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*This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for our upcoming conversation. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues. Prepared by FOCUS St. Louis.*

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## **CLOSING THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

According to the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are now responsible for presenting achievement data by racial group. The picture of disparity which this paints raises the question—how equal is education in St. Louis? Many of our failing schools are located in the poorest neighborhoods, with high concentrations of minority students. How can we as a region ensure that all of our schools are able to educate our children to the standards we as a community set?

It is difficult to connect the racial achievement gap that persists in our region to one single cause or explanation as it is a multi-faceted issue. Expectations, resource distribution, and cultural competency of institutions all play roles in this problem. Each of these aspects is described below followed by some possible alternative approaches to solutions.

### **SOME FACTS**

- In 2004, Illinois eighth grade math assessments revealed African American students on average scored 35 points lower than their white counterparts. In Missouri, the average was 33 points lower on math assessments.
- In 2001, graduation rates in Missouri showed only 58% of African American students graduate four years after entering high school, while 77% of white students graduated. In Illinois the graduation rates were 53% for African American students and 84% for white students.

## EXPECTATIONS

Expectations have long been linked to outcomes. Referred to as the “Pygmalion Effect,” expectations and standards set for students have a direct relationship to student performance. Low expectations lead to low achievement, but when we set high expectations for our children as students, they rise up to meet that challenge.

The culture of low expectations has long been cited as a leading cause in the low academic achievement of minority students. These expectations arise in schools as well as in communities and

individual homes. Stereotypes of minorities, particularly of African American males, lead to low expectations and a lack of nurturing for these children who are viewed prematurely as problems. According to some, expectations of delinquency and behavior problems become self-fulfilling prophecies in schools, communities, and homes where adults are quick to assume the worst. The alternative to this would be for schools, communities, and families to work together to set high educational standards for all children.

### The Department of Defense Model

The United States Department of Defense Education Activity operates two school systems for children of enlisted personnel in other countries, and on bases located within the U.S. Employing military standards of discipline, training, commitment, and high expectations these schools have been successful in significantly narrowing the achievement gap between white students and minorities with the achievement gap for these schools being well below the national average. Student demographics of these schools are similar to many inner city schools, which are often cited as failing. Forty percent of enrollment are students of color, 50% of the students qualify for reduced price or free lunches, student mobility is at a rate of 35%, and 80% of the students have parents with no education beyond a high school diploma. Assessment tests show high levels of success for all students, but particularly African American and Hispanic students. These schools are successful for a number of reasons. The school provides a culture of high expectations for all its students, is flexible in the designing of its curriculum allowing for changes to meet the needs of the student population. Schools hire quality teachers, provide extensive professional development, and effectively use all available resources. Other factors that may contribute to the high student success is the small size of the schools, the availability of before and after school programs, and the high level of community and parental involvement.

## RESOURCES

In St. Louis and the surrounding areas, schools located in the poorest neighborhoods, have the highest number of minority students, and the lowest number of resources available to them. Availability of resources, financial and

otherwise, is a major factor in the achievement of students. The quality of teachers, including their experience and training, as well as the quality of the curriculum are two key resources needed for student success. Beyond the school

system, resource inequities are found in the communities and homes of these students. Research has shown that minority students are less likely than their white counterparts to have access to in home resources such as the internet, computers, encyclopedias, or even a parent at home in the evening. Due to segregated housing, failing schools are most often located in high-minority,

high-poverty neighborhoods. These communities lack additional resources, such as after school programs, cultural institutions, museums, and parks. All of these resources found in homes and communities contribute to student success. When they are not available, student academic achievement is negatively affected.

### **SOME FACTS**

- In Missouri, 39% of secondary classes in high minority schools are taught by teachers lacking a major or minor in that field compared to only 22% of classes in low minority schools.
- The same is true in Illinois with 37% of classes in high minority schools and only 17% of classes in low minority schools.
- In 2003, of students placed in gifted and talented programs in Missouri only 7% were African American compared to 89% white. In Illinois the numbers were 8% African American and 80% white.
- Looking at suspensions, for the same year: African American students are disproportionately represented. While they make up 17% of the student population in Missouri, they account for 35% of the suspensions.
- African American students make up 21% of the student population in Illinois, yet account for 36% of all suspensions.

### **CULTURALLY COMPETENT SCHOOLS**

Despite growing diversity in our classrooms, the policies, practices, and procedures of the dominant culture remain the accepted approach to learning. This gives children of the dominant culture a significant learning advantage over students of other races and ethnicities who are made to adapt their learning styles in order to succeed.

Culturally competent educators learn to effectively communicate with students from different races, cultures, and classes while respecting the cultural differences they bring to

the classroom. Culturally competent educators also become more aware of their own attitudes toward members of different races and cultures with whom they may be working. There are hidden rules and agendas within economic and cultural structures that affect school institutions. This affects the policies and procedures embedded within the schools as well as the instructor's response to these policies and interactions with individual students and their classrooms.

**SOME ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES:**

In discussion about the racial achievement gap—its causes, its existence, and its solutions—there are many viewpoints as to what could or should be done to achieve high academic performance for all students.

- Some view the achievement gap not as an issue of race, but as an issue of class. People supporting this idea believe that the gap in test scores is not reflective of race, but rather it is due to the socio-economic status of the student's family. They assert that children who are performing poorly do so because they do not have the resources, financially or otherwise, to compete with other children. According to this perspective, the real gap is between children coming from well off homes and neighborhoods versus those who come from poor homes and neighborhoods.
- Among the arguments for closing the achievement gap is the idea of including extra funding earmarked for support services aimed at minority students. Examples would include developing before and after school programs as well as additional tutoring. Funds could also be used to work with parents of minority students on ways to help their child at home. Opponents argue it isn't fair to spend more money on minority students. All children need funding to support their education and all children should be funded equally. They believe it isn't the government or community's responsibility to make up for the differences between economic levels tied to the funding gap. All children should be funded equally at school and beyond that it is the parent's responsibility to provide for their child's educational needs.
- Still others have a different perspective. Some believe the problem is not in the schools or the level of funding provided for the children, but in homes and communities. Aligning standards, setting flexible curriculums, etc. does nothing if the child does not have a stable home environment with the support needed to be successful in school. They trace the root of the achievement gap to what is being done in the homes, citing a lack of parent involvement in their child's education, a lack of discipline for children in their homes and communities, and attitude of indifference and low expectations for the child's educational achievement. The belief is that the school and teachers can only instruct, they can't reinforce the behaviors at home or ensure that a child's homework is complete, or that the child has someone to help with his or her studies. To fix the problem, we have to start at home and remedy those issues first.
- Some believe that the fact that research shows us how to fix the problem combined with the fact that our community is not implementing these measures, indicates that there is an element of racism in our society that continues to perpetuate the racial achievement gap. Research has shown that setting higher standards, aligning curriculum to these standards, equitably distributing resources, involving parents in schools, and increasing the cultural competency of schools would all help close the gap. What is needed is the political will to do this.