

1 The Achievement Gap

Our Ultimate Challenge

Carlos, a fifth-grade Latino student in an urban school district, wrote the following essay:

When I grow up I will get married and have two kids and I will make lots of money. I will be a good dad because I will play with my kids and bring money home to pay for all the food and bills. I will treat my wife nice and not fight with her about money. I am going to work at an office building and be the manager. Not like the men I see on the corner. I am going to have beautiful cars and a nice life.

At Carlos's elementary school, only 8% of his classmates meet fifth-grade reading standards on the state assessment. Just 10% of them met state mathematics standards, 4% met writing standards, and 3% met state science standards. Last year, the graduation rate at Carlos's neighborhood high school was 48% and if Carlos is one of those 48% who graduate, chances are that he will not have the skills necessary to pursue further education successfully, much less manage a business. His future income will most likely be far less than he needs for the "nice life" he envisions. Unfortunately, Carlos's chances of realizing his dreams are not good. For a snapshot of high school dropout rates by gender and race, see Table 1.1 below.

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Another fifth-grade student, Jacob, attends an elementary school 25 miles from Carlos's school in a more affluent White suburban neighborhood. His aspirations are similar to the ones Carlos wrote about. Jacob's chances for realizing his dreams, however, are not as slim. At Jacob's school, 97% of the fifth-grade class met reading standards and 96% met math standards. Eleventh-grade students in Jacob's neighborhood high school had an average ACT score of 24.3; 87% of the students met state standards in reading, 89% in mathematics, 84% in writing, and 89% in science. The graduation rate was 98% last year. By attending these schools, Jacob will be well on his way to having a "nice life."

As Carlos graduates from fifth grade and prepares for his future, the next 6 years of his schooling represent a journey of roadblocks and the challenge of being successful in a system set up for "other people." In contrast, Jacob's next 6 years are a bridge to attaining his dreams and successful experiences with people and systems that believe in his abilities. That is not to say that Carlos will not succeed, but he will have to have fortitude, resolve, and a great amount of support, faith, and good fortune. He will certainly need better schooling and more opportunities in school than he has now. Without additional intervention from the educational system, educators, and community, Carlos is far more likely to end up like one of those men he "sees on the corner."

Table 1.1 Percentage of high school dropouts (status dropouts) among persons 16–24 years old by gender and race: 2000–2004.

Year	Total			Male			Female		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
2000	6.9	13.1	27.8	7.0	15.3	31.8	6.9	11.1	23.5
2001	7.3	10.9	27.0	7.9	13.0	31.6	6.7	9.0	22.1
2002	6.5	11.3	25.7	6.7	12.8	29.6	6.3	9.9	21.2
2003	6.3	10.9	23.5	7.1	12.5	26.7	5.6	9.5	20.1
2004	6.8	11.8	23.8	7.1	13.5	28.5	6.4	10.2	18.5

NOTE: "Status dropouts" are 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school program regardless of when they left school. People who have received GED credentials are counted as high school completers. From the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey. Copyright 2004.

The disparities between Carlos's and Jacob's stories are all too familiar and can be echoed across the United States. Carlos's and Jacob's futures represent what we think of when we hear the term *achievement gap*. The term describes the extreme disparities between children who live in low-income, impoverished communities and children who live in affluent, middle-to-high income communities. This moral and educational problem is something educators have sought to solve, but the gap persists and remains an ongoing issue.

