A reflection on academic achievement gaps in public schools

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Across the United States there are dismaying gaps in educational attainment among racial and ethnic groups of children and among the children of upper income and lower income families. Public schools are the largest social institution in our nation, where “during school hours, one-fifth of the total American population consists of public school students K through 12.”(1) I believe as Christians we are called to explore whether the huge institution of public schools embodies our ethic that we would love our neighbors and our neighbors’ children as ourselves. How does our faith speak, for example, to the way public schools incorporate attitudes about race and poverty, power and privilege, and cultural dominance and marginalization? After all, our UCC General Synod 18 reminded us: “The public schools belong to us, the people, and are controllable by democratic means. If we have the will, we can act to ensure that all schools offer equal education for all children.”(2)

After calling a child to enter a gathering of the Disciples, Jesus condemns people who would put stumbling blocks before children. Then he asks, “If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (Matthew 18: 12) Achievement gaps across America’s public schools are a sign that our society has allowed many of God’s lambs to go astray. It will be critical for our society to identify the stumbling blocks for which we are responsible, to find the lost lambs, and to bring them back into the fold.

Achievement gaps have been documented as children enter kindergarten, and they often widen as children move through their schooling. Certainly gaps are apparent in graduation rates, where in Wisconsin, for example, 92% of white students graduate from high school compared to only 40% of their African American counterparts.(3) Gaps are evident in standardized test scores, in New York, for example, which reported a 34 point gap in reading and a 39 point gap in math between the percentage of African American and Hispanic students and the number of white students meeting state standards in 4th Grade.(4) The United States Department of Education reported that from 1990 until 1999, the racial gap in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress widened significantly with “the average black 17-year-old reading only about as well as the average white 13-year-old.”(5)

The gap shows up in the relatively small number of African American and Latino-Latina students enrolled in honors courses and the relatively larger number enrolled in remedial classes and special education. While the achievement gap has been correlated with poverty, it is also apparent in higher-income areas. A group of largely middle class suburban school districts with significant African American student populations, including Berkeley, California, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Montclair, New Jersey, Evanston, Illinois, and Cleveland Heights, Ohio have formed the Minority Student Achievement Network to invite their staffs and African American student leaders to develop strategies for overcoming the achievement gap. Achievement gaps are the reason the UCC’s General Synod 23, in Kansas City just last summer, passed a resolution proclaiming justice in public education as perhaps the foremost civil rights issue in our new century. This new resolution updates the strong policy base from GS 15 in 1985 and GS 18, which cautioned in 1991, “Because the poor and their children are disproportionately people of color, the educational inequities in our public schools reinforce the racial/ethnic injustices of our society... in many areas...we observe a virtual return to segregated education built on white and middle class flight from school and neighborhood integration.”(6)
Achievement gaps are also the reason two former bodies of the UCC, the American Missionary Association and the Commission for Racial Justice, appointed a small Public Education Task Force in 1999 to visit public schools across the United States and to reflect upon those visits in the context of our faith. Touring schools in Pennsylvania, Oregon, and rural North Carolina during 1999 and 2000, members of this group made three observations about factors contributing to achievement gaps:

■ Every region where the group visited was enduring a school finance crisis.

■ In every location, family poverty was interwoven with funding inequity to magnify scarcity for the children.

■ Children and parents from ethnically and racially diverse cultures seemed to be made invisible by schools that didn’t reflect or respond to their realities. English language learners were experiencing serious challenges.(7)

Finally achievement gaps are the reason General Synod 23’s new Resolution extended the tenure of this Task Force and expanded its reach broadly across the ministries of the denomination to study civil rights and funding issues in public schools and report to General Synods 24 and 25.

**What do we know about the reasons for achievement gaps?**

Achievement gaps are associated with public school segregation. Because federal courts have been retreating now for twenty-five years from guaranteeing racial integration as a civil right, the extent of racial segregation in America’s big city school districts in 2002 is deeply troubling. According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University:

Almost a half century after the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that Southern school segregation was unconstitutional and “inherently unequal,” new statistics from the 1998-1999 school year show that segregation continued to intensify throughout the 1990s, a period in which there were three major Supreme Court decisions authorizing a return to segregated neighborhood schools and limiting the reach and duration of desegregation orders...very little has been done to provide desegregated education for Latino students. They have been more segregated than blacks now for a number of years...”(8)

Following a half century of middle class out-migration in the majority of American metropolitan areas, public schools in the United States are segregated not only by race but also by poverty. A school is considered poverty-concentrated when, according to federal guidelines, the majority of its students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Today many urban schools are economically segregated to such a degree that over ninety percent of children meet this qualification. Often in America’s big cities racial and economic segregation coincide. “Heavily minority schools are much more likely to be high-poverty schools than heavily white schools. Only one in twenty predominantly white schools is poverty concentrated compared with more than 80 percent of predominantly black and Latino schools. Schools that are 90-100 percent black and Hispanic are fourteen times more likely to be majority poor than schools that are 90 percent white.”(9)

Concentrated family poverty has been documented as a cause of achievement gaps. Such poverty affects not only the school’s poorest students, but in fact seems to influence the school’s functioning in many ways, reducing opportunities for all the students. Here is how Gary Orfield of the Harvard Civil Rights Project describes the dynamics of race, poverty, and achievement:

