Raising Achievement and Closing the Gap

A Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellowship Report

Communities In Schools
ROBERT H. B. BALDWIN
FELLOWS PROGRAM

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Raising Achievement and Closing the Gap

Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellow, 2006-2007

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Project Description

Public education is in the national spotlight. Everyone from parents to educators to policy makers is currently engaged in a dialogue about how to better prepare youth for productive futures. Most of the discourse has focused on instructional practices and home-based factors. There has been much discussion about teacher qualifications, poor facilities, lower expectations and economic deprivation, with little attention or thought given to the psycho-social aspects of the child that integrate all of these factors. The interface between student support services and psycho-social development has virtually been ignored. Youth development professionals have the training, expertise and experience to enter the national dialogue and offer effective interventions. Unfortunately there is a paucity of empirical evidence regarding the role of youth development professionals and the potential for valuable contributions in closing this gap.

As the achievement gap is one of the most pertinent domestic issues facing this nation, it is imperative that Communities In Schools (CIS) and similar organizations be a part of the solution. Driven by the need for a more comprehensive approach to the achievement gap issue, an exploratory case study examining the role of integrated student services in closing the achievement gap is highlighted in this paper. Implications for best practices and recommendations for further research are also presented.

Procedure and Methodology

One way to approach this examination is to study schools that have no gap or are successfully eliminating gaps between majority and minority students. This case study looks at six public schools that range from elementary to secondary grade levels. These schools either produced unusually large academic growth among minority children who entered school at least one to two grade levels behind their majority peers, or exhibited no disparity between groups of children. The schools represent rural, urban and urban/suburban American communities.

After a review of the literature, qualitative case study research was conducted using Grounded Theory (See p. 9). Interview and observation protocols were developed for the following groups:

- Students
- Teachers
- Administrators
- School paraprofessionals such as cafeteria staff
- Community partners
- Parents
- Artifacts from the sites, such as newsletters and meeting agendas

Data from each of these sources was collected and analyzed.

Preliminary Findings

Analysis of the results indicates that there is a role for integrated student services in supporting young people and closing the achievement gap, and that CIS is in a position to lead these efforts. Distinct cycles of risk and protection were identified. The Communities In Schools Model is poised to enhance and, in some instances, deliver protective cycle elements.

INTRODUCTION

Professionals who work directly with youth, or work to create environments where youth will thrive, are constantly confronted with two concepts that are often incompatible.

On the one hand, working in youth development requires a belief in, and commitment to, positive outcomes for children, which often includes removing the barriers to the achievement of those outcomes. Yet at the same time, in order to address these barriers, youth development professionals often become experts in what is wrong. This focus of time and talent on what is holding youth back may erode the belief in and commitment to a society where children develop to their full potential.

It is at this strange intersection, this paradoxical crossroads within the field of youth development, that my journey with this project begins. As the executive director of Communities In Schools of Newark, New Jersey, I had just left the wake of a CIS student who had been gunned down while walking home late at night. The funeral home was packed with young people who had walked those same streets to pay their respects and share their grief. My site coordinator, who had worked with this young man for several years, was inconsolable.

I was devastated, hurt and frustrated. I thought about the CIS mission to champion the connection between this young man and the resources he needed, and I wondered whether I had been enough of a champion. Maybe I had concentrated so much on day-to-day crises that my capacity to be a champion for our students had diminished. Perhaps I had been so focused on symptoms – on what was wrong – that my belief in a positive future for this young man had waned.

Based on my education, skills and experiences, I could eloquently provide an in-depth analysis of what was wrong in the community where this young man had grown up, and what CIS had done to mitigate those elements. But my analysis rarely resulted in an optimism for the future of his peers. It usually resulted in a slow and subtle erosion of a belief in what could be, not just for a small segment of CIS students, but for an entire community. I clearly recalled conversations with students who questioned the inequities in their educational experiences, and how they asked me why students in schools less than three miles away had it so much better. These questions led to the contemplation of issues such as racial inequities and structural racism – ideas that had previously seemed too lofty and comprehensive for a hands-on executive director.

 Now seeing an unavoidable connection, I dove into the literature and began grappling with the same issues as academia and the popular media: Should this gap be explained as nature or nurture? Can it be closed with educational and psychosocial programming? Or can it only be dealt with by the family? Are the causes more related to the media, parenting or just plain laziness? Sorting through all of these mostly abstract arguments was less than uplifting, and did little to mitigate the chill and unease I had been feeling since the wake.

It was during one of these moments I remembered something else that had happened that same month. I met a CIS 6th grader who, after making sure his young cousin had made it home safely traveling on a route where there had been a recent shooting, was on his way back to school to attend one of our after-school programs. Not only could he name the college he wanted to attend, he proudly informed me that he currently had the grades needed to get accepted. Remembering this CIS student, I reflected that it's students like this one who have the answers. As philosopher Thomas Troward stated very simply, "The law of flotation was not discovered by contemplating the sinking of things, but by contemplating the floating of things which floated naturally, and then intelligently asking why they did so."

These experiences led to the emergence of three notions. The first was that my belief had been slowly eroding, which had taken the "shine" off my commitment. The second was that the lofty, comprehensive and uncomfortable concept of racial disparities could no longer be ignored if CIS as an organization, and I as a professional, wanted significant changes for our black and Latino students. The third was not something new, just the re-appearance of a lesson I thought I had previously internalized: If applying my time and talent to what is wrong had not delivered the results I needed, a change in tactics was imperative. It was time to become an expert in the "floaters."

