

Op-Ed: Better Outcomes for All

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Posted: September 11, 2017

Low-income, minority students, and those with disabilities are not achieving the same levels of academic success as their white and middle-income peers. This disparity is called the *academic achievement gap* and has long been one of the biggest challenges facing the American education system. It is part of the overall responsibility of the stewards of any school system to ensure that the approach to educating all students is designed to help each child come as close as reasonably possible to realizing their potential. Not surprisingly, public education tends to be most successful with students who come to school already well-equipped to benefit from the standard model. An achievement gap is simply the predictable result when the circumstances of some students who walk in the doors every day are not aligned with the circumstances that typically translate to success under the standard model.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the achievement gap, the Burlington School District (BSD) is no different from most of the United States. In Burlington, the largest and most ethnically diverse district in Vermont, there is a wide disparity between the academic performance of lower income students, students of color, and those on individual education plans (IEPs) and their white and middle- and upper-income counterparts. School administrators and teachers are keenly aware of this challenge, and despite great effort by all involved, there has been little progress toward narrowing the achievement gap. This is why we need a comprehensive strategy that will help support our low-income students, minority students, and those with disabilities.

It is a top District priority to give all of our students the best chance at success and to do everything possible to eliminate the achievement gap. While closing the achievement gap is hard, schools in other parts of the country have made substantial progress toward that goal. What will help? Increased teacher support for at-risk student groups has been proven to positively impact academic performance. Examples range from George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama to the Harlem Children's Zone to Imperial High School in California. While there is no single or easy solution, a coordinated approach to educating all students is needed. Educators at schools that have made progress all agree on the following principles: the fundamental belief that all of their students can learn must be shared, and all involved share the responsibility of figuring out how to make this happen.

The National Education Association (NEA) itself has weighed in on this important issue, recommending supplementary instruction as an effective strategy for addressing needs of at-risk students. Teachers know that their work, focused on important goals, matters. That is why the Board proposed a labor-management or advisory committee to create a collaborative process for organizing the teachers' time and work towards closing the achievement gap.

The Board greatly respects and admires the work of our teachers. Indeed, Burlington has some of the finest teachers in the state, and I expect they all would agree addressing the achievement gap is a top priority. Many teachers already use their unscheduled blocks and planning time to

address this issue. Despite this dedication, the achievement gap remains. To make progress, all of our administrators and teachers need to work together to achieve better outcomes than we are seeing by centrally coordinating these heroic efforts occurring at all levels across the District. This requires a more *comprehensive* and *integrated* strategy, drawing on the expertise already in our schools. Our children will be better served when we find ways to work together—Board, administration, teachers, and parents alike.

Closing the achievement gap is a long-term goal, and teacher voices are essential in creating the local strategies that can bring success in closing the achievement gap. Other districts have made progress, and we can, too. We know that there is more to learn, and that the work is long. The Board welcomes additional proposals from the BEA and is eager to talk about any and all proposals for how we can better serve our at-risk students and close the achievement gap.