

**“Closing the Achievement Gap: School Resources and Beyond”**  
**SEDL Policy Forum 2004**  
**Omni Downtown Austin Hotel**  
**September 27-28, 2004**



## SUMMARY

State policymakers from Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas joined guest speakers—Richard Rothstein, Shirley Neeley, Karen Mapp, and Larry Picus—to share their knowledge at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) annual policy forum. The forum provided participants with varying views on the achievement gap, with the common theme that resources needed to help students be successful must include and go beyond the classroom, school, and field of education to include family and community resources. After a rousing opening activity in which participants introduced one another, the program focused on the issue at hand—what can be done about the achievement gap.

### *Academic Differences and Social Class: A National Perspective*

Mr. Richard Rothstein

Economic Policy Institute and Teacher’s College, Columbia University

Rothstein began by declaring that the 2014 national goal to close the achievement gap is unrealistic. His message that school reform is important, but poverty and minority status will never let us completely close the gap was clear. He mentioned research findings that, on average, socioeconomic factors affect student achievement, even in the best of schools. He noted his book, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (2004), has additional examples and research to support his points.

Rothstein discussed three common misunderstandings about the achievement gap.

- Schools make a big difference but have very little influence on achievement distribution across students. Rather schools make a difference in the level of achievement. He referred to the seminal Coleman Report (1966) finding that a child’s family background impacts achievement more than education resources. To find where to get a copy of the Coleman Report, go to <http://www.worldcatlibraries.org/wcpa/ow/c26698305dc054a7.html>.

- The achievement gap portrayed and discussed currently is not the same gap of 5–10 years ago because of a shift from achievement averages based on national norms to “proficiency” cut off points determined by state criterion. This has created mischief in how achievement levels are established and comparisons made between student groups.
- The gap is a representation of group averages, not the achievement of any individual. There are many examples of children from disadvantaged backgrounds that succeed, but this does not mean that all children from disadvantaged backgrounds will. Students’ social and economic family characteristics are a powerful influence on average achievement.

Rothstein raised the question, “Can a child’s environment/rearing be overcome by good teachers and high expectations?” He talked about research on: how much children are read to, books in the home, parental use of problem-solving and collaborative communication vs. task response demands, and parental occupation impact on child literacy. He recommended ensuring all children get equivalent pre-school opportunities. Further, he emphasized the higher rate of absenteeism and health (vision, hearing, dental, lead poisoning, asthma, and nutrition), housing, and mobility problems that can directly affect achievement in children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Rothstein pointed out the common measure of poverty, free/reduced price lunch, is inadequate because it ranges from families with no income to those with income above the federal poverty level. Also, it is not the only measure of socioeconomic status, i.e., assets should be considered. In regard to the Black-White gap, he noted Black poverty as more permanent and White poverty more episodic, and labor market discrimination that exists for Black high school graduates, but not college graduates.

Several publications Rothstein mentioned in his presentation:

Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., & Rivkin, S. G. (2004). Disruption versus Tiebout Improvement: The Costs and Benefits of Switching Schools, *Journal of Public Economics* 88(9), 1721-1746. For a copy of this article go to: <http://edpro.stanford.edu/eah/down.htm#migration>

Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1992). American parenting of language-learning children: Persisting differences in family-child interactions observed in natural home environments. *Developmental Psychology* 28(6), 1096-1105. (Rothstein referred to this as the Kansas study)

Neuman, S. B. (2003). From rhetoric to reality: The case for high-quality compensatory prekindergarten programs. *Phi Delta Kappan* 85(4), 286-291.

### ***Achievement Gaps in the SEDL Region: What Data Tell Us***

Ms. Diane Pan, Dr. Debra Hughes Jones, and Ms. Lotte Smith-Hansen  
SEDL Policy Research

Pan gave a brief overview of SEDL’s three policy research studies on education resources and student achievement. She discussed several lessons learned from this research:

- Socioeconomic differences must be examined to address the achievement gap. Significant findings regarding instructional spending and student performance changed or disappeared when controlling for student socioeconomic measures.

- Existing data to accurately measure a child's well-being, socioeconomics demographics, and school readiness may not be current, available, or disaggregated to an individual level. State education agencies collect data on students, but these data contain a limited range of measures that tell only a small part of the story.
- Data systems are improving. States are motivated by NCLB to track achievement by subgroups and better measure teacher quality. Census data are now available at the school district level. In SEDL's region, states are making progress toward upgrading data systems.