SCHOOL COUNSELING AND THE GAP

Most school counselors would say that they are doing all that they can do to help students like Carlos. Rightly so, most school counselors are concerned about the achievement gap and believe that they are doing everything they can to close the gap. One missing link, however, is that many school counselors are not trained to assist students to overcome societal, familial, and educational barriers. In most cases, school counselors will know how to invite Carlos's parents to participate in school events, how to work with Carlos in a small counseling group, how to counsel Carlos about friendship issues, and how to consult with his teachers about his low grades. However, school counselors are rarely prepared to challenge Carlos's teachers regarding what may be their low expectations of Latino male students or to advocate for more educational support sources in Carlos's community. These are the types of activities that are needed to help Carlos persevere and overcome obstacles to achieving his dreams. As a professional counselor and counselor educator with extensive background in multicultural training, I believe that these are the types of activities that should be in school counselor job descriptions. This book is my attempt to offer to school counselors the lessons and strategies that research and experience have shown will ensure students like Carlos have opportunities to succeed.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN AND WHERE WE ARE HEADED

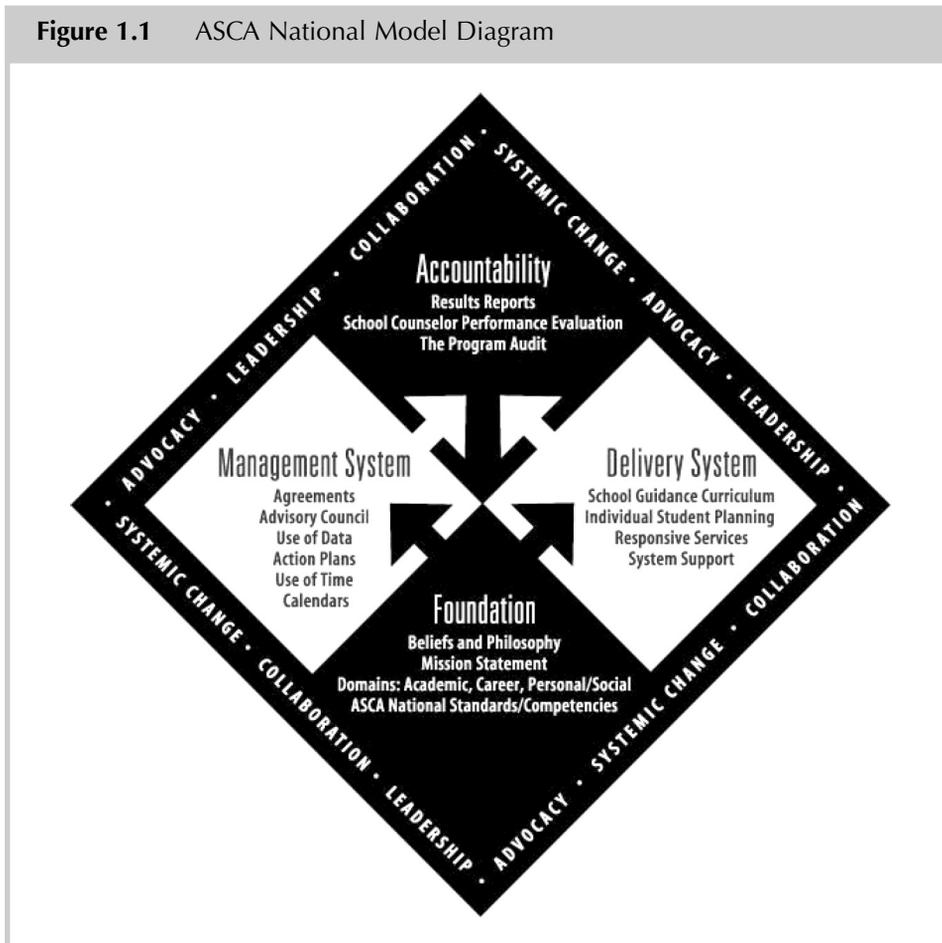
For many years, school counselors or guidance counselors have, in part, been blamed for the perpetuation of educational inequalities in schools by supporting tracking systems and by denying students the opportunity to enter or remain in advanced tracks. Although every school has its educators who prefer the status quo, there are many wonderful counselors who help students achieve their dreams. But there is still much more that school

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counselors can do to help all students (particularly poor and ethnic minority students) achieve. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has begun to address this challenge by posing the question, "How are students different because of what school counselors do?" As a result of this question, ASCA created its National Model, a framework for school counseling programs. See the diagram in Figure 1.1 below.