Many of our students are members of a nationwide group that is significantly behind their white peers academically. The Education Trust tells us that the average black and Latino 12th grader is functioning at the academic level of the average white 8th grader. This gap has horrific implications for dropping out, employability, and health and safety.

I have studied not only the achievement gap but public schools that have either closed it or are rapidly on the way to closing it. I read the experts in education, sociology, anthropology, epidemiology, public health and my personal favorite, psychology. I've heard every posited solution, from left wing to right wing to the street-corner chicken wing. I have been in neighborhoods where grown men were too scared to go outside, and communities that are so remote no hotels existed within 20 miles. I've spoken with kids, parents, teachers, custodians, counselors, principals, government officials and tribal leaders, all to discover what is the best course of action for integrated school-based student services to take in helping close this gap.

Although I made some preliminary determinations, based on the results of my case study, much of what I learned was gleaned from the journey. Yes, it is about high expectations, modeling, smaller learning environments, data- and student-based decision making operationalized with a heavy-handed, often overbearing dose of accountability – but the key element is something else.

It can be illustrated by the story of a superintendent who stated during a summer faculty retreat that there would be no more business math for freshmen. After comparing the percentage of freshmen in his schools who took algebra to those in a neighboring district where the majority of the students were white, he decided that all of his freshmen would

take some form of algebra. His instructional leaders were alarmed, and raised concerns that ranged from lack of student preparedness to not enough faculty who were comfortable teaching algebra. The superintendent provided some ways to address the concerns and continued to insist on his course of action.

Two weeks later, during the first week of school, he still saw business math on many schedules. He called in the principals and was told that since the fall schedules had already been set well before the retreat, they thought he meant the change in the math curriculum would take place the next school year. The superintendent made it clear that the expectation was for the current year, and if he and the scheduling people had to work through two weekends, so be it. All freshmen must be in some type of algebra by the third week of school.

The key element here, and in all of the places I have researched, is the will of a champion. Whether it's in the professionals, parents or, most importantly, our students themselves, it is the will to acknowledge racial and economic disparities when it is uncomfortable to do so, push past obstacles and break through resistance to do the things you know are best that effects meaningful change.

The founder of Communities In Schools, Bill Milliken, so wisely tells us that it's not programs that change young people's lives, but relationships. This project is a first step in determining the best way for youth development professionals to ignite, cultivate and maintain the relationships and services needed to raise achievement and close gaps for students of color. I look forward to sharing my findings in the hope that they might not only help to close the gap, but stop the resulting social decay.

Acknowledgments

PROJECT BACKGROUND

During the spring of 2006, Communities In Schools of Newark partner schools lost three students to gang-related gun violence. Over the following summer, reports on standardized testing mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act indicated that the majority of our black and Latino youth were performing well below their white and Asian peers in other districts.

Newark was not alone. Both popular and education media are extremely concerned about a gap in achievement between minority and majority students, high dropout rates, and violence in what are being called "low-performing schools." Noticing a hole in the literature with respect to the role of integrated student support and youth development services, I decided to pursue work opportunities that would allow me to develop comprehensive youth development strategies to address the achievement gap.

After more than 30 years, CIS has a history of providing quality services for children. The unique structure of the organization makes it possible to develop a multitude of strategies to address any given issue. One such strategy is the Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellows Program, which supports experienced CIS personnel as they work to develop best practices for serving youth. I submitted a proposal to do case-study research on raising achievement and closing gaps for black and Latino students. CIS, recognizing that a key element of the dropout epidemic is the significant achievement gap between black and Latino students and their white and Asian classmates, accepted my proposal, which I researched throughout 2007.

This exploratory case study looked at six public schools that ranged from elementary to secondary grade levels. The schools represent grades K-12 in rural, urban and urban/suburban American communities. These schools have no achievement gap or are successfully eliminating gaps between black, brown, white and Asian students. They were researched using qualitative research methods. Criteria for selection consisted of performance of black and Latino students on state-mandated tests that either matched or exceeded the performance of their white peers within the same state on the same test, or the doubling of student performance on standardized tests within a year. Questionnaires, guided interviews, observations and artifact analysis were conducted at each site. Participants consisted of students, teachers, parents, administrators, student support personnel and community partners.

PROCEDURE

As we recall, Thomas Troward stated, "The law of flotation was not discovered by contemplating the sinking of things, but by contemplating the floating of things which floated naturally, and then intelligently asking why they did so." Gathering data on what is wrong or is not working for our youth in schools and society has been exhausted by many social scientists. This focus on deficits seems to have distracted practitioners from exploring and celebrating strategies that work. Little time and attention has been given to what Troward would call the floaters. This study explores six regular public schools whose students are black and Latino with economic challenges, yet are performing equitably to their white peers in higher economic communities or doubling performance on an annual basis to achieve parity. Studying these schools involved five interrelated phases.

1. Collaboration

The initial phase of this project involved gaining the perspectives of experts on raising achievement and closing race-based gaps. The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization that collects data and highlights public schools that are eradicating racial disparities. Through attending its national conference and meeting repeatedly with its personnel, I obtained tremendous insight into the systemic components of closing the achievement gap.

