Dissertations

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Program Evaluation For Assessing The Effectiveness Of Tracking The Academic Growth And Attendance Of Black Students In Closing The Black And White Achievement Gap

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Attendance of Black Students in Closing the Black and White Achievement Gap

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

 Program Evaluation

 Change Leadership Plan

 Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The "program" can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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Abstract

Across the United States in almost every city, every suburb, and every rural area there is a gap between the achievements of Black and White students. The term "achievement gap" has become an accepted label in situations where Black students severely underperform relative to their White counterparts. Many school districts have discretely avoided discussing and or addressing the gap for decades. School District Z, located in an urban suburb just outside of a large midwestern city, is the focus of this research as they attempt to address the gap. District Z is composed of approximately two-thirds students of color, yet the achievement gap between Black and White students is 37 and 41 percentage points in reading and math, respectively. District Z's plan of attack is to require principals to track the attendance and academic achievement of all Black students as part of their evaluation. This research explores the effectiveness of tracking the attendance and academic growth of Black students on the achievement gap between Black and White students by examining standardized assessment data since the initiative was put in place. What I found was that District Z's gap-closing program was not effective and, in fact, the achievement gap between White and Black students widened over a five-year span. At the conclusion of this article, I will provide an analysis of the data and research-based practices that may narrow District Z's achievement gap.

Preface

I did not have a real sense of the impact the color of my skin would have on my life until I graduated with my undergraduate degree and entered Corporate America. Of course, there were situations that occurred on a regular basis that alluded to the fact that my skin color played a part in decisions or comments that were made, but it was not until years later that I reflected on those situations for what might have really fueled the outcomes. After graduating from college, I was hired by one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the U.S. as a pharmaceutical sales representative in the Chicago area. It was in this role that I became aware of racist behaviors and comments directed towards me. Comments that some may only think in their minds were spewed at me from White male doctors as if what they were saying was common knowledge– comments about how my color and gender would keep me from being successful and how I would have to be better than the other reps. Some doctors outright refused to meet with me, but I would see White reps come in and out of their offices. I learned hard and fast lessons from that job that have stuck with me almost twenty years later. One of the most glaring is that we in the U.S. have a long way to go before we eliminate learned bias and racism and accept and value non-Whites.

Growing up in a poor, urban city with a population of around 55,000, 98% of which were Black, I was exposed to many positive Black role models, particularly my teachers, church members, and family friends. I was reared to believe that I could be President of the United States of America if I wanted to be. My encounters with Black adults were positive. As a student, I was pushed to do my best. I was motivated to learn, I knew that college was my next step, and I knew without a doubt that I would "be somebody." What I did not know was that the lives of all Black kids did not mirror my experiences. I did not know that many were taught by

teachers (mostly White) who did not support them, set high expectations, or believe in their abilities the way my teachers did. I did not know that they did not learn about Black history all year like I did or that they were not forced to take the honors courses and be involved in school organizations like me. I did not know that there was a world of Black children being systematically set up to fail. This realization made my heart ache. I was sad about the opportunities not afforded to the other Black children and I was angry that not much was being done about it. This is what inspires my work.

My encounters with the White male doctors along with the realization of the harsh realities of educational achievement for many Black children in America prompted my interest in the achievement gap. I wanted to learn how the perceptions of the capabilities of Black students could be framed without knowing the person or their background. I wanted to know why so many Black children were being restricted from reaching their potential. I wanted to know why there was a gap in learning between Black and White children and what was being done about it. My curiosity led me on a journey to research the implications of slavery on the education of Black children and on White America.

Educational challenges like the achievement gap place complex demands on educators. Although not a new concept, the term has gained much popularity in the era of high stakes testing. In my opinion, the complexity of the issue then stems from an expectation of change. Since we cannot change the children in our schools, we will have to change the schools that educate our children. Many teachers, like the White doctors I encountered, have already developed an opinion of what Black children are capable of. Across the state in which I live, over 70% of teachers are White and female and teach from a European model of education–one that has not changed much since the inception of public schools when Blacks were still subjected

to racism and racist practices that prevented educational achievement. It is essential that we learn to teach the very population that schools were not created to serve. This paper will illuminate the struggles of Blacks in the area of education from slavery to the present and evaluate the effectiveness of one suburban district's plan to reduce the achievement gap.

In my research, I analyzed standardized assessment data by subgroup over a period of five years, specifically looking for patterns of growth in isolation, and increases and decreases in achievement between Black and White students across grade levels. I also researched and analyzed the district's strategic plan. The strategic plan gave me insight into the priorities, beliefs, and aspirations held by the district's leadership. Lastly, I evaluated the district's plan for closing the gap, exploring its implementation and effectiveness.

As an employee of District Z for the majority of my research journey, I learned several leadership lessons, the most important being that if leadership (school board, superintendent, cabinet) does not share the belief that a problem exists and share an understanding and commitment to solving the problem, then it will not be solved. The achievement gap is clearly an adaptive challenge; it will not be solved by doing things that we have already done. Problems like this require clear diagnosis, self-reflection, and action on behalf of the system and each participating individual. This process also brought to light an old saying: "What gets measured, gets done." Explicit success criteria must be developed for all district-wide initiatives. All employees should be able to know if we have succeeded. During this process, I was also reminded that sometimes families are intentionally kept uninformed as part of a strategy–a poor one, I might add. Some may think that announcing to parents and guardians that their Black and Latino students are failing and are far behind the achievement of their White peers would cause an extreme backlash. In some cases, it may, but in others, it would demonstrate ownership of the

issue and hopefully the will to act to remedy the situation. Once the decision to act is made and all of the plans are laid out, consistency is mandatory. Specifically, it is imperative to be consistent with delivering the message throughout the school system as well as externally. If some employees are only required to do some parts, others not required to participate at all, and still others who are unaware that the initiative even exists, the chances of success decrease significantly. Involving parents in all stages of the development and implementation process is critical. Parent and stakeholder involvement adds an additional layer of accountability that some organizations are not comfortable with; however, for an initiative as large as this, parents must be informed. A growth mindset, in this case, would believe that the parents can grow from being "in the know." The may learn of strategies, supports, and outside connections that will positively influence the success of the initiative.

I am a better leader, a more informed parent, and a more compassionate educator as a result of this process. My eyes were "wide shut," as the saying goes, in several areas. Several times, I read data in disbelief. I constantly wondered, "How can this be?" I am compelled to share what I have learned with friends and colleagues whenever I can. I believe I have accurately captured the educational plight and successes of Blacks in this country–information that might change the perspectives of many Americans, maybe even the White doctors who unashamedly shared their tainted views of me and my ability to succeed because of my skin color.

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Section One: Introduction

Purpose

Gaps in the education of White students and their Black peers have existed since slavery. The very nature of slavery required that Black slaves were kept at a disadvantage in all areas of functionality, except physical labor, in order for the system to work. A slave believed to have skills in the areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic could be punished by death. In fact, in response to sparse literacy movements to educate slaves, several southern states enacted laws to prohibit any person from teaching or enabling a slave to be taught to read or write. South Carolina was one of the first states to enact such legislation in 1740, followed by the Georgia Colony in 1770 (Anderson, 2004). In the early 1800s, North Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Virginia followed suit, imposing whippings, imprisonment, fines, and various other punishments for those who taught slaves to read or write. When Southerners did educate their slaves, it was with the intent of making them better workers (Bullock, 1967). Several authorities in this area, including Bullock and Anderson, have contended that the laws against teaching slaves to read and write grew out of a variety of fears and concerns, the main fear being literacy as a means to freedom, as anti-slavery literature was available. Those who enacted these state laws likely never envisioned a world with free Blacks and therefore did not consider or care about the possible impact of their decisions (prohibiting the education of slaves) on society as a whole.

As early as 1800, approximately 90% of White Americans were literate. In stark contrast, 90% of Black Americans were illiterate. It was here that the first gap emerged, and the great divide began. Through a combination of grassroots campaigns and newly acquired political power, Blacks in the south were able to narrow the gap and by 1900, slightly more than

half of southern Blacks claimed to be literate. Most were young females and males between the ages of 10 to 14. Illiteracy persisted among Black adults (Cornelius, 1991).

Similar to many initiatives to eradicate the gaps between Black and White students, progress was brought to a halt during the first half of the twentieth century as southern Whites regained control of the state and local governments. Discriminatory practices in school funding were blatant and rampant and southern states were encouraged to pledge themselves to the education of White children, even if it meant diverting to White schools the portion of school funds paid by Black citizens. Although being taxed for public education, Black parents were all but forced to find other means to educate their children (Anderson, 2004).

The Supreme Court Ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 signified a major victory for Black students. The decision led to a mandate for the desegregation of schools, but it was immediately met with counter-reform initiatives by many states which included maneuvers to determine the minimum amount of desegregation Blacks would accept. The 1964 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which, along with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, focused on the inequality of school resources and sparked optimism for progress in the education of Black children. However, both ESEA and the Civil Rights Act have fallen short in the attempt to win or at least equalize a race that began with Whites in the lead for over 200 years.

In response to Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act, James S. Coleman and others conducted research concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or natural origin in public educational institutions at all levels in the United States. The report produced by Coleman is extensive, to say the least. Coleman examined school characteristics, achievement in public schools, and the relation of

achievement to school characteristics, among others (Coleman, 1966). His work provided quantitative evidence of what many already knew–there were gaps in the educational opportunities for Black students when compared to their White counterparts.

