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Organizational Change Plan For Closing The Black And White Achievement Gap

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Organizational Change Plan for 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 this 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. Approximately two-thirds of District Z is composed of students of color, yet the achievement gap between Black and White students is 37 and 41 percentage points in reading and math respectively. As part of District Z's plan for addressing the achievement gap, principals will be required to track the attendance and academic achievement of all Black students as part of their evaluation. In a previous work, I explored 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; in fact, the achievement gap between White and Black students widened over a five-year span. Having identified areas in need of improvement, I will now focus on potential strategies and targeted actions that will assist District Z in achieving its desired goals.

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 the type of 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 United States. as a pharmaceutical sales representative in the Chicago area. It was while in this role that racist behaviors and comments towards me became overt or when I became aware of them. 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 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, of which 98% of the residents 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 and 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 it is 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 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 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) do not have a shared belief that a problem exists and shared 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. In 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 mediate 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 are decreased 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 represent a belief that the parents can grow from being "in the know." They 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. There were several times where 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.

How do design experiences for students of color who more often than not, are viewed through a deficit lens? How do we prepare them to live in a world that does not value their experiences, preferences and values? Throughout this paper, I discuss the changes and shifts District Z will need to explore to adequately meet the needs of parents and students of color.

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Section One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Like most school districts nationwide, District Z–the focus of this change leadership

project–is struggling to close the achievement gap between Black students and their White

counterparts. Assessment data indicate that Black students have historically underperformed on

Illinois state and district assessments. According to the Illinois State Report Card's 2014 Illinois

Standard Achievement Test (ISAT[1]) 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% Black students meeting or exceeding standards. 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. It is important

to mention that the Black-White achievement gap is tightly linked to, and a direct result of, the

opportunity gaps between Black and White students. Throughout this paper, you will see both

gaps mentioned.

In 2013, in response to the consistent gap in achievement between Black and White

students, 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 and actions taken as a result of the student's growth and attendance 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. Therefore, the method for tracking of the

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[1] The Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) measured individual student achievement in reading, writing and math relative to the Illinois Learning Standards. Students in grades 3 through 8 were testing annually. Starting in 2014-2015, Illinois will replace the ISAT with a new test, called PARCC, that is fully aligned to the New Illinois Learning Standards.

growth and attendance potentially varied among each of the 42 elementary buildings, as did the communication with staff and parents and metrics to monitor progress.

The problem is twofold: 1) the primary problem is that an achievement gap exists between Black and White students in a district dominated by students of color, and 2) the district's response to the achievement gap is not being monitored for effectiveness, is not a part of the district's strategic plan, and is not being treated with any sense of urgency. A change is needed in the way district-level administrators view the achievement gap from a historical perspective, its implications, and action steps necessary to narrow the gap. The gap implicitly says to stakeholders and the nation that District Z, composed of two-thirds students of color, is not effectively educating a majority of its students. The gap also implicitly says that a district comprised of 78% White teachers is struggling to meet the needs of students of color and currently have ineffective practices in place to narrow the gap.

If change is initiated successfully, narrowing the achievement gap will become a district-wide priority from the top down and become a part of the culture. The district's strategic plan would reflect the urgency to narrow the gap with specific priorities and action steps. The district would actively seek to implement programs within and outside of schools that will level the playing field for students of color, while providing equitable services to school-dependent students. All stakeholders would become aware of the gap and its current implications on teaching, learning, and school and district culture. Parents would be invited to share their thoughts about the current status of the gap, share needs, and present recommendations for action steps. A task force, including cabinet members, parents, students, teachers, and administrators, would be formed with the sole purpose of holding the district and its employees accountable for progress toward narrowing the gap and for making suggestions for improvement as needed.

Ultimately, a strategic plan will be put in place with measurable outcomes around action items to close the gap and improve access to quality teaching and learning for students of color.

I anticipate there will also be negative consequences of successfully initiating this change. Those concerns potentially include a public feeling of reverse racism, meaning a specific ethnic group of students now have access to resources that other students do not. Others may feel that the additional resources aimed at improving learning for students of color are unnecessary and that the students are already performing at their potential. Additionally, as has been a complaint in the past, some community members and parents of non-minority students may feel that their tax dollars should only support initiatives that will benefit their students. For these reasons, I am certain that there may be more negative than positive feedback from the formation of a strategic plan, and for that reason the district will have to take a firm stand on supporting the work that needs to be done to close the achievement gap and ensure equity for students of color.

Rationale

I chose this particular problem as the focus of my change plan because, although I believe the premise (closing the achievement gap) to be admirable and necessary, I am not convinced that the district's current 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 Hispanic students for that matter, have historically performed below their White peers across all grade levels. Although mean group differences have decreased over time, they are still large. The 1998

National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP[2]) 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).

Another reason I chose to address this problem is because as an employee of the district and an educator, I want to see all students succeed. 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. At that time, community-district relationships were strained. The community had 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. One of the examples of their attempt to improve implementation was the achievement gap initiative. I can only assume that the intended outcome of this work was 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 short, the initiative required elementary building principals to track the attendance and academic achievement of Black students. Harlan argues that Black students tend to achieve lower than their White counterparts. He states that this trend was demonstrated early in the twentieth century when Whites with governmental power used it to halt the spread of public schools and opportunities for Black children. Such systemic repression was so severe that it continued to affect the educational opportunities for Black students throughout the twentieth

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[2] The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. Assessments are conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL).

century (as cited in Anderson, 2004, p. 5). Hinz et al., (as cited in Parke & Kanyongo, p. 163), with the Minneapolis public schools, found that students who were absent 20% of the time scored 20 points lower than students who attended school nearly every day. Roby (2004) studied Grades 4, 6, 9, and 12 in all Ohio schools where attendance rates ranged from 85% to 99%. Strong correlations were found between schools' attendance rates and student achievement on the Ohio Proficiency Tests. The authors cited here support District Z's thinking behind tracking the attendance and academic achievement of Black students, as literature indicates a correlation between attendance and academic achievement. The challenge then is to uncover if the implementation of the tracking was effective in closing the achievement gap.

