

*This paper was developed by a consortium of superintendents across the state from districts with large student populations of English language learners. Its purpose was to respond to Washington Learns' final report. The paper was presented to the governor's office on November 29, 2006, and is supported by WASA.*

## **Working together to close the achievement gap**

### Introduction/Background

Persistent gaps between the academic achievements of different groups of children are thoroughly documented by the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress and other statistical analyses of state assessments (WASL), grades, course selection, and dropout rates. Despite improvements in some years, the gap endures as a consistent and disturbing phenomenon that contradicts the fundamental belief that any child who studies and works hard, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or country of origin, will succeed in school and in life (Infobrief, January 2006).

Reflecting the national trend of the past decade, Washington assessment data show a relatively large and unchanged achievement gap. White and Asian student performance are relatively similar and far exceed the scores of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students.

The gap remains relatively unchanged in spite of thirteen years of school improvement in Washington because the average rate of improvement among minorities has either been slower or not much better than that of white and Asian students. To reduce and ultimately close the gap, minority students will need to accelerate achievement at a faster rate in the future (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002).

The increased focus in Washington State and the nation (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) on high academic standards for all students has brought a heightened awareness of the disparities in student achievement. This achievement gap has become a concern of parents, educators, legislators, and community members. The Washington Learns Committee is attempting to take action to remove the barriers to achievement. However, the recent Washington Learns report recommendations fall short of meeting the needs of a large segment of underserved students in our state. Specifically, the lack of concrete instructional strategies for English Language Learners fails to address Hispanic students in our area.

Some of the broad-based examples that should have been included in the report and currently being implemented in the Yakima valley schools include:

- An innovative, engaging, and challenging curriculum (with academic support) that builds on the strengths of each learner and enables students to develop strong academic skills and honor their cultural heritage;
- High-quality teachers for each classroom supported by ongoing job-embedded professional development; and
- Additional resources for strengthening schools, families and communities.

Any effort to close the achievement gap among students in our state must concentrate on underserved populations – high poverty students, students with special learning needs, students of different cultural backgrounds, nonnative speakers, and rural students.

## Recommended Action

The following recommendations are based on the background and needs presented and reflect a consensus of school leadership.

- Provide specific instructional, curriculum and assessment strategies that reflect an understanding of English Language Learners to include: what teachers, schools and communities can provide to ensure each child is provided a healthy, knowledgeable, and engaged learning environment.
- Ensure a highly qualified teacher for every classroom. Provide teachers with ongoing, job-embedded, professional staff development on successful instructional strategies for ELL (An analysis of data from the UTD Texas School Project found that high quality teachers substantially closed the achievement gap, especially of low-income primary school students, Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kahn, 2005).
- Provide the additional funding required to acknowledge and focus on closing the achievement gap for English Language Learners. This funding is required to accelerate the progress of English Language Learners. To close the achievement gap requires closing the funding gap that exists between the

desire of school districts to meet state, federal and student learning targets and the corresponding funding provided to accomplish these tasks.

- Examples of specific needs for this additional funding include:
  - Early childhood experiences for ELL to include, pre-school, all-day kindergarten, parent literacy, family engagement activities, parent training, and community collaboration on early learning opportunities and appropriate kindergarten readiness assessment tools;
  - Teacher training and ongoing professional development;
  - Curriculum alignment with standards-based programs to ensure congruence and fidelity with proven ELL instructional practices and evidenced-base assessments;
  - Smaller class sizes and student load requirements to address identified specific student learning needs;
  - Greater focus on intervention strategies, remediation, one-to-one coaching and learning opportunities;
  - Expand early learning teacher training to produce more well-trained, culturally-competent, diverse child care providers and early education teachers;
  - Provide English Language Learner “advocate” within middle and high schools to greatly enhance academic and career guidance and support;
  - Accelerate the literacy learning opportunities for ELL at a level commensurate with the current efforts in raising math skills;
  - Increased after-school, summer school and “double shot” efforts for students to learn in flexible and non-traditional approaches;

- Parent training on parent involvement and home environment strategies designed to increase student achievement;
- Provide a greater focus on students who have transitioned from ELL programs into regular classrooms with support in meeting the demands of English;
- Identify the foundation competencies teachers need to assist ELL and design preparation and professional development programs to meet these skills;
- Design job-embedded practices that connect and support ELL and regular classroom teachers in an environment of collaboration focused on aligning and support ELL success;
- Examine, discuss and correct current policies, programs (state and federal) that conflict and contradict successful efforts to raise ELL achievement, i.e., Reading First/Dual Language: is there research related to ELL reading that can guide implementation of Reading First versions of Dual Language programs?;
- Program evaluation and standards-based assessments for formative and summative evaluation of student learning and program success; and
- Leadership training for building level and district office leadership on the impact of their behavior on student learning.

(Additional examples will be provided during our work together to support the Washington Learns initiatives)

### Conclusion

The achievement gaps remain, perplexing and persistent. There is general consensus schools are not closing achievement gaps, indeed, in some cases the gaps have widened in the era of school reform.

School leaders appreciate the attention Washington Learns offers in closing the achievement gap. However, the current recommendations provided in the final report fall short of meeting the learning needs of our majority student populations, i.e., English Language Learners. Any effort to close the achievement gap must provide specific strategies for eliminating the gap and offer funding proposals that complement these recommendations.

We look forward to working closely with the Washington Learns Committee to provide specific examples of highly effective practices for English Language Learners and to assist in identifying funding needs to complement these practices. We welcome the opportunity to be an active partner with Washington Learns in meeting the needs of all students.

### References

Available upon request.