Coleman's work is very closely linked to what modern-day researchers call the "opportunity gap." The opportunity gaps are the twenty-first century barriers to equal opportunity for Blacks and other people of color. "Although opinion research shows that overt racial animosity has declined significantly, it has been replaced by more sophisticated, yet equally exclusionary dynamics such as covert discrimination, structural inequality and implicit bias" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 9). All of these modern tactics represent potential barriers to opportunities for Black Americans.

Although the term *opportunity gap* is new, the phenomenon is not new at all. The fact that numerous southern states intentionally and actively prohibited the education of Blacks for centuries considerably impacted the plight and availability of opportunities for Blacks today in many facets of life, particularly education. The actions and opinions of these same Whites did not disappear over time as some might think. They have been passed down and manifested systematically in the school systems we experience today. This fact causes a high level of anxiety for me as the parent of a Black male. I have a heightened sense of awareness and concern as it relates to my son's classroom teacher's perception of him, his relationship with school staff, and his performance on state assessments.

Like most school districts nationwide, School District Z, the focus of this program evaluation, is struggling to close the achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts. Covering 90 square miles, School District Z serves portions of 11 communities in the northwest suburbs of a large Midwestern city. School District Z serves over 40,000 children

in grades pre-K through 12 and ranks as one of the largest in the state with 40 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 5 high schools (Omitted for confidentiality, 2014).

On average, District Z's Black students represent 7% of the student population. White students represent 31% of the student population. The remainder of the students represent the following ethnicities: Hispanic 50%, Asian 8%, American Indian 1%, and two or more races 3%. Assessment data indicate that Blacks students have historically underperformed on Illinois State and district assessments. According to the 2014 State Report Card and State Standardized Achievement Test results for District Z, the gap between Black and White students in reading is 37 percentage points, with 69% of White students meeting or exceeding standards and 32% of Black students meeting or exceeding standards.[1] The gap between Black and White students in math was 41 percentage points, with 75% of White students meeting or exceeding standards and 34% of Black students meeting or exceeding standards. There is also an achievement gap between Hispanic and White students in District Z; however, that gap is not a focus for the district and it is beyond the scope of this program evaluation.

In 2013, in response to the achievement gap, District Z implemented a directive for elementary principals to intentionally and purposefully track the academic growth and daily attendance of each Black student in his or her building. The tracking of student's growth and attendance and actions taken as a result were part of each principal's formal evaluation. It is important to note that principals were not given a framework or format for implementing this initiative and not all principals adhered to or were aware of the directive. Therefore, tracking growth and attendance potentially looked different in each of the 42 elementary buildings as did the methods of communication with staff and parents and reporting of metrics to monitor progress.

For most schools, the achievement gap is easily identified through the analysis of historical standardized test data and academic improvement trends. Although it may seem cliché, the goal of all teachers and principals is to improve student learning and ensure that all students obtain a quality education, as evidenced by achievement on benchmark and state assessments. School District Z publicly shed light on the achievement gap several years ago and made closing the gap a priority for all. In a district where students of color now represent approximately two-thirds of the student population and White teachers represent the same ratio, questions about a plan of action quickly arose from some staff members. As an employee and parent of a Black child in District Z, I too became concerned about the learning and achievement of my first-grade son.

The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore the effectiveness of tracking the attendance and academic growth of Black students on the achievement gap between Black and White students. The goal of the evaluation was to uncover the district's priorities and aspirations as it relates to the achievement gap and ensure that those priorities are reflected in the design of the initiative. Patton (2008) stated that the future of evaluation is tied to the future effectiveness of the program. The original promise of the evaluation was to pave the way to effective programming. The current and future effectiveness of this program depends on an effective evaluation. It is my hope to shed light on the district's desired outcomes and promote a focused, accountable approach to closing the Black and White achievement gap.

Rationale

I chose to evaluate this particular program because, although I believe the premise (closing the achievement gap) to be admirable and necessary, I am not convinced that the district's approach is the most effective at reducing the gap. As a District Z administrator, I am

concerned about the academic growth and performance of all students, especially when subgroups begin to fall by the wayside. Black students, and Latino students for that matter, have historically performed lower than their White peers across all grade levels. Although mean group differences have slightly decreased over time, they are still large. The 1998 National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) data suggest that at the current rate of change the gap in reading achievement will close in about 30 years and the gaps in mathematics and science will close in about 75 years (Hedges and Nowell, 1999).

I became a school teacher in District Z in 2005. While the gap was very much an issue at that time, minimal conversations were had and even less was done about it. Additionally, the community has accused District Z of implementing programs and initiatives without vetting the necessary resources, communication, and follow through needed to make them work. The district has since attempted to make effective program implementation a priority. I can assume that the intended outcome of this work is for the achievement gap to narrow, but district-level administrators have intentionally left many pieces to chance and have omitted a theory of action to support the work. In a top-down manner, building principals were told to track the attendance and academic progress of Black students. It is important to note that according to the Illinois State Report Card, as a district, attendance has held steady at 94% to 95% for the last five years for all student groups. That leaves us to question the reason behind tracking the attendance of Black students.

As for support of the tracking of achievement, literature indicates that Black students tend to achieve lower than their White counterparts. That the trend was demonstrated early in the twentieth century when Whites with governmental power used it to halt the spread of public schools for Black children. The systemic repression was so severe that it continued to affect the

shape and character of educational opportunities for Black students throughout the twentieth century (Harlan, 1958).

I am personally connected to this initiative for two reasons. First, my son is Black and a first-grade student in District Z. To date, my son has performed above grade level in kindergarten and first-grade assessments. However, trends and data from the Illinois State Report Card indicate that by third grade, regardless of his academic achievements right now or my family's financial status and other positive demographic details, he too will soon experience a gap in achievement between him and his White counterparts. This fact causes me worry and anxiety. I wonder what might happen between first and third grade that would lead to an approximate 37% gap and 42% gap in reading and math, respectively, between him and his White peers. There are thousands of other families in the district just like me who want to know what the district is doing to curtail this looming problem.

Second, as a District Z administrator, I firmly believe that all students can learn under the right conditions. I also know that students present with a variety of challenges to the learning environment that need to be addressed in different ways (Barton & Coley, 2009). Learning is not homogeneous. Therefore, I am interested to find out what schools are doing to meet the needs of Black students that will lead to a decrease in the achievement gap. I wonder how the district-level administrators determined that attendance was one of the key factors leading to the achievement gap. How do we know that tracking attendance and academic progress is the answer?

This program evaluation will provide stakeholders with a deeper understanding of the achievement and opportunity gaps, interventions, and the effectiveness of those interventions on closing the gaps, particularly the tracking of attendance and academic growth. Stakeholders

include principals, elementary assistant superintendents, teachers, Black students, and their parents. I anticipate that all of the stakeholders are committed to the work of this program in an effort to close the achievement and opportunity gaps.

I also think it safe to assume that many parents of Black students are not aware of the severity of the achievement gap. According to the State Report Card, from 2010 to 2014, the gap grew 9 percentage points in reading and 16 percentage points in math, overall. The divide is even larger in some specific grade levels. It would be beneficial for parents to understand this nationwide epidemic and what District Z is doing about it. Black parents and students are major stakeholders in this initiative as its effectiveness, or lack thereof, directly impacts and involves them both. Students should be an integral part of this initiative as well. They should be included in a manner that allows them to take ownership of their learning. Parents are equally involved in that they should be aware of how their students fare in comparison to other students and what is being done to ensure continued academic growth.

I think it is also imperative to communicate such data to teachers, especially. As the sole provider of knowledge to students for most of the day, teachers need to be keenly aware of the performance of subgroups within their classroom and school and reflective about what they are doing or not doing to narrow the gap between Black and White students.

Lastly, I am passionate about this program and the need to narrow the Black and White student achievement gap because as a child there were no racial achievement gaps in my elementary, middle, or high schools. The primary reason is that approximately 90% of the student population was Black (within the district, I was not a member of a subgroup outside of gender) and so were approximately 85% of the teaching and administrative staff. If what research reports and what current trends indicate is correct, then the 10% White students should

have excelled higher than the Black students. The truth is that they did not. I ranked 11 out of roughly 500 graduating seniors and none of the top ten was White. They were all Black. I have an intense desire to find out what the root cause(s) of the gap is and what the tracking of Black student attendance and academic growth alone will do to narrow the gap between Black students and their White peers.

Goals

The goal of District Z's achievement gap program and of my program evaluation was to improve student learning. My definition of a goal is the end toward which effort is directed. If I were to parse the definition further, the "end" must be established prior to the effort and the direction of the effort must be clear; otherwise, there is no "end" to reach. Using this definition, it is clear that District Z has not clearly defined a goal in a literal sense. When the attendance tracking and academic performance monitoring initiative began, the "end" was not communicated to the principals, only the effort that was required (i.e. the tracking of data). Principals were not even clear about the direction they were headed. The goal of my program evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the tracking activities principals are required to do as it relates to narrowing the achievement gap and gain insight into how those actions will improve student learning. This program evaluation was an important cog in the wheel of research as I examined the achievement gap and the work of District Z to reduce it.

Research Questions

My research was guided by this question: Is the practice of tracking the academic growth and attendance of Black students closing the achievement gap between Black and White students? I also examined District Z's beliefs and practices as it relates to Black students

achieving success and specific and measurable goal related to their district priorities and aspirations.

In my opinion, initiatives, programs, curriculum selections, etc. are the cornerstone of an effectively functioning school district. Districts identify the needs of students, teachers, and staff and incorporate resources to meet those needs, with the ultimate goal being a measurable improvement in student learning. It would be wise for a district to ensure that the programs implemented to meet students' needs are research-based, targeted, measurable, and timely and utilize resources available within the district. The effectiveness of this program, now in its third year of implementation, has yet to be evaluated. A formative evaluation of this program is necessary to determine if District Z is reaching the desired outcomes.