The ASCA National Model's focus is on bridging counseling and academic achievement via systemic and collaborative efforts between counselors, teachers, administrators, parents, and students. More important, the National Model emphasizes accountability and the use of results reports, school counselor performance standards, and program audits. Also, included in the National Model are National Standards that act as the objectives for student outcomes. These student outcomes are divided into three areas: *academic*

Figure 1.1 ASCA National Model Diagram



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development, career development, and personal and social development. The ASCA National Model and Standards have clearly moved the school counseling profession in a direction in which counselors act as an integral part of the school's mission and are linked to the academic focus of today's schools.

However, even if counselors design their programs aligned with the Model, there will still be children like Carlos who will not be served or who need additional barriers removed before they can achieve. This is where this book will help. What else do counselors need to do *beyond* the ASCA model to help all students achieve?

THE POWER OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors must assume the power that they have in schools, power that enables them to either dampen the dreams of students or help them to realize their dreams. As evidence, I have heard the following statements from adults:

- "My counselor said that I would never get into college . . . that's why I never applied. I wish I hadn't listened to her."
- "My counselor really believed in my ability. If it hadn't been for him telling me that I was capable, I probably would have ended up like my friends—hanging out and getting into trouble."

These statements are evidence that school counselors have an enormous amount of power that, if channeled in the right direction, would help close the gap. Of course, counselors are not the only people in a school building who make important decisions about students. However, the school counselor can be the one person in a school that will act as an advocate for students. This book will propose ways in which school counselors can make a difference in the lives of all children.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP DEFINED

As mentioned previously, one of the major problems facing the educational system in the United States is the widespread inequity in educational achievement and opportunity across ethnic and socioeconomic groups. On a variety of measures, such as high school completion and college participation rates, Advanced Placement course enrollment, and standardized achievement tests, ethnically diverse (with the exception of Asian Americans) and low-income students have much lower levels of achievement. This gap has become more widely known as the *achievement gap* and denotes when

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groups of students with relatively equal ability don't achieve in school at the same levels. In fact, one group often far exceeds the achievement level of the other. There are gaps between girls and boys, gaps between poor and wealthy students, and gaps between urban and suburban students, just to name a few. But the most glaring gap, nationally and locally, is among races. Even when parents' income and wealth is comparable, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and immigrants for whom English is not a first language lag behind English-speaking, native-born, White students. The evidence for these gaps has been documented repeatedly (Chubb & Loveless, 2001; Education Trust, 2006; Fine, 2001; Haycock, Jerald, & Huang, 2001).

Why focus on the achievement gap at all? One reason for widespread concern over the gap in student achievement is that it involves substantial social and economic costs. Low educational achievement is associated with high unemployment, lower earnings, higher crime, and a greater dependency on welfare and other social services. The social costs of these outcomes can be staggering. Another reason for the widespread concern over the achievement gap is that the ethnic diversity of the U.S. population is increasingly growing and, by 2020, it is expected that school districts in major cities will have student populations consisting of predominately students-of-color (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999).

The achievement gap is a complex problem and parallels other societal gaps (such as poverty) that differ among ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Although it is impossible to discuss the achievement gap without discussing these other societal gaps, the achievement gap seems to be most prevalent in those schools that are not attending to issues of social justice; that is, to issues of equity, equality, and possibility for all students. Social justice champions the belief that one can change the world and that all persons may contribute to the whole of society while striving for their own potential. Acquiring an awareness and acknowledgment of social justice is a logical goal in closing the achievement gap. That is the focus of this book.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GAP

Although schools may have little influence over poverty or community factors, what goes on in schools could lessen their negative effect. For decades, policymakers, researchers, and school reformers have sought ways in which schools could address the achievement gap. Strategies have focused on school funding, teacher quality, student interventions and motivation, school organization, management, school climate, market competition, and school accountability to the public. The following pages offer a look at where the gaps and inequities exist.

