



Asking the Unasked

Reflection on a series about closing the “achievement gap”

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In October of 2015, Education Evolving (EE) produced a three-session series in partnership with the Achievement Gap Committee, each session examining a different dimension of the challenge to close the gap in achievement across different categories of students. This report is a selective summary of the main points and questions highlighted in this series.

The series was moderated by Robert Wedl, a former Minnesota commissioner of education and a long time senior associate with EE. Wedl set the context of chronic frustration with achievement gaps, in both urban and suburban schools. These gaps, he said, boil down to how easily one can predict academic success by poverty, ethnicity, English language learning, and student mobility. While there is an achievement gap in comparing students across these categories there is also an amazingly narrow definition as to what achievement is, what the achievement gap actually means, how to best measure learning, and what can be done to improve student learning.

Wedl was most concerned not by what we are doing wrong in advancing student learning, but rather by what we do not do. Few schools use the gold standard research methodologies available. “There really are no silver bullets,” Wedl said, “is a common quote.” But what people perhaps are actually saying is they do not know what to do. Wedl argues that indeed there are some silver bullets and when they are used, students consistently “beat the odds.”

He outlined the three-part series, starting with a session defining what the achievement gap means and also what it means for a school to ‘beat the odds’—examining one school that consistently does. The second session explored complications with using standardized tests for accountability purposes. The third session featured actual examples of strategies that reduce, if not close, gaps. All three sessions were held at the Wilder Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Session 1: What is achievement and what does “beating the odds” actually mean?

The opening session featured noted statistician and measurement expert David Heistad, Ph.D., now the director of research, evaluation and assessment for the Bloomington schools, formerly in a similar position with the Minneapolis district; and Bill Wilson, founding director of the Higher Ground Academy in Saint Paul.

Heistad acknowledged that most people get their ‘achievement’ information from newspapers, which have a habit of only reporting rankings of schools by their mean proficiency scores. To understand where the learning gaps are and to spot schools or even classrooms that are ‘beating the odds,’ he said, you have to use multiple lenses and assessments and be willing to track students over at least three years. The better indicator of the extent to which a student is learning is ‘growth’ in scores or—even better—what he called ‘value-added.’

The concept of ‘value-added,’ Heistad explained, is essentially the ‘growth’ in student test scores adjusted for poverty and other student demographic factors beyond a school’s control. “What I do to identify schools that are ‘beating the odds,’” Heistad told the group, “is to look for schools or groups of students in grades or even classrooms where poverty statistics would normally predict failure. When I find success instead, I dig into why this is happening, to isolate the factors that explain why the results are better than expected.”

Heistad described the importance of the Measure of Academic Progress or MAP test in his work. While not the official state test, two-thirds of students in Minnesota are in districts that elect to use this instrument, including Bloomington where Heistad works. Why? In part because it is an ‘adaptive test’ that allows greater precision in student scores, and in part because it can be given multiple times to identify changes within and across years (‘learning growth’) for individual students.

When data from the No Child Left Behind testing regime became known, many parents assumed they could just look at the school average test scores and make a judgment about whether their children should attend a given school. Not so, said Heistad, as the MAP assessments began to show that some schools not ranked highly for absolute aggregate proficiency were actually producing impressive levels of academic growth. Students were prospering.

One such school consistently identified as ‘beating the odds’ is Higher Ground Academy. Wedl asked Bill Wilson, the director there, how the school consistently managed to do so? Wilson then took the podium and cited three core convictions:

- First, parents have to be involved. Wilson said parents are there every day, in the halls; a part of the education plan. “It’s like a small village,” he said, “even though the school has nearly 800 students.”
- Second, Wilson asserted, provocatively, that “poverty is not a predictor of anything.” He said that Higher Ground works to remove barriers, to get things out of the way that prevent young people from learning. Much of that work, he said, was through working with parents and their communities. It is all the more remarkable that most of Higher Ground’s students are recent immigrants from East Africa—arriving usually speaking no English. In essence, Wilson was saying that it comes down to building a culture of success for the school community.
- Third, he stressed the importance of high expectations. “We have standards,” he told the group, “and we have confidence that all our students can get there.”

“What we do,” Wilson said, “is debunk the notion of the connection between race and intelligence.” “To graduate, all our students have to be accepted at a postsecondary institution, since one of the new realities is that everyone needs some education beyond high school. In our most recent graduating class, all were accepted to a postsecondary institution and only one has dropped out. Compare that to any other school.”

“And,” Wilson added, “we do not automatically sort students by age. We dare to put them in grades based on skill levels and let them move as fast as they can. You can see the results.”

Session 2: What are we testing for?

Focusing on the question nearly never asked, session two featured John Tanner, the author of the 2013 book, *The Pitfalls of Reform*.

Before getting to a judgment even harsher than Heistad’s in the previous session, Tanner introduced the audience to a brief history of testing, pointing to how it originated in academia as a primitive but effective way to have students reveal, in a one-on-one interview with their professors, what they had learned. “When the costs of paper began to fall,” he went on, “groups of psychologists thought about ways to scale up testing.”