While my primary question involved evaluating the effectiveness of the program, my secondary questions included the following:

a. Are the district's aspirations and intended outcomes for this program clear? How was progress toward the intended outcomes to be measured?

b. How are principals currently tracking the academic growth and attendance of Black students?

c. What have been some of the threats/barriers to implementing this initiative? How have they been addressed?

d. Are students, parents, and staff aware of the program?

e. How was the program communicated to principals? What was the message?

Currently, District Z's single initiative to close the achievement gap is the Black growth and attendance data collection mentioned earlier. I wanted to dig deeper into the rationale behind that initiative, the intended outcomes, district-wide measurement tools, and stakeholder

communication and involvement. A framework was needed for principals to collect information

and data. A key missing component of this initiative was support. Once the district realized

there was a need to close the gap and decided on a "plan," creating a strategy for implementation

and support for that plan should have been the next logical step, but it was not. Therefore, I also

examined what supports the district has in place or can provide to schools in order to achieve

their aspirations. Yong-Lyun Kim (2011) stated that, "[school leaders should] be able to develop

a strategic plan for sustainable school improvement in terms of student achievement, educational

environment, and school management" (p. 304). After surveying principals and obtaining data

about the achievement gap program, I intend to share the results with district leaders and have

conversations about the sustainability and accountability measures for this program.

Through her research in program evaluation, Kim (2011) developed a strategic planning

approach which comprises the following seven analysis steps:

1) Define program and evaluation goals

2) Identify stakeholders and their interests

3) Identify program services including components and activities

4) Build a program theory with linkages between goals, services, and outcomes

5) Weight program components and activities based on the degree of importance in
   achieving the goal

6) Assess outcomes of program activities

7) Measure program effectiveness (summing)

This approach represents a possible method of analyzing District Z's achievement gap

program. Using Kim's approach allowed for an evaluation of the effect of the program

components and their outcomes.

Section Two: Review of the Literature

Gaps in the social-, economic-, academic-, and education-related opportunities between Blacks and Whites has existed for centuries, more specifically since slavery. Viewed as the primary labor source in the colonies and later the United States for at least 200 years, Blacks began their existence on the continent of North America at a disadvantage. As a result, many gaps have developed between the two groups and are all predicated upon race, or rather, the perception of how race defines one's ability and rights in this country. Inequalities in areas that, by western standards, define success have conveniently been ignored by those in power in government, media, education, healthcare, and employment. Barriers, both covert and overt, include systemic social, economic, political, and academic obstruction to progress for Blacks. Modern researchers have collectively coined these gaps the opportunity gap (Jenkins, 2009). Additional research has focused on how the opportunity gap has contributed to the educational achievement gap.

It is abundantly clear that students from certain ethnic groups, most prominently Blacks and Latinos, do not fare well in U.S. schools and have not for generations (Noguera, 2000). Noguera (2000) said that unless we believe that those who have more wealth (or white skin) are inherently superior to those who have less (and brown skin), we should be troubled by the fact that patterns of achievement are often fairly predictable, particularly with respect to children's race, class, and background. It is rare to find poor and/or ethnic minority children from less educated families achieving at high levels. In fact, Boykin and Noguera (2011) found that these patterns are so consistent that when we see schools ranked by their test scores, they are not surprised to find that wherever poverty is concentrated and schools are segregated, achievement tends to be lowest. Fortunately, this is not always the case. There is a sprinkling of high-

poverty, high-performing school across the nation. The mere existence of these schools is evidence that under the right conditions, poor and minority students can achieve.

Through efforts like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the U.S. has made closing the Black and White achievement gap a national priority. Billions of government and state funds have been poured into initiatives and programs that allegedly support closing the achievement gap. If this is the case, what is preventing the nation and its schools from making greater progress?

In the next section, I will focus on the opportunity gap and academic achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts in an effort to explain how the gap began, factors that have impacted the gap (both negatively and positively), and high leverage practices designed to narrow the gap.

The Achievement Gap: Historical Context

Literacy and the ability to write has long been the great separator between Blacks and Whites (Cornelius, 1991). The ability to read and write, or lack thereof, was used as justification to label African slaves as lesser human beings or scarcely human at all. Africans brought to this country for labor were intentionally and strategically deprived of the opportunity to learn to read and write. Although the punishment for learning to read was swift, intense, and hostile for the learner and very possibly the teachers, Africans and later generations of African Americans continued to voraciously seek opportunities to learn to read and write. Over time, the growth of Black schools, churches, and literate Blacks in the north posed a threat for White southerners whose income was based on the free labor slavery provided—so much so that in the early 1800's, White southerners aggressively imported over 100,000 more slaves in order to support their economy, while slavery was on the decline in the north. Southerners believed that it was not very practical to educate Blacks unless it was going to contribute to them working more

efficaciously. Others thought that education would lead to revolt and some believed Blacks to be less intelligent and, therefore, would not benefit from education in a manner comparable to Whites (Jeynes, 2007, p.86).

Blacks in the south were afforded little to no opportunities for education. Since the U.S. government did not address the issue of slavery, let alone education for Blacks, head-on, alternative means of educating Blacks had to be found. Various religious groups, including Presbyterians and Quakers, established many schools for Blacks in the south, but their efforts were brought to a screeching halt when a North Carolina grand jury formally blamed Quakers for slave revolts in a number of cities in 1796. At the petitioning of slave owners, one by one Southern governments either forced or intimated the schools to close. As a result, stringent laws were passed against teaching slaves how to read and write (Jeynes, 2007, p.96).

Post-slavery, Blacks in the North were lawfully permitted to attend any school that White children attended–public or private. While most did not attend due to the inherent awkwardness of attending an all-White school, some Blacks petitioned state governments for segregated schools. In response, some received financial support from private White sources to begin all-Black private schools. Literature indicates that many Black leaders of the 1800s were educated during this era and consequently made lasting contributions to the United States–further supporting the belief that given the right opportunities situated in equality for all, poor people of color can achieve (Jeynes, 2007, p. 90).

Blacks in the South still faced hardships as it related to education. One of the few saving graces was abolitionists and freedmen who traveled to the South in order to teach former slaves in what were called Freedmen Schools. These people endured profound sacrifices and the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in an effort to educate Blacks. The Freedmen schools would be

short-lived as southern governments forced them to close. Other states, like Florida, imposed an

educational tax upon freedmen and required teachers to be certified by the superintendent, who

could reject the certification of anyone he chose. In Alabama, freedmen were threatened with

losing their jobs if they attended school. In Virginia, freedmen were refused housing if the

landlord received word of him attending school. On a regular basis, schools, students, and

teachers were attacked by mobs, namely the KKK. Some schools were burned down and others

stoned by angry citizens. Bullock (1970) wrote, "Many of these incidents were mischievous

pranks, but most were overt expressions of an intense resentment of any action taken to educate

Negroes . . . They were a set pattern that would prevail for almost one hundred years: Where

official rejection of Negro rights was apparent violence against Negro rights movements" (p. 97).

The next major attempt to halt the literacy of Blacks, outside of slavery, occurred around

the 1820s when the rights of free Blacks were severely limited. "New states admitted to the

Union after 1819 restricted suffrage to white males. Most northern states also limited or barred

black immigration and prohibited black participation in the courts. City codes separated blacks

from whites," (Cornelius, 1991, p.30). Around the same time period, approximately 90% of

White males and females were literate. In contrast, approximately 90% of Blacks were illiterate.

Even under severe constraints, Blacks forged ahead with recognizable educational reform

movements. The 1866 Civil Rights Act and Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving

Blacks citizenship and the right to vote, were noteworthy accomplishments. In 1870, Blacks

represented more than 40% of the population in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, South

Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia. As many as 2,000 Black men held public

office from 1865 to 1877. The work of grass-roots organizations and new Black political

representation paid off between 1870 and 1890–so much so that by 1900, slightly half of

southern Blacks claimed to be literate (Anderson, 2004).

The narrowing of the literacy gap would not last for long, as southern Whites regained

control of local and state governments in the south in the late nineteenth century after the Civil

War. Once protective federal troops were removed from the south, Blacks lost a significant

blanket of protection. Access to education for Black students dropped, along with attendance

rates. White southerners in government used their power to repress the education of Blacks.

Several court cases, that struck down many Black's defenses to fight against discrimination in

education, sent the message that things were about to change. The general pattern was for courts

to uphold the separation of Whites and Blacks in all areas, including education–what Ladson-

Billings (2006) referred to as legal apartheid. Local school boards had the power to discriminate

in the allocation of school funds, teacher hiring and pay and educational resources in general

(Anderson, 2004). An unfortunate corollary to Whites having control of state and local

educational decisions was that although Blacks paid taxes, their funds were mainly diverted to

support the education of White students. Southern states made it clear in word and deed that the

education of Whites was the priority, by any means necessary. These decisions laid the

foundation for what Bullock (1967) referred to as a biracial society. By the early 1900s, Black

public officials were virtually non-existent, inequality was once again on the rise, and racial

segregation became institutionalized.

Amazingly resilient, even in the face of universal denial of educational opportunities,

Blacks persevered. Anderson (2004) stated that "Between 1914 and 1932, ordinary African-

American citizens, despite living and working in cash-poor economies raised over $4,725,000 to

help construct nearly 5000 Rosenwald Schools[1]" (p.7). In 1935, enough elementary schools had

been built to accommodate the vast majority of young Blacks. In one generation the elementary school attendance of young Black children increased from 36% to 90% and this remarkable transformation rested squarely on the economic and cultural capital of ordinary Black men and women (Anderson, 2004).