Standardized Tests

Student achievement gaps among ethnic and socioeconomic groups are large and persistent. Despite long-term progress by African American and Latino and Latina students, the gaps on various standardized tests remain wide. For instance, on the 2004 reading trends test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average score of African American students at age 17 was slightly lower than the White students at age 13. In math, the average score for African American 13-year-olds was more than 20 points below that of White 13-year-olds—roughly the equivalent of two grade levels behind. In science, the average score for Latino 9-year-olds was the equivalent of more than three grade levels behind that of White 9-year-olds.

According to NAEP, in the 18- to 24-year-old group, about 90% of Whites and 94% of Asian Americans had either completed high school or earned a GED (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2004). Among African Americans, the rate dropped to 81% and among Latinos to 63%. And, approximately 76% of White high school graduates and 86% of Asian American high school graduates went directly to college, compared with 71% of African American and 71% of Latino graduates (Green & Forster, 2003). For those who stay in high school to graduate, low-income and ethnic minority students have more limited access to the rigorous coursework needed for college readiness.

Course-Taking Patterns

Disparities exist in students' course-taking patterns as well. Data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that approximately 62% of White, African American, and Hispanic or Latino high school graduates each were enrolled in an Algebra 1 course in high school in 1998. But that pattern did not hold for higher-level math courses. Whereas 64% of White students took Algebra 2, only 55% of African American and 48% of Hispanic or Latino students were also enrolled. Even larger gaps appear in honors course enrollment: 7.5% of White students, 3.4% of African American students, and 3.7% of Hispanic or Latino students took Advanced Placement calculus (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

The news is not all bad. Today, there are more African American and Latino students taking academically rigorous courses than in the past. But researchers have found that schools in culturally and linguistically diverse or high-poverty areas often offer a less-rigorous curriculum to begin with. Because they cover less material or give less homework they fail to challenge students. This is a problem because research has found that students enrolled in challenging courses—in topics such as algebra,

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trigonometry, chemistry, and advanced English—usually have higher standardized test scores than their peers.

Teacher Experience and Expectations

Low-income students and students-of-color are more likely to be taught by less-experienced teachers than are White students. Researchers have cited this factor as one of the most critical variables for explaining the achievement gap. There is a correlation between higher teacher certification scores and higher student achievement scores. Teachers in districts where there are high percentages of Black or Latino students tend to have lower scores on their certification tests.

Studies have suggested that teachers sometimes have lower academic expectations for African American and Latino children than they do for Whites or Asian American. By setting low expectations, teachers run the risk of perpetuating the achievement gap because they do not encourage African American and Latino students to follow a rigorous curriculum.

Cultural Competence

Educators' lack of cultural competence or lack of cultural sensitivity can negatively impact the achievement of students. Educators who lack the cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills to work with diverse groups of students and parents are less equipped to nurture the academic achievement of diverse students.

Availability of Resources

Resource disparities handicap schools. Low-minority schools tend to be much better funded and have all-around stronger resources than do high-minority schools. The same relationship holds true for schools in low-poverty versus high-poverty areas. There is persuasive evidence that this factor contributes to the achievement gap. For example, data from the NAEP show the achievement gap between low-poverty and high-poverty schools increased throughout the 1990s (Education Trust, 2001).

Special Education

Another critical gap in student achievement is the gap in the identification of special education students. Students-of-color, specifically Native American and African American students, are significantly more likely than White students to be identified as having a disability. For example, in most states, African American students are identified at 1.5 to 4 times the

rate of White students in the disability categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance (The Civil Rights Project, 2003). In addition, Latino and Asian American students are underidentified in cognitive disability categories compared with White students, raising questions about whether the special education needs of these children are being met (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Once identified, most students-of-color are significantly more likely to be removed from the general education program and educated in a more restrictive environment.

