

# The Racial Achievement Gap within our School:

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Eliminating the gaps through integration

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As we prepare to incorporate many low-income students from urban school systems into our suburban school it is imperative that we acknowledge that a racial achievement gap does indeed exist. It is our first step in addressing how best to close this gap. To close the gap it is necessary to determine why the gap exists in the first place. Is it politics or culture, specifically No Child Left Behind? Does the gap exist due to socio-economic factors? Or, is it on some level racism by or toward teachers? Speculation abounds as to why we have a racial achievement gap in a country that is generally prosperous and supposedly education oriented. What resources must we utilize in impeding an educational decline in our school, while elevating those most at risk?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), mandated in 2002, is at the heart of the political machine in what was deemed educational reform to raise the bar of academic achievement with an ultimate goal of eliminating the academic performance gap between white majority and multi-cultural minority in the United States. The belief of politicians was to increase competitiveness of American students with their European counterparts in math and science, as well as eliminating the majority/minority academic performance gap by year 2014. As we begin 2011 the racial achievement gap is still a wide chasm, but according to David Dunn, Chief of Staff for US Department of Education, No Child Left Behind is making substantial progress as he stated to Frank Stasio of NPR (National Public Radio), "...the gap between African-American and white peers and Hispanic and white peers in nine-year-olds is at an all-time low." (Dunn 2006) At the same time, NPR correspondent Claudio Sanchez voices an opinion that a federal

education policy was absolutely necessary, although he questions whether the goal by 2014 is realistic. Sanchez also stated “The notion that schools alone can create equal achievement for children of different social backgrounds is, in many ways, not based on any true understanding of the factors that contribute to these kids’ education.” (Sanchez 2006).

Although the core belief of No Child Left Behind is admirable, there are too many variables involved in educating our children to thrust them all into the same requirements and expect a level outcome in achievement. The US Department of Education has backed this program extensively by placing the burden on the states and school administrators to ensure the state standards of educational achievement score highly on the national test score. This burden has created a great deal of animosity toward the department of education from individual teachers and administrators. As Thernstrom and Thernstrom indicated on YouTube’s *Mind the Gap in Education*, “No Child Left Behind is necessary, but insufficient.” (Thernstrom 2008), whereas Donna Ford of the Achievement Gap Project believes schools, specifically teachers, are too obsessed in teaching to the test and not in teaching to the individual.

By creating the Achievement Gap Project, Ford hopes to enlighten the minority communities about the existence of this gap, find ways to get community involvement to close the gap and most importantly to change the attitudes on learning with black males. This project is a noble pursuit and one that if successful can surely shrink the gap considerably, unlike No Child Left Behind, which has many flaws. Although it is

necessary to acknowledge that many educators and educational innovators, such as Noguera and Wing point out,

“The issue is receiving more attention now in part because of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law...even the fiercest critics of the Bush administration must acknowledge that despite its many flaws, No Child Left Behind has, in an odd way, moved the national conversation about race and education forward, because for the first time in our nation’s history, schools are required to produce evidence that they can serve all students.” (Noguera, pg 7)

In addition, Noguera and Wing believe that because of No Child Left Behind, suburban school districts are pressured to find ways to resolve the achievement gap.