I am personally connected to this initiative, as my son is Black and a first-grade student in District Z. To date, my son has performed above grade level on 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 components, he too will soon experience a gap in achievement between him and his White counterparts. This fact causes worry and anxiety. I wonder what might happen between first and third grade that would lead to 37% and 42% gaps 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. Secondly, as a District Z administrator, I firmly believe that all students can learn. 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, and District Z must consider alternate interventions.

I also think it safe to assume that many parents of Black students are not aware of the severity of the achievement gap. From a district-community relationship aspect, it is critical to create an open and honest dialogue with stakeholders. According to the Illinois State Report Card, from 2010 to 2014, the gap has grown 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 the steps District Z is taking to address 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. 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-White student achievement gap because as a child, there were no racial achievement gaps in my elementary, middle, or high schools. The primary reason could be that approximately 90% of the student population was Black 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% of White students should have excelled more than the Black students (Pitre, 2014; Poliakoff, 2014; Singham, 2003). 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 discover the root cause(s) of the gap and what the tracking of Black student attendance and academic growth will do to narrow the gap between Black students and their White peers.

The educational community at large needs to know what factors contributed to successful educational experiences like mine. Was it the teachers, support from the community, family structure, or educational opportunities? I am not sure, but I know that my experience is not unique. There are countless Black students just like me from impoverished areas who have found success and there is even more research that explores *how* this happens (Carter, 2000). There is no magic bullet, but there must be an underlying common denominator that exists in the lives of students like me at some point in our educational careers that made the difference. It is imperative that those of us who are committed to excellence and leveling the playing field for students of color develop viable solutions.

Goals

The end goal of District Z's achievement gap program and of my change plan is to improve student learning and improve opportunities for school dependent children. My understanding 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). My fellow principals and I were far from clear about the direction we were to be headed.

The goal of my change plan will be to uncover effective strategies as it relates to how to modify District Z's current action steps around closing the achievement gap. I will focus on where District Z is with its current action plan and what needs to be removed, modified, or added to bring the district closer to the goal of closing the gap. The Four Cs (Wagner et al., 2006) will guide my work in making recommendations for change.

Demographics

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 with 40 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 5 high schools.

On average, District Z's Black students represent 7% of the student population and White students represent 31% of the student population. The remainders of the students represent the following ethnicities: Hispanic 50%, Asian 8%, American Indian 1%, and two or more races 3%. In terms of teaching staff, 78.3% are White and 76.4% are female. The district employs just over 2,000 teachers.

Section Two: Assessing the Four Cs

The Four Cs (Wagner et al., 2006) offers a framework for evaluating the challenges and goals associated with change. At the center of the Four Cs is improving teaching and learning. The framework allows one to break down a problem or area being investigated into parts, so that the whole or big picture may be more easily understood. The parts, also referred to arenas of change, are context, culture, conditions, and competencies (See Appendices A & B). Wagner et al., (2006) argues that parts are interrelated elements that make up an organization or change effort.

Context

Context refers to the social, economic, and historical realm in which our work takes place. Understanding context means knowing the world from which our students come. Fully understanding the context is critical as it shapes the vision for transformation. Oftentimes, to alter one facet of a system, the entire system must change in some form. This is especially true as all of the Four Cs are interrelated, that it, the success of one depends on the others (Wagner et al., 2006).

District Z is a racially diverse district composed of 69% students of color, with a teaching staff that is 78% White. The specific racial breakdown was discussed in section one. Sixty-two percent of students are low-income. As previewed in section one, there is an academic achievement gap between the district's White population and its students of color. For the purpose of this plan, I will focus on the gap between Black and White students.

According to the Illinois State Report Card's 2014 Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) 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. 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.

To address the gap, District Z required all elementary principals to track the attendance and academic growth of all Black students. The district has also developed a strategic plan that includes aspirations, priorities, and initiatives around student achievement. The stated aspiration is: *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.* The priority is: *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*. District Z is still working to develop initiatives around this aspiration.

In framing the context, it is also important to note that instructional supports are not available to all students who demonstrate an academic need. For example, students at Title I schools receive funding that can be used to support student learning through interventionists, which non-Title I schools do not have access to. Communication with families is inconsistent and not always transparent. To illustrate this point, many families may be aware of District Z's strategic plan, but few, if any, Black parents are aware of the tracking of their child's attendance and academic progress in isolation.

Most of District Z's teachers, 70% of which are White females, are unfamiliar with the "Black experience" outside of school. Their perceptions about Black families and students are mostly derived from limited interactions with Blacks and what is perpetuated through the media. Therefore, their context of teaching students of color is warped, as it is derived from a single story, and one that is typically not accurate. Teachers are largely unaware of the social injustices

their students of color and their families face on a daily basis and how such oppression presents inside of the school. Mardi Schmeichel (2012) refers to this as the difference-deficit approach. The author adds, "The belief that children of different racial groups were inherently different from each other rested on the assumption that white, middle class behavior and attitudes were typical or normal" (p. 214).

It is interesting to observe White teachers interact with Black students who are classified as low-income. For example, I remember intervening with a White male teacher who had an alleged disciplinary problem with a Black boy. The teacher was struggling to get the boy to respond to his requests. I decided to observe their interaction before making a recommendation to the teacher. I noticed that the teacher, who normally spoke standard English, had begun to use slang and what he thought was "hip-hop speak" with the student. His efforts failed with the student and, frankly, upset me to an extent. I was quite surprised that the White male teacher thought that if he shifted his communication to include non-standard English words and catchy "urban" phrases that the student would understand him better or respond to his request. What experiences led this teacher to think that the young Black boy's lack of response to his request was due to a lack of comprehension? Understanding Black students and their social and historical experiences should never be reduced to implementing catchy phrases and slang. It is truly understanding the context of their existence in a world of opposition and a search for positive traits upon which to build that makes the difference. This incident exemplifies the distance between District Z and cultural proficiency.