Losen and Orfield report even more disturbing statistics:

- Among high school youth with disabilities, about 75% of African American students, as compared with 47% of White students, are not employed two years out of school. Three to five years out of school, the arrest rate for African Americans with disabilities is 40%, as compared with 27% for Whites.
- The identification of African American students for mental retardation is pronounced in the South. Southern states constituted nearly three quarters of the states with unusually high incidence levels, where between 2.75 and 5.41% of the African Americans enrolled were labeled as mentally retarded. The prevalence of mental retardation for Whites nationally was approximately .75% in 2001, and in no state did the incidence of mental retardation among Whites rise above 2.32%.
- Poverty does not explain the gross racial disparities in mental retardation and emotional disturbance, nor does it explain disparities in the category of specific learning disability or any medically diagnosed disabilities.

Thinking About . . . Students With Special Needs

What is the process of identifying students for special education at your school? Are there a disproportionate number of students-of-color in special education programs? If so, has your staff discussed what to do about it?

College Education

When looking at college graduation statistics, young African Americans are only about half as likely as White students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 29 and young Latinos are only one-third as likely as Whites to earn a college degree (Haycock, 2001). Although the number of African American, Latino, and Native American students enrolled in college has risen, those

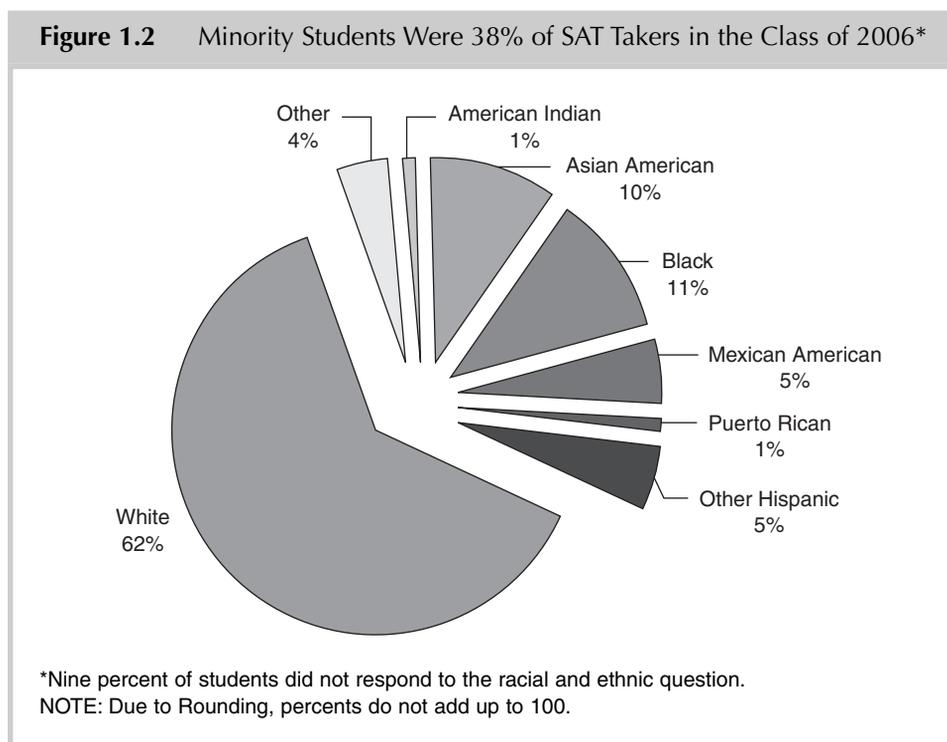
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enrollment figures are far below the representation of those students in K–12 schools and below what would be projected for average college attendance given those K–12 enrollment figures (Allen, 2003).

