

# ***Closing the Gap***

**June 2009**

*Collected and Disseminated by the Achievement Gap Action Group in Wayland*

The purpose of this memo is twofold. First, it is to record many of the efforts across Wayland to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning in our schools. The central focus of the initiatives described in this memo is involves closing gaps in school achievement between different groups of students in our schools. Over time, we have found that the largest and most persistent gaps in school achievement are those that exist between our White and Asian students and our Black and Latino students.

We believe through focused, well-coordinated efforts we can effectively close this gap. Again, the purpose of this memo is to profile some of the ways in which Wayland teachers and administrators are working together to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning in our schools and, with that, close the achievement gap. The initiatives profiled in this memo might also prompt others to devise new ways to meet the needs of their most struggling students in our school, a disproportionate number of which are Black and Latino.

Finally, we conclude this memo with a slightly revised set of recommendations that we intend to execute in this ongoing effort to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning in our schools, particularly as it serves to help us close the gap in achievement between our Black and Latino and White and Asian students. We believe strongly that there are strategies, techniques and analysis that will help Wayland close this gap. Further we are confident that Wayland has the expertise and the wherewithal to close the gap.

## **Part One: A Snapshot of Initiatives Across Wayland's Schools**

### **Administrative Council**

The educational leadership in Wayland has experienced a great deal of change in recent years. Six of the members of the Administrative Council have been in the role they serve currently for less than two years. While change is something with which educators are accustomed, on the leadership level, personnel changes could well change the focus, understanding, and approach to initiatives. That said, we thought it important to revisit our understanding of this issue – to get on the same page, if you will. This initiative is doomed to fail if we do not share the same definition and a common understanding of what the gap is, what causes it, and the most effective measures to close it.

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, the Action Group was given the entire Administrative Council Meeting to focus efforts on closing the achievement gap. We invited Dr. Theresa Perry, whose overall role in this effort is described in deeper detail in the elementary report. Dr. Perry is a well-known professor of education from Simmons College. She has dedicated a great deal of her professional life to researching effective teaching strategies for students of color. What is more, she has done work in districts that are high performing and well-resourced, but still have a racial achievement gap. Her recent work in Evanston, IL is one of several communities in which she has worked whose *problem* resembles that Wayland seeks to address.

We started with a definition: The racial achievement gap is the "...[academic performance] gap that exists between Black and Brown students and their White and Asian counterparts..." (Singleton, 2006). We then sought to dispel some of the prevailing misconceptions about the gap that worked only to slow our progress on this important work, most notably the impact of class. We cited Berlak's work in which he declares that "Even when parents' income and wealth is comparable, African-American, Native American, Latino, and immigrants for whom English is not a first language lag behind English-speaking, native born white students." (Berlak, 2001).

Definitions were not the only wrinkle we sought to iron out in this presentation. We also sought to broaden the measures of the gap. In recent years, the gap has been defined across all levels by MCAS performance. We shall continue to monitor MCAS performance as measure of our efforts. However, there are other significant measures that merit attention. As was noted in last year's report, there is a significant discrepancy in the grade point averages between Black and Latino students and White and Asian students at the high school. We also observed an over-representation of Black and Latino students in introductory level courses and underrepresentation in advanced placement courses at the high school. There are disproportionate numbers of students of color on individualized education plans at all levels. Further, while students of color accounted for approximately 6% of the total population at the high school last year, 48% of the total suspensions were students of color. Of the total number of students suspended, 39% were students of color. Accordingly, it behooves us to look at these and similar measures to better understand the causes of the gap, how it manifests itself and how best to tailor our approach to close it. Monitoring MCAS is important, but alone, it provides far too narrow a view of the real issue.

After a brief presentation of the aforementioned definitions and data points, the team was treated to a presentation of Dr. Tricia O'Reilly's thesis. The presentation wove in the critical, but notably absent voices of students of color. The research provided us with deeper insight to the some of the barriers to student learning.

What followed was a powerful discussion involving Dr. Perry's assessment of the issues we presented. She offered the team relevant reading to help us better understand the work. She also provided useful hints for the work that lie ahead. Most notably, Dr. Perry required us to "interrogate the environment", that is to identify and subsequently breakdown the barriers to learning. Are their policies that are exclusionary? Are the practices that reward the most involved/influential families and students, while marginalizing families who are not? What have the schools done to communicate an equal expectation for all students?