Jones discussed data on student poverty, health insurance, enrollment by race, and graduation in SEDL's region (AR, LA, NM, OK, and TX). She pointed out differences across racial subgroups, across the five states, and between the states and the nation, revealing regional variations that might impact achievement. Some subgroups, i.e., American Indian and Asian, were included in only some data displays because of the small size of their population. However, across the region American Indian students graduate at similar rates to other Non-White students. Jones described the three most recent years (1998, 2002, and 2003) of collected and reported National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading achievement data for 4<sup>th</sup> grade subgroups in the five states and made comparisons to the percent of students on free and reduced price lunch (FRPL). Regarding NAEP reading in all five states:

- students on FRPL generally track the pattern of NAEP results for Hispanic students
- the White and Black gap was greater than between White and any other Non-White group, except in New Mexico where the Native American and White gap was greater
- the gap between White and Non-White students narrowed over time.

Jones also discussed the most recent year of publicly available state achievement test results for White and Non-White groups in reading or literacy for 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> graders (varied by state). She noted similar findings to the NAEP reading results regarding the extent of the gap between subgroups and the trend in the FRPL pattern. Although there is some evidence of a narrowing of the gap, Jones recommended we consider the data, recognizing that while standardized tests give an indication of mastery of basic proficiency, they may not capture other important success factors such as creativity, resourcefulness with problem-solving, and other unmeasured skills.

Smith-Hansen presented maps of the states showing socio-economic factors (student poverty-FRPL, minority enrollment, parent education, and public assistance), per-pupil expenditures, student achievement, and teacher quality (education, certification, and salary). Based on significant correlations in SEDL's region, she showed strong relationships between:

- student minority and other socio-economic factors
- student minority, student poverty and poor achievement
- student poverty and lower teacher quality
- student poverty and higher per-pupil expenditures and lower teacher salary
- poor achievement and lower teacher quality.

She, again, raised the issue of what resources are needed to make students successful if clearly socio-economic factors play an important role. Participants raised additional questions and a discussion ensued about state demographic patterns, achievement issues, and broadening perspectives on the resources beyond education that are needed to narrow the gap.

To view SEDL's slides (additional slides/modifications included), go to <http://www.sedl.org/rel/policydocs/forum2004/pf04-slides.ppt>



***From Texas School District Strategies to State Education Policy***

Dr. Shirley Neeley  
Texas Education Agency

Neeley's key message was, "Keep the main thing, the main thing – focus on student learning." She talked about the Texas education accountability system, including transitions, strengths and limitations, and new passing rates and high school requirements. Problems for the system are compounded by changing demographics and enrollment increasing by 8,000 students per year. Neeley pointed out data trends in reading achievement, with increases in all subgroups, and attributed some to funding a statewide training for all 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers in reading. She described that Texas is focusing on migrant students, tracking their achievement in other states, and is placing an emphasis on PK-16 initiatives, i.e., providing a seamless transition, vertical teaming, and higher education preparation/readiness. There has been an increase in Texas students taking the ACT exam and greater participation of females and minorities in higher education (4 year universities, community colleges, and vocational programs).

Neeley expressed concerns about the NCLB adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirement regarding the percent inclusion of special education students and suggested a phase-in or hold harmless plan be considered. She is not sure parents will understand the AYP results and anticipates much disappointment, although educators can help parents better understand. Another concern is the recent ruling declaring Texas' education finance system as unconstitutional once again and the requirement to find a resolution by October 2005.

Neeley described experiences while superintendent in a high poverty, high minority, property poor, Texas school district with constantly changing demographics and increasing enrollment. She outlined strategies she attributes to consistently improving achievement across the district, emphasizing the crucial aspect of good leadership—especially the school principal:

- accountability links: teacher → student, principal → school, state superintendent → district
- accept no excuses until students succeed
- "good is better but better is best", strive for high goals to achieve exemplary status in 5 years
- get rid of incompetent people
- spend funding on training and ensure appropriate and effective professional development

- figure out what needs to be done and do it
- establish numerous benchmarks to be able to constantly assess student ability.

Neeley concluded by stressing that there are no magic bullets, instead there is much hard work in front of us if we are to close the achievement gap. She offered some ideas to consider: health clinics in schools, sharing best practices, collaborating with Just For the Kids, increasing public trust, receiving support from research organizations such as SEDL, and merit pay for students.

