

A How-to Plan for Widening the Gap

Decisions about instruction can minimize or maximize the learning gaps between groups of students. Educators can choose paths that will either widen or reduce the gaps.

By Kim Marshall

What if a malevolent superintendent of schools wanted to *widen* the achievement gap in his district? It's an outrageous idea, but let's pursue it nonetheless. He'd be well aware that entering kindergarten students don't start school equal due to differences in temperament, upbringing, and neighborhood influences. How could he build on those initial differences and create an even *wider* gap by high school graduation? Here's the evil genius' 15-point battle plan, in which he would:

1. Tell principals and teachers that students' classroom performance reflects their innate intelligence, which can't be changed by even the most effective teaching. This belief system would accelerate the performance of students who seem smarter to teachers and undermine the confidence and effort of those who don't.

2. Mandate tracking, with lower groups getting a slower-paced, basic-skills, test-prep-oriented curriculum and upper groups getting accelerated instruction emphasizing higher-order thinking skills. This would stack the deck in favor of advantaged students and lead lower-track students to conclude, the less I do, the less I'll have to do.

3. Assign teachers with a proven track record to high-achieving classes and rookies to classes with the most challenged students. Since teachers are on a steep learning curve in their first few years, and since low-achieving students are more dependent on effective teaching, these assignments would help high achievers and hold back the disadvantaged.

4. Curtail professional development in classroom management, which would have the effect of increasing discipline problems and do the most harm to students with weak entering skills and short attention spans.

5. Ensure that teachers keep the criteria for getting good grades a secret; after all, learning to read the teacher's mind is an important life skill. This would give an ongoing advantage to students whose parents inculcate middle-class expectations similar to those of teachers.

6. Encourage teachers to prepare lessons the night before, in isolation from their colleagues. This would maximize inconsistencies and discontinuities from class to class and grade to grade, ensuring that only students with strong background knowledge from their families would excel.

7. Blame parents when students are reading below grade level and lack the "core knowledge" to understand the curriculum. This would produce ongoing confusion and discourage students who have difficulty reading and understanding textbooks and other materials.

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8. Discourage schools from wasting their time on hands-on learning experiences, extracurricular activities, and field trips. This would give a significant leg up to students who can deal with a "book learning" curriculum because their families have immersed them in educationally enriching conversations, after-school activities, museums, concerts, and travel.

9. Train teachers to call only on students who raise their hands and to build on correct responses to maintain a brisk classroom pace. This would enhance the self-confidence of already proficient students and minimize class participation and engagement among those who enter with lower proficiency.

10. Forbid principals from making unannounced classroom visits, require them to base their annual teacher evaluations on lengthy write-ups of a single lesson, and discourage them from negatively evaluating all but the most egregiously incompetent teachers.

11. Require that all classwork and tests be summative, with students getting A, B, C, D, and F grades and little explanatory feedback. This would boost the confidence and achievement of students with strong entering skills and deprive low-achieving students of the feedback they need to improve — as well as constantly remind them that they are failures.

12. Tell teachers to give demanding homework assignments that can be completed successfully only with the assistance of well-educated parents. This would give a daily learning boost to students who chose their parents well and daily frustration and failure for those who didn't.

13. Tell principals and teachers that what parents do with their children at home is none of the school's business and that schools can't influence it much anyway. This would lead schools to deemphasize parent outreach and would leave unproductive parenting practices in place.

14. Require teachers to use a rigidly paced curriculum and forbid teachers from working beyond the contractual school day. This would put a stop to extra help for students who don't master material the first time, leaving them in the dust as the curriculum relentlessly moves forward.

15. Maximize the length of summer vacations, ensuring an annual setback for students with fewer educational opportunities and literacy resources in their homes and neighborhoods.

What's the point of this depressing fantasy? As you doubtless noticed, many of these practices are already common in some schools. That's why Paul Tough wrote in a *New York Times Magazine* article, "The evidence is now overwhelming that if you take an average low-income child and put him into an average American public school, he will almost certainly come out poorly educated" (2006).

You may also have noticed that half of these practices benefit advantaged students (having the most effective teachers, a higher-level curriculum, higher expectations, and greater opportunities for class participation, etc.). The other half are neutral or considerably less harmful to advantaged than to disadvantaged students. Thus, schools that use these practices drive the achievement of these two groups apart, widening the gap every day.

Which suggests an intriguing question: Would implementing the exact opposite of these 15 practices disproportionately benefit disadvantaged students and close the achievement gap?