Twenty years after the private funding for Black schools had run out and numerous court cases were filed to abate *Plessy*[2] were denied, the question of whether enforced segregation in public schools deprived Black children of equal protection under the U.S. Constitution was brought to the court's attention again. In May of 1954, Justice Earl Warren issued the court's response to the question in *Brown*[3]. The court rejected the idea that separate could be equal or that laws maintaining segregation could provide equal protection under the constitution. The plaintiffs in *Brown* hoped that by giving Black children access to the same schools and classrooms where White children studied would equalize educational resources and academic outcomes (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004).

The hopes of the *Brown* plaintiffs would not come to fruition in the immediate future. Even before the *Brown* decision was handed down, strategies to counteract the decision were being developed with the aim of preserving segregation. One tactic sought to delay the desegregation of schools, another was outright defiance of the law. In order to delay the integration of Blacks, some southern states offered Blacks money to equalize school facilities, others implemented with the minimum amount of desegregation that Blacks would accept. Outright defiance of the law on behalf of Whites usually erupted in violence and protests (Anderson, 2004). Most of the school integration that actually happened in the South took place after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and after other court orders took effect in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). On the surface desegregation seemed to be the answer

to the educational opportunities Blacks wanted for themselves and their children; however, many would argue that the law fell short of delivering truly equalized educational access and outcomes.

It took 15 years for the Supreme Court to address the implementation (or lack thereof) of *Brown*. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that it was the duty of school districts that had operated dual systems to dismantle the effects of segregation "root and branch," though the Court failed to make clear what it meant by the phrase. The Court hinted at the meaning a few years later in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg v. Board of Education* when it referred to demographic patterns. In short, the Supreme Court recognized that school segregation causes housing segregation and housing segregation causes school segregation. Essentially, when patterns of racial segregation are established and left unchecked, they lead to a cycle of systemic segregation in all areas of life (Dadisman, 1994). To be clear, segregation is not the cause of the achievement gap; it is a result or outcome of a misguided social construct that affirms the superiority of one race over another. The separation of Black and White students is inherently not a bad thing; however, the separation of Black and White students without equal and adequate opportunities and access to resources *is* a bad thing. I am of the opinion that what the *Brown* decision attempted to do was level the playing field. While the law made it legal for Blacks to attend schools with Whites, it did not take into account the social, emotional and mental ramifications of forced integration. Once integrated, were Black students able to learn? Did they feel safe enough to attend to the learning environment? Were they supported by teachers and administration? From the beginning, the presence of Black students was perceived as an intrusion and because they were viewed from a deficit model in comparison to their White schoolmates, educating them was regarded as a challenge (Noguera & Akom,

2000). White people's beliefs, rooted in superiority to people of color, did not evaporate at the onset of integration. If anything, their beliefs were brought to the forefront as Black students attempted to enter into White only schools and classrooms thirsty for an equal opportunity to learn. Therefore, desegregation did little to narrow the achievement gap between Black and White students. In some cases, desegregation may have exacerbated the issue.

Overall, educational opportunities for Black children at the elementary and secondary level were improving at an extremely slow rate. In 1960, the eighth grade was the terminal grade for most of the South's Black school children. By 1960, 31% of Blacks 25 years old and over had graduated from high school (Anderson, 2004).

It wasn't until the early 1970s that nationally representative test scores for student subgroups became available. Based on this data, the trend line reveals a positive picture of a narrowing gap until the late 1980s. Barton and Coley (2010) cited research from Grissmer and Eiseman (2008), who found that up to a third of the narrowing of the achievement gap could be explained by a set of factors that included parent education and income, characteristics of the parent(s), and race/ethnicity. During the same period, the gap narrowed in family resources, such as parental income, education, and occupation. Specifically, Grissmer and Eiseman (2008) noted that anti-poverty programs initiated in the late 1960s and early 1970s helped Black families more than White families. Such efforts were especially significant between 1968 and 1972 in the South, where Black test score gains were the largest. Barton and Coley (2010) were careful to state that "While there is some evidence to support these factors, it is largely suggestive, not conclusive" (p. 12). Nonetheless, the findings of Grissmer and his colleagues align with the ideas of Sue Brooks (2007) and Ladson-Billings (2006), in that the closing of the achievement gap is greater than an educational deficit. It involves an intense historical

examination of economics, resource allocation, poverty, segregation, social equity, and the underfunding of schools that have all contributed to an educational debt.

The period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s was also a time when states began mandating statewide minimum competency testing (MCT). Although faced with skepticism, some researchers believe that preparation for basic skills tests and reduction in average class sizes, among others, was a reason Black students' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally mandated test administered periodically to a national sample of students, scores rose during the 1970s and 1980s (Ferguson and Mehta, 2007).

Specifically, in 1971, when NAEP first began its assessments, the largest gap was between Black and White students, at age 17, in reading at 53 points. Similar gaps among nine- and thirteen-year-olds existed and ranged from 35 to 46 points in math and reading, respectively. By the late 1980s, a large narrowing of the gap occurred in reading and math depending on the age group and subject. For example, in reading for 13-year-olds, the gap narrowed from 44 in 1971 to 18 in 1988. In math for 13-year-olds, the gap narrowed from 46 to 24 for the same time period. Other age groups and subjects saw at least a 10-point narrowing of the gap during the same time period (Barton and Coley, 2010).

In the 1990s, the gap narrowing generally halted and then began to increase in many cases. For 9-year-old students in reading, the gap widened from 29 in 1988 to 35 in 1999 and from 25 to 28 in math. For 13-year-olds in reading, the gap widened from 18 to 29 and from 24 to 32 in math during the same time frame. Seventeen-year-olds saw an increase of 11 points in reading and 3 points in math, with some fluctuations during the decade. From 1999 to 2004, the gap began to narrow again with the largest reductions in reading. Between the 2004 and 2008

assessments there was little change in the gap in math; in reading the gap narrowed slightly for 9 and 13-year-olds (Barton and Coley, 2010).

The racial achievement gap reflects a national failure to equalize educational opportunity (Brooks, 2007). The Black and White achievement gap is the outcome, not the diagnosis. It is a result of centuries of the systemic denial of education, resources, economic advancement, health-care, social integration, civil rights, and much more, upon a singular group of people because of the color of their skin.

The Opportunity Gap as a Contributing Factor to the Achievement Gap

Crabtree (2002) reported that 49% of Americans were aware that a gap exists between White students and students of color. Of those, 66% said that they do not see the problem as one of education quality, but of other factors related to the students' background. In addition to the nation at-large being unaware of the achievement gap, adding to the problem is a district and school funding gap and a plethora of other educational and non-educational factors, which have been coined the opportunity gap. Those who cited "other factors" reported the following as what might contribute to the gap: the home-life of the students, economic hardships, poor community environment, and lack of parental involvement.

Conversely, Ladson-Billings (2006) identified the disparities in per-pupil spending in Chicago as an example of a major contributing factor that contributes to the opportunity gap. The Chicago public schools spend about $8,482 annually per pupil while nearby Highland Park spends $17,291 per pupil. The Chicago public schools have an 87% Black and Latino population, while Highland Park has a 90% White population. Philadelphia and New York per-pupil spending represent similar disparities among Black/Latino and White students. While Ladson-Billings (2006) stated that she cannot prove that schools are poorly funded *because*

Black and Latino students attend them, she *could* demonstrate that the amount of funding rises with the rise in White students. This pattern of inequitable funding has occurred over centuries. Schooling was nonexistent for Blacks during much of the early history of the nation. The opportunity to learn to read, write, and attend school was not afforded to Blacks. Once the opportunity for education was provided it was inequitable and of low quality. Crabtree (2002) shares that regardless of the relative importance of factors causing the achievement gap, providing more educational opportunities will have a positive impact.

Another contributing factor of the opportunity gap is best stated by Noguera (2000), who wrote that " . . . educational practices often have the effect of favoring students and hindering the educational opportunities of African-Americans and Latinos . . . Consistently such students are educated in schools that are woefully inadequate in most measures of quality and funding" (p.30). Noguera went on to discuss how even students of color who meet criteria for access to advanced classes are more likely to be turned away based on the recommendation of a counselor or teacher. They are also more likely to be tracked, ability grouped, and placed in remedial special education classes (Noguera, 2000). Ferguson and Mehta (2004) reported that tracking and ability grouping are leading "suspects" for why integration has not produced greater benefits for minority children. Black students attending the same school as White students could have completely different instructional experiences due to bias, academic preparation (another opportunity gap), race and socioeconomic status. It is known that students in lower-level academic classrooms may not be exposed to the curriculum and rigor they need in order to be prepared for future learning. Here again, the opportunity to access high-quality learning is intentionally denied to Black students.

Noguera (2000) asserted that beyond the policies and practices that contribute to the achievement gap, there are a number of complex cultural factors, namely how children come to perceive the relationship between their racial identity and what they can do academically. The manner in which students are sorted and tracked relegates students of color to classrooms and programming within schools that are perceived as requiring low ability. For example, when Black students, who meet the criteria, are excluded from AP courses it is likely that they may perceive such courses as beyond their ability level. The same goes for extracurricular programs like band or student council; when Black students see these activities as intended for "White students only," they are much less likely to join. Narrowing the gaps (opportunity and achievement) would require a reduction in the disparities in life chances and life experiences for Blacks.

Hedges and Nowell (1999) suggested that one way to mitigate the achievement gap is to equalize opportunity structures for White and Black youths so that differences between the two decline. The two authors found that parental education and income played a role in the reduction of group differences over time. Intentional interventions aimed at creating opportunities to move more Blacks to the highest end of the achievement distribution.