Culture

Wagner et al. (2006) defines culture as the invisible, but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system. These meanings can impede and promote growth within a system.

Several aspects of District Z's culture have shifted over time. In the past 10 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the enrollment of students of color, specifically Hispanic students, who represent approximately 50% of the student population. Unfortunately, the mindset of district employees and its systems did not change along with the student demographics. There is an absence of the belief that all children can learn. Negative perceptions about students of color, their ability to learn, and familial situations have remained and permeated the culture of the district. However, many of the White staff (78%) do not see themselves as contributors to the achievement gap or the other social and emotional issues facing students of color.

Approximately five years ago, District Z purchased a program called Courageous Conversations about Race, based on the work of Glenn E. Singleton. The district began to host several district-wide and school-site workshops. The purpose was to take the topic of race from being the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the back of the room and place it on the table to be confronted. The workshops were intended to give people opportunities to have honest conversations about race with people who have had different experiences. Singleton (2015) said Courageous Conversations will help educators become more observant of the ways that race and racism are operating within their schools. Engaging in these tough conversations help educators to see the inequity at work. One year and three workshops later, the Courageous Conversations model was dropped, but no one talked about why. In conversations with other Black

administrators, we all shared a feeling of being undervalued and having common frustrations with the system. I personally believe that the White majority was uncomfortable with the process, topics, accompanying workshops, and activities and so the initiative was abandoned. As the only Black adult in a building of all White staff, I definitely saw a need for the program and the missed opportunity to grow.

My experiences in District Z saw a superficial advocacy of students of color by White staff members. For example, teachers and administrators, having not taken the time to get to know a student of color, will give praise and support on the surface, while underneath rests beliefs and perceptions that subtly work to stifle the student's growth and devalue their abilities. As a group, many of the White administrators subtly express a lack of understanding as it relates to issues of equity relating to students of color. On many occasions, I have listened to discontent and complaints about Title I funding and why it is designated for certain students and not others. Small microaggressions like this lead me to believe that District Z's culture is one that lacks a mindset of remedying social injustices, bias, and matters of inequity as it relates to students of color.

On an annual basis, District Z showcases its academic achievement data at a board meeting. Aggregated data is emphasized which indicates collective growth on average among students. Disaggregated data by subgroup is also discussed, but only briefly. Even with the presentation of academic achievement data at board meetings, a majority of the families of the 40,000 students in the district were unaware of how their students fared against their grade level counterparts. What this implies about district culture is that parents, especially the low-income parents of students of color, trust the administration and teachers of the district implicitly. In fact, at board meetings, the data is hardly ever questioned by parents of color, but almost always

by White parents and community members–in a district that is overwhelmingly Latino. This begs the question: Why aren't Latino and Black parents more vocal about the lack of achievement of their students and what does that say about the culture and transparency of the district?

Conditions

Wagner et al. (2006) define conditions as the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible and visible arrangements of time, space, and resources.

As is relates to the achievement gap, District Z does not host training in the area of cultural competency. As I stated earlier, the district attempted to implement Courageous Conversations about Race, but the program was quickly abandoned. Without it, or any other model as a framework, conversations about race and culture rarely happen across the 55 schools. Teachers, although trained how to conduct data analysis, still need refreshers, especially in examining disaggregated data by ethnicity. Many may wonder what the achievement gap really means, what can they do about it, or if anything can be done at all. I have heard teachers discount families of students of color with statements like, "These parents just don't care. These families don't value education." The conditions that allow for such belief systems to perpetuate among staff are the lack of direction from leadership, lack of programs and professional development to alter the belief system (i.e. Courageous Conversations about Race), and lack of resources and time dedicated to dissecting the problem and retaining viable solutions.

Of the 55 schools in District Z, less than 10 have Black principals or assistant principals. Human resources departments often claim to increase the racial and ethnic diversity within the district's administration, but have been slow to make changes. Leadership at the district level seems to marginalize the gaps in academic achievement and opportunities of Black and Latino

students. Conversations about the gaps are only conducted in one-on-one conversations with principals, never in a large setting. The assistant superintendents of teaching and learning, who supervise the 55 principals and assistant principals, have not publicly picked up the social justice banner. Staff in the Curriculum and Professional Development departments do not specifically or intentionally explore strategies for improving the teaching and learning of students of color, although they are consistently the lowest performing subgroup.

Structurally, the district's schools are mostly segregated, as students attend schools based on attendance boundaries – the geographic area served by a local school. Therefore, most low-income students reside in concentrated areas. This can be traced back to decades of residential segregation, where families of color were not allowed to purchase homes in White areas. Research has shown that students in low-income areas experience high teacher turnover and a lack of experienced educators (Barton & Coley, 2009). This holds true for District Z as well.

Roza and McCormick (2006) said that "if public schools are serious about closing achievement gaps, they must begin to allocate more resources to the students with the greatest needs" (p. 8). Currently, District Z does not disclose how money is allocated by school, so it is difficult to determine who gets how much funding and which areas need additional funding. District Z does receive Title I funding, but it is unclear if the additional funds are achieving the desired incomes. If district personnel agree that we should practice equity in funding and thereby dedicate more resources to low-income students in an effort to level the playing field, then changes need to be made.

Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) defines competencies as the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influence student learning. Competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed, and collaborative.