Many would disagree. It seems more logical that the rising tide of enlightened school practices would lift all boats. I've explored this question by asking groups of educators what kind of student they think will benefit the most from effective teaching:

- (a) Students who enter the classroom with low achievement.
- (b) Those entering with average achievement.
- (c) Those entering with high achievement.
- (d) All students.

Most people choose (d). But the correct answer is (a). Good teaching helps all students, but it gives the biggest boost to students who enter classrooms with low achievement. Research bears this out. In one study, grade 5-7 students who had three effective teachers in a row experienced almost uniformly high achievement despite differences in entering achievement. Of the students who had three ineffective teachers in a row, those who entered with low achievement nose-dived while better-prepared students dipped only a little bit (Bracey 2004; Carey 2004).

Good teaching is a powerful gap-closer. Might the same dynamic operate schoolwide if we flipped all of the 15 negative practices? Let's imagine a school that consistently implemented the opposite of each one. Ask yourself which students would benefit the most:

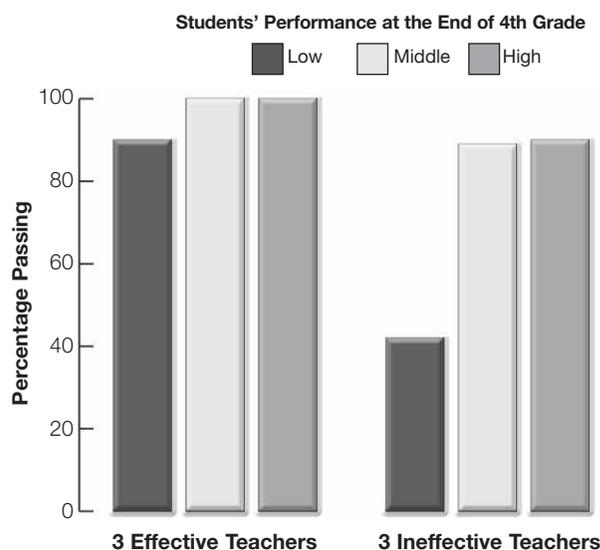
- Students are constantly told that people aren't just born smart — they can get smart through

effective effort (Howard 1992).

- Students are grouped heterogeneously (with the possible exception of math in middle and high schools) and instruction is differentiated while maintaining high expectations for all.
- Teachers with a demonstrated record of being the most effective are assigned to the most challenging students and grade levels.
- Schoolwide discipline is positive and strong, and the climate in each classroom is conducive to learning.
- Learning expectations and the criteria for proficiency are made clear to students and parents in grade-by-grade curriculum goals, scoring guides, and exemplars of high-quality student work.
- Teacher teams collaboratively map out curriculum units and agree on standards, big ideas, essential questions, content knowledge, skills, and final assessments before planning lessons.
- Reading levels are accelerated by using "just right" materials, and gaps in students' core knowledge are systematically filled so that they can understand grade-level materials.

FIG. 1.
The Effect of Teachers Accumulates

Fourth-graders of all abilities who have three effective teachers in a row will pass 7th-grade math test.



Source: Adapted from Carey, Kevin. "The Real Value of Teachers: If Good Teachers Matter, Why Don't We Act Like It?" *Thinking K-16* 6 (Winter 2004): 9. Original source: Babu, Sitha, and Robert Mendro. "Teacher Accountability: HLM-Based Teacher Effectiveness Indices." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 2003.