Research findings of a study conducted by Quaglia, Fox, and Corso (2010) state that the opportunity gap has three elements: the expectations gap, the relationship gap, and the participation gap. Luckily, as a child I experienced none of these gaps. As it relates to the expectations gap, my teachers, parents, and I had high performance expectations. They strategically set the bar high and I rose to the occasion. There were also no gaps in my relationships with teachers. I knew that they all cared for me and I trusted them. The third element of the opportunity gap, the participation gap, was also non-existent for me. I was very

involved in activities inside of the school and within my community. School was a fun and engaging experience for me. I understand that my experiences may not reflect the status quo, even for other Black students attending an all-Black school in an all-Black community, but it raises the question of what occurred during my and many of my successful peers' formative years that propelled us to excel.

Section Three: Methodology

Research Design Overview

Through this program evaluation, I uncovered District Z's strategies for implementing the achievement gap (reduction) program, real-world challenges, and real-world outcomes of the program based on data. My overall goal was to improve the effectiveness of this program, not render judgment and walk away. To achieve this goal, I used a mixed method approach–a combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analysis, all informed by my own experiences and informal observations.

Patton (2008) defined utilization-focused evaluation as "Evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses. [It] begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration for how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use" (p. 37).

According to Patton (2008), both qualitative and quantitative data can contribute to all aspects of evaluative inquiries. He also found that in many cases, both qualitative and quantitative methods should be used together.

For the purposes of my evaluation, qualitative data was gathered through the use of surveys with five principals at select District Z elementary schools. Quantitative data was gathered through the results of the Illinois Standard Achievement Test[4] (ISAT) reports from 2010-2015. Results were disaggregated to reflect subgroup performance. I then compared the data from years without the initiative to years when the initiative was in place. I also analyzed the attendance records of Black and White students from the same time period to determine

trends as a group. My intent was to determine if a relationship exists between tracking the attendance and academic achievement of Black students and the achievement gap.

Principals represented the end-users, so to speak, of the achievement gap program. Surveying principals gave me first-hand information regarding their individual implementation modes, barriers to implementation, and the impact of the program on Black students and their families.

My research design was informed by the critical/transformative/emancipatory paradigm. The critical component of this design challenged the status quo and examined the impact of race and other social factors on society. The perception of race and the status quo were two major components of this program evaluation and that impacted the outcomes. The transformative component of this design, similar to the critical component, challenged widely-accepted beliefs and lent itself to insights that promote new models or frameworks. Data trends for Black academic growth and attendance have provided some evidence for some of the widely accepted beliefs centered on attendance and learning. The emancipatory component of this paradigm sought to eliminate the power imbalance, particularly between the researcher and those being researched. In this case, using the utilization-focused approach has leveled the playing field and allowed for the researched to be included in the process as much as the researcher. Overall, this paradigm embraced the participatory action research method that I will incorporate. It also provided for research being done with and for the participants.

Participants

The participants of my program evaluation were elementary school principals. As I stated earlier, it was important that I obtain information from the end-user of the program. I selected five principals from among the 42 elementary schools within my district to complete the

survey. The principals were selected based on the academic achievement of their Black students compared to White students; I selected two schools that have made significant gains in narrowing the achievement gap since 2010, two schools who have made minimal to no gains in narrowing the achievement gap since 2010, and one school that falls in the middle.

Principals at varying points on the continuum of "narrowing the gap" had valuable insight to share about their experiences and beliefs as it relates to the Black and White student achievement gap. It was interesting to uncover commonalities, differences, beliefs, political frames and opinions about District Z through this process with principals.

Data Gathering Techniques

Surveys. A survey was designed by me as the primary researcher. Overall, the survey queried principals about their experiences with, or ideas about, the achievement gap initiative (James et al., 2008, p. 106). In designing the survey questions, I was careful to avoid bias, leading questions, and questions without a specific measurable element.

A survey also allowed participants an opportunity to think critically about each question without me being present. The surveys were administered via Google Forms.

Standardized Tests. Standardized tests are generally a yardstick against which educators measure the progress of their students (Bagin & Rudner, 1994). I chose standardized tests as a quantitative metric because they represent the gold-standard in school data. I used one standardized test, ISAT, to evaluate the progress of the achievement gap initiative. I examined the data for trends; specifically, I analyzed disaggregated data by subgroup (Black and White), from 2010 to 2015. Trends for both subgroups were noted, along with the discrepancy between both groups, in reading and math. This data was obtained from District Z's Chief of Equity and

Social Justice. In his role, he was responsible for ensuring academic success for all students and implementing and monitoring programs/initiatives to that end.

Data Analysis Techniques

After receiving the surveys of principals, I analyzed and coded their responses to reflect major themes in the data. Using codes enabled me to separate and sort text into different categories, allowing me to look at it with fresh eyes and in a new way (James et al., 2008, p. 88). From my reading, I determined that selective coding would work best for this evaluation. Selective coding allowed me to begin with preselected themes or ideas in mind and then sort the data accordingly instead of the reverse.

With the quantitative data obtained from ISAT reports, I arranged the data so that patterns were easily recognized. I created graphic organizers to represent students' benchmarks, growth, and the existing gap in both reading and math. Finally, after groups of ideas or themes began to emerge, I was able to draw conclusions about the data, comparing one data set to another, and used that information to make recommendations based on my findings.

Section Four: Findings and Interpretation

At the onset of this program evaluation, I decided to examine ISAT reports from 2010 to 2015 for School District Z. Next, I disaggregated the data to reflect scores for Black and White students from 2010-2015. From the trend reports, I wanted to identify two schools that had made significant gains in narrowing the achievement gap since 2010, two schools who had made minimal to no gains in narrowing the achievement gap since 2010, and one school that falls in the middle. After identifying the five schools that met my criteria, I emailed surveys the principals of those buildings. The purpose of this survey was to assess the effectiveness of tracking the academic growth and attendance of Black students in closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. Unfortunately, only one principal responded to the survey, which severely limited the reliability of the survey data, given the small sample size.

Next, data from 2010-2014 were collected from the State Standardized Assessment to evaluate the impact of the achievement gap program on the district's elementary schools. I analyzed disaggregated data by subgroup (Black and White) from 2010 to 2014. Trends in growth for both subgroups were noted along with the discrepancy between both groups in reading and math. I analyzed the attendance records of Black and White students from 2010-2014 district-wide. I examined this data to determine attendance trends as a group. My intent was to determine if there is a relationship between tracking the attendance and academic achievement of Black students and the achievement gap.

Research in Context

According to district enrollment as of September 30, 2015, there are approximately 40,400 students in grades Pre-K through 12. Of these, 20,536 are in grades K-6, with 15,172 in grades 2-6 (students tested on the state assessment). Of the district's total enrollment 6.5% or

2,626 students are Black and 29.9% or 12,080 are White. From 2010-2015, the average number of Black students tested on the state assessments in reading and math in grades 3-6 ranged from 1,154 to 1,241. The average number of White students meeting the same criteria ranged from 5,316 to 6,475. You will note that the number of White students enrolled in the district decreased by about 1,100 students and then leveled around 5,300, while the number of Black students has remained relatively flat.

Figure 1

Number of Students Assessed on ISAT Reading and Math: Grades 3-6
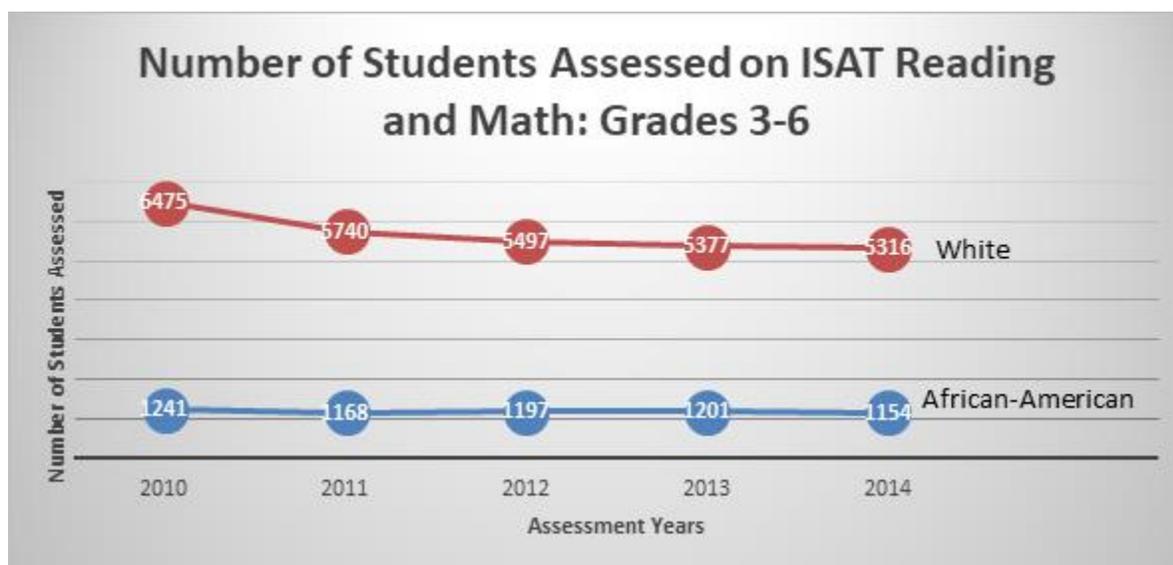
In analyzing ISAT data, I examined all 41 elementary schools as a whole and disaggregated the data by Black and White subgroups. The sample size of students for each grade level (White and Black) shifted from year-to-year depending on mobility, promotion to middle school, demographics of incoming students, ethnic group identification (self-reported by parents), and other factors.