As it relates to competencies in skills and knowledge applied to closing the achievement gap, District Z is experiencing a deficit. Teacher and leadership competencies ultimately improve student learning. Therefore, a model or framework must exist in order to guide any school district toward improvement in learning. District Z lacks established priorities around the achievement gap, which leads to an absence of data analysis and action planning related to closing the gap. Furthermore, most of the 78% White teacher staff lack multicultural exposure and tend to not include diverse representations in literature and instruction as a whole. Finally, there is no cultural competency component in the district professional development plan.

In order to produce significant improvement in narrowing the achievement and opportunity gaps between Black and White students, a major shift in the thinking of those in leadership must occur. There has to be a philosophical and moral discomfort with the social injustices, both within and outside of schools, that depress the academic achievement of Black students. In short, District Z will need to take a stance–one that denotes action and a lack of tolerance for inequities levied against all students.

Section Three: Methodology

The achievement gap between Black and White students is not unique to District Z. In fact, this is a nationwide problem with various contributing factors and solutions. The major factors that have contributed to the gap in District Z are: 1) Student demographics are changing, specifically an increase in the enrollment of students of color; 2) District Z has not developed a plan of action to address the changing demographics, needs of students, and looming achievement gap; 3) Literature indicates (Schmeichel, 2012; Duncan, 2002) that many of the 78.3% White teaching staff hold perceptions and beliefs that do not support cultural identity and diversity as it relates to teaching and learning; and 4) Leadership, district staff, and stakeholders lack awareness and understanding of the gap. It is clear that District Z's singular plan to track the attendance and achievement of Black students will not address all of the factors that have contributed to the gaps between Black and White students. What I hope to do is shed light on the effectiveness on the single initiative on achievement and attendance.

Research Design

In order to gather information regarding the current state (as-is) of Black student achievement and attendance in District Z, I collected quantitative data from state assessments and attendance records. Specifically, I compared the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) results from the spring of 2015 and spring of 2016 for Black and White students in grades 3 through 6. Disaggregated PARCC data from math and reading assessments along with aggregated data was also extracted. The goal of the PARCC data analysis was to determine the percent of Black and White students who met or exceeded standards in both school years. I also analyzed the data using cohorts of students from third to

sixth grade. Here, I wanted to determine if cohorts of Black and White students performed the same from one grade to the next.

Next, I compared randomized attendance data from 2015 and 2016 in an effort identify trends and any gaps in attendance between Black and White students. The random attendance data included four elementary schools and a total of 3,936 students representing White, Black, and Hispanic populations. The random students included those who received free and reduced lunches, those who paid, and females and males. Since District Z included the tracking of attendance into its gap-closing plan, I assumed that they had evidence of Black student attendance negatively impacting achievement. My analysis, which are informed by my own experiences and informal observations, will determine if there might be a correlation between attendance and Black student achievement.

Data Analysis Techniques

PARCC composite (English Language Arts/ELA and math) achievement data from spring of 2015 and spring of 2016 for Black and White students was graphed. Gaps between Black and White students that met or exceeded standards in each school year were analyzed. Overall, data analysis required identification of themes: gap decreases and gap increases.

Section Four: Relevant Literature

I began my research thinking there might be at least a sprinkling of consistency for strategies on how to begin closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. There is obviously a plethora of research on this topic and a scattering of schools across the nation who have been able to successfully narrow the gap. It quickly became clear that each school and each district had their own formula. Although there were some consistent pieces, the narrowing of the gap largely seemed to be influenced by a variety of factors, several of which I will discuss here. To begin, I will address what districts and schools have done outside of the school and then transition to efforts within schools that have successfully narrowed the gap. Note that you will see both the achievement and opportunity gap mentioned herein. The opportunity gap is discussed as a precursor to the achievement gap–one contributes to the other.

Outside of the School

Characteristics outside of school that influence a student's academic achievement are varied and often it is difficult to quantify the direct impact, as many factors overlap, merge in and out of children's circumstances, and do not impact all children the same way. Additionally, not all low-income, Black, or students of color experience all of the characteristics you will read about. Students experience some, most, or all characteristics at different levels and for varied lengths of time. In vivo, it is impossible for researchers to control for any of these characteristics because of their interdependence. For this reason, I have found that many researchers examine average incidences as a research method and make recommendations based on the plausibility of a decrease in such incidences and an increase in academic achievement.

Morsy and Rothstein (2015) suggested five characteristics outside of school that impact a student's academic achievement: 1) parenting practices that impede children's intellectual and

behavioral development, 2) single parenthood, 3) parent's irregular work schedules, 4) inadequate access to primary and preventative health care, and 5) exposure to and absorption of lead in the blood. As you have already read, District Z has not elected to focus its gap-narrowing efforts outside of the school at all, which prompted me to discuss this area. If the district were to focus on an area outside of the school, I would recommend one from the authors' list – parenting practices.

For the purposes of this discussion, parenting practices include having books available in the home to be read to a child, reading to children, talking with children, and engaging in arts and craft activities. Morsy and Rothstein (2015) reported that White adults spend 36% more time than Black adults reading to young children, and three times more time talking with and listening to them. Other analyses find that Black mothers are about two-thirds as likely as White mothers to read to toddlers daily. On average, White parents reported 112 books in the home, Black parents 44. Other research finds that parents who are on public assistance, unemployed, or with less than a high school education typically provide less cognitive stimulation to children. When reading aloud, lower-class (income) parents provide less guidance and are less strategic in building on children's prior knowledge to expand it. By age six, White children have typically spent 1,300 more hours engaged in conversations with adults than Black children. Six-year-olds from affluent families have spent 1,300 more hours in indoor and outdoor recreation, churches, businesses, and other non-school, non-home, and non-caretaker settings than children from low-income families. Differences are greater still (1,800 hours) between children of parents with less than a high school education and children of college graduates.