Similar insight was achieved after attending a conference on "Doubling Student Achievement" hosted by the University of Wisconsin. Both conferences provided a vehicle to establish relationships with educators who could be considered "floaters," and the opportunity to recruit schools for the study. I also met with experts such as urban sociologist Pedro Noquera.

2. Literature Review

I conducted a review of the literature with respect to qualitative research and the achievement gap, reading and analyzing articles and books related to conducting qualitative case study research. Topics reviewed included theory development through case study research and appropriate methodology.

There has been significant research on the causes and nature of the achievement gap. Two prominent schools of thought have emerged to explain the gap and offer recommendations for its elimination. These two groups can be characterized as "windowists" and "mirrorists."

Windowists dedicate their time and attention to factors outside of the schoolhouse that have an impact on academic performance. This group focuses on socioeconomic and race-related variables, and the effect these variables have on students. Things such as poor nutrition, low-birth weight, single-parent homes and disintegrating neighborhoods have been examined by this group. The larger questions regarding why these phenomena disproportionately affect black and Latino students are rarely addressed by educational practitioners. While they may posit that American society will have racial disparities in education as long as there are disparities in society, there is little if any discussion among windowists about manifestations and solutions within schools.

One exception within the windowist school is psychologist Claude Steele, who examined the impediments to equal performance among students of equal abilities within the context of racial stereotypes and identity. He analyzed what has been referred to as "stereotype threat," which he defines as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype."

To test this construct of stereotype threat, an experiment was designed to determine if such a threat can have an impact on performance. This study examined black and white college students who were matched with a student of equal ability from the other race. Participants were given a test designed to be challenging and provoke frustration in all students. Prior to the administration of the test, participants were told that the test was diagnostic with respect to their "intellectual functioning." Even though the participants had been equally matched based on prior performances, the black students scored significantly below their white classmates. Prior to another administration of the same test with a second group of equally matched black and white students, participants were told that the test assessed "ability" and was racially fair. There was no significant difference between the black and white students after this administration.

Steele and his colleagues argued that stereotype threat had influenced the performance of the first group, and when it was removed black students performed in accordance with prior testing. These findings have been replicated with various group stereotypes including gender, and have significant implications for youth and education services.

Many windowists would argue that factors contributing to the achievement gap such as the development of negative associations with one's race are not created in school, nor can educators control them. Most assert that until there is serious exploration of disparities in economics and related access to quality experiences and services, there is little, if anything, educators can be expected to do to successfully address the achievement gap. Thus, many of these theorists look outside of school to explain the achievement gap and to explore solutions.

The second group of theorists spend their time and attention differently. These "mirrorists" look within the school for explanations and answers. They explore factors such as standards-based instruction and assessment, quality of instruction, academic rigor, funding formulas, discipline practices and leadership. Most mirrorists argue that there is strong evidence to suggest that educators can change their practices regarding such factors within the schoolhouse in ways that raise achievement and close gaps.

The Education Trust has done extensive work with public schools that have made significant strides in reducing or eliminating the achievement gap. In 2007, researchers Barr and Parrett identified the following key factors within schools that are raising achievement and closing gaps:

- Effective district leadership;

- Engaged parents and community;

- Understanding and holding high expectations for culturally diverse students;

- Targeting low performers;

- Aligning, managing and monitoring curriculum;

- Creating a culture of assessment and data literacy;

- Building instructional capacity;

- Reorganizing time, space and transitions.

While considerable research and discussion has been devoted to promoting and refuting the perspectives of both the windowists and mirrorists, both arguments are valid. They simply may be analyzing the achievement gap from different vantage points. Windows and mirrors are both variations of glass, as societal and school-based factors are variations of the etiology of and solution to the achievement gap. For example, the origin of stereotype threat may be rooted outside the school in socio-cultural norms and practices, but it can be reinforced and remedied within the education system. To develop a comprehensive approach to raising achievement and closing gaps, it is imperative that both perspectives be connected and considered simultaneously. By examining both schools of thought at the same time, roles and responsibilities for student support services will become clearer. With its expertise in connecting community, school and student, CIS provides an exemplary framework for blending key components of each perspective to examine the achievement gap and chart a course of action that includes integrated student support services.

3. Theory Development

After a thorough review of the literature and a blending of windowist and mirrorist positions, I used a public health framework utilizing risk and protective factors to hypothesize risk factors contributing to the underachievement of black and Latino children. Although the following four were identified and confirmed in the study, they are related and dynamic. These risk factors interact to create what can be referred to as a "cycle of risk" and should not be considered in isolation.

Low Expectations

Both the literature and study participants indicate that black and Latino students frequently interact with adults both within and outside of school who have lower expectations for them than they do for their white and Asian peers.

