

# Closing and Reversing Achievement Gaps:

## Six Recommendations

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Dedicated to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., PhD,  
Nobel Peace Prize Awardee for combating racial inequality

**I**S IT POSSIBLE TO CLOSE OR REVERSE RACIAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAPS in places least expected—low income predominately black schools located in highly challenged neighborhoods and communities? In this commentary, I'm sharing from our research and development activities six recommendations that together offer high promise of closing and reversing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in unexpected places.

### 1. Look inside the Box

Current reforms feature a wide range of outside-the-box policies and practices: cognitive, affective, social, cultural, economic, pedagogical, and curriculum enhancements along with pre-professional training, professional development workshops, and high-stakes entrepreneurial models. Although some of these reforms have documented positive incremental change, none has consistently closed or reversed racial, socioeconomic, or black male gender gaps in public school settings. Instead of looking outside these communities for justice, why not look inside these communities for solutions? In 2007, we identified 107 K-12 public schools located in 16 metropolitan areas which had nearly closed or actually reversed racial, socioeconomic, and black male gender gaps in reading and math. Like lilies of the field strutting their glorious bloom in environmentally challenged places, our detailed analysis on a small number of these inside-the-box schools indicated that they normalized six policies and practices associated with gap closures and reversals even in challenged environments which surrounded them.

### 2. Walk the Line

In her book *Walking in Circles*, my former colleague Barbara Sizemore talked about the rise and fall of gap-closing reforms in black communities. Simon and Garfunkel's *slip sliding away...the nearer your destination, the more you slip sliding away* [equity] is a lyrical rendering of Sizemore's thesis. We have identified four reasons why the attainment of equity is so challenging and if achieved so difficult to maintain. First, at federal, state, and district levels we fail systematically and ongoingly to articulate the costs of inequity and the rewards of equity, the problem of *Acknowledging*. Second, at federal, district and state levels, we fail to consider schools with histories of accelerated closures and reversals, the problem of *Specifying*. Third, we fail to invite, train, and certify decisional, positional, and reputational leaders who together must launch and sustain the drive toward equity, the problem of *Empowering*. Fourth, we fail at national, state, district levels to implement methods for initial and ongoing training to improve quality of implementation and level of impact ongoingly, the problem of *Disseminating*. If we resolve *each* of these problems at a high level of proficiency ( $\geq 75\%$ ), we will have 'aced' it (recommended pronunciation for *ASED*), and only then will we be able to walk a straight line toward justice rather than circles around it.

### 3. Measure what Matters

There is an urgent need to develop new metrics for justice attainment and maintenance. Toward this end we propose a system of metrics which estimate levels of *equity* (ratio of black over white proficiency, e.g., 35/70) x 100 or 50%) which we compare against what I refer to as our nation's cultural null (3/5 x 100% or 60% which represents the value of black life stipulated in our Constitutional Convention of 1787). How well have we done in overcoming this racist construction of black life? That we have not exceeded 60% proficiency in any discipline in most urban school districts is easily interpretable by parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians who need to know. *Efficiency*, the number of projected years to gap closures based on prior performance, estab-

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lishes a time horizon for expected gap closures). *Sufficiency*, the performance of black students relative to white and other students on district, state, national, and international assessments, evaluates the extent to which black students are prepared competitively for existing and future opportunities at every level of the market place—from local to global, a reasonable, plausible, and defensible expectation for a model democratic republic.

#### 4. Follow the Light

In Plato's Cave Allegory, what's familiar is what's *real*—in our instance *abounding racial and socioeconomic evidence of educational disparities in reading, math, and science*. Affirming what's *truth* is conventionally unfamiliar—*evolving evidence that it's possible to close and even reverse racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in reading, math, and science*. Shifting from what's *real* to what's *truth* is described by Plato as disorienting and blinding as fellow sojourners emerge from their caves of former ignorance. We must welcome those who overcome blinding disorientation of the light—knowledge that there are ways and means of accelerating closures and reversals of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in reading and math. For example, fewer than 5% of the 107 inside-the-box gap closing and reversing schools mentioned in the first paragraph were 'seen' and awarded our nation's most prestigious and sought Blue Ribbon by the United States Department of Education. However, we must extend our love and compassion to those who become so disoriented and blinded by the light that they return without inducement to their caves of familiar ignorance, a condition I now refer to as *cultural photophobia*—a failure to accommodate what's true about these culturally extraordinary schools. What shall we do here? First, I counsel patience. Second, I counsel prior development of local management strategies that feature loving and compassionate ways and means of fostering sight recovery so all can complete their journey as enablers of truth which benefits all our nation's children.

#### 5. Dilute Cultural Toxins

Cultural toxins issue from 400 years of racial animus toward blacks in America (1619-2019). Although we acknowledge and commend progress that has been made in removing cultural toxins, published studies indicate that nearly 80 percent of whites and almost 50 percent of blacks consciously or unselfconsciously identify with racist stereotypes about blacks as *mentally defective* intellectually, morally, and emotionally and *physically gifted* athletically, sexually, and rhythmically. This racial animus afflicting the majority of America's population complicates and undermines our local, state, and national drive toward justice. Bear in mind that there are huge publicly and privately funded industries, institutions, and associations that profit from the presumption that blacks are *mentally defective* and *physically gifted*. Regretfully, this also includes America's schools. Here's what we propose: (a) piloting our model for enabling justice in multiple school districts within a particular state and (b) replicating (a) in different states. Should results be sufficiently promising from applications (a) and (b), we then (c) utilize results to lobby the United States Department of Education to consider policy and practice changes that are more concordant with our nation's founding standard *liberty and justice for all* (1776). To the benefit of schools as well as the nation, these bottom-up-top-down strategies may well dilute 400 years of cultural toxins in ways top-down strategies alone have not and cannot.

#### 6. Honor Gap Reversals

If Jamal and Edward apply with identical training and experience backgrounds for the same job, guess who gets the first interview and subsequent offer? Edward's white sounding name provides the advantage. The implication here is that blacks may need to score higher than whites to obtain parity of access to America's fountains of opportunity—educational, economic, and occupational as well as services and privileges that promote *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. My black parents' prescient saying was not altogether exaggerated: *You have to be twice as good to get half as much*. Until cultural toxins are substantially diluted systemically, the lead responsibility must fall to local school districts and communities to demonstrate how to close and reverse achievement gaps in ways that garner and normalize state and federal attention and funding. Only then can Justice reign and Freedom ring in America. Until such time we must not only cultivate but also honor gap reversals that enable Justice (Equity) and Freedom (Fair Access to the nation's fountains of opportunity) which together honor foundational principles of liberty and justice for all—a pledge taken every weekday in every school, by elected and appointed politicians in weekly or monthly public meetings, and by fans of every color and class at public ceremonies or athletic games nearly every weekend of the year. To the extent we enable justice and freedom as pledged every day of every week, we'd become a much more admired and emulated democratic republic which could help the world transition to a better, safer, and flourishing place *for all God's children* (MLK).