### ***The Why, What and How of Effective School, Family and Community Partnerships***

Dr. Karen Mapp

Institute for Responsive Education and Boston Public Schools

Mapp summarized research findings from her book “*A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*,” on the positive relationship between family involvement and outcomes across student subgroups, i.e., higher grades and test scores, enrollment in higher level programs, higher attendance and promotion rates, and decreased discipline problems. She described the impact of community partnerships, including improved school leadership and staffing, upgraded school facilities, and increased resources for and quality of programs. She noted programs found to be most effective:

- engage families to support their children’s learning at home
- focus on academics, linked to learning
- consistently involve families, PK-16
- recognize that all cultural groups have ways to engage in education
- use a multi-faceted approach to connect with families and communities.

Mapp emphasized schools must embrace a systemic philosophy of partnerships, meaning share power with families; recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences; establish trusting and respectful relationships with families and the community; share decision-making; and address specific parental and community needs (as opposed to second-guessing what parents need). The process of joining forces with families and communities involves three components—welcoming (families are at the top of the agenda), honoring (engage families where they are at) and connecting (focus on student’s success). It also involves conducting needs assessments and making asset maps of all the different types of assets and contributions that parents and community members have to offer schools.

Mapp discussed with forum participants what states can do to support schools and districts in building effective partnerships with families and communities. Some examples included imbedding family and community involvement in principal and superintendent preparation programs, helping schools and districts share best practices, and connecting with other state-level agencies and organizations that serve children.

Several publications Mapp mentioned in her presentation:

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform, *Educational Leadership* 60(6), 40-45. To review a summary of this article go to: [http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed\\_lead/200303/bryk.html](http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200303/bryk.html)

Epstein, J. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press.

To view Mapp's slide presentation, go to <http://www.sedl.org/rel/policydocs/forum2004/pf04-Mapp.ppt>



### ***Cross-State Group Discussions***

#### ***Group Facilitators:***

Dr. Shirley Neeley, Texas Education Agency

Mr. Richard Rothstein, Economic Policy Institute and Teacher's College, Columbia University

Dr. Karen Mapp, Institute for Responsive Education and Boston Public Schools

Dr. Lawrence Picus, University of Southern California and SEDL policy content advisor

Participants met in small groups to discuss resources available in their states and the challenges associated with getting the necessary/desired resources to help students achieve. Discussions in the small groups were guided by three questions.

1. What are the policies your state has considered or implemented with respect to the achievement gap?
2. What are the limitations or challenges in your state that impede efforts to close the achievement gap (e.g., special populations, compliance with legislation/regulations, funding, collaboration across agencies, etc.)?
3. What resources are available to help you? What additional resources would you find helpful in finding solutions to your achievement gap issues?

Topics discussed in small groups with Shirley Neeley and Richard Rothstein

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 🍏 achievement test limitations and diagnostic testing     | 🍏 early childhood programs      |
| 🍏 narrowing vs. closing gap and levels to narrowing gap   | 🍏 teacher training              |
| 🍏 accountability and data systems                         | 🍏 curriculum reform             |
| 🍏 academic incentive programs for students                | 🍏 revenue sources               |
| 🍏 setting goals and expectations for students and schools | 🍏 parent involvement            |
| 🍏 district dialogues leading to change                    | 🍏 court and legislative impact  |
| 🍏 state agency vs. local monitoring                       | 🍏 impact of public perception   |
| 🍏 children's health (physical/mental)                     | 🍏 health/education partnerships |

Topics discussed in small group with Karen Mapp and Larry Picus

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 🍏 academic incentive programs for students            | 🍏 home visiting programs       |
| 🍏 student accountability and data systems             | 🍏 state office reform          |
| 🍏 state policies encouraging partnerships             | 🍏 parent involvement           |
| 🍏 connecting the business community                   | 🍏 court and legislative impact |
| 🍏 state agency vs. local expectations/understanding   | 🍏 student mentoring            |
| 🍏 funding formula, compensatory funds, and stipends   | 🍏 supplemental services        |
| 🍏 fiscal and programmatic accountability and adequacy | 🍏 Native American needs        |
| 🍏 communicating/sharing best practices and policies   | 🍏 media campaigns              |

Additional resources mentioned in small group discussion:

Just for Kids <http://www.just4kids.org/jftk/index.cfm?st=US&loc=home>

Pacific Educational Group–Glenn Singleton <http://www.pacificeducationalgroup.com/index.htm>

Parent Information and Resource Centers <http://www.pirc-info.net/>

Parents as Teachers program <http://www.patnc.org/site/pp.asp?c=eqLNKTNGE&b=132797>

Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard III, A. (2003). *Young, gifted, and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston, MA, Beacon Press.