### **Elementary**

At the elementary level, the principals and the METCO Director wrote a grant to the Wayland Public Schools Foundation, requesting funds to hire Theresa Perry, anti-racist educator, author and national speaker, and two Wheelock college professors, Pat Willott and Teri Meier, to work with the elementary teachers to close the Achievement Gap in

math and language arts. Our data in Wayland coincides with the national figures that there is approximately a 20 point discrepancy between our Black and Latino students and our White and Asian students, on statewide assessments. We have been granted \$8,500 to begin the effort to help teachers to gain strategies to close this gap, while improving strategies for all students. In April, 2009, Professor Pat Willott presented information to the elementary school teachers at a Wednesday in-service, which included MCAS math assessments for 2007 and 2008, showing that there is gap of approximately 20 points in specific areas on third and fourth grade tests. This professional development presentation, however, did not go as planned, as the speaker was not an effective presenter to a large group of teachers. In late June, Mabel Reid-Wallace, Jim Lee and Debbie Bearse will meet with Theresa Perry to revise a plan for the upcoming school year, which may include securing a different individual to help with the math segment. We would like to recommend that Theresa Perry will do a “kick-off” presentation in September to instill excitement among the elementary teachers regarding this initiative.

The need for a concerted effort to address the inequity that exists between the achievement of different cohorts of students is supported through local data, classroom anecdotal information and national research. The annual review of MCAS scores, coupled with district wide assessments in reading and math, and teacher observations, provides evidence of this disparity. Our goal is to work closely with the language arts and math directors to compile the individual classroom data, i.e., MCAS, Dibels, GRADE and Everyday Math assessments, into a comprehensive central data collection spreadsheet that will show and track the data student progress once effective strategies are put into place. The consultants will hold focus groups with a representative group of teachers from each elementary school, in order to get their assessment of the nature and specific challenges the subgroups are experiencing in mathematics and reading. Drawing on the above diagnosis, current research and the consultants’ experience working in schools, three workshops will be presented to K-5 teachers:

- Creating educational environments that support high achievement among Black and Latino students
- Literacy practices that support the development of fluency in reading and writing among Black and Latino students
- Helping Black and Latino students achieve in mathematics – what we know – what we can do

This professional development will be targeted to raising the achievement of our students of color, but research has shown that all students benefit from the vast differentiated instruction that occurs as a result of aiming to close the achievement gap. Closing the achievement gap promotes raising expectations for all students, and to that end, as the gap closes, teachers will spend less time on remediation and re-teaching and more time on curriculum development and extension learning.

This initiative will simultaneously involve the consultants visiting and serving as critical coaches to two teachers in each elementary school, who will volunteer to be “satellite classrooms.” Their classrooms will be available to all teachers in the district. Based on the consultants’ work in these “satellite classrooms,” the teachers and consultants will

organize two presentations for teachers, one in math and one in literacy. We plan to begin this work on Wednesday, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009, followed by designated times in October for selected teachers to work with the achievement gap consultants, under the direction of Theresa Perry. We feel that this will be a one to five year process to experience positive results at the elementary level. We expect that there will be results within the year in the satellite classrooms. Our goal is to put great effort into closing the gap at the elementary level, which will ultimately provide a strong foundation to students in language arts and math as they enter middle school.

In addition to this work in the classroom, we are working diligently to expand the efforts of a larger number of adults to help to close this gap outside the classroom. To this end, we have maintained on-going efforts to strengthen the relationships between our students of color, our Wayland resident students and our families from Boston and Wayland. These efforts include mentor programs at all three schools, organized Boston/Wayland play dates and programs, after school homework clubs and teacher discussion groups. All three schools are currently working with new Wayland and Boston families to help to broaden our school and community initiatives, which we hope will hasten the process of closing the achievement gap. Research indicates that when students feel a sense of belonging and trust, there is a greater chance that they put more effort into their learning.

## **Wayland Middle School**

**School-wide Professional Development:** Harvard Professor, Ron Ferguson puts forth a useful, researched-based, conceptual framework of a tripod as a three prong approach for closing the Achievement Gap. His legs of the “tripod” represent content, pedagogy and relationships. Ferguson asserts that

- 1) teachers must understand what they are teaching (content knowledge);
- 2) teachers need multiple, effective ways to communicate the material to students (pedagogy); and
- 3) they need to relate to students (relationships) in ways that motivate and enable them.