These results are appalling, yet they paint a real-life picture of why Black students are behind their White peers in access to opportunities and achievement. Let us briefly examine the

backstory, which we are all too familiar with. It is no secret *why* the statistics largely indicate poor parenting practices for Black children; decades of systemic racism and segregation, lack of access to a quality education, housing instability, discriminatory hiring practices, etc. have contributed to the Black adult experience, which often becomes the experience of their children. The question becomes, how can we remedy this? What needs to occur to decrease the incidence of the poor parenting practices that reduce Black children's achievement in school? It is my opinion that the plan to positively impact parenting practices is two-fold and should include support for the parent and support for the child. Most of the support will require changes in state and federal governmental policies that have systematically forced many Black families against a wall, so to speak. At the local level, schools and school districts will have to do the heavy lifting.

Rothstein (2013) discusses the intersection of school segregation and residential isolation on low-income student learning. Rothstein makes several points that I agree with, and several that I do not. I agree that the residential segregation of low-income Black children is government ordained and is not accident. It is a direct result of racially motivated law, public policy, and government-sponsored discrimination. As this and many other disadvantages accumulate, children from lower social classes inevitably have lower average achievement than middle-class children and have less access to opportunities at-large. The share of Black students attending schools that are more than 90% minority grew from 34% in 1989 to 39% in 2007. In 1989, Black students typically attended schools in which 43% of their fellow students were low-income; by 2007, this figure had risen to 59% (Orfield, 2009). This means that the isolation of low-income Black children has increased. Given that high-poverty schools typically have less

experienced teachers, poor resource allocation, and are underfunded, it makes sense that the achievement gap between Black and White students is sustained.

I must iterate again that school segregation, which contributes to achievement and opportunity gaps, is a direct result of residential segregation, among other factors. Nineteenth and twentieth century history is bursting with case law and reports of housing segregation against Blacks. Both the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Administration (VA) denied mortgage insurance to Blacks who attempted to move from the city to the suburbs. Both administrations also prohibited developers from selling to Blacks and required developers to write deed restrictions that prohibited resale of homes to what the FHA called an incompatible racial element (Rothstein, 2013). The court provided no remedy for Black potential purchasers who had been unconstitutionally excluded from White suburbs. Redlining, developed by bank regulators from the Federal Reserve and other agencies, outlined on maps neighborhoods where Blacks were to be refused home loans. Mayors promoted the establishment of homeowner associations and pushed them to enact racial deed restrictions, universities received Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax exemptions for promoting residential segregation in the areas surrounding their campuses, and when Black or integrated neighborhoods were too close to White ones or business districts, federal and state officials routed highways through those neighborhoods leaving high-rise apartments and ghettos as the only option for Black families to move to. In instances when a Black family was able to find a realtor who would help them move into a White neighborhood, many times their home was bombed and the realtor lost his or her license (Rothstein, 2013). Clearly, the separation of Blacks from Whites in housing has allowed state and governmental agencies to continue the same practices in schools. As I mentioned earlier, while I do agree with Rothstein in some areas, as it relates to school segregation, I

disagree in part with his solution. Rothstein believes that integration is the answer. He says, "The problems students bring to school are so overwhelming that policy should never assume that even the most skilled and dedicated faculty can overcome them. Although schools can make a difference, they cannot erase the damage caused by concentrated poverty and racial isolation" (p. 2). I agree that faculty and staff alone cannot erase the damage caused by the strategic isolation of Blacks in ghettos, but I believe that a comprehensive approach that includes adequate health care, employment opportunities, wage-leveling, job opportunities, high-quality committed educators, cultural competency development, and general access to community resources with service the root of the problem. Taking Black children and placing them in environments where they are not valued and encounter racist attitudes will not contribute to their success, especially as it relates to cultural pride.

Similar to poor parenting practices listed above, school and residential segregation will not be remedied by school districts alone but they can play a critical role, especially when developing attendance boundaries. For example, in District Z attendance boundaries have shifted several times due to population increases in some areas. Most of the population increases have been attributed to Latino families moving to certain regions. When the conversations about boundary changes began, some families and spokespersons were adamant that the students should be kept in one area instead of spreading them across several local schools. In particular, they felt that the English Language Learners (ELLs) should stay together. Others thought that the increase in enrollment would negatively impact their child's education and were very vocal about not allowing the Latino students to attend their child's school. Unfortunately, the status quo for our society has been set from a single story by a single group of people and those with different experiences or ethnicities are considered a threat. School districts should consider the

historical perspectives that support schools giving every family and child what he or she needs to thrive. Government policies that restrict that basic fundamental right hurt everyone in the long run.

Inside of the School

Factors inside of schools that depress the academic achievement of Black students and perpetuate the Black-White achievement and opportunity gaps can be classified in one broad category–confronting race, poverty, and equity in schools and classrooms (Milner, 2015). It is well known that Black low-income students largely begin their educational journeys ill-prepared and far behind in the race to education for external reasons that we have already discussed. Contrary to what some believe, race and poverty present inside of the school and classroom in different ways. When teachers and staff are unaware of race and poverty, its representations, and their own personal biases, students suffer.

To be clear, poverty transcends ethnic and racial lines, but the disproportionate manner in which poverty affects people of color is of concern. Hence, the intersection of race and poverty and its impact on education must be addressed. To frame the following conversation on poverty, the U.S. Department of Health and Human services reported household poverty indicators between 2010 and 2017 as an annual income of $22,050 in 2010 increasing upward to $24,600 in 2015 for a family of four. In 2010, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) reported that 22% of our nation's children were poor–the largest group, Latino (5.8 million); white, non-Hispanic (5.2 million); and Black (4.1 million). In 2012, the CDF reported that 11.2 million children of color were poor with Black children being the poorest proportionately (39.6%) (Edelman, 2012). According to the United States Census Bureau (2017) in 2015, 37% of Black children and 32% of Hispanic children were poor, contrasted with 12% of White, non-Hispanic children. While

the overall child poverty rate declined slightly, the child poverty rate for Black children

increased by 10% between 2013 and 2014. Nearly 1 in 5 Black children live in extreme poverty,

which is defined as living at half of the identified poverty level or below - a 13% increase since

2013.