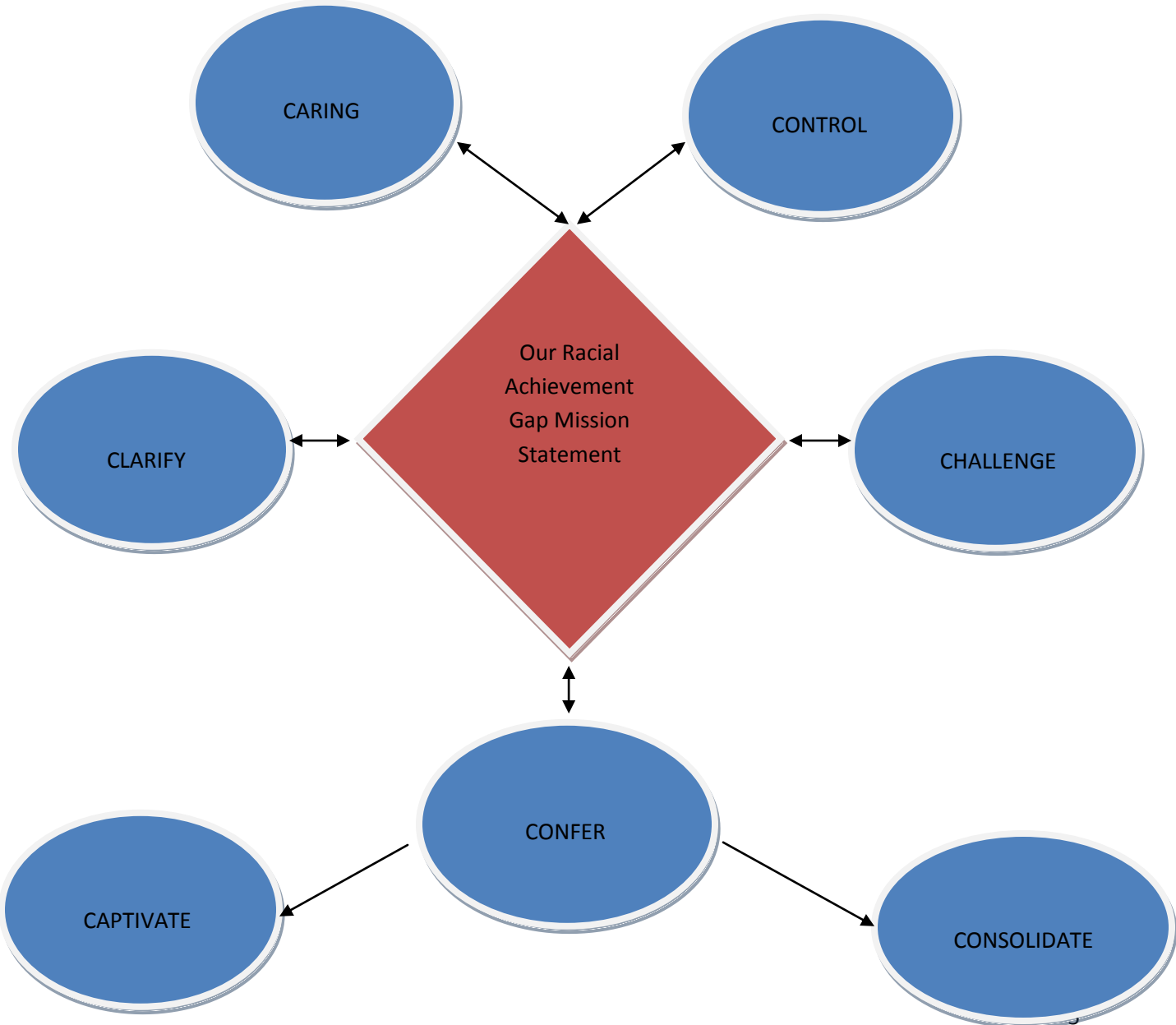
Unfortunately, they also indicate that unlike Berkley High School in Berkley, California, these suburban schools are not moving in the right direction with the same goodwill and good intentions as Berkley exhibits.

With all this in mind we must find ways to continue the successful curriculum in our school and at the same time look for new ways to provide the means to elevate and integrate our incoming urban students to a level consistent with the highest achievement possible. To do this successfully we must identify each student’s socio-economic environment and establish programs to get parents involved and evolve a deeper understanding of the factors that determine the level of a student’s motivation toward learning.

Ronald Ferguson has developed the Seven C’s of education that is a starting point to improvement of our education system that will become our mission statement. Each of the Seven C’s will be mandated as an outline of the work that will be necessary to achieve our goal of integration and successful achievement and begin closing the

racial achievement gap. It is our hope that the majority of new students are already poised to obtain high achievement, but for those that may lag behind, our implementation of the seven C's will encourage these students to attain the same levels as their peers.

**Ferguson's Seven C's in Closing to Racial Achievement Gap**



In order to implement the Seven C's in our school we must determine the course necessary to make them strong and fruitful. Each of the Seven C's will guide us toward eliminating the gaps of integration.