### ***Policy Implications for Effective Resource Allocation***

Mr. Richard Rothstein, Economic Policy Institute and Teacher's College, Columbia University

Dr. Karen Mapp, Institute for Responsive Education and Boston Public Schools

Dr. Lawrence Picus, University of Southern California and SEDL policy content advisor

Rothstein discussed the costs to meet national achievement standards related to the gap. He noted \$8,000–\$9,000 per pupil is spent, on average, nationally and this would have to double for most children and be \$20,000 or more for disadvantaged children to reach NCLB goals. He pointed out 20 percent increments in teacher salaries have not been enough to attract teachers to unattractive schools (high poverty, high minority, and rural schools), yet pay incentives are important. Further, class size reduction would be beneficial from the current national average of 24 pupils in K–3 classes to 18, but would increase costs by approximately 25 percent. He also spoke about time resources teachers need to meet achievement goals, including additional hours

per week and lower class loads. He recommended these resources to narrow the gap: early childhood programs and child care of high quality, afterschool and summer school programs, and health and social institutions (e.g., dental or ophthalmology clinic in schools would cost approximately \$500 per pupil). He emphasized targeted spending, i.e., make informed decisions about which interventions to prioritize for the most gain, especially for disadvantaged students.

Mapp stated the education community needs to be more entrepreneurial and collaborate across all agencies serving children. This includes cross-functional conversations and reciprocity of services with the business community, health organizations, and other agencies outside the public education system. This will take a willingness of all agencies, especially education, to admit their challenges and weaknesses. Further, federal funding to support federal achievement gap policies must be provided. Mapp pointed out that prioritizing and targeting efforts to make the biggest impact is important as we cannot do everything at once. A first step is to focus on educators' belief systems and behaviors, especially in leadership, to ensure they value family and community partnerships, have the knowledge about how to build effective partnerships, and engage in difficult conversations about how to involve parents and community members from all racial and social backgrounds. To do this, training, professional development, and systems for staff accountability are needed in education.

Picus responded to the costs Rothstein discussed by emphasizing money must be spent on resources that will make a difference. It is important to have long-term goals for student achievement and a plan for the resources needed to reach those goals, rather than responding to day-to-day pressures. He noted education, social services, health, and others state agencies must coordinate the services they provide for children, pooling state funds rather than competing for them. Picus highlighted schools must learn to take advantage of all resources and services in their communities to coordinate and target them to best help the students who need them.

The discussion following the panel presentation offered several strategies and resources:

- information on public trust of schools and a national alumni organization for all public school attendees – Public Education Network <http://www.publiceducation.org/>
- “principal for a day” program bringing business leaders to schools <http://web.naesp.org/pfad/>
- needs and asset mapping, possibly using a fishbowl discussion <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/fishbowls.html>

### ***Lessons Learned: Next Steps in Your State***

All forum participants

Forum participants discussed what they learned from the forum, how this information will be used in their state, and what they will address in their individual jobs when they return to their own setting. In Texas, a participant from the state education agency will begin collaborating with another from the state health agency to implement a project funded through the Centers for Disease Control. In New Mexico, an education agency participant plans to incorporate information about how achievement gap issues can be addressed at a level beyond the schools in

a state symposium addressing best practices to be held in the Spring of 2005. Participants also described programs and collaborative partnerships in their states that are examples of resources discussed throughout the forum. In Arkansas, a health services and early childhood education collaborative partnership exists that other states can use as a resource when establishing successful partnerships across agencies. Additionally, participants brought to light some of the resources they will consider in their decision-making and policy and program development related to the achievement gap. These included: early childhood education from prenatal onward, health services to disseminate education-related materials, and education information where parents spend their time (grocery stores and beauty salons). A concluding thought, elucidated by one of the forum participants, was most powerful—educators have spent too much time admiring the problem. We must engage in high-quality discussions about the issues, tie them to solutions, and take action.