Findings

The achievement gaps between Black and White students on ISAT reading and math has increased since 2010. In reading, at least 28% more White students have met or exceeded standards. At least 25% more White students met or exceeded standards in math and reading. By 2014, the gap had widened to 37% and 41%, respectively.

Figure 2

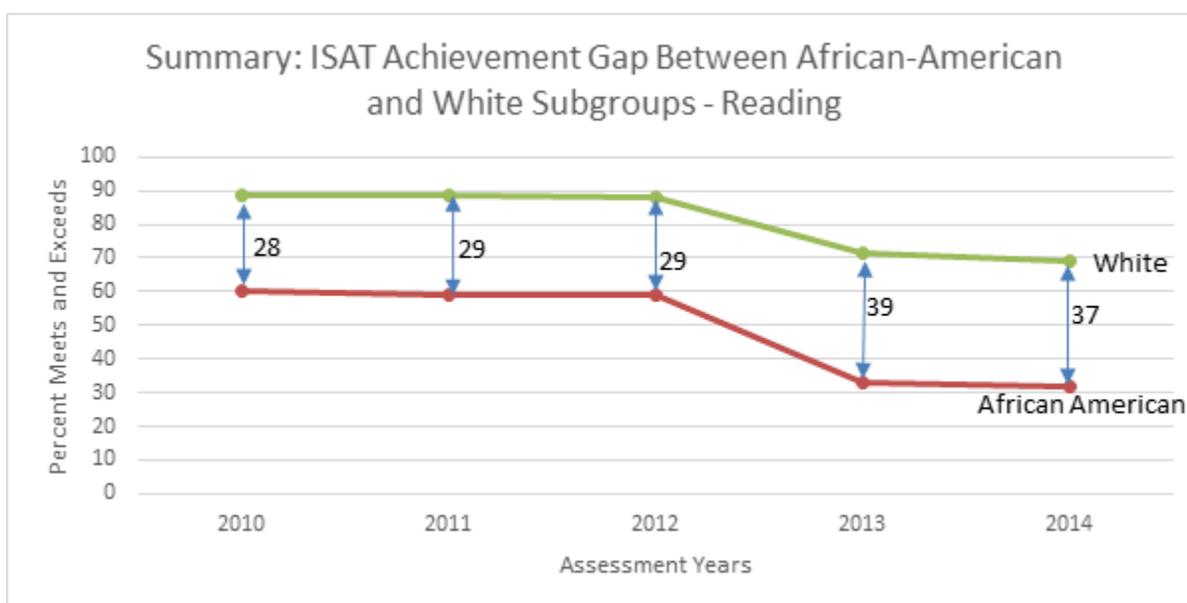*Summary: ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Subgroups - Reading*

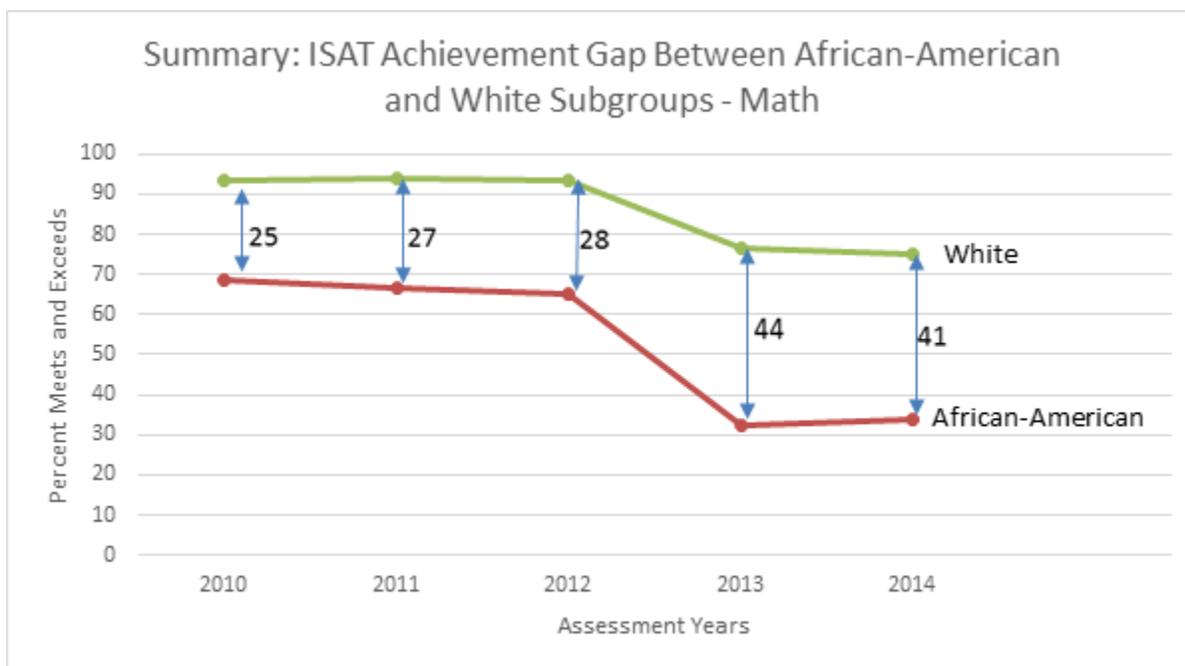Summary: ISAT Achievement Gap Between African-American and White Subgroups - Reading

Figure 3

Summary: ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Subgroups - Math

The two graphs above provide a birds-eye view of the district's impact on closing the Black and White achievement gap. Overall, the achievement gap between Black and White students, assessed on ISAT from 2010-2014, has widened in both reading and math. Since 2010, approximately 80 to 90% of White students have met or exceeded standards in reading. During the same time period, approximately 30 to 60% of Black students met or exceeded standards. For Black students, almost the same is true for math, except that in 2010 and 2011 students lingered around 70% meets and exceeds. Thereafter, results began to decline. As in reading, White students have maintained around 90% meets and exceeds, with a slight decline in 2013 and 2014 to approximately 75% in math.

Next, I will discuss the district's impact on closing the achievement gap between Black and White students separately in grades 3 through 6.
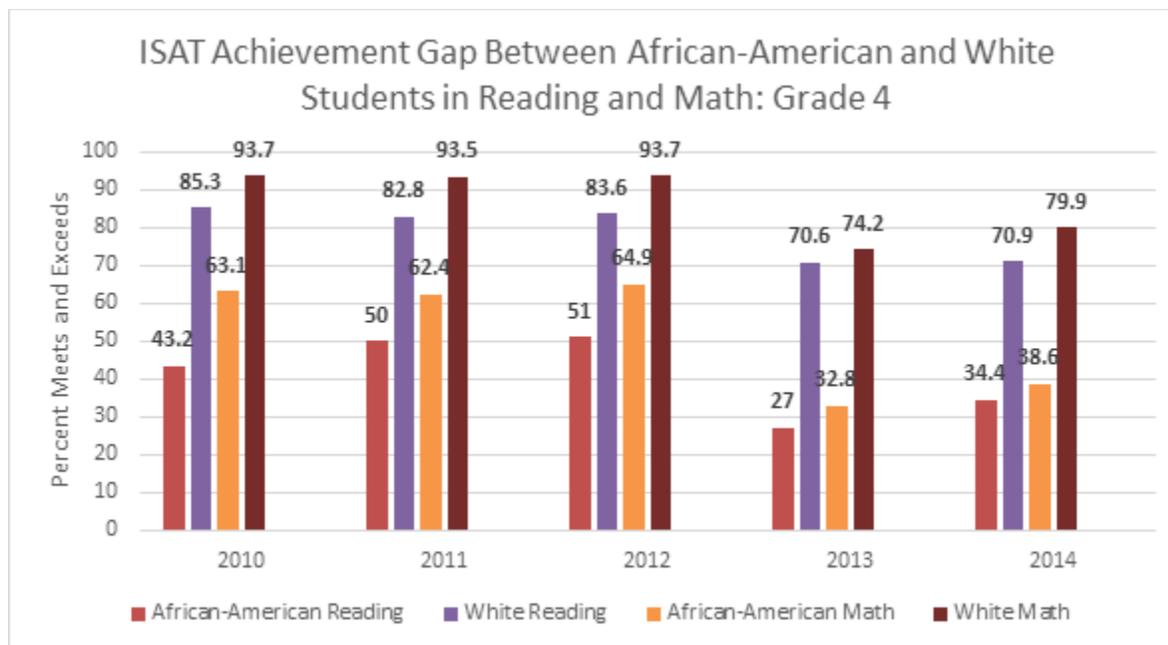
Figure 4

ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White in Reading and Math: Grade 3
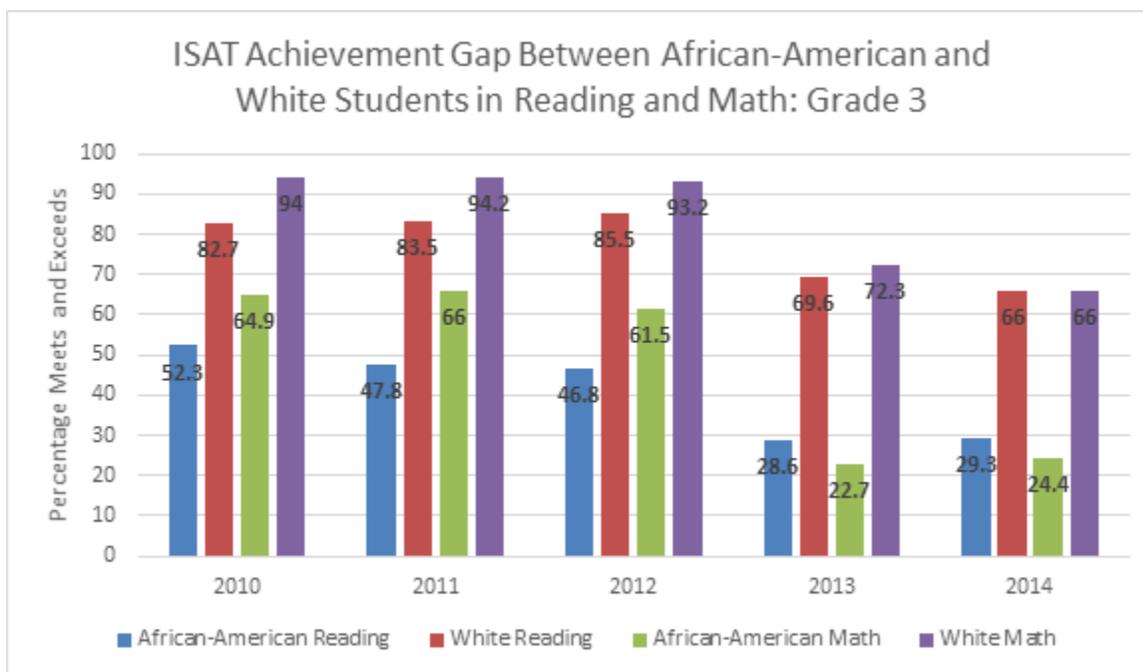
Third-grade Black students have trailed White students in reading and math performance consistently since 2010. From 2010 to 2012, Black students performed slightly better in math than they did in reading. From 2010 to 2012, the gap between Black and White students in reading and math hovered around 30 percentage points. During the 2013 assessment, the gaps widened to as much as 50 percentage points in math and only decreased slightly in reading and math during the 2014 assessment. Eighty to ninety percent of White students consistently meet and exceeded from 2010 to 2012. They also experienced a decline during the 2013 assessment and again in 2014.

Figure 5

ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Students in Reading and Math: Grade 4

Similar to Black students in third grade, fourth-grade students also experienced an achievement deficit that produced a gap of at approximately 30 percentage points in math and reading from 2010-2014. The gap in both content areas widened in 2013 to almost 50 percentage points, with a very slight narrowing in 2014. White students maintained their performance levels from 2010 to 2012, with 80% and higher meeting and exceeding standards.

Figure 6

ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Students in Reading and Math: Grade 5
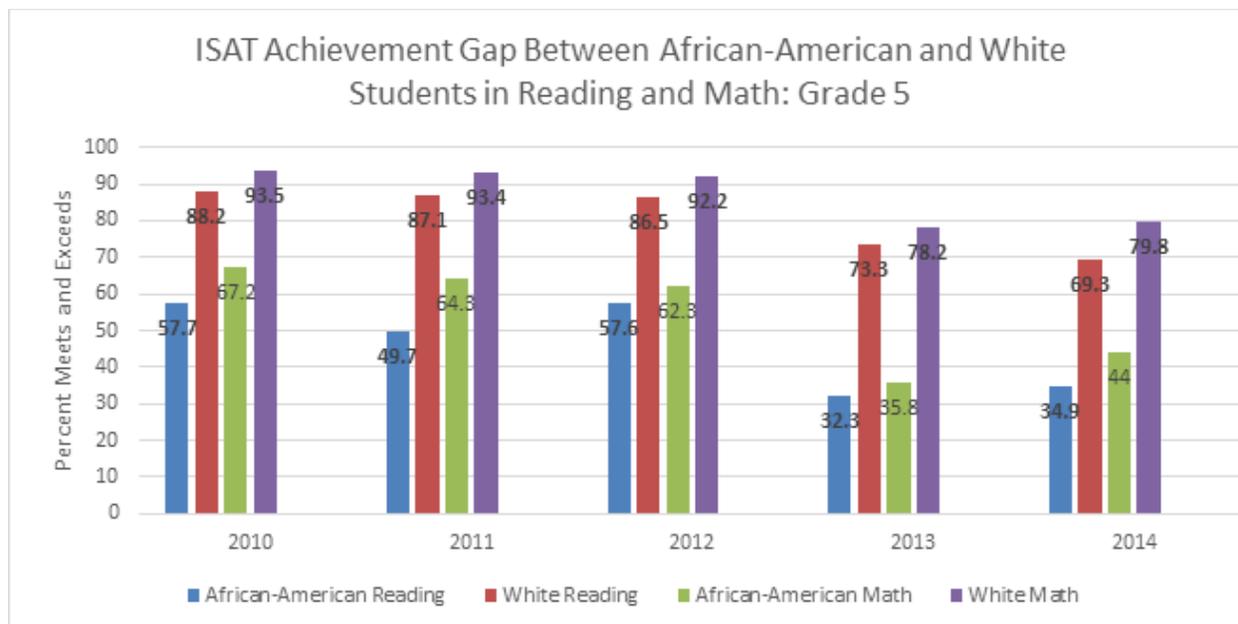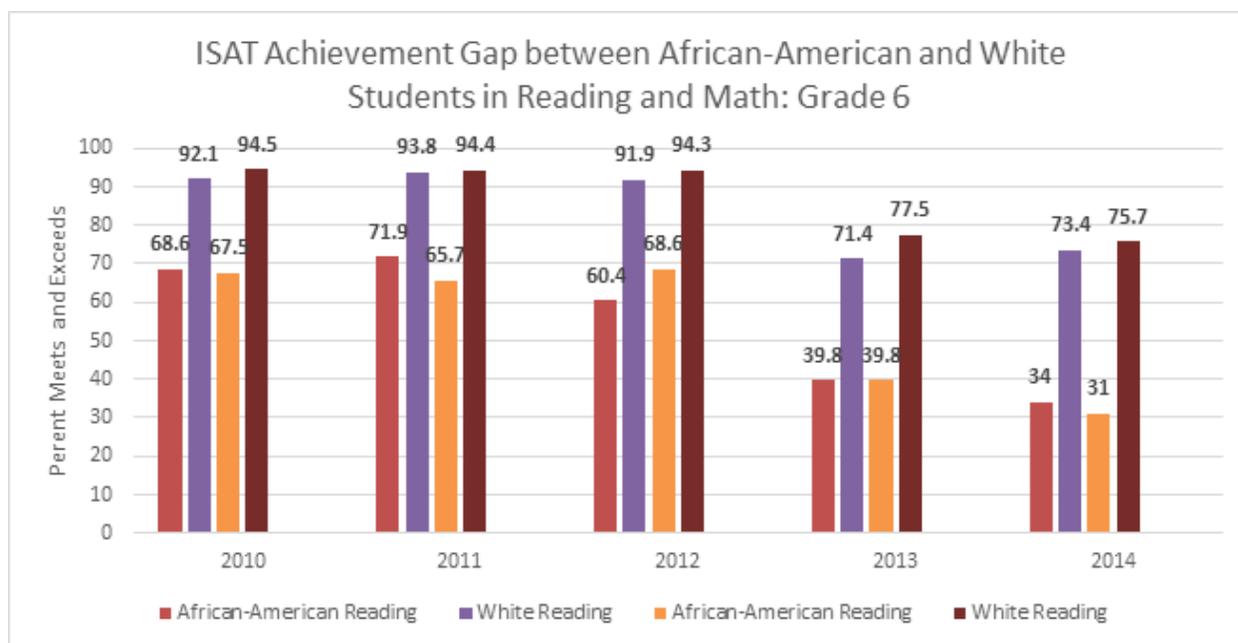

Figure 7

ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Students in Reading and Math: Grade 6

The above two graphs, along with the graphs representing grades 3 and 4, demonstrate that a clear gap exists between Black and White students according to ISAT data from 2010 to 2014. The gap percentage fluctuates but typically ranges from 30 to 40%. Ninety percent of White students in grades 3 through 6 consistently met or exceeded ISAT standards in math from 2010 to 2012, while 60 to 67% of Black students met or exceeded during the same time period. All of the grade level graphs indicate a drop in the percent of students meeting or exceeding in 2013. The decrease in reading and math for both ethnicities was dramatic. White students dropped approximately 20 percentage points, while Black students decreased approximately 30 percentage points. District Z attributes this gap to an increase in the ISAT cut-scores to better align the assessment to the Common Core.

Below is a single cohort of students in grades 3 through 7. The graph shows the same cohort of Black and White students from 2010 to 2014. Slight increases and decreases in the number of students in the cohort can be attributed to mobility, primarily, and other factors. At its widest, the gap range was almost 38 percentage points in 2013.

