

State Working Hard To Address the Achievement Gap While Balancing the Needs of All Students

North Carolina education officials have their sights firmly set on closing the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups. At the same time, they are keenly aware of the perils of focusing exclusively on the needs of one group of students versus another—no matter the cause of differences in education outcomes.

“We expect all students to make growth each year,” says Marvin Pittman, director of the Division of School Improvement in the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. “You cannot close the gap by holding one group stagnant.”

Pittman says one concern state education officials have is that white parents will be alienated by what they perceive to be excessive focus on traditionally underachieving minorities. For both practical and pragmatic reasons, that is not likely to happen. That’s because of the formula undergirding the state’s testing program—Accountability, Basics, and Control (ABCs). Besides stipulating that a certain percentage of students perform at grade level or above, the program requires that students register a certain level of academic growth each year, or teachers fail to qualify for bonus money. “If you do that [focus only on minorities], you won’t meet your growth goal.”

At the same time, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Ward has adopted a 10-point plan to close the achievement gap (see p. 101). That means educators must hit a moving target as they attempt to bring minority achievement levels up to match the performance of a white majority that also continues to improve.

Still, Pittman believes the performance of African-American and American-Indian students on end-of-grade tests in recent years proves the goal of closing the achievement gap can be achieved. In 1996–97, for example, whites registered a combined 72.7 percent passing rate on end-of-grade tests in science and math, while only 38.4 percent of African-American students scored at grade level. By 2002–2003, the pass-

ing rate for whites had improved by 16.1 percent to 88.8, but African Americans had registered far greater gains to an overall passing rate of 66.9 percent—an improvement in the number of children passing of 28.5 percent. Meanwhile, the passing rate for American-Indian children improved from 62.7 percent to 72.3 percent in a single year—from 2001–2002 to 2002–2003.

“Everybody is going up,” says Pittman, who uses the example of lines on a graph to illustrate. “They are converging, which is what we wanted to happen. The line for African-American students is steep. That’s what has to happen. It’s much steeper than the white line. Of course, we’ve got a lot more work to do.”

Nonetheless, much of what Ward set out to achieve in his 10-point plan is accomplished or is well underway. Students at every performance level are showing improvement on end-of-grade tests. A permanent advisory committee, called the Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Commission, has been formed and issued its first report in 2001. “We use that report as a framework for our work,” says Pittman. “It guides everything we do.”

The School Improvement Division has added a Closing the Gap Section with a section chief, two consultants, and six educators on loan. Modeled on the Assistance teams that aid failing schools under the ABCs program, these educators help local school systems address the needs of minority students through training and technical assistance and conduct an annual conference where exemplary methods of educating minority students are highlighted.

In addition, local school systems are required to prepare annual plans that outline how they intend to address the achievement gap, while challenging all students to improve their achievement levels. Students who are performing below grade level at grades three, five, and eight must receive remediation and have a personal education plan before they can be pro-

moted. The plan travels with the child to help guide instruction at the next grade level. The intent is that the "receiving teacher" has a better understanding of the educational needs of the child, says Pittman. "What has the school done before for the child? What are the weaknesses? What are the strengths?"

The plan also becomes important if a child is retained—or asked to repeat a grade. "If you are retaining a child, you don't want to just give the child more of the same," says Pittman. "It didn't work the first time. It's probably not going to work this time." Pittman describes the personal education plan as "focused intervention" to help struggling students improve.

Pittman says the state also has put in place dual language sites for Hispanic/Latino students who struggle to learn in English, set up a center in the Closing the Gap Section where people across the state can call to learn about best practices and resources, and encouraged school systems across the state to create their own local task forces to examine what can be done to close the achievement gap for minority students.

But despite a clear focus on improving minority achievement, Pittman says it's also important to remember what the effort is not about. "It's not about taking resources from certain groups and focusing all our resources on minorities and the poor," says Pittman. "It's about targeting to where the needs are. When lower performing students perform better, the whole school performs better."

Keeping a watchful eye on the progress is the appointed State Board of Education, chaired

by former state legislator Howard Lee of Orange County. "There are numerous efforts that are being made to move the gap closer," observes Lee. "Different systems are trying different things with varying results. In addition to looking at the gap between ethnic groups, we need to look at the gap within ethnic groups. If we cure the intra-ethnic group gap, we will have made huge steps toward curing the inter-ethnic group gap.

"Looking back five years ago to now," says Lee, "I think we have had incredible results. Blacks and American Indians have made the most remarkable growth. The gap between white and black students seems to be the one that is closing the fastest. If we look within groups, the gap between groups will close even faster."

But Lee, an African American who has been elected to offices ranging from mayor of Chapel Hill to multiple terms in the state Senate, believes there is danger in focusing too much on race as it relates to school achievement. "We need to put more emphasis on socioeconomics as opposed to ethnicity," says Lee. "If we are not careful, we will assume that all white students are functioning well when they are not."

Lee believes a three-pronged approach to addressing the gap will yield the best results: (1) base work more on socioeconomics rather than ethnicity, focusing on high income, middle income, and low income students; (2) address the gap within each ethnic group, causing the group as a whole to rise; and (3) last, put the focus on the gap between ethnic groups.

—Mike McLaughlin

ladder never have to make that choice."

Growing numbers of children in North Carolina live in low-income families. About 20 percent of North Carolina's children live below the poverty line, according to a September 2003 census survey.³⁴ That's up from 18.5 percent in 2000. It also means that in a playground of 100 children from various economic backgrounds, one in every five would come from families that struggle to meet the basic needs of their children.

"Solving the family resources problem is very difficult," Vignor says. "We can try to give parents

more guidance on what it takes to keep their kid performing well in school. But talking at them is not going to relieve the economic pressure they feel. You have to be cautious about expecting very large changes in the way parents behave."

Low-income African-American parents may feel uncomfortable at school, may distrust the teacher or staff, or may have had a difficult time themselves when they were in school. That has as much to do with socio-economics as race, says Nancy Hill, an associate professor of psychology at Duke University.