Cycle of Risk
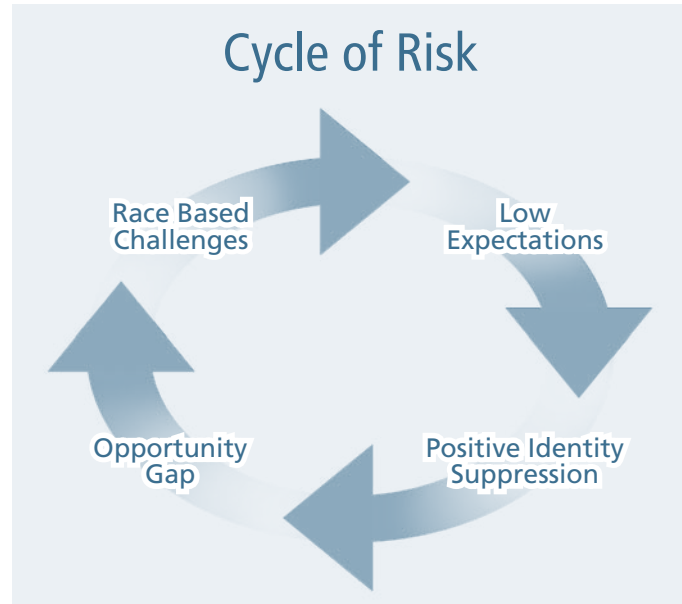
Positive Identity Suppression

Related to concepts identified in the literature such as stereotype threat, positive identity suppression refers to the socio-cultural images and practices that make it difficult for black and Latino students to develop concepts of self that include scholastic excellence and characteristics that promote academic and civic success.

Opportunity Gap

The opportunity gap also refers to factors within and outside of school. Black and Latino students have less access to modern, technologically equipped schools, teachers who are certified in the subject being taught, rigorous coursework and consistent leadership.

Race-Based Challenges

While many of the other risk cycle components are indirectly related to racial phenomena, race-based challenges are those obstacles that are overtly and clearly rooted in negative attitudes and behavior toward black and Latino students. An example would be the experience of one participant who spoke of racist jokes being made in class and similar cartoons anonymously circulated at her part-time job.

These components of the risk cycle were then used to create an investigative framework for onsite research. This framework focused on identifying what elements constitute a protective cycle and how student support services are related to these elements (see Appendix 1, "Cycle/Question/Strategy Integration").

4. Site Selection

Although there was high academic achievement in all six of the schools, they still struggled with the same challenges as other schools in lower socio-economic neighborhoods with a higher percentage of black and Latino students, whether they were rural, urban/suburban or urban. During one site visit, a teenager was murdered one block away the previous evening. In another community, I was faced with the ongoing problem of not being able to get a cab driver to take me to the school due to fear of violence. Several of the schools I studied dealt with fights and other discipline issues while I was present. I relate these incidents not to stereotype schools or children, but to illustrate that the schools selected are producing students who are doubling their performance or are performing as well as their white peers while embedded in communities that are faced with significant challenges.

Schools in Philadelphia, rural Washington state, urban/suburban California, urban/suburban New York, Chicago and Baltimore were a part of the study. The sites were selected based on the following criteria:

- High poverty and/or black and or Latino student population;
- Location, to bring geographic diversity to the study;
- Regular public school (non-charter school) status;
- Grade level, to bring age diversity to the study;
- Students performing on standardized tests in a manner commensurate with the state average for white students;
- Students who have doubled their performance on state-mandated tests over a two- year period.

5. Protocol Development

Three protocols were developed for this study. Once the protective factors were identified, sample questions aligned with these factors for a guided interview, observations and artifact analysis were developed. A separate interview protocol was developed for students, practitioners and parents. Pilot versions of each protocol were given to five sample subjects in each category. Feedback from these sample interviews was used to refine each interview protocol.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology used for this study is rooted in Grounded Theory, originally posited by Glaser and Strauss. Instead of methods that result in the testing of hypotheses, Grounded Theory guides the researcher through a process that will clarify or illuminate a theory. Since one of the key purposes of this investigation was to begin formulating a theory for youth development service delivery to help raise achievement and close gaps, Grounded Theory was selected as a model. The idea is that an underlying theory exists and it is the researcher's job to discover it through a process including multiple steps.

Data collection is the first step in Grounded Theory and was conducted during this case study research. Interviews were conducted with students, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, community-based service providers and student support personnel. Ninety-six percent of these interviews were audiotaped. Classes, meetings, and one-on-one interactions were observed, and artifacts such as newsletters, bulletin boards, and meeting agendas were collected for analysis.

After the interviews were transcribed, notes were taken on each interview, observation and artifact. The technique of constant comparison was used to code the material and identify themes and categories. These categories were then sorted and became what were identified as protective cycle elements. The breakdown of units of analysis is as follows:

School*	Interviews	Observations	Artifacts
Philadelphia, elementary	18	7	17
Rural Washington state, high school	13	10	21
Urban/suburban California, high school	16	5	14
Chicago, elementary school	9	4	13
Baltimore, high school	11	6	6
Urban/suburban New York, middle and high school	9	3	4
TOTAL	**76**	**35**	**75**

Note: Confidentiality agreements with the school principals preclude naming these individual schools.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Over 300 hours of interviews, 35 observations and 75 artifacts were analyzed to discover the patterns and categories that paint a clear picture of a Cycle of Protection. I emphasized identifying the essence of the experiences of the children and how those experiences worked to buffer the impact of the identified Risk Cycle. Evidence of all the Risk and Protective Cycle elements was found in every school within the study. Quotes from students and adults have been included for illustration.