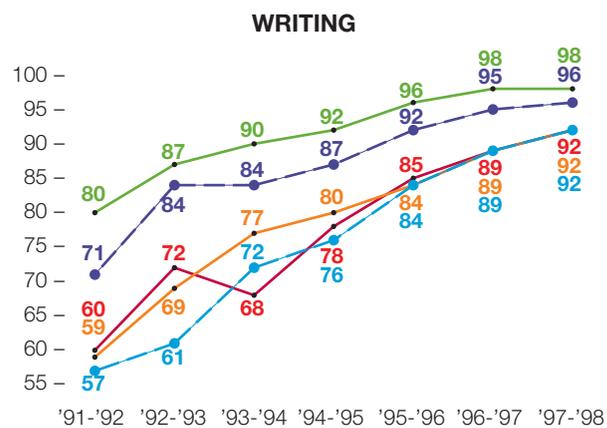
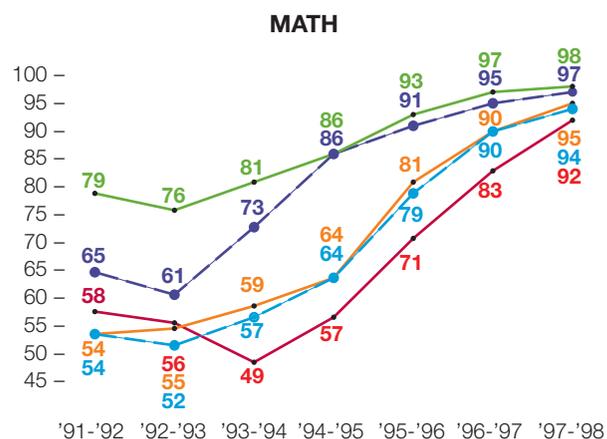
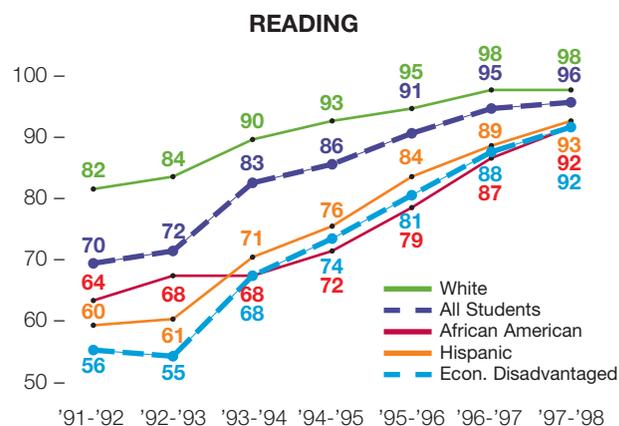
- Teaching caters to different learning styles, teachers maximize active student involvement, and all students are involved in enriching extracurricular activities.
- Teachers constantly check for understanding during classes by using all-class response systems (e.g., individual dry-erase boards and “clickers”) and use the feedback to fine-tune instruction and reach all students.
- Principals make frequent unannounced classroom visits, give each teacher prompt face-to-face feedback, refuse to tolerate mediocre or low-quality teaching, and work with teacher teams and instructional coaches to maximize adult and student learning.

“The evidence is now overwhelming that if you take an average low-income child and put him into an average American public school, he will almost certainly come out poorly educated.”

- Students know that a poor grade isn’t the end of the line. It means that more work needs to be done, and there are multiple opportunities for success. Students take interim assessments every five to nine weeks, and teacher teams analyze the results, give students detailed feedback on how they are doing, reteach, and foster a results-oriented culture.
- Teachers assign homework that students can do independently based on in-class learning and resources available to all.
- Parents are continuously informed of ways they can support their children’s learning at home and in school.
- Struggling students get prompt one-on-one or small-group help targeted to their needs — without missing out on core instruction.
- Academically needy students have expanded learning time during and after school hours, go to summer school, and have the materials and incentives needed to maximize learning outside school.

What would be the impact of these practices? In each case, I would argue that students entering with academic disadvantages would disproportionately bene-

FIG. 2. Brazosport (Texas) Independent School District Closes the Achievement Gap



Source: Brazosport Independent School District.

fit. Advantaged students would benefit too, but not as dramatically — which would cause the achievement gap to gradually close. A graph from the Brazosport Independent School District in Texas shows what this looks like. All students benefited from the district’s ef-

fective practices, but African-American, Hispanic, and low-income students improved at a slightly more rapid pace than white students over a six-year period, virtually erasing the gap between subgroups.

Although these graphs are based on an earlier, less-rigorous generation of state tests (the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), they give us a vivid picture of what success looks like. Is there a principal who wouldn't be proud to have graphs like this hanging in the front hall? They also show the power of plotting the percent of students scoring proficient and above over time; this is the best way to show progress in closing the achievement gap.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Okay, all this makes sense, but implementing 15 effective practices is daunting. Which would have the greatest impact? Where should a school begin?

To answer this, let's examine the moment of truth in classrooms. A teacher finishes a well-taught curriculum unit (perhaps a six-week study of the Civil War) and gives an assessment to see how much students learned. She scores the assessments, records the grades, and then simplifies the data into a tally graph showing the number of students who scored at the Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Failure level. Each tally mark represents one student:

4 - IIII
3 - IIIIIIIII
2 - IIIIIIIII
1 - IIII

The bottom line is that only 52% of students scored proficient or above — hardly a smashing success, and yet a very common pattern of achievement.