Figure 8

ISAT Achievement Gap Between African American and White Students in Reading: Cohorts-Grades 3-7

ISAT Achievement Gap between African-American and White Students in Reading: Cohort-Grades 3-7
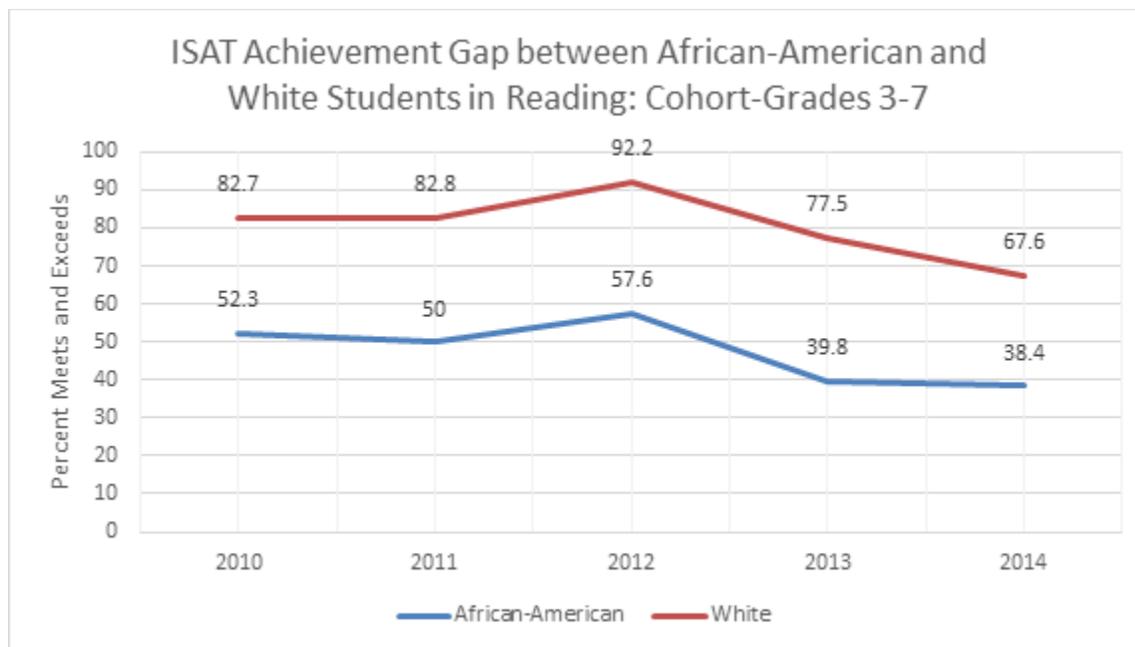
Part of the school district's program to close the achievement gap includes monitoring the attendance of Black students. As a district, the attendance rate has been 95 or 94% since 2011. There was no considerable difference between the attendance rate of Black and White students.

Figure 9

District Z's Attendance Rates

District Attendance Rates	
2011	94%
2012	94%
2013	94%
2014	95%
2015	94%

Interpretation

These results are consistent with what countless researchers (Anderson, 2004; Barton & Coley, 2010; Books, 2007; Crabtree, 2002; Jenkins, 2009) across the nation have reported; there is an unquestionable gap between the achievement of Black and White students in math and reading. White students are learning and excelling at the curriculum being presented and Black students, overall, are not. These outcomes are no surprise and are aligned with nationwide findings. The reason why the results reflect a large gap between the academic achievement of White and Black students is complicated and regularly the topic of conversation among politicians, community members, parents, and educators. In a very simplistic form, this data indicate that there are opportunities to adjust the way teachers are teaching and the way Black students are receiving that teaching. It also indicates that that problem has persisted over time and a sustainable solution has not been found.

Researchers (Hardesty & Plucker, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McKinley, 2006; Noguera & Akom, 2000) have attributed possible explanations of the achievement gap to a lack of equitable resources among Black and White students, poor teacher quality/professional

development, curriculum, parent training, learning environments, level of poverty, family

dynamics, and many more. Therefore, without further research, I cannot definitively identify

why the achievement gap exists and is widening in this school district.

However, I have established a hypothesis: as an administrator in this district for the past

five years and a teacher for six years before that, I know that teachers, staff, and administrators

lack cultural competency. Some teachers and staff embrace the idea, and are probably taught, to

"not see color." Not seeing color inhibits a person's ability to fully connect with an individual

for who they are as a person, as a community member, and as a person with a past and as an

individual with different needs. Over 70% of the teaching staff in my district is White. Over

70% of the teaching staff in the district is female. The views, beliefs, social norms, exposure,

biases, prejudices, likes, dislikes, etc. of this group of people (White females) all contribute to

the learning environment (a critical component of student success) and are knowingly or

unknowingly placed upon students, 49.6% of whom are Hispanic and 6.8% who are Black. I am

not implying that White teachers cannot teach students of color. I am saying that White female

teachers, who don't live in the areas where they teach, who do not "see color," who have been

exposed to decades of the media's derogatory representation of Black students regarding their

ability to learn, may unknowingly negatively impact the achievement gap. The work to remedy

this problem is complex and requires a myriad of resources and extensive levels of commitment.

As I mentioned before, literature indicates that something has gone wrong with the

education of Black students in District Z and across the nation. Several authors and leaders in

the Black community define race as a social construct designed to alienate a group of people and

promote the power of another, and nothing more. They dispute the notion that genetics prevent

Black students from learning and reaching the bar set by for their White counterparts. If this is

true and race/ethnicity does not impact the way one learns, then what does? My response is: cultural proficiency, equality, access and opportunity. Despite this district's efforts and notwithstanding some minor improvements in these areas, the gap has widened.

Not surprisingly, these findings contradict one of the district's aspirations and accompanying priority as it relates to academic achievement:

Aspiration: We will educate the whole student by providing an enriched, high-quality experience that empowers all graduates to be competitive members of the global society. Priority: We will coordinate our efforts to provide a nurturing and safe learning experience and a flexible approach in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of each student.

It is clear that a sustainable solution to the achievement gap will require social, educational, and governmental reform that is explicitly designed to level the playing field between Blacks and Whites inside and outside of the school.

Section Five: Judgement and Recommendations

The purpose of this program evaluation is to explore the effectiveness of tracking the attendance and academic growth of Black students on the Black and White achievement gap. According to the data, this program has not been effective at closing the achievement gap. As a matter of fact, the gap has widened during this program in math and reading. It would be inaccurate to cite the ineffectiveness of this program as the primary reason the gap has not narrowed in District Z, nor do I believe that to be the case. There are multiple factors at play here, some of which I mentioned earlier. However, I do believe that the classroom teacher is the most impactful factor leading to student success inside of the school. In order to effectively teach students, you have to be able to reach them, in the sense that you seek to understand each student as a whole. The development of the classroom environment must move beyond safety and into high expectations, respect, rapport, and family involvement. This requires teachers to be mindful and aware of the children they interact with daily.

Unfortunately, without the complete surveys of the five principals I intended to survey, I am left without a response to my secondary questions, which included the perceptions and beliefs of principals as it related to the district's program to close the gap. Nonetheless, I did experience several positive results. The positive results of my research are that, although the district has not made gains to close the achievement gap, I have provided perspective as to where it stands currently and what is not working. As such, most of the current research, as it relates to closing the academic achievement and opportunity gaps, points toward building the social and economic capital of people/students of color. Many of the challenges that face Black students derive from a social and economic deficit inflicted upon them centuries ago. In the early years, this may look like District Z providing adequate pre-schooling to all students, not just those

identified as high-risk. They should consider providing full-day kindergarten as part of a free public education. The district should also consider a more comprehensive approach to student learning. Academic achievement is important; however, it cannot be successfully achieved without providing support to the entire family. District Z will need to reach beyond the school walls to reduce some of the behind-the-scenes inequities that exist for Black students.

At school, educators must move beyond the shallow tracking of attendance and academic achievement of Black students. The tracking of data does not provide a plan of action, nor does it require anything to be done with the information that has been tracked and accumulated. In my opinion, the district should dig deeper and examine teacher training, teacher and staff cultural competency, and the implications of a curriculum that is not reflective of students of color, their interests, or heritage in most cases. The district will need to develop intentional interventions aimed at moving Black students to the higher end of achievement.

Yong-Lyun Kim (2011) stated that "School leaders can actively drive school changes and improvements when they initiate educational reforms based on precisely developed plans and implemented programs that effectively reflect educational needs and appraisals from various stakeholder groups" (p.35). Closing the achievement gap will require a certain level of change, both in thinking and action, by all stakeholders. The plan must not be arbitrarily designed, especially if school leaders are to be held accountable.

The district can also become more strategic in its use of data and test results. Since leadership knows that Black students are not achieving at the rates of their White peers, what are they doing about it? What are the specific gaps in learning that need to be filled? What role does curriculum design play? What instructional strategies are least and most effective at increasing achievement? District Z should look closely and carefully at implementing a

model/program that will be sustainable over time and reach out to all of the stakeholders involved. The model must include families, community, and the entire district in a data-driven manner. Efforts to close the achievement gap cannot be instituted by leadership and pushed down to the school principals. The efforts will require a paradigm shift for most of the White educators in the district. A shift from a sympathetic desire to help, to an understanding that *all* students can learn and reach the high-expectations that are set before them–if given the opportunity under the right conditions.

Endnotes

[1] Julius Rosenwald, the wealthy president of Sears, Roebuck and Company established the Julius Rosenwald Fund to give money to charitable causes. Most famously, he built schools. Inspired by Booker T. Washington, Rosenwald built 5,357 schools for African-Americans in fifteen southern states. His efforts helped promote community involvement, as communities had to raise an equal amount of money in order to receive a grant (Schneider, 2014).

[2] *Plessy v. Ferguson,* the famous 1896 Supreme Court case, concerned separate compartments in railway carriages, but the Court's opinion left no doubt that the constitutionality of the provision of "separate but equal" facilities for different races had more general application. It specifically described "the establishment of separate schools for White and colored children" as "a valid exercise of the legislative power" and led to the spread of Jim Crow laws. Named after a stereotypical Black music-hall character, these laws enforced racial segregation in all walks of life, including schools, across the southern United States. In practice, though, the facilities were separate but often far from equal, and segregation was used to keep African Americans in a subservient position (Rathbone, 2010).

[3] *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that mandated desegregation of America's public schools. The decision was a landmark event as it struck down the doctrine of separate but equal (Ferguson and Mehta, 2004).

[4] The ISAT measures the achievement of students in reading and mathematics in grades three through eight and science in grades four and seven based upon the Illinois Assessment Frameworks.

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