Risk Cycle

Risk	Quote
Low Expectations	"Are you sure you can handle it? There's a lot of reading."
	Words spoken by an 11- year-old girl from Chicago while describing an experience at a regional summer program for advanced students. She was the only child of color during a small group orientation at a week-long residential program. When members were asked by their leader to share their professional aspirations with their peers, this student stated she wanted to be a prosecutor. The words above were spoken to her by the leader in front of the group. She spoke at length about how this comment made her feel isolated and less than her peers. She stated that she barely spoke a word for the rest of the week.
Positive Identity Suppression	"When I'm in school I act professional, but going home I can't be left open for something to jump off."
	Words spoken by a 16-year-old boy from Baltimore while describing how he often needs to hide his behaviors that are not in alignment with negative stereotypes of African American males to avoid negative consequences.
Opportunity Gap	"There's nothing to do here but get in trouble, no playground or anything. When I asked them to share what they did last summer, most of them talked about playing in an abandoned car."
	Words spoken by a teacher from Philadelphia while describing the lack of access to enrichment experiences for her students.
Race-Based Challenges	"I got to school and 'Niggers Go Home' was on the side of the building. No one really did anything. I remember one teacher trying to get it off."
	Words spoken by a 16-year-old from Baltimore while describing an experience he had as an elementary student in that city.

Protective Cycle

Having found evidence of the risk cycle described in the literature review, elements of a protective cycle began to emerge from the case study. After careful coding and analysis of the audiotapes and artifacts, five dynamic factors were illustrated.

Positive Peer Group

There were clear, observable and frequent peer-to-peer behaviors that encouraged scholarship. Adults also engaged in actions that encouraged and reinforced this climate.

Immersion in Positive Growth-Oriented Environment

Professionals often stress the importance of safe school environments for academic achievement. This research supports that notion but takes it a step further. Not only were the sites consistent with rules and consequences, but there was a culture of growth and movement. Adults and students were all striving to reach another level and could articulate where they were, where they wanted to go and their plan to get there.

Regular Interaction with Caring, "Scaffolding" Adult

One of Communities In Schools' "Five Basics" for children is a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult. While this is definitely a basic for healthy child development, I was often intrigued by the number of truly caring adults who worked in relatively safe schools, and yet the children were still underachieving. This case study suggests that caring is the crucial foundation for what the Lev Vygotsky, a developmental psychologist, calls "scaffolding." It involves adults providing a framework to help children's psychosocial development, then modeling how to use it. To counteract risk cycle elements in all six sites, there was evident of adults doing just this. They were providing concrete strategies, modeling them, and providing reinforcement and encouragement as students attempted to use the frameworks.

Enrichment

Enrichment was the least surprising of the protective cycle elements, but it was evident. Adults in all sites creatively worked to bring unique and unusual experiences to their students. What is particularly noteworthy was the innovation with which they pursued resources for these experiences. Some were as simple as walking the students to the public library and others included complex barter relationships.

Racial Socialization

Stevenson has argued that racial socialization is a crucial aspect of resiliency in black children. It involves articulating and modeling specific skills needed for healthy development in a society where being black is often a risk factor in and of itself. Children are then coached as they develop these skills in a very deliberate way. Evidence of this type of socialization was also found in all six sites. It was being utilized with both black and Latino students.

Cycle of Protection
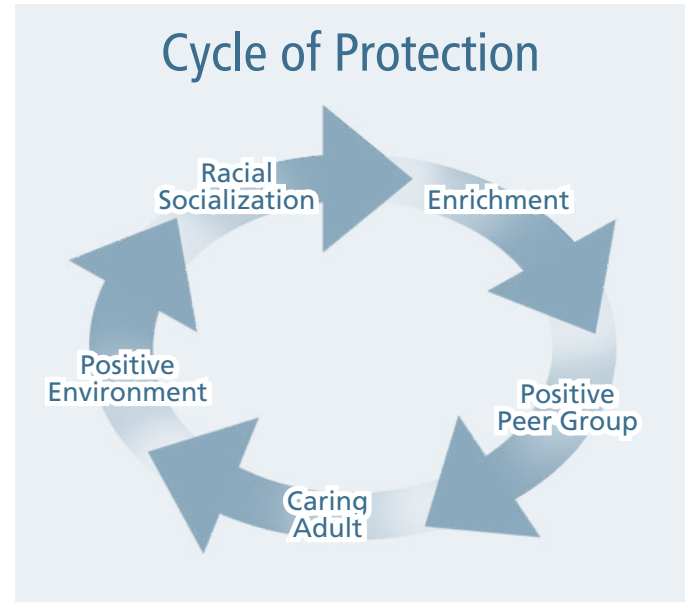
Protective Element	Quote
Positive Peer Group	"We're a family here. You don't do anything to put down, degrade or embarrass a family member. You're going to support your family member whether they make a mistake or not." Although these words were spoken by an assistant principal during a talk to incoming freshmen during their orientation, this sentiment was found at all six sites. Each school had cultivated an environment where peers were extremely supportive of one another. Each member of the peer community was challenged to try his or her best and seek assistance when necessary with respect to academics or personal growth.
Immersion In Positive, Growth-Oriented Environment	"When I was in 3rd grade, the teacher told us that only three of us would graduate. It's not like that here. They're not worried about who's supposed to drop out, they stay focused on us doing well. They always look for good." The participating schools had very distinct and consistent growth environments and cultures that were reflected in every aspect of the school experience. These environments constantly reinforced and emphasized movement and development. Students were continually challenged to set, obtain and reset goals.
Regular Interaction with Caring, "Scaffolding" Adult	"I build her up. We lift her up. We keep her built up 'cause we know the world is trying to tear her down." Caring adults are often present in schools that are not successful with black and Latino students. What was unique about the case study sites is that the caring was blended with what Lev Vygotsky refers to as "scaffolding." This means that an adult models and/or coaches the next steps in a developmental process. Coaching for growth and movement was a key component of the adult/student interactions within all six sites.
Enrichment	"We take these kids everywhere and expose them to as much as possible." Each site had well-organized, comprehensive enrichment activities that were aligned with school goals and often coordinated with community partners. This was frequently done in spite of minimal financial resources. Students were organized to compete in regional events, taken to the library and often walked to free events.
Racial Socialization	"She told us, 'Just brace yourselves. Just because of the color of your skin, there are people who think you will end up at KFC asking people if they want regular or extra crispy.'" The concept of racial socialization, developed by H. C. Stevenson, was found both informally and formally in all six participating sites. Stevenson defines racial socialization as "a set of communications, interactions and behaviors between parents and youth regarding how blacks ought to decide about their cultural heritage as well as how to respond to the racial hostility, empowerment or confusion of American society." The quote exemplifies this in a one-to-one interaction. However, evidence of this happening systemically was also present at all six sites. For example, one teacher used a history/language arts project on Lorraine Hansberry's family struggle for parity in housing as a way to highlight strategies to deal with racism.