As a schoolhouse, we focused primarily on the second leg, pedagogy, during the 2008-2009 school year. Our curriculum leadership team developed a series of school-wide inservices to help teachers tinker at the edge of their practice (which on whole is solid). Together, we read “Stickiness,” a chapter from Malcolm Gladwell’s, [The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference](#). Our premise was that small intentional adjustments in lesson design would make lessons more memorable or “sticky” for students. After digging deeply into Gladwell’s text through silent conversations, we then chose two clarity moves for teachers to collectively work on in order to make their lessons “stickier.” First, faculty engaged in developing skills to frame lessons more effectively by using props, pictures, stories, or metaphors. Next, we practiced how to use criteria charts effectively, asking and helping students to identify what makes a high-quality piece of work good. By making criteria explicit, and then teaching focus lessons on how to develop the skills to achieve the high quality work, we aimed to create more equitable classrooms and demystify success. While we feel these specific teaching

moves help all learners, we specifically expect these moves to help our students of color raise their work quality. Building on high quality pedagogy, our professional development plan for next year is to use an apprenticeship approach and use different types of scaffolds to lift work quality.

**Achievement Gap Working Group:** This year at WMS we began an Achievement Gap Working Group to attempt to target specific students of color in their areas of challenge. The plan was to have teachers meet once in the fall to choose a student and discuss the goals of the group. Rather than spending precious time meeting as a teacher group to discuss the achievement gap problem, interested teachers were instead asked to commit to trying to spend one hour a week working one-on-one to lift a student's skills. We set up a wiki for teachers to use to communicate about their successes and roadblocks. The group met pockets of success, but the work felt isolated (as folks weren't comfortable with using the wiki) and teachers lost steam given competing demands for their time. Upon reflection, next year we will attempt to ask teachers to pair up and double-team a student – surrounding him or her with support. Teaming increases teachers' peer pressure for accountability and allows teachers to partner together to puzzle out how best to move the student. We also need to develop good systems for measuring and documenting results of the intervention as seen by student gains/progress.

**Data Collection:** Finally, to get a better handle on student progress, we set up a spreadsheet of all of our non-white students, documenting performance over time as measured by MCAS scores (beginning in 4<sup>th</sup> grade), school grades, and student services needed. Archiving individual student performance over time will help assess our progress and investigate patterns of performance.

### **Wayland High School**

Teachers at the high school spent considerable time during the 2007-2008 academic school year grappling with the data and developing goals. The goals are simply stated, but will require a consistent effort over time. They are:

- *Enrollment of Students of Color in Honors/AP is courses is proportionally equal to that of White and Asian students*
- *Number of Students of Color on an Individualized Education Plan shall be in proportion to their White and Asian Peers*
- *All students of color shall achieve at least a scaled score of 240 (equivalent of "proficient" level or CPI of 100) on the ELA and Math MCAS exams*
- *Improved self-motivation, self-confidence, and in-school comfort level.*

We believe that these goals are achievable and we expect to see results from our efforts in two to five years.

This year, the overarching goal was to develop a deeper understanding of the racial achievement gap. A sub-element of this goal, though important in its own right, involved developing a common language on the achievement gap. What is it? What causes it? During the 07-08 year, the entire faculty read an article by Ron Ferguson that artfully described the Tripod Project. In short, it is his contention that a three-pronged approach is the most effective means to close the gap. Schools must evaluate their content to

ensure that it is accessible and culturally relevant. Schools must ensure that the prevailing teaching strategies are both effective and culturally competent. Finally, he contends that teacher-student relationships have to be at the core of the process. Teachers need to know who they are teaching and students have to be able to trust that their teachers understand them and have their best interests at heart. The article served as the springboard for many of the activities this year.

Responding to faculty feedback requesting examples of attempts to close the gap by schools like Wayland, each faculty member was provided a copy of Pedro Noguera's Unfinished Business to read over the summer months. The book proved successful in helping the faculty develop a common language around the achievement gap. It provided us an illustrative example of what should and can be done as well as pitfalls to avoid. Two Wednesday in-service sessions in September were dedicated to discussion of the book.

To further our understanding of the "why", Tricia O'Reilly presented her thesis to the faculty in October. Hers was a qualitative study involving METCO students. Her findings indicated that Boston Resident students very much appreciated the education they were receiving in *Said Town*, but there are considerable issues among this group of students with regard to teacher-student relationships. Specifically, students indicated their disappointment in their teachers' inability to effectively respond to classroom situations wherein race was the topic/issue. They were particularly expressive with regard to their belief that White and Asian students did not "understand" them or their experience at Wayland High School. They also cited what they perceived to be low expectations by their teachers. This and other compelling data breathed life into the work of Claude Steele and others who cite Stereotype Threat as notable barrier to learning. In short, this theory suggests that students tend to internalize some of the perceived negative beliefs about them.