I frequently describe this scenario to groups of educators and ask them what happens next. There's usually an awkward pause, and then someone says, "She moves on." That's the reality in most classrooms — for several reasons. Teachers are under such pressure to cover the curriculum and prepare their students for high-stakes tests that they don't feel that they have the "luxury" to slow down and work with students who

haven't fully mastered the material and those who outright failed. Some teachers believe this pattern of achievement reflects deeply rooted differences in intelligence. Some teachers are worried about backlash from the parents of high-achieving students. And some teachers aren't confident they have the skills to help students who didn't get it the first time around.

These are powerful reasons. But let's be blunt: Every time a teacher moves on with this many students below mastery, the achievement gap widens. The students in the bottom two levels are almost always students who were already having difficulty in this and other subjects. In fact, they're probably the same students who entered school with disadvantages. In many cases, the teacher could have predicted exactly which students would fail before instruction even began. If the teacher moves on, these students will begin the next unit that much more confused, that much more discouraged, and that much more likely to think they're stupid, adopt a negative attitude, and act out in class. And so it goes.

Where should a school begin? The principal must insist that teachers *stop* when they see data like this, meet with their grade-level colleagues, compare notes and analyze what students didn't understand, gain insights about why, and reteach the material in a different way (not just louder and slower), while simultaneously providing enrichment and peer tutoring opportunities for the students who did learn. This is not rocket science, but it requires structures to support teachers in this work — and a conviction that if these simple steps aren't taken, things will get progressively worse and the gap will soon widen into a chasm.

There's a direct analog in the automobile business. In the 1980s, some car manufacturers (with the hot breath of Japanese competition on their necks) began to give assembly-line workers the power to stop the line if they saw a defect in a car and to fix it on the spot (and analyze why it happened), rather than waiting for the problem to be caught by an inspector at the end of the line — or by a customer later on. Fixing problems early is much less costly and time-consuming, and empowering workers on the assembly line was the best way to do it. Ultimately, assembly lines moved faster. This innovation, along with getting managers to listen to front-line workers in factories, helped gradually improve the quality of American cars and close the gap with Japan.

Similarly in schools, we need to empower teachers to stop when they see evidence that their teaching hasn't reached some students (which almost always happens, even with highly accomplished teachers and

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well-prepared students) and fix the problem before it compounds. Research on highly effective schools shows that this is one of the most important things they are doing. The key elements are clarity around what students should learn, on-the-spot assessments to monitor learning as instruction unfolds in classrooms, common interim assessments every five to nine weeks, immediate analysis of the results by teacher teams and administrators, and effective use of the insights gained to improve teaching and help

America needs a full-court press, with everyone working together to alleviate poverty, crime, unemployment, discrimination, health and housing problems, lead-paint poisoning, and other factors that result in some children starting school with such serious handicaps.

struggling students. British researcher Dylan Wiliam offers this eloquent description: “Agile teaching, responsive to student learning minute by minute, day by day, month by month.”

Here’s the thing about initial teaching: It’s inherently imperfect. We can never know what’s going on inside every child’s head, and a lot of what we teach isn’t learned. Students aren’t a bunch of video cameras whose record buttons we push when we teach and whose play buttons we push when it’s time to assess. Initial teaching rarely produces mastery in more than half of students, and those who don’t master the material the first time around are disproportionately those with economic and educational disadvantages.

It’s what schools do when some students don’t learn that makes the difference and has the potential to close the gap. Karin Chenoweth in *It’s Being Done*, her wonderful book on 15 effective schools, calls it “the relentless pursuit of good instruction” (2007). By constantly focusing on whether students are learning, schools can create a ripple effect, producing improvements in unit and lesson planning, more finely tuning classroom activities, and continuously improving achievement for all.

Richard Rothstein has argued that schools can’t close the achievement gap on their own, and he’s right (2004). America needs a full-court press, with the president, the federal government, state officials, mayors, university professors, doctors, dentists, business leaders, consultants, community organizers, and advocates working to-

gether to alleviate poverty, crime, unemployment, discrimination, health and housing problems, lead-paint poisoning, and other factors that result in some children starting school with such serious handicaps.

But as we wait for this mobilization, schools can do a great deal right now. Schools can undertake all 15 of the interventions listed above without waiting for poverty and crime and racism to be erased. The most basic change — constantly checking to see if students are learning and following up when they aren’t — can be implemented in any school tomorrow. If we focus on that key classroom dynamic — the moment of truth where the gap either widens or narrows — we can make a huge difference in the outcomes we care about most. ■

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“Okay, now that I have your attention . . .”

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