In addition to the emergence of the Protective Cycle elements, several other themes or concepts were present at all of the sites in the study. Although they are all embedded within the Protective Cycle, they were prominent enough to warrant separate discussion here. These concepts can be placed in the categories of Culture Leadership and Challenging Popular Assumptions.

Culture

The climates of the six schools studied had very common elements. What is particularly noteworthy is that these elements were present regardless of variety in size, age group and region.

Stockdale Paradox

In his book Good to Great, Jim Collins refers to what he calls the Stockdale Paradox. Named after a prisoner of war who survived when others did not, this phenomenon was also found embedded in the cultures of the six schools studied.

The concept begins with a clear understanding and acceptance of obstacles. Paradoxically, this understanding and acceptance does not overwhelm or paralyze, but rather is coupled with an unwavering belief that things will improve, and the discipline to behave in ways that will realize those improvements. From students to custodians to principals, from newsletters to flyers, I saw an acknowledgment that there were significant challenges within each school. However, this acknowledgment was paired with an unrelenting belief that the children will thrive academically.

Green Zone Schools

When examining the achievement gap, both lay and professional observers will often assert that schools are a reflection of their communities and will not change until the community does. This notion reflects the windowist viewpoint mentioned earlier. The cultures of the schools in this study did not endorse this concept. Rather, the schools were seen by both students and adults as "green zones" or safe havens – places to buffer or shield students from community-based challenges.

Caste Busting and Glorification of Movement

Whether formally, through tracking or limited access to advanced classes, or informally, through low expectations, ability grouping is prevalent within American schools. Unfortunately, once a student is formally or informally labeled by both peers and adults, it is often difficult to move to a higher group or caste. If a student was in the lowest reading group in 2nd grade, he or she will be the student no one thinks to ask to join the school paper in 10th grade.

This was not the case within these case study schools. Adults make sure that the gateway to a higher level is never closed, and they expect students to move. Students articulate an understanding of this and are rewarded and praised for any incremental step forward.

Leadership

All of the principals at the six schools demonstrated some common traits. Four were male and two were female, three were black, one was white and one was Latino. They ranged in age from 43 to 66, and grew up in their respective regions of the country. Yet all exhibited the following characteristics.

Benevolent Despotism

The principals in this study worked collaboratively, but all ideas, interventions and frameworks had to be sanctioned by them. While faculty, staff, students and parents could express opinions, if they were not in alignment with those of the principal, they were not adopted. Faculty spoke of a cessation of challenges to the principal's ideas, as it was clear such assertions would go nowhere.

Intensely Focused Alignment, Accountability and Praise

Goals for leadership, faculty and students were clearly articulated by more than 93 percent of the adults interviewed at each site. Analysis of observations and artifacts indicates that events and actions were strictly aligned with these goals. Any activity that was not aligned with goals was challenged by leadership and shaped or replaced with something that was more in alignment

Isolation from Peers

All the principals described themselves as loners at best, or as outcasts within their local districts.. Although they had achieved student outcomes that often earned national recognition, they had not been given local formal or informal rewards or awards. One principal had the U.S. Secretary of Education visit her school; another was given a prestigious award for having the highest graduation rate in the country for black males; but neither had been recognized locally, or invited to model or mentor for their peers.

Challenging Popular Assumptions

Assumptions about student performance are prevalent within public education. Assertions are often made and accepted because they seem logical, have historical resonance, or are often repeated. Because they become so familiar, it is surprising when evidence to dispute them arises. This case study yielded several such instances.

Assumption: Working on closing the achievement gap diminishes resources for higher-performing students that will hinder their ability to excel.