How do the preceding statistics impact Black students' learning in school? It is important

for educators to acknowledge that living in poverty does not diminish a child's intellectual

ability, work ethic, perseverance, or determination. Educators must refrain from viewing the

families and communities of students as liabilities–deficient, insufficient, and incapable of

supporting students for the expectations they will face inside of school (Milner, 2015). As the

first Black administrator (or person of color) at an elementary school with an all-White teaching

staff and student demographics of 55% White, 21% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 5% Black (Illinois

Report Card, 2015), I am all too familiar with phrases like, "They don't care about school," "The

parents never come to the school," and "These kids are from a different generation." I have

found that many educators are quick to blame families who do not conform to or respond in the

"normal" way. Instead of examining their own biases and acknowledging the racism and

discrimination that the families of color face daily in nearly all facets of life, they take the easier

route of making excuses. This is not to say that Black families need sympathy; they have

persevered in spite of countless intentional, systemic roadblocks to success. Rather, educators

should be exposed to the backstory–the narrative that has placed many Black and Latino families

in their current circumstances. People who live in poverty react to the conditions of their

experiences. Likewise, those who live in oppressive situations due to inadequate and unstable

jobs, transportation, or housing have a different worldview and behave based on those

conditions. For example, a low income, Black, intermediate grade-school student in my building

found himself in trouble with his White female teacher on several occasions within a two-week time period. The teacher emailed the parent several times over the two-week period to inform her of the situation and what had been done thus far. Finally, out of frustration, the teacher brought the student to my office and described the student's behavior, her attempts to contact the parent with no response, and demanded that something be done immediately. Before responding to the teacher, I asked the student to sit outside of my office for a moment, as I wanted to dig deeper with the teacher. Once the student was outside of my office, the teacher began to vent about how the student's disrespect was intolerable and the fact that the parent had not responded to her emails clearly meant that she was not interested. I asked the teacher if she had asked the student about his day, his morning at home, or his weekend. She looked confused. I explained that it could be possible that something at home is impacting the student at school. I suggested that she call the parent. Again, she stated that she had emailed several times. I told the teacher that it is likely that the family may not have Internet access at home and could have used a relative or inactive email to register the student. I could tell that the teacher had never considered that a family might not have Internet access or a computer, for that matter, in the home. I called the student back in my office with the teacher present and asked simply, "How are things going at home?" The student responded with a litany of issues including the passing of his grandmother and a potential move from the area and the school. The teacher's gaze softened. With the teacher present, I called the student's mother, who shared a similar story and mentioned that she was working on getting a computer and had not received the teacher's emails. I talked to the student about his choices and offered an introduction to and meeting with the social worker for grief counseling. Instead of feeling sympathy, as this student's issues could happen in any child's life, I hope that the teacher left with a need to build relationships with

students and families, seek to understand their lives, and how her assumptions (the parent did not care) can be based on incorrect assumptions. Did poverty and race play a role in this scenario? Absolutely. I would venture that the mother of the student would have liked to have a computer with Internet access at home. Why wouldn't she want to afford her children the same opportunities as his peers? I also believe she probably could not afford one at the time and in the same vein, was probably not earning a decent wage to support her family's needs, let alone wants. The role of race impacted the teacher's perceptions of the student's behavior and the reason behind the parent's unresponsiveness, which impacted her response to the entire scenario. Racial stereotypes and models presented by the media may have taught the teacher that Black boys have behavior problems and must be dealt with swiftly. White-normed societal models may have taught her that all homes should have computers and Internet access and that all parents check emails daily. Movies and media may have taught her that Black mothers are not caring, do not value education, or are uneducated themselves, which may have contributed to the teacher's statement that the mother was uninterested. Luckily, I was able to intervene and paint a different picture for the teacher that I hope will impact her practice in the long-term.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and theorists would likely state that the teacher reacted in a manner that aligns with her white, dominant experiences. Taylor, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2009) state that "Critical Race Theory begins with the notion that racism is 'normal, aberrant, in American society' and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture (p. 21). One of the strategies of CRT is to unmask and expose racism in its various permutations and propose radical solutions for addressing it. My approach in addressing the teacher did not specifically reference race or racism, neither explicitly nor implicitly. In hindsight, I was not immersed in the research of race and its impact in

schooling to have such a conversation with her. My research in CRT has also illuminated

stereotype threat - a social and psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation for

which a negative stereotype about one's group applies (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings,

2009). In the aforementioned case where the white teacher was unable to reach the black parent

due to communication barriers, she readily assumed that the parent did not care about her child

(a stereotype of black parents). The impact of stereotype bias is damaging to the those who

identify with the domain to which the stereotype is being applied and the receiver. The emotional

reactions of the receiver can be distracting to learning, if a student. If the parent recognized the

teacher's acceptance of the stereotype, her trust in the teacher and the school might have suffered

significantly. Considering the damage situations like this one can cause, I am now more than

willing to embrace the potential discomfort that is present when addressing issues of race and

cultural insensitivity.

As we examine the intersection of race, poverty, and equity and its impact on Black

student achievement in school, we cannot forget the importance of instruction. Years ago, my

school district brought educational consultant Ruby Payne to our campus to provide professional

development to all teachers on teaching students who live in poverty. I remember being excited

that someone was finally going to address race head-on and help change the mindset of our

approximately 2,000 teachers, 77% of which are White and 75% are female (Illinois Report

Card, 2016). Unfortunately, Payne made poverty an excuse for students to not perform well

academically in school and not understanding how education "works." She alleged that families

of poverty often do not value education, a sentiment with which I vehemently disagree. Whether

intentional or not, she perpetuated the stereotypes already held by many of the teachers. I

remember thinking that Payne gave teachers of students of poverty ammunition for their biases,

White-normed referenced thinking, and low expectations. She failed to mention funding disparities, the absence of high-quality teaching, teacher turnover, deficit versus growth model thinking, or any of the other governmental limitations and policies that contribute to the Black-White achievement gap.

