

Taking on the Achievement Gap

Written by Supt. Bret Miles, Holyoke School Dist. Re-1J

At the last few meetings, the Holyoke School Board has been reviewing student achievement data from standardized tests administered in Colorado. As part of the analysis and discussion, we have taken time to focus on Achievement Gaps.

An Achievement Gap is the discrepancy in performance between two different groups. We analyzed differences in achievement by gender and by ethnicity, with a focus on discrepancies between our White and Hispanic students.

School districts across the nation analyze Achievement Gaps because we are charged with getting all of our students the skills and knowledge necessary to be a productive citizen in our democracy. In fact, as part of the process of being an accredited school district in Colorado, our achievement gaps are measured by the State.

We focus on this area because citizens expect our graduates to read, write and do math at a level which provides individuals opportunities to secure good jobs and meet their personal goals. This need is equally true of boys and girls, Hispanic and White students. Our mission is achievement for all.

Our Achievement Gaps were not necessarily surprising, but very significant in many cases. The district routinely found gender gaps in reading and writing. When looking at reading and writing, our girls outscored our boys more than 81 percent of the time, half of which were double digit gaps spanning up to 35 percent. In one case, the girls had 68 percent of the class score in the Proficient and Advanced categories while only 33 percent of the boys could do the same.

Our ethnic gaps were also very prevalent. White students outscored their Hispanic classmates on every test, half of the tests had over a 30 percent gap. On one particular test, 71 percent of the White students scored Proficient and Advanced while only 31 percent of the Hispanic students in the same class scored in that range.

I'm sure that as you are reading these results, you may not be totally surprised. You may be thinking that it is not too surprising to see girls out-perform boys in reading and writing. You may be thinking, "Boys are so active and just don't enjoy sitting and reading as much as girls."

In reviewing the ethnic achievement gap you might be thinking, "That gap is probably attributed

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to students learning English. How can they be proficient when they are learning a new language?" As we break down data to an individual level these statements could be absolutely true. Nonetheless, these obstacles can be overcome.

One of the most exciting areas of school research today showcases the success stories of 90-90-90 schools. These are schools with 90 percent of the students representing a minority population, 90 percent of the students eligible for free lunch according to federal poverty guidelines and 90 percent of the students scoring proficient on state exams.

The 90-90-90 schools give us every reason to believe that a strong curriculum implemented with the best instructional practices in our profession can overcome the most formidable challenges.

As your teachers in the Holyoke School District reviewed data this fall, they examined the Achievement Gaps carefully. Many of the groups made goals to address these issues. We don't take this challenge lightly and we know prevailing over issues associated with poverty and language won't be easy.

But, this fall I have been most impressed with the desire I see in our teachers discussing what the school could do, what each teacher could do, in order to close the Achievement Gaps and ensure all students have the knowledge and skills outlined in our curriculum. Our kids are in good hands.