This was not found to be the case in this study. Focusing on closing the distance between majority and minority students did not have a negative impact on the achievement of higher-performing students. For example, increasing support for Latino students in Advanced Placement classes did not affect the passing rate for white students on Advanced Placement exams. Nor did standardized test scores decrease in

surrounding suburban communities as performance in low-performing schools significantly increased.

Assumption: All people successfully working to close the gap have to be well versed in racism theory or comfortable with the topic of race.

A little less than a quarter of the respondents in this study linked their work to closing gaps in achievement between majority and minority students. All but one member of this group were classroom teachers, and characterized their efforts as raising student achievement outside of a context of racial disparities. What is interesting to note is that their efforts were completely aligned with an administrator and students who explained challenges and successes within a framework of race and racial inequities.

Assumption: Children today are relatively unaware of racial dynamics.

There are abundant examples throughout the study to refute this idea. Not only were students aware of racial dynamics, they were eager to speak about them. This was true no matter the age group and no matter the racial background. The following statements exemplify the essence of these dialogues. The first was spoken by a 3rd grade Philadelphia student, and the second by a 15-year-old from California.

"They underestimate people who look like you and me because of the color of our skin."

"This is what someone wrote in the paper about us when we were trying to get college prep classes for all LA schools: 'College prep would be a waste; there will not be enough jobs when they finish and they'll still end up mowing my lawn.'"

Assumption: Most people are unwilling to address racial disparities and dynamics.

While many people may be uncomfortable and unwilling to discuss race, this investigation indicates that there is a critical mass of people who are. More than 75 percent of respondents were eager to examine policies and practices with respect to racial inequities in a non-accusatory, solution-oriented tone.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS, INC.

Many of the proposed and practiced interventions for raising achievement and closing gaps exclude integrated student services. These services have been documented to improve academic outcomes and can be a powerful addition to efforts to raise the achievement of black and Latino students. Getting results by including integrated student services would involve using the findings of this case study research to promote protective cycle elements. The most viable organization with an integrated student service approach is Communities In Schools.

This case study investigation yielded an abundance of information that will be useful for Communities In Schools. As the essence of the CIS mission is to champion the connection between resources and our youth to increase graduation rates, the CIS Integrated Student Services Model is a viable strategy to raise achievement and close gaps.

The utility of the CIS Model as a strategy to address academic disparities is also supported by the organization's history of successfully working with students of color and supporting research on race equity issues. Eighty-one percent of the children and families served by Communities In Schools are black and Latino. CIS has sponsored internal and external studies on race, disparity and its work. Integrating the findings of this research into the CIS Model would be a powerful component of a comprehensive strategy to address the achievement gap.

Here are five questions that CIS practitioners can ask themselves as a way of assessing current attitudes and strengths:

1) Is CIS more windowist or mirrorist?

2) How is this reflected in what we do with students?

3) Is CIS ready to stand firm behind the fact that low-income students with environmental challenges can excel in school?

4) Will CIS move from being an "anchor" to a "compass"?

5) Is CIS willing to move to culturally competent service delivery?

CIS has a Total Quality System that delineates standards and best practices for local affiliates. Recommendations 1 – 4 below should be incorporated into this system. This would provide affiliates with a framework and accountability system to work on raising achievement and closing gaps.

1) Develop an evidence-based case management model that incorporates components of the protective cycle.

2) Create a standard of cultural competence and incorporate it into our reporting system.

3) Incorporate risk and protective factor elements into needs assessment tools where appropriate.

4) Develop tools for:

    – Service alignment with school reform practices;
    – Protective cycle component brokerage;
    – Incorporating the protective cycle in family engagement work;
    – Assessing the need for a "green zone" school.

The following four recommendations would create vehicles for support and advocacy for work within and outside of the CIS network to raise achievement and close gaps.

5) Develop a strategic brokerage model for protective cycle elements.

6) Move towards more strategic partnerships with school reform/ academic improvement organizations in addition to those that emphasize social services.

7) Develop an achievement gap community of practice (see Appendix 3).

8) Develop and support internal and external policies that:

– Elevate expectations; and
– Promote caste busting.

CONCLUSION

At a time when public education is in the national spotlight and issues of race are being addressed more openly, it is imperative to explore the achievement gap from a youth development rather that a youth deficit perspective. The solutions are not going to come in the form of a magic curriculum or miraculous program, but in systemically relating to the whole child and understanding that psychosocial well-being is an integral part of academic success.

CIS is poised to take a lead role in helping other stakeholders understand this and support youth development services with resources. This Baldwin Fellows project is a step toward developing a model that cultivates internal expertise with respect to raising achievement and closing gaps, and eventually promoting this model to the larger professional community.