Dr. O'Reilly's presentation was followed by two sessions facilitated by Empowering Multicultural Initiatives personnel. The focus was help teachers better understand the power of their actions and how best to tailor them to facilitate better relationships with ALL of their students, while also reducing or eliminating the stereotype threat.

In addition to the professional development efforts, a new, more representative strategy team was formed at the high school. This team represents every facet of the high school from subject areas to guidance. Thinking long-term and in terms of sustainability, the effort should be partnered approach between teachers and administration. The team has been meeting and strategizing on next steps for the high school. In the short term, the team has resolved to hold special parent meeting with parents of students of color. Research has repeatedly identified parental involvement as key factor in student performance. We intend to develop a deeper bond with our parents of students of color. It starts with a special meeting to convey our intentions and gather some much needed feedback.

Finally, in an effort to address the final goal listed above, the in-school comfort level objective, there are two efforts ongoing. First and foremost, the METCO Student

Council will reconnect with the School Climate Committee, a union that existed years ago and disbanded due to transportation limitations. This union will help foster more understanding between students of different races on campus. Further, a meeting has been scheduled with Kim Godsoe, Coordinator of the Posse program at Brandeis University. The hope is to develop a formal mentor program, connecting our students of color with college students of color involved in the Posse Program.

## **Related Efforts**

### **Parent Participants at the MDA:**

Each year, the METCO Program brings together educators from across Massachusetts to network, learn about the issues of race and social class in our schools and generally build the knowledge and skills they need to address the learning needs of our students. This year, a significant contingent from Wayland attended the METCO Conference, including a number of both Boston-resident and Wayland-resident parents.

### **EMI-EDCO Multi-District Initiative**

Wayland was invited to participate in a multi-district initiative focused on closing the achievement gap. The details of this newly developed program have yet to be worked out. We do know that the focus will be on improving math ability for students of color during the gatekeeper years, 5-8. The suggestion is to develop a rigorous summer enrichment program staffed by certified, EMI trained teachers. There is much more to come on this front.

## **Part Two: The Achievement Gap Initiatives Recommendations**

### **Developing Leadership Capacity Dedicated to Closing the Gap**

In keeping with last year's recommendation, we continue to see value in creating a dedicated position (i.e. a stipend or a portion of FTE's) to lead the district's efforts to improve teaching and learning and, with that, close the achievement gap. As has been the case for two years running, issues of budgeting, hiring and overall school management left consume massive amounts of time, leaving precious little time to attend to this important topic, as there were so many other more immediate or deadline driven issues for many of the administrators on our team.

We still believe that a stipend position of leadership (similar to the K-12 directors in other areas) would not only prove the administrators' support for this initiative but, with the right person, it might also ensure that one or more individuals are responsible for convening regular meetings, publicizing our collective work and generally leading efforts to close the Achievement Gap, as it is an identified part of a person's job. A significant focus of this year's discussion among building administrators involved connecting the efforts at the three levels. We are a school system, not a system of schools. Therefore

there should be a tie that binds between the efforts at the three levels. The effort should be systemic. A professional serving in this role would certainly help in this regard.

### **Essential Measures of Success**

We believe it is essential that the district continue to focus on outcomes. However, there is a element on which there is fundamental change. Previously, we agreed that MCAS proficiency and grade point average as the only sole measures on which we would quantify our success or lack thereof. We have determined that the issue is too broad and complex to focus exclusively on one or two measures. What is more, only focusing on the MCAS on the elementary level precludes earlier detection of academic deficiencies. When does the gap begin? Are we identifying assessments before 3<sup>rd</sup> grade that might help focus our early intervention efforts? We will continue monitor MCAS performance on all levels, but we cannot ignore other indicators of disparity in performance. Accordingly, the Elementary school will broaden their measures of success to include MCAS, Dibels, GRADE, and Everyday Math assessments. The Middle School will continue to monitor MCAS scores, but will also evaluate grades and course placement. As is mentioned above, the high school will continue to the monitor course placement, special education statistics, and several factors that all under the emotional wellness umbrella in addition to MCAS data.

### **Keeping the Issue Central to Our Work**

As was communicated last, the achievement gap is a problem that Wayland shares not only with other suburban districts around Boston but the nation as a whole. There is no magical solution. We all need to be patient, but not complacent. The research suggests that even the most concerted efforts will not yield immediate results. Some years will be better than others. However, we must keep this work in the fore. While efforts on this initiative are specifically designed to serve the needs of the students of color, the research agrees that this work benefits **ALL** students. This is work is fits with our philosophy and values. In short we seek to meet the educational needs of all students.