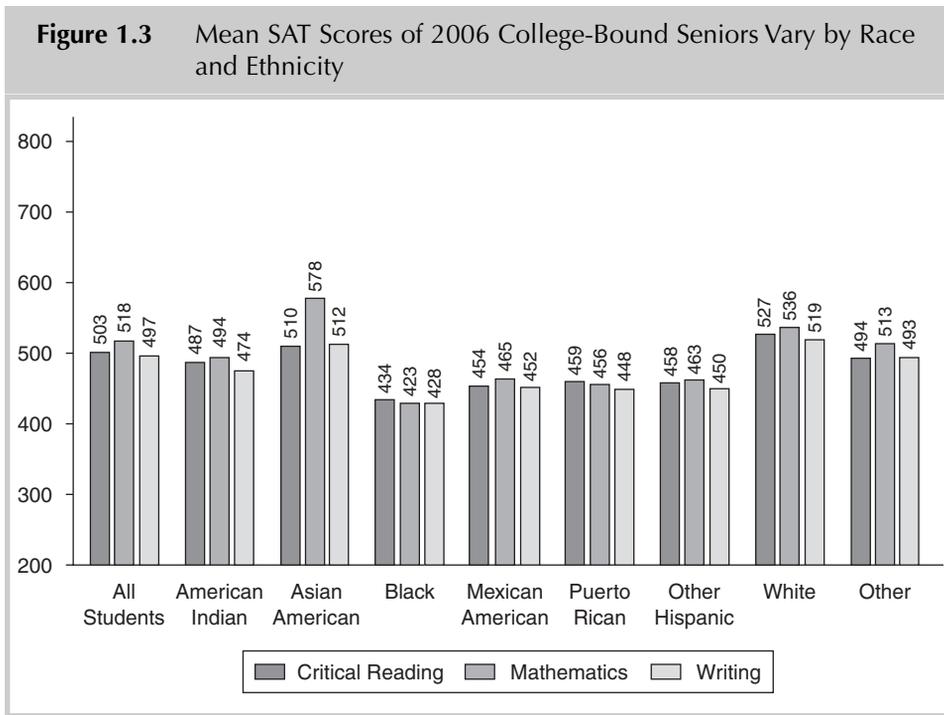
Another way to illustrate the achievement gap is to examine SAT college entrance examination scores. A review of 2006 SAT scores revealed that African American students performed 93 points lower on the critical reading section and 107 points lower in mathematics. Asian American students, however, scored 42 points higher than White students in mathematics and 149 points higher than African American students (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

The Gap Across the Educational Continuum

Although the achievement gap is typically seen as a problem affecting school-age children, in fact the gap first opens during the preschool years. Studies consistently show that poor and ethnically diverse children have already fallen behind well before they enter kindergarten. These children, as young as 3 years old, already perform far below average on tests of school readiness. Unless one believes that this poor performance is due entirely or



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primarily to genetic factors, it follows that the preschool environments of poor and ethnically diverse children are deficient in supplying the types of experiences that promote school readiness (Haskins & Rouse, 2005).

Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2006) indicate that some groups of young children have higher rates of participation in center-based preschool programs than others. For example, in each of the years observed, a greater percentage of middle-to-high income children aged 3–5 participated in center-based programs than low-income children. The difference in rates of participation between children from low-income and middle-income families was 13% in 2005 (47% vs. 60%).

In addition, a greater percentage of African American and White children than Hispanic or Latino children participate in center-based preschool programs. In 2005, 66% of African American children and 59% of White children participated in such programs, compared with 43% of Hispanic or Latino children. White and Latino middle-income children were more likely than their low-income peers to participate in center-based preschool programs, whereas no measurable difference was found between low-income and middle-income African American children.

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Thinking About . . . Barriers to Learning

Think about the challenges that low-income and ethnically diverse families face on a regular basis (e.g., discrimination, child care tuition, economic strain, limited access to resources, etc.). How do these challenges affect the education of children?

Community and Home Factors

Although counselors have less control over what takes place in the community and home than in the school, there are certain factors we need to be aware of in order to do our work most effectively. If students of poverty are not succeeding in school, it may be due to a variety of factors that affect academic achievement, such as poor nutrition, substandard housing, and substance abuse. These conditions influence students' ability to learn.