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Additional Resources

The Aspen Institute

Roundtable on Community Change

281 Park Avenue South, 5th Floor

New York, NY 10010

(212) 672-5510

The Education Trust

1250 H Street NW

Washington, D.C. 20005

(202) 293-1217

Edtrust.org

APPENDIX 1

Cycle/Question/Strategy Integration

Risk Factor	Related Questions	Barr and Parrett Strategies
Low Expectations	1) Many people's expectations for back students are very low. Do your student support personnel deal with this issue? 2) What do they do?	• Understand and hold high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students.
Suppression of Positive Identity Development	3) Many people believe that black students who strive to do well in school have to overcome stereotypes about acting white. Is this true for your students? 4) Are there any student support personnel who address this issue? 5) What do they do? 6) Do your students attend any programs to help deal with this?	• Understand and hold high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students. • Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners.
Opportunity Gap	7) Do you feel your students have the same access to opportunities as most white students? 8) Do you see any support personnel dealing with this? 9) Do any programs address this in the school? 10) Do your support personnel play a role in any of the following?: a) Effective leadership b) Community and parent engagement c) Understanding and holding high expectations for culturally diverse students d) Targeting low-performing students e) Implementing curriculum- aligned programs f) Contributing to an assessment-data-literate culture g) Building and sustaining instructional capacity h) Reorganization of time, space and transitions	All eight strategies.
Race-Based Obstacles	11) Do you feel your students have faced or will face obstacles that are race based? 12) Are student support service personnel addressing this? 13) Do you feel you are addressing these issues effectively? 14) Who in the school could help you? 15) What could they do?	• Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners. • Understand and hold high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students.

APPENDIX 2 - GUARDIAN LETTER AND CONSENT FORMS

January 2007

Dear Parent/ Guardian:

While the media and the literature have spent a significant amount of time and energy on the underperformance and academic disengagement of students of color, the successes of students like your child and schools like Hall rarely get documented. I am visiting the school to learn more about the role of student support services in helping our students excel. I would like the opportunity to speak with your child to gain his or her point of view about the success of Hall. Students will be asked about fifteen questions and their responses recorded. Some of the interviews will be in a focus group format, as well as one-on-one sessions.

All of the participants are guaranteed anonymity throughout this study. During the interviews, your child may stop at any time and for any reason without penalty. This study is strictly on a volunteer basis and students will not be penalized if they opt not to participate. If you do not wish for your child to participate, it will not have a negative impact on your child in school. There are no foreseeable risks to this study and there is also no direct benefit to your child participating in the study, except for a $15.00 gift certificate to Barnes & Noble bookstore.

If you give your child permission to be interviewed, please sign below and return this form with your child. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at (973) 626-5914. Thank you for supporting this important work

Sincerely,

Jennifer I. Durham, Psy.D.

_____ My child may participate in the study.

____ My child may not participate in the study.

Student Name: _____ (Please Print)

Parent / Guardian Signature: _____

CHILD CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Academically High-Achieving Schools

1) My name is Dr. Jennifer Durham and I work for Communities In Schools, Inc.

2) We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how student support services promote the academic performance of black and Latino students.

3) If you agree to be in this study, it will be an opportunity for a young person of your generation to discuss these important matters. However, there is no direct benefit in your participation.

4) There are no perceived risks in this study. You will be granted anonymity, meaning your name will not be used and nothing you tell me will be traced to you directly.

5) There is a dearth of literature on high-achieving black and Latino students. In addition, you will be able to present another perspective on this issue that may not have been addressed previously.

6) Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if both of your parents/guardians say "yes," you can still decide not to be in this study.

7) If you don't want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. This study is strictly on a volunteer basis and you will not be penalized if you opt not to participate in the study. It will not have a negative impact on your role in school.

8) You can ask any questions that you have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me or ask me the next time you see me.

9) Signing your name below means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you sign it.

_____   _____

Name of Participant   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

ADULT CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Academically High-Achieving Schools

1) My name is Dr. Jennifer Durham and I work for Communities In Schools, Inc.

2) We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how student support services promote the academic performance of black and Latino students.

3) If you agree to be in this study, it will be an opportunity for you to discuss these important matters. However, there is no direct benefit in your participation.

4) There are no perceived risks in this study. You will be granted anonymity, meaning your name will not be used and nothing you tell me will be traced to you directly.

5) There is a dearth of literature on high-achieving black and Latino students. You will be able to present another perspective on this issue that may not have been addressed previously.

6) If you don't want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. This study is strictly on a volunteer basis and you will not be penalized if you opt not to participate. It will not have a negative impact on your role in school.

7) You can ask any questions that you have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me or ask me the next time you see me.

8) Signing your name below means that you agree to be in this study. You will be given a copy of this form after you sign it.

_____   _____

Name of Participant   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX 3

Outline

Achievement Gap Community of Practice

Vision

An active community of a cross-section of the CIS family to develop and apply a practical, multi-level approach for CIS to assist in closing of achievement gap.

Mission

To develop, share, and support best practices and tools to be used within CIS and the greater youth services profession to assist in the closing of the achievement gap

I.   **Home**
     The basic map of the Community of Practice site

II. **Calendar**
     A calendar of all CIS online and real-time events related to the achievement gap, in addition to similar events of other organizations.

III. **Blog**
     Bi-weekly interactions with community members related to the achievement gap with respect to current events.

IV. **Library**
     A place for all readings, presentations (video, PowerPoint, and audio), agendas, meeting minutes and policy statements. One reading will be highlighted each month and will be coordinated with the monthly forum and case study topics.

V.   **Questions and Answers**
     A listing of frequently asked questions and answers related to the achievement gap, in addition to a place to pose and answer questions within the community.

VI. **Meetings**
     A space for online video and audio conferencing that will host monthly community meetings and forums.

VII. **Position Papers**
     All papers produced by the community.

VIII. **Message from Bill and Dan**
     A video message from Bill and Dan supporting the work of the Achievement Gap Community of Practice.

IX. **About Us**
     Information on Communities of Practice, CIS and the CIS Community of Practice