For centuries, White culture has been elevated to the top of a hierarchical norm representing what is acceptable and right. Differences were seen as deficits. Characterizations of the "deficits" attributed to different races were applied to teaching and learning and left no room for considering racial cultural differences as positive or as potential resources from which teachers might draw (Schmeichel, 2012). La Belle (1971) presented a counter narrative to the findings of some of the earlier research presented by Schmeichel (2012). La Belle (1971) described a good teacher as being responsible for learning about her students' culture and using that knowledge to inform her classroom practice. In order to support their arguments that teachers could use cultural knowledge to implement "good teaching" in their classrooms, Cazden and Leggett (1976), building on arguments of La Belle (1971), presented scientific evidence of cultural difference, providing validity and justification for the promotion of culturally relevant teaching practices. Schmeichel (2012) states:

> In addition to a shift towards using evidence-based practices to implement culturally relevant teaching, this work indicated a shift from using cultural knowledge to identify what was wrong with the child to using cultural knowledge in the classroom to implement good teaching practices for children of color for the purpose of improving academic performance." (p. 7).

As more ethnographic research began to surface, Ogbu (1981) warned educators about applying the results to their practice, as many ethnographers had not been properly trained.

Ogbu (1981) acknowledged that ethnographic work in schools had identified the way in which communication patterns could lead to student failure, which debunked the previous cultural deficit models, but he felt that the results of micro ethnographic research could be misleading or overly simplistic. Villegas (1988) added that the work of ethnographic research suggested that culturally sensitive solutions were available, which reaffirmed the ability of educators to influence students' lives in a positive way; however, by leaving social structures and inequities unexamined, home/school language research diverts attention away from the social inequalities that sustain the widespread academic failure of minority students. In other words, being culturally proficient without acknowledging the social and political systems of inequity would fail and worse, give the illusion of progress while still ignoring the large problem (Schmeichel, 2012).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) is often credited with the development of the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. She argued that previous research in this area sought to align cultures or make them compatible with each other. In both approaches, the source of student achievement or failure was teacher/student language patterns and a shared focus on fixing students to fit into existing school structures. Ladson-Billings (2006) identified both as deficit approaches. Villegas (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006) argued that without consideration of the structural inequity within society and educational institutions, the sociolinguistic analysis could provide only part of the picture of what is going on in the classroom. The next logical step, from Ladson-Billings' perspective, was a theory which could address student achievement and cultural identity affirmation while casting a critical eye upon schools and society in general.

What culturally relevant pedagogy does, as one possible remedy to the Black-White achievement gap, is support a shift from thinking of differences as deficits to seeing them as

positives to be built upon and accepted. Unlike many critics, I do not believe that it "fixes an

identity" upon students of color. Obviously, there will be Black students who may not wholly

respond to culturally relevant pedagogy. Just like not all Black children are poor, or raised by

single mothers, culturally relevant pedagogy disrupts the single story that has been told to people

from other cultures as it relates to Black children and their learning. It helps to lift a group of

people out of educational oppression. In addition, with the right professional development,

focused on race consciousness and cultural bias, it gives teachers a platform to address social

justice and inequity inside of the classroom. Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that in terms of

teaching students of color, the problem is not "what to do," but rather is "how we think." She

stressed that the difference between deficit-oriented pedagogy and a growth mindset approach is

based upon not only how teachers think about their students, but how teachers think about

society. She said, "Teachers who I term culturally relevant assume that an asymmetrical (even

antagonistic) relationship exists between poor students of color and society" (Ladson-Billings,

2006, p. 30). Ladson-Billings (2006) noted that in fields like medicine and social work, the idea

of cultural competence is perceived as a skill set which enables dominant group members to read

the cultural messages of their clients more skillfully, which can result in practices that "reflect a

static and essentialized view of culture and tend to reinforce stereotypes" (p. 36). She argued

that her promotion of cultural competence was geared toward improving students' lives rather

than making teachers feel better about themselves. Culturally relevant teaching is, in this sense,

an "ethical position" (p. 40) that teachers must assume, not a predetermined set of strategies that

work with "these" kids. In order for culturally relevant pedagogy to be effective, teachers must

be willing and able to critique society and take a stance against all that creates inequities for

students of color.

Earlier in this literature review we examined factors outside and inside of schools that depress the academic achievement of Black students and perpetuate the Black-White achievement and opportunity gaps. I classified the factors into one broad category–confronting race, poverty, and equity in schools and classrooms (Milner, 2015). To that end, I have shared how a lack of school readiness, segregation, residential isolation, teacher perceptions of Black children, instruction, and a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy have contributed to the opportunity and achievement gaps. In Section Seven, I will synthesize these findings and present a future context for addressing the Black-White achievement and opportunity gaps inside and outside of schools in District Z.

Section Five: Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the 2013-2014 school year, District Z implemented their gap closing initiative of tracking the attendance and academic growth of Black students. The charts and graphs below represent data obtained from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years as it relates to the attendance of Black and White students and PARCC academic achievement.

Figure 1

2015 PARCC Meets and Exceeds

Figure 1: 2015 PARCC Meets and Exceeds

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of Black and White students that met or exceeded standards in grades 3 through 8 in the spring of 2015. This data represents composite scores, including math and English Language Arts (ELA). Under 20% of Black students met or exceeded standards in all grade levels, except eighth, where 20.97% met or exceeded. Over 50%

of White students met or exceeded in all grade levels except fifth and sixth grades, where

47.17% and 45.57% met or exceeded, respectively.

