

All Students Reaching the Top: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap

One of the most urgent concerns among education stakeholders today is the under representation of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans among high-achieving students. The authors of the report prepared by the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability believe that it is possible to close the achievement gap between non-minority and minority student populations.

What research-based strategies can the educational community use to close the achievement gap?

Provide High Quality Teaching and Instruction in the Classroom

- (a) Teaching students from diverse backgrounds to acquire knowledge requires that teachers first determine where students are in their prior knowledge and use that as a starting point for instruction. Inquiry-based approaches such as reciprocal teaching are particularly helpful in modeling effective intellectual habits.
- (b) Students need ample opportunities to practice and demonstrate their understanding, so that their knowledge bases in various subjects become routine and can be retrieved automatically. For students whose home environments lack these opportunities, teachers should create explicit classroom support and instruction.
- (c) High achievement requires that students understand subject matter deeply. Teachers can foster this by using active modes of teaching and learning—authentic learning, problem-based learning, and learning with peers.
- (d) Teaching students to transfer their learning across multiple contexts and over time is perhaps one of the most enduring lessons that promote high achievement. By testing knowledge frequently, under different conditions (pencil and paper tests, projects, research papers), in different modalities (visual and auditory), in different contexts (individual and group assignments), and with systematic feedback, all students develop a variety of sophisticated academic skills—skills that are useful and valued by complex learning environments in the competitive world of higher education and professional careers.

Develop Trusting Relationships in School

High achievement is greatly enhanced when students of diversity are supported by a school climate in which trust is cultivated. Research shows that minority group students experience *stereotype threat* as they move into academic environments that expect high achievement. This happens when a high-achieving student of color finds him/herself among a majority population that implicitly questions his/her achievement. Feelings of isolation and insecurity can influence self-perception and effort. Teachers and administrators should actively work to foster positive, trusting relationships between students from different backgrounds.

Provide Supports for Pro-Academic Behavior in the School and Community

Students from minority populations experience inequality of access to many of the environmental supports that influence pro-academic behavior—supports to which high-achieving students from non-minority populations enjoy access and control. These supports include several types of capital: cultural, financial, health, human, institutional, pedagogical, personal, political, and social.

- (a) Teachers can create high-quality academic and social environments that help to close the achievement gap. In the school and classroom, teachers can
- influence the development of intellectual friendships between students from diverse backgrounds,
 - set the conditions for group problem solving,
 - encourage academic risk-taking,
 - create safe opportunities for students to make mistakes,
 - reinforce efforts to offer different solutions, and
 - develop service-learning opportunities, so students can give back to the community.

Learning-centered classrooms are those in which teachers are aware of the cultural differences that affect students' comfort level in working together. Students' concept of what it means to be intelligent can also affect their perseverance and risk-taking behavior. Therefore, setting the difficulty level of academic assignments should be demanding enough to maintain interest, but not so difficult as to lead to discouragement.

- (b) High-achievement learning environments help students become part of a social group whose members
- understand the importance of reading,
 - accept ethical and moral responsibility for hard work and to be among the best,
 - set high standards,
 - follow through and are dependable,
 - understand how to work well with others,
 - become proficient at using advanced technologies, and
 - speak with clarity and confidence.

- (c) High-achieving students are routinely exposed to supplemental forms of education, outside the formal school curriculum. These opportunities may be in the form of travel with family, visits to museums, engagement with the arts, scouting, and tutoring. Also, pairing students with mentors who are professionals in the students' areas of interest is an effective strategy to expose them to models of academic excellence.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for institutions at the national, state, and local levels. These are directed to policy that fosters excellence in setting standards, promotes academic scholarship among educators, and demands high-performance leadership at all levels.

The full article on which this research brief is based, can be found at <http://www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/allstudents.pdf>