine their practices, policies, and outcomes. The right metrics and systems can help districts stay on track or re-direct their actions if change is needed. Some of these systems can be

## DIVERSE AND EQUITABLE SCHOOLS

“There is a real distinction between desegregation, which means getting diverse bodies in the building, and integration, which means creating positive academic and social experiences for all students.

Most people use the words interchangeably.... But a truly integrated school focuses on creating a positive experience for all students of all backgrounds, and supports what we call the “ABCDs” of diverse and equitable schools: strong academics, a strong sense of belonging, a commitment to dismantling racism, and an appreciation of diversity.”

- Lee Teitel, Oak Achievement Gap Advisory Committee Member, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

For the full interview, see <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/08/reimagining-integration>

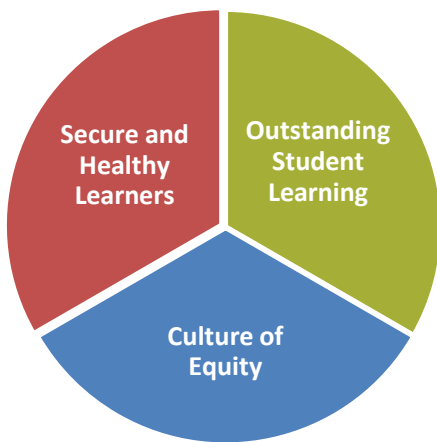
internal—providing district leaders and staff with data on progress so that they can adjust strategies and tactics over time. Others can be external, making information about progress readily and transparently available to the public so that the community can help hold the district accountable for addressing achievement gaps.

## Research-Based Goals, Priorities, and Strategies to Narrow Academic Achievement Gaps

To narrow achievement gaps in low-poverty and diverse schools, research directs district leaders to pursue three complementary **goals**:

- **Outstanding learning for all:** policies and practices that provide all students with excellent academic instruction in every classroom, every year.
- **Secure and healthy learners:** strategies and partnerships that meet students’ basic needs, support their families, and promote physical and social-emotional wellness.
- **Culture of equity:** building skills to lead and thrive and reducing bias.

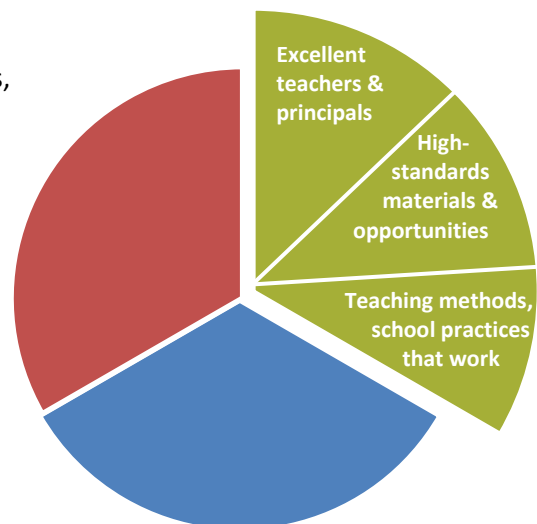
Within each goal, districts can pursue **priority approaches and strategies** shown by research to advance students, schools, and communities toward the goal (see table below). The following sections explain each goal’s importance and the priority approaches and strategies that will help districts succeed. For references to all of the research Public Impact reviewed, see the endnotes and see Appendix B, page 24.



<i>Goals</i>	<i>Priority Approaches</i>
<b>Outstanding student learning for all</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guaranteeing excellent teachers and principals</li> <li>• Ensuring access to high-standards materials and learning opportunities</li> <li>• Using teaching methods and school practices that work</li> </ul>
<b>Secure and healthy learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting basic needs</li> <li>• Supporting families</li> <li>• Fostering wellness and joy</li> </ul>
<b>Culture of equity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing key equity challenges in schools</li> <li>• Fostering engagement and community accountability</li> <li>• Equipping individuals to act</li> </ul>

### *Outstanding Student Learning for All*

Since the focus of this report is closing *academic* achievement gaps, improved instruction to foster learning is a leading strategy. As subsequent sections reveal, research also suggests value in addressing other issues outside of academics, such as students’ and families’ health and well-being. But without a focus on academic improvement, research suggests these other interventions will not make a significant dent in achievement gaps.<sup>54</sup> Some strategies in this section achieve important academic effects, but are described in greater detail under “Culture of Equity” due to their direct ties to culture and race.