Figure 2

2016 PARCC Meets and Exceeds
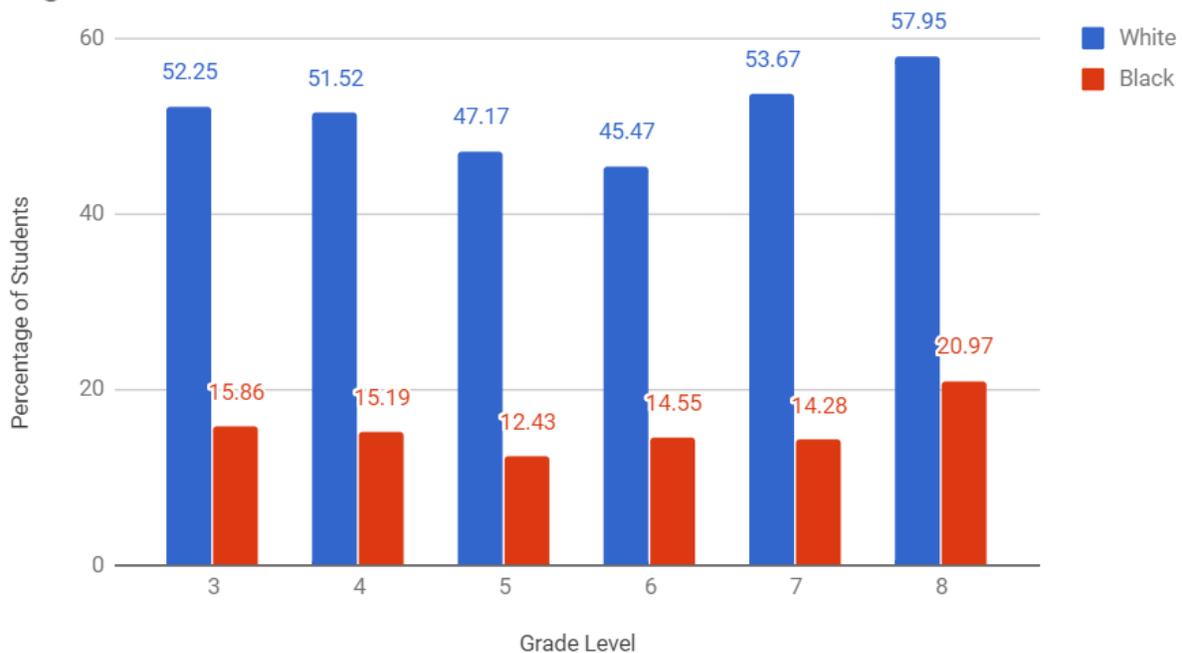

Figure 2: 2016 PARCC Meets and Exceeds
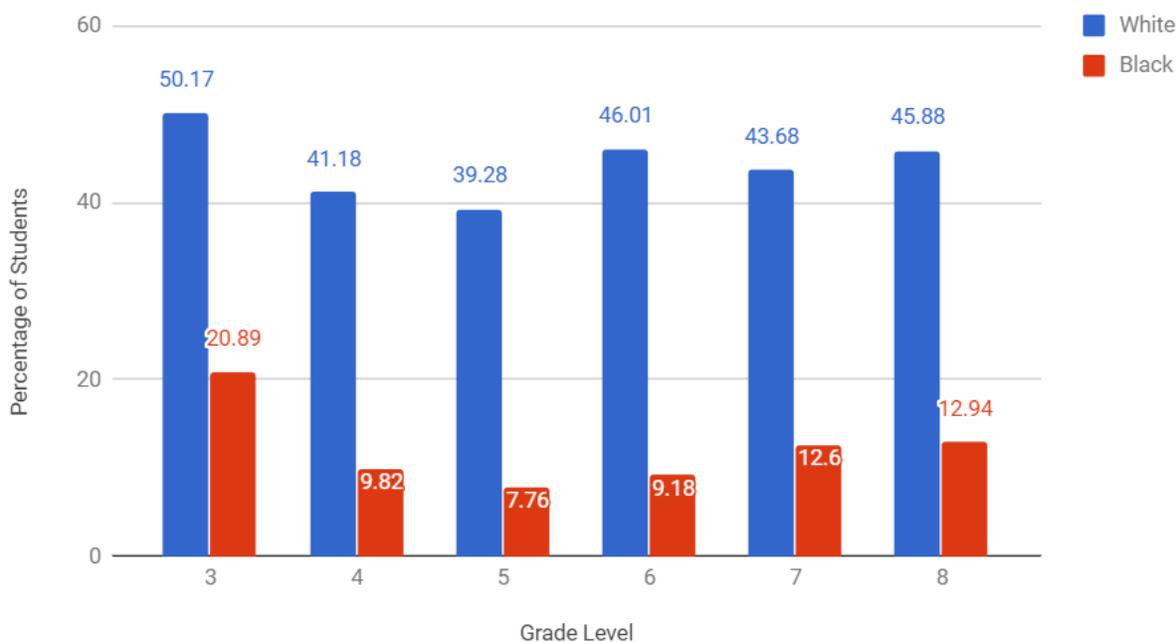
Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of Black and White students that met or exceeded

standards in grades 3 through 8 in the spring of 2016. This data represents composite scores,

including math and English Language Arts (ELA). In the spring of 2016, the only group of

White students to have more than 50% meet or exceed was third grade. All other White students

across grade levels were between 39% and 45.88% meeting and exceeding. The percent of

Black students meeting or exceeding standards decreased as well. In the spring of 2015,

percentages of Black students meeting and exceeding was around 12-14%; in 2016, that

percentage dropped to an average of 10.46%, excluding third grade with 20.89% meeting or

exceeding.

Figure 3

Composite PARCC Achievement Gap Percentages

Black/