Another community factor is the legacy of discrimination that plagues many communities and affects the belief that one can or cannot succeed. The belief that some children cannot learn at high levels persists, and when children believe that society does not expect them to succeed, or when they themselves believe they cannot succeed, they do poorly in school.

In general, children-of-color and low-income children are less likely than White children to have parents with high levels of educational attainment. Combined with lower family income and parents' hectic work schedules, the extent to which parents can foster positive opportunities for learning at home is limited. Opportunities such as having access to books and computers—or even being read to before bedtime—may be more limited for ethnically diverse and low-income children. Finally, a family speaking a language other than English at home can also affect a child's learning opportunities.

Student Factors

There has been some research to indicate that low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse students' emotional and social development contributes to their low achievement. For instance, some research has suggested that African American students can become anxious about displaying negative racial stereotypes in their academic work. The result, researchers say, is a kind of vicious cycle in which African American students can be so worried about seeming stereotypically ungifted academically that their

anxiety actually makes them perform less well than they could. This phenomenon has been called *stereotype threat* (Steele, 1997).

Peer pressure and identity issues have also been cited as contributing to the low academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Peer pressure may cause students to ridicule or demean academic success. There is some dispute as to the effects of peer pressure, however. Some researchers (e.g., Ogbu, 1994), for example, have pointed to a phenomenon in high-minority schools whereby black students who perform poorly actually criticize their academically successful peers for “acting White.” These researchers have charged that African American students tend to idolize a youth culture that scorns academic achievement. However, other researchers (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994) have argued that such a culture exerts no special power on African American students in particular; instead, they claim that African American students are no more likely to dislike or scorn school than are White students.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CLOSING THE GAP?

In 2000, the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) published a study of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Wisconsin (Manset et al., 2000). They found that these schools had some common characteristics. Each had more than one of the following:

1. purposeful and proactive leadership,
2. data-based decision making and program monitoring,
3. a sense of community,
4. high expectations for students,
5. staff-initiated professional development,
6. opportunities for staff interaction,
7. curriculum aligned with state standards,
8. use of local and state assessment data,
9. parent and community involvement, and
10. alternative support programs.

In addition, several other studies have identified commonalities among successful schools. One of the federal Comprehensive School Reform models,

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Success for All (Slavin et al., 1998) identified the following characteristics of schools that were instrumental in closing the gap:

1. leadership,
2. commitment of entire staff,
3. extensive professional development,
4. early literacy support, and
5. data-driven instructional decision-making and student monitoring.

This research points to common practices that show potential for closing the achievement gap. Leadership that establishes a culture of high expectations is certainly key. An emphasis on time for academic learning both during and beyond the school day is another policy and practice that works. In addition, schoolwide use of data and parental involvement seem to be critical components of schools that are successful.

Though this research is helpful, it is unclear how these school reform components translate to school counselor practice. The only current national school reform initiative that includes school counselors is the Education Trust's *Transforming School Counseling Initiative*, which focuses on the work of school counselors as advocates, leaders, and as creators of opportunities for all students to define, nurture, and accomplish high academic aspirations. The Education Trust has worked with a small percentage of counselor education programs on training "transformed school counselors."

Nevertheless, there is still much to be done to prepare counselors to work within a school reform framework. Without a doubt, school counselors can assist with school reform efforts by addressing issues of social justice through development of a school counseling program aligned with the American School Counselor Association's National Model and Standards. The social justice-focused functions offered in this book will hopefully begin to fill a void in the literature and in the work of school counselors.

Counselor in Action

Download data from your state's Department of Education Web site. Choose a school in an urban, suburban, and rural district. Examine each school's standardized test scores, attendance, dropouts, and graduation rates. Discuss with your colleagues the achievement gaps and any other gaps that you can detect in the data.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think school counselors and school counseling professionals have been absent from school reform initiatives?
2. How do you explain the lack of a gap between Asian American students and White students in reading and math?
3. In your community, what efforts are being made to close the achievement gap between students? Write down a few that come to mind. Are these efforts successful? Why or why not?