- **Guaranteeing excellent teachers and principals.** The research is clear—excellent teachers<sup>55</sup> and principals<sup>56</sup> can and do have huge effects on student learning, more than any other school-based factors. Yet, even within diverse schools, African-American children tend to be placed in classrooms "with more negative contextual characteristics and a less effective teacher," which has a significant impact on achievement gaps.<sup>57</sup> Districts will not successfully close achievement gaps unless they give students of color and low-income students consistent access to excellent teachers supported by top-notch school principals.

But that is a tall order. Nationwide, a quarter of classrooms have teachers who consistently achieve well over a year's worth of academic growth with their students—enough growth to close achievement gaps *if* students had such teachers consistently for three to four years in every subject. To give students of color and low-income students much more consistent access to that caliber of teaching, districts can pursue several strategies:

- *Redesigning to enable the district's excellent teachers and principals to reach all students.* A growing number of schools are redesigning teaching roles so that great teachers reach more students, taking full responsibility for their learning, primarily by leading a teaching team and sometimes by teaching more students directly.<sup>58</sup> Doing so makes it possible for schools to reach all their students with great teaching. In a January 2018 study, researchers found that teachers who were on average at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in student learning gains, who then joined teams led by teacher-leaders known as multi-classroom leaders, produced learning gains equivalent to those of teachers from the 75<sup>th</sup> to 85<sup>th</sup> percentile in math, and, nearly that high in reading.<sup>59</sup> These multi-classroom leaders led an average of 6 teachers. At the same time, if districts pay teachers more for taking on these roles, they create a career path for teachers that may help attract and retain talented educators. And they could do the same for great principals, enabling them to extend their reach to a small group of schools as multi-school leaders.
  - *Giving students access to at least one and ideally more teachers matching their racial identity (and other identities) at each level (elementary, middle, and high school).* We discuss this point below under "Culture of Equity."
- **Ensuring access to high-standards materials and learning opportunities.** Research makes clear that students learn more in classes that set higher expectations for learning. Too often, students of color and low-income students lack access to such classes. Districts can remedy that deficit by:
    - *Adopting curricula for each grade and subject with high standards and aligned, differentiation-ready lessons and interim assessments.* Curriculum matters. State education agencies that limited school curriculum choices to options that align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were found to have higher student growth than states where schools were allowed to choose unaligned curriculum.<sup>60</sup> While the effect is not huge, it is larger than other strategies such as reducing class sizes.<sup>61</sup> Adopting a strong curriculum schoolwide creates a foundation for all students. But to address achievement *gaps*, districts also need to attend to the gap in access to advanced learning opportunities, discussed under "Culture of Equity," below.
    - *Providing culturally relevant assignments.* Discussed under "Culture of Equity," below.
  - **Using teaching methods and school practices that work.** Experts agree on key features of instruction that help students achieve and grow. Together, this research base points to a set of district and school strategies including:
    - *Focusing professional learning on providing proven elements of instructional excellence consistently.* Public Impact recently released a summary of these elements on delivering and improving instruction (for example, connecting with students and families, setting high goals and delivering rigorous, personalized or

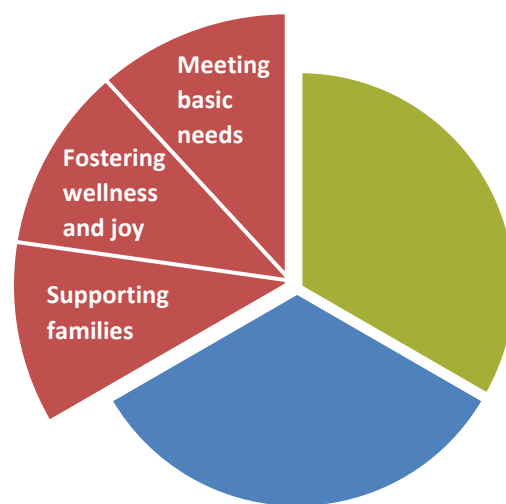
differentiated instruction, and monitoring results and adjusting instruction as needed), using the commonalities found across many research-based frameworks.<sup>62</sup>