To do that, they settled on using ‘averages-based’ or ‘rank order’ tests; the approach was to give all students a test and compare each student’s performance to the average—to discriminate between students doing well and those not doing so well. Such tests could be issued over and over. Averages had a way of following a steady pattern, not changing all that much over time. It became possible then to compare groups of students by year cohort or by the schools they attended, all relative to established averages.

But here, Tanner went on to say, is the harsh judgment: designing tests to rank order through averages sacrificed the capacity for tests to tell us how much any given student or group of students has *learned*. These tests are not designed to measure the objective quantity of knowledge acquired in any given area—only the *relative* amount as compared with the average student. And, these tests are not given at two different points in time to determine how much a student’s understanding has increased. Because of these shortcomings, they cannot be used to discover the causes of positive results either; hence the ridiculous nature of tying students test scores to teacher evaluations, or anything else.

The terrible irony of course, Tanner added, is that every state in the U.S. uses these average-based, rank order tests. And the national regime that lasted for a dozen years—No Child Left Behind—justified these tests in part for their purpose of ‘informing instruction,’ which clearly they could not (and did not) do.

So, what of the much-lamented achievement gaps? Those statistics are merely snapshots of cohort averages, and as such, are not likely to change much over time. You might reason that accelerating the achievement of low performing groups would show up in the testing averages, but they do not tend to do that, in part because all groups are making progress. In fact, the obsession with testing that endures in the U.S. may actually be maintaining the gaps, Tanner asserted.

One would think that Tanner’s deeply researched, quietly thoughtful but provocative premise would be the subject of discussion and debates at nearly every conference where educators gather. But it is not. And the nation’s frustration and sorrow over gaps continues.

Session 3: Building on what works

The final session in the series lifted up two interesting examples of how changing the way things are done can make a difference on gaps.

Kim Gibbons, now at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Applied Research and Education Innovation (CAREI) and formerly the long-serving director of the St. Croix River School District, is a nationally known expert on Response to Intervention (RtI), now often called Multi-tiered Support System (MTSS). Gibbons has been a powerful presence since the founding years of the RtI method.

Gibbons was quick to point out that RtI was a bad name for a good methodology. (She joked that when she and her colleagues were developing the method, they should have made RtI mean ‘really terrific instruction.’) Gibbons stressed how difficult it is to get educators to change the way they do things, even in the presence of evidence-based better methodology. And, she admitted, RtI or MTSS does need a bit of demystification. Done well, it rests on three pillars:

- Frequent, quick diagnostic assessments of student performance
- Effective instruction and intervention (see tiers below)
- Collaborative use of data to inform interventions

Done properly (insiders use the phrase “implemented with fidelity” here), MTSS can be used across any curriculum, at all levels and grades. It features three tiers of instruction:

- Tier One – this is the mainline, core instruction for all students;
- Tier Two – moderate, in-classroom intervention for an average of 15 percent of students who show through frequent assessments of progress they need a little additional help;
- Tier Three – the more serious interventions for those needing substantial additional assistance; usually using a different instruction strategy and curriculum than that used in other two tiers (an average of 5-10 percent of students).

It is usually the Tier Three interventions that contribute most significantly to reducing the usual gaps. And one of the benefits, though many special education advocates do not share the enthusiasm for these results, is that fewer students need to be classified as having a ‘specific learning disability’.

Another approach, explained by Angela Jerabek and Anu Sharma, focuses on creating more intentional relationships. Pioneered at the St. Louis Park High School by Jerabek and called Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR), this intervention strategy had its origins when Jerabek told her principal she thought she should resign. Discouraged by seeing such high failures in new high school students in their ninth grade, she had concluded she must be in the wrong career. Fate, though, had granted her a creative, flexible principal who challenged her to stay and create a new approach for these students. She thought about it and agreed to try.

The result was BARR, which, while not making any changes in the curriculum or the school schedule, relies heavily on professional development for teachers; creating sensitivity to the social-emotional dimension of being in high school; instituting ‘risk reviews’ to monitor on a regular basis students most likely to fail; aggressive involvement of whole families in meeting the challenge students face in school; and mostly, to build the quality of relationships between teachers and individual students that literally changed the way students saw their prospects for success.

Sharma, a research consultant, then showed several slides on the statistics—a 73 percent decrease in the failure rate of 9th grade students over the first decade, a period in which students of color dramatically increased as a percentage of the school population.

Meanwhile, BARR won a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) Award to support the program and later one of the Validation Awards, through which Jerabek and Sharma have taken BARR on

the road, extending the program now to schools in seven states. They go where they are invited and find they get comparable results in all sorts of schools.

At one point, Robert Wedl, in his role as moderator, asked, as he had in other sessions: What stops other districts, other schools, from doing what seems obviously to work? The panelists shook their heads and pointed again to the difficulty of getting existing institutions to make any radical changes. And that may be where the core problem lies with the achievement gap.