When the Supreme Court said that separate schools were “inherently unequal” it was discussing the impact of discrimination, not the talent of minority students...there is no doubt that segregated schools
are unequal in easily measurable ways. To a considerable degree this is because the segregated minority schools are overwhelmingly likely to have to contend with the educational impacts of concentrated poverty....Anyone who wants to explore the continuing inequalities need only examine the test scores, dropout rates, and other statistics for various schools in a metropolitan community and relate them to statistics for school poverty...and race...to see a distressingly clear pattern... a very strong correlation between the percent poor in a school and its average test score. Therefore, minority students in segregated schools, no matter how able they may be as individuals, usually face a much lower level of competition.... Such schools tend to have teachers who are themselves much more likely to be teaching a subject they did not study and with which they have had little experience. This, in turn, often means that there are not enough students ready for advanced and AP courses and that those opportunities are eliminated even for students who are ready because there are not sufficient students to fill a teacher’s advanced classes.”(10)

When the UCC’s recently expanded Public Education Task Force met in Cleveland, Ohio in April 2002, its members spent several hours reflecting on disparities and inequities they had observed among a number of high schools they visited on Cleveland’s East Side and in six of its eastern suburbs—farther east. Cleveland, with its African American population located almost entirely on the East Side and in varying degrees in the eastern suburbs, has been identified as among the most racially segregated cities in the United States. Even in relatively brief school visits, members of the Task Force noticed troubling inequities that surely contribute to the well documented achievement gaps across the seven school districts:

■ Race, class and poverty all seem to be very significant issues affecting student achievement.

■ Students in poverty have many distractions.

■ It seems that the higher the funding the lower the class size.

■ Arts education, access to technology, and curricular offerings are unequal among the districts.

■ Almost 50 years after Brown, there is extreme segregation in a metropolitan area where there are 31 school district jurisdictions.

■ Jurisdictional boundaries and politics make it very difficult to deal with the big justice issues.

■ Shaping a multicultural curriculum is an enormous and very complex issue.

■ Establishing justice will require allocating additional funding for the districts with the greatest challenges. There is an important difference between equal and equitable funding.

■ A school’s location and the sense of the type of community it symbolizes has a great deal of influence on the character of the school. It isn’t just a matter of funding.

■ The perception about the district matters in many ways.

■ Different communities have a different sense of entitlement—programs they expect to be offered to their children and the way they expect their children to be treated.

■ The importance of citizen support for schools could be seen in so many different ways throughout our school visits.

The UCC’s Task Force will visit schools in Phoenix, Arizona in the fall to observe language, culture, and school funding concerns in this city’s very diverse urban schools near the Mexican border, and to observe
a school on the Gila River Indian Reservation. To examine social and health factors outside of school that directly affect learning, the group also plans a visit to the Maricopa County Pappas School, serving the homeless children of Greater Phoenix. In the spring of 2003 the Task Force will visit schools in a rural setting.

Why are achievement gaps increasingly in the news?

In a recent Call for Action, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged all the states to present to the NAACP by May 10, 2002, “a Five-Year Educational Equity Partnership Plan for closing the racial disparities in achievement by at least 50% over the next five years.(11) The NAACP now threatens to file civil rights complaints against those states that have not presented a plan, and it is assembling powerful allies, including The National Black Caucus of State Legislators, whose spokesperson, Ohio State Senator C. J. Prentiss, writes,

“In order for us to successfully close the achievement gap, we are building broad alliances with other civil rights and education organizations at both the national and state level. At the national level we anticipate working closely with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to develop a national strategy to increase public awareness of the black-white achievement gap. At the state level, we anticipate working with local chapters of the NAACP and a broad range of organizations to build the political will necessary to enact into law our policy and funding recommendations.”(12)

The NAACP’s Call for Action demands reducing the number of inexperienced and uncertified teachers in urban and rural areas, expanding access to the most challenging courses, repairing worn out school facilities, and making sure all students have excellent textbooks, advanced curriculum and access to technology.(13)

Achievement gaps are also being widely reported because the recent 2001 Reauthorization of the 35 year old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) includes President Bush’s demand for standardized testing in all the states and the reporting of all scores by race and economic level to document the size of achievement gaps. While, beginning in fall 2003, the new ESEA law will impose sanctions on schools that post low test scores, many people worry that the President’s 2003 proposed budget does not include adequate federal funding to support the educational reforms needed to increase test scores as required by the 2001 ESEA. At the same time many states are experiencing budget crises that will restrict investment in schools. Ironically, however, education funding advocates are hoping that the new ESEA, with its mandated standardized testing (and score reporting by economics and race), may provide evidence for future civil rights and school funding complaints by groups like the NAACP against the federal government that has made the testing a requirement. “If they’re able to link this data to particular kinds of reformsÑsay, smaller class sizesÑthen lawyers could provide the courts with a remedy to increase test scores in poor districts.... It may be possible to argue to the Supreme Court that national government’s failure to pay for such reforms violates the 14th Amendment...“(14)

Conclusion

Achievement gaps are a life-limiting tragedy for the children who have been left behind. They are also tangible evidence of institutional racism and social alienation in America’s public schools. Achievement gaps prove that, beginning in childhood in the institution we have designed to shape our children in their formative years, our society marginalizes segments of our population. Quite simply America’s public schools serve some groups of children better than others. Achievement gaps prove the breadth and depth of institutionalized racism in America. Closing achievement gaps will require that in central ways our society be transformed. Closing the gaps will require that we envision a society that treasures every one of God’s children, and that we set out to invest publicly in a K-12 public education system that is the
embodiment of opportunity. Only then can our society find the lambs we have pushed away and bring them back into the fold.

Notes


11. NAACP, Call for Action In Education 2002, p. 10.


13. NAACP, p. 4.