- *Universally screening for and equitably responding to learning differences and learning disabilities.* Teachers must address individual student learning needs. If schools redesigned roles as recommended here to place excellent teachers in charge of teaching teams, teachers would receive more daily support for this difficult but imperative work. Districts could then focus professional development for teacher-leaders on how to understand learning differences and personalize learning for students. They can also help their schools work well for all students by following the tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), representing content in multiple ways, giving students multiple options for expressing themselves, and stimulating interest and motivation in learners.<sup>63</sup>
- *Providing universal access to personalized instruction, directed by teachers.* Tutoring and small-group instruction have a similar effect to having an excellent teacher. Whether one-on-one or in a very small group, tutoring allows adults to connect with students and grasp each student’s specific barriers to learning more easily. Tutoring is a major learning booster used outside of school: Wealthier families use tutoring to ensure that their children meet standards, excel further, and pursue their passions. For all students to have that same access, and the learning benefits, tutoring must happen at school and/or be provided for free in other accessible venues.<sup>64</sup>
- *Implementing research-based empathetic discipline policies.* We discuss this under “Culture of Equity,” below.
- *Increasing understanding of and response to trauma.* Teachers must also be prepared to teach students who have faced trauma. Researchers estimate that half of America’s students have experienced at least one or more types of trauma, such as witnessing abuse or being a victim of abuse.<sup>65</sup> African-American and Latino students are at higher risks for experiencing more trauma than their white peers.<sup>66</sup> And many refugee students struggle with trauma experienced in their home countries and the upheaval of coming to the United States.<sup>67</sup> Because students with trauma are more likely to “act out,” teachers may respond with disciplinary actions that exacerbate higher suspension and expulsion rates for students of color, discussed above. In addition to providing mental health supports for students who have experienced trauma (discussed further below), schools must train their educators to recognize and react to students with trauma.

## Secure and Healthy Learners

While improving instruction as outlined above is critical to closing academic gaps, addressing students’ health and well-being can also contribute to academic success. District leaders may consider those outside their responsibility. But since these factors affect how prepared students are to learn when they arrive at school, districts must find ways to address these needs directly and through partnerships.

For all the services discussed in this section, districts and their partners can think of service provision at three levels:



**Universal:** Though available to all, universal services can still close gaps if the challenges they address fall disproportionately on students of color and/or low-income students. For example, universal screening for the effects of trauma would benefit students of color and low-income students disproportionately because they have higher incidences of the adverse childhood events that cause trauma.

**Group-targeted:** In some cases, targeting services to a specific group can be the most effective, such as efforts to provide affordable housing for low-income families to reduce the impact of housing instability on learning.

**Individual-targeted:** Other services make sense to provide to specific children who exhibit need, such as mental health services for those who have suffered high levels of childhood trauma.

- **Meeting basic needs.** Far too many students' basic safety, shelter, and food needs are not met. Districts can take steps to mitigate these gaps. Two examples:

- *Offering breakfast, snack, and dinner options, as well as summer meals to students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.* Low-poverty schools that are not eligible for federal assistance to provide such meals can partner with local food pantries and anti-hunger programs to find ways to fill meal gaps for students.
- *Reducing the number of school transitions due to in-district housing instability, via busing.* Approximately 15 percent of the racial achievement gap between African-American and white students can be explained by mobility—how often students change schools, often due to housing instability.<sup>68</sup> To increase school stability, districts should consider allowing families the option to remain in their school even if they move outside its neighborhood boundaries. Districts can also support partnerships in the community to provide affordable housing that decreases moves.

- **Fostering wellness and joy.** The good news is that addressing physical and mental health issues can dramatically affect learning. According to one study, each additional “health asset” a student had was associated with an 18 percent increase in academic achievement—such as a healthy weight, limited screen time, and good emotional health.<sup>69</sup> School districts can help promote good health by:

- *Offering school-based health clinics (SBHCs).* SBHCs are significantly associated with improving student attendance and grades.<sup>70</sup> Federal, state, and local funds and resources are available for districts interested in starting SBHCs. One resource is the [School-Based Health Alliance](#), which offers many free tools, as well as consulting services.<sup>71</sup>

## SURVIVING VS. THRIVING

At East Chapel Hill High School, I had access to a variety of AP classes for which I later received college credit. The strong college-going culture meant I was surrounded by peers whose goals were to also attend college. However, even among the crowd I still felt a sense of loneliness. Often there were few students who looked like me in my classes or who identified with me either as Latino or first generation. For most of the school, it seemed to be common knowledge what classes to take and how to apply to college. That made asking questions hard. When I look back at my experience in high school, I see the advantages I had, [but] also how the school did little to reach out to me and provide resources for students like me—students who seemed to have everything under control on the surface but actually had little information about how to achieve their goals. I survived high school by making friends who cared enough about me to guide me and let me hold on to them. However, I had the potential to thrive.

- Laura Ornelas, Oak Achievement Gap Advisory Committee Member and College Adviser of UNC Carolina College Advising Corps

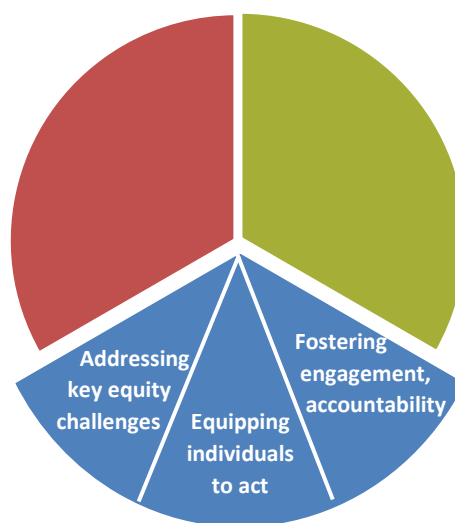
- *Fostering social-emotional learning and other building blocks of academic success.* Students who have experienced trauma often struggle with social-emotional skills, such as self-management, self-awareness, and decision-making. Improving social-emotional learning (SEL) can improve school attendance, grades, and academic achievement, so it is imperative that school districts build goals around SEL and implement SEL programs for students.<sup>72</sup> Research shows that the most effective SEL programs share four characteristics that form the acronym SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Districts can turn to such organizations as CASEL for resources on effective SEL practices,<sup>73</sup> or to Brooke Stafford-Brizard’s *Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development*.<sup>74</sup>
- *Addressing mental health challenges, including those arising from childhood trauma.* Racism and trauma negatively affect mental health. Schools can address this challenge by teaching teachers to recognize the signs of emotional distress and mental health challenges and by providing *school-based health clinics* that include mental health services.<sup>75</sup>

● **Supporting families.** Every parent wants the best for their children and their families. However, not all families are equally outfitted with the tools and resources they might need. Districts cannot assume they know what families need, but they should seek to understand by asking families and students. Surveys can help with this, and many states and school districts are moving toward requiring schools to disseminate family and student surveys annually or per semester. Some states and districts even include these surveys as part of their school performance report cards and ratings. Collecting information isn’t enough, however. Districts must be willing and ready to use the information provided to make changes and engage families in the ways they have requested. Family needs differ, and schools can’t assume need by statistical facts: Schools must have a routine process for identifying specific needs of each family and responding to those needs, either directly or by linking families with matching community services.

## Culture of Equity

Addressing achievement gaps means addressing the systemic racism and perpetual inequality that are woven into the nation’s institutions, including schools. Many of the recommendations in the previous sections are designed to do just that, by dismantling the policies and practices that stemmed from, and now perpetuate, racial and income-based differences. Examples include eradicating unequal access to great teaching; equipping teachers to understand and address the challenges caused by trauma and other factors that disproportionately affect children of color and low-income children; and more.

In addition to those systemic and institutional changes, districts can also foster a culture of equity by pursuing the strategies in this section.



• **Addressing key equity challenges in education.** Striving for equity means addressing some critical issues related to culture and race that underlie achievement gaps in schools, including:

○ *Giving students access to at least one and ideally more teachers matching their racial identity (and other identities) at each level (elementary, middle, and high school).* New research suggests that having at least one African-American teacher in elementary school significantly increases the likelihood that low-income, African-American students will graduate from high school and consider college.<sup>76</sup> Districts must devote considerable attention and resources to recruiting teachers of color into their applicant pools. The research on how best to attract and retain teachers of color is limited, but existing evidence suggests that districts can better recruit teachers of color by including current teachers of color in the hiring process and paying them for their time, as well as promoting open and safe working environments.<sup>77</sup> At scale, adding more teachers of color to the teaching pool will be essential: Right now, public school teachers of color make up just 18 percent of the teaching force nationwide—while students of color make up 50 percent of the student population.<sup>78</sup> Districts need to raise the appeal of teaching jobs and lower the barriers to entry, such as by creating paid residency programs that help teachers in training avoid debt. Adding multi-classroom leaders matching the identities of the student population can give even more students access to positive role models.<sup>79</sup>

○ *Ensuring equitable access to advanced learning opportunities via ongoing student readiness identification and wide-open opportunities for participation.* Low-income and minority students are underrepresented in gifted education programs<sup>80</sup> and advanced courses (such as honors and Advanced Placement).<sup>81</sup> Research suggests that this is primarily because of identification processes that rely on teachers or parents actively referring students to these opportunities. Moving to an ongoing, universal screening process can help reduce the likelihood that underrepresented students are overlooked, as can using nonverbal screening assessments.<sup>82</sup> The district must also support students with resources such as tutoring as they get higher-level instruction. Research suggests that tutoring programs can benefit students significantly, particularly African-American students.<sup>83</sup> The more success that schools and districts have in closing gaps in basic performance, the more important it will be to offer access to advanced learning opportunities. Students must be able to make advanced learning progress at school, rather than relying on out-of-school tutoring, courses, and academic coaching that are typically inaccessible to families with modest incomes.

Access to advanced programs is especially important in today's schools, where this is the only option for advanced learning opportunities. Arguably, schools should shift to less rigid structures, where students have access to "all you can eat" learning all the time, rather than requiring students to gain admission into a special program to advance. In such an environment, schools would still need strong systems of monitoring and intervention to ensure that all students had full access to the opportunities available to them.

## ENGAGE THE "NON-ENTITLED"

"Engage with community leaders and families, and not just the usual suspects. Summon your best active listening skills and reach out to faith-based leaders, community leaders (formal and informal), and key communicators. Don't rely on the same structures that have always existed, although they need to be engaged as well, they don't usually comprise the non-entitled. Model this for others."

- Josh Starr, Oak Achievement Gap Advisory Committee Member and Chief Executive Officer of PDK International

For the full blog post see <http://www.justinccohen.com/blog/2016/7/8/guest-post-josh-starr-on-anti-racist-school-system-leadership>

- *Providing culturally relevant assignments.* While educators and students have long expressed a need and desire for culturally relevant materials, there was limited research on their impact. A recent study, however, shows that ethnic studies classes (such as those taught in San Francisco high schools) can improve student attendance and grades, as well as increase the average number of credits students earn.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, districts should consider introducing both ethnically relevant materials and ethnic studies courses as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve curriculum and materials.
- *Implementing research-based empathetic discipline policies.* Under prevailing discipline systems, students of color are more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students, and suspensions and expulsions significantly increase achievement gaps by disproportionately removing students of color from the learning environment.<sup>85</sup> To remedy this, districts can pass policies that help reduce suspensions and expulsions, such as enacting research-based empathetic discipline policies and limiting the offenses for which students can be suspended and expelled. And they should encourage schools to explore mindset trainings and professional development that is shown to help teachers better empathize with students and reduce suspension rates.<sup>86</sup>
- **Fostering engagement and community accountability.** Schools are part of their communities, yet school districts sometimes see themselves as being at odds with the community and vice versa. Community members often feel excluded from school- and district-wide decisions. Open school board meetings and “community engagement” staff members are not enough. Districts must look beyond community engagement to shared leadership, meaning they must form community partnerships and find ways to share decision-making power with teachers, students, and families.

Shared leadership doesn’t just happen overnight. Districts must work with the community to recognize opportunities for change, mobilize people and resources to make those changes, and seek engagement from diverse and nontraditional partners. These groups then have to choose a structure that will enable effective collaboration, actively build trust among the collaborators, and develop learning opportunities for partners.<sup>87</sup> Roles and power to effect real action in the district and schools must be clear.

- **Equipping individuals to act.** Addressing achievement requires strong leadership and personal resilience in the face of challenges. Equipping people at all levels to act on the commitment to close gaps is thus a critical element of a district’s approach. Elements of this capacity-building include:
  - *Equipping district leadership, school leadership, teachers, and students with the training and tools needed to act.* In part, this means equipping a wide array of individuals with the tools to lead work forward in general, such as the capacity to set a compelling vision and mobilize others to carry out a plan. Beyond that, leaders addressing achievement gaps specifically need the ability to have difficult conversations, especially but not only around issues of race. Racial equity training is key to addressing this issue. This training should provide participants with an analytic framework to understand and obtain a clear definition of systemic racism; explore the construction and history of race and racism (nationally, locally, and in schools); help participants examine their own racial identities and biases; and explore tools and strategies to advance racial equity.
  - *Providing students with activities and training that promote their self-worth and resilience.* For example, several studies have found that students score better when assigned writing tasks that encourage them to reflect on personal values, such as their relationships with their friends and families. Racial achievement gaps, specifically between African-American and white students, are significantly reduced in such writing tasks. The theory behind the success of this simple activity is that the negative impacts of stereotyping can be countered by reaffirming African-American students’ sense of personal identity. Thus, schools and teachers can and should help students persevere by encouraging healthy mindsets and self-esteem.



- *Addressing implicit bias.* Implicit bias is defined as the attitudes we have toward people or when we associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.<sup>88</sup> Research shows that these biases hurt students in many ways, especially when teachers’ biases result in lowered expectations for low-income students and students of color,<sup>89</sup> as well as unequal discipline rates for students of color.<sup>90</sup> Research on reducing and eliminating bias is still emerging, but there is some evidence that the “habit” of bias can be broken by implementing strategies like taking on the perspective of others and actively replacing stereotypical thoughts with unbiased ones.<sup>91</sup> Of course, strategies like this require a person to first acknowledge their biases—something most struggle to do. Therefore, districts should build consistent, reputable equity and anti-bias training into their professional learning activities for all teachers, leaders, and administrators, track the effectiveness of that training over time, and continue improving it based on those results.

## Call to Action

Thurgood Marshall once said, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.” Low-poverty and diverse districts, more so than segregated schools, have the opportunity to serve as a model for how heterogenous student communities can not only learn and live together, but also achieve equitably. No district has accomplished this feat yet. Yet doing so is within reach.

To cross that canyon, a district must be willing to **commit to equity, engage families and the community, take a complete set of actions to fulfil the commitment, and embrace accountability for success.**

### *Commit to Equity*

1. Officially adopt an equity plan. Include explicit, actionable goals related to narrowing achievement gaps and eliminating racial disparities.
2. Create measurable benchmarks to measure progress for each goal.
3. Measure your district’s “baseline” by acknowledging current disparities and inequities.

### *Engage Communities*

1. Create “seats at the table” for teachers, students, and families by devising structures that allow for engagement and decision-making power in the formation of a strategic plan.
2. Provide leadership training for everyone at the table so that all have the opportunity to effect change.
3. Involve community partners early to tap community strengths—and include in the equity plan.
4. Use this engagement to create a strategic plan for meeting the goals in your equity plan. Include teachers, students, families, and community members in input and feedback.

### *Act on Commitments*

1. Make a detailed action plan to achieve each broad element in the strategic plan. Include specific action steps, roles with accountability per step, timelines, and interim deadlines.
2. Establish a process to check progress against the action plan, and revise the action steps as needed until each priority of the strategic plan and goal of the equity plan is met.

### *Embrace Accountability*

1. Publish baseline performance on goals, and communicate disparities and gaps with the public.
2. Continuously meet, share progress with the public, and improve. Be proud of successes, but be open about challenges and struggles.
3. When changes are needed to meet the goals, communicate next steps immediately and publicly.

# Appendix A: Oak Foundation's Advisory Committee

Oak Foundation formed the below advisory committee to provide input and perspective during this project. Oak Foundation hosted two meetings of the committee.

## **Committee Members**

Melanie Brown, Gates Foundation

Dorian Burton, Kenan Charitable Trust

Kim Hoke, formerly Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public School Foundation (retired)

Wanda Hunter, Racial Equity Institute

Ricky Hurtado, Scholars' Latino Initiative at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Laura Ornelas, student of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Joshua Starr, PDK International

Lee Teitel, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Alexandra Zagbayou, Student U

## **Facilitator**

Althea Gonzalez, Consultant

## **Oak Foundation Participants**

Dana Brinson, Programme Officer for Learning Differences

Millie Brobston, Programme Officer for Special Interest

## **Public Impact Participants**

Alexandria Crampton, Associate Consultant

Stephanie Dean, Vice President of Strategic Policy Advising

Bryan Hassel, Co-President

Veronica Brooks-Uy, Consultant

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