**Caring:** Teachers and Administrators, at the most basic level, are care-givers by providing the service of education. As Jonathon Kozol related on *Shame on the Nation*, "Key to everything is unlocking the motivation in a child's heart." (Kozol, 2008) This motivation comes from the primal need of all children to be cared for, in other words, it is necessary that they know in words and deeds that this school is theirs, that they have value.

**Control:** Ronald Ferguson emphasizes that control of conditions within our school will allow in depth instruction within the guidelines of NCLB, but we must "strike a balance of control and autonomy." (Ferguson, 2010) Maintaining control will be our primary objective and will require structure. Regardless of their outward demeanor, students thrive on structure and it may very well be the only structure they have in their young lives. It will be each teacher's required task to use a measure of autonomy in their classroom in how they teach a given subject based on each student's individual needs, while maintaining strict control. Consequently, each classroom will be continually monitored for quality of teaching and classroom discipline.

**Clarify:** Avoiding confusion on what is expected of each individual to succeed within our school is a top priority. Set high expectations of everyone and evaluate often on what works and what does not. John Ogbu wrote in *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*, "Teacher expectations have been shown to be an important cause of academic

disengagement and low performance.” (Ogbu, pg 286) In addition to clarification of classroom requirements and behavior it must also be emphasized that to avoid disengagement and low performance, teachers and administrators are to be continually cognizant of equality of expectations. No two students are alike, but the approach to understanding each students needs must and will be practiced with each student in equal measure.

**Challenge:** Simply closing the achievement gap will be our biggest challenge. But, we must also challenge ourselves, each other and every student in our classroom to be the best in all endeavors. In order to maintain the best possible teaching methods, and continually teach each other new methods, we must be open to the challenge and allow creativity to emote. We cannot accomplish our goals if we devolve into what Donna Ford terms as “Drive-thru Teaching.” (Ford 2008) Meaning we cannot assume all teaching roles are necessary and we must teach more than the basics.

**Captivate:** Captivating a student’s interest and respect in the classroom is the surest way to involve students in their own learning. Ferguson teaches that in order to captivate an audience it is necessary to make the instruction interesting and instigating stimulation. This goal will be a challenge and will require thoughts on creativity. Utilizing creativity will not only engage student’s interest, but enhance teacher enjoyment of their students.

**Confer:** Initiate an atmosphere of teamwork with your fellow teachers and administrators by conferring often on your ideas, concerns and practices. Ferguson believes, “Interaction with students in a back and forth exchange activates student

thinking.” (Ferguson 2010) We must also initiate this dialogue with the community as well. Sharing problems and creativity of instruction will move us forward. Set community goals for involvement to gain new perspectives on where we are and where we expect to be in eliminating the racial achievement gap.

**Consolidate:** Create a roadmap of learning by organizing your forces. Use your students often in your instruction and allow their own creativity to surface. This will bring more involvement into learning. Consolidation of culture by acknowledging and celebrating our differences is also a means of thwarting racial fears by understanding student’s cultures and home environments, or as Ford states, “Change teachers deficit thinking.” (Ford 2008)

Establishing Ferguson’s Seven C’s as our mission statement is designed to integrate our urban students into our suburban environment. Our goal is to create an atmosphere of equality where each student is as important as the next, while overcoming resistance of each community. We will become involved with parent organizations and explore our student’s socio-economic status to determine the best course of curriculum in order for each student to succeed. We will abide by the rules of Dr. Lorraine Monroe of the Frederick Douglass School in New York as she tells her student’s “you are not responsible for your home life...but you are responsible for your school life.” (Monroe 2009)

We will utilize the characteristics as set forth on NPR’s *What Makes a Good High School?* (Korry 2006) which includes building strong teams of teaching, more teacher accountability and building strong parent involvement.



As we look forward toward the challenge of integration we will eliminate any pre-conceptions that urban students are unwilling to learn as long as we give them our undivided care and attention, along with the tools necessary to support learning. We will eliminate any pre-conceptions that parents of lower socio-economic status are uninterested in their children's education and we will do this using the Seven C's, as well as modeling successful programs, such as the Achievement Gap Project established by Donna Ford. As long as we recognize the racial achievement gap exists, then we will close that gap.

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