

Closing the Achievement Gap Supports A Vision Shared

Closing the achievement gap should be and is a top priority for students, parents, educators, and business and community stakeholders in West Virginia. The Education Alliance, a statewide education fund has a mission to create positive, systemic change in public education, in partnership with ***West Virginia: A Vision Shared!***, the state's economic development plan. The connection between a strong educational system and positive economic development is clear. Increasing the effectiveness of citizen education is by far one of the Mountain State's best economic development strategies.

The strategy of The Education Alliance in its partnership with A Vision Shared is to use action research, selective programs and strategic alliances to foster student achievement. A pivotal effort will be to find meaningful ways of reducing the achievement gap that exists in West Virginia.

In West Virginia, the impact of the state's No Child Left Behind mandate places significant pressure to accomplish our mission. A year ago, The Education Alliance added a section to its website which explained the federal No Child Left Behind law in plain English and presented West Virginia data in easy-to-understand bar graphs. These graphs clearly revealed that three groups: students on free and reduced lunch, African American students, and special education students, met standards at a much lower rate than others did. In fact, it was shown that their achievement became progressively *worse* as they became middle and high school students.

Example: last year 90 percent of the African American students covered by the law did meet academic standards in elementary school but almost the same percentage, 83.3 percent did *not* meet standards in high school. A similar profile existed for students on free and reduced lunch, which accounts for almost half of the public school students in West Virginia. The Education Alliance is piloting the Results-Based Partnership initiative, where schools and their partners work together to identify students' academic needs and design programs to help them overcome deficiencies.

For decades, researchers have been interested in the dynamics of the achievement gap and best practices for closing it. In an effort to make that research easily accessible to stakeholders and policy makers, the Alliance produced a series of research summaries on closing the achievement gap. Two publications, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Policy Implications for Teacher Quality, Curriculum and Teacher Expectations*, and *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Focus on Rural Schools* were published in spring 2004. Two more research summaries focusing on secondary schools and professional development will be published this fall. All summaries are short, easy to read, and conclude with a list of policy implications. Because of this, efforts to close the gap in West Virginia will not have to start from scratch.

The Alliance was amazed to discover that despite the depth of their research, few researchers spoke directly to the group of people most affected—the students themselves! The Alliance therefore conducted a pilot project to get initial impressions on

what high school students thought about their school experience and how they saw this gap. Eight focus groups were held in four high schools to listen to what white low socio-economic status students and African American students said about the achievement gap. These groups were held with both high achieving and low achieving students in rural and urban high schools utilizing the same protocol, questionnaire and comment cards.

In all eight focus groups, students clearly identified pertinent, well defined, variables: the need to feel respected at school, the importance of a variety of teaching methods, the desire for better interpersonal relations between students and teachers, more effective assistance with course selection and scheduling, greater parental involvement, higher academic expectations and more equitable treatment among student groups. Some students experienced racism and classism that would shock many of us. The low-achieving students tended to internalize the unfairness they experienced and became demoralized while the high achieving students used this perceived unfairness to fuel their drive for success.

Many of these students talked in a wistful tone about having a mentor or an academic coach to set high expectations for them, push them to work harder and believe in them. To quote one student, *"I want a coach that will condition me and prepare me for the future....whether I have to practice harder or strengthen my weakness. I would want him to encourage me throughout that process."* The good news is that broad-based Community Dialogue groups throughout West Virginia are echoing sentiments expressed by many students and more school partnerships are starting to provide the mentoring and coaching they long for.

A Vision Shared has designed a broad framework for better jobs and a stronger economy supported by a strong education infrastructure. As a Collaborative Partner with A Vision Shared, The Education Alliance is committed to assuming a leading role in coordinating the efforts of education, business, labor and community to advocate for public education improvements in student achievement, school resources, teaching quality, and career preparation. As we work together and build upon our many areas of agreement, tangible progress will be evident. Given the highly competitive global economy and job migration, such changes will not come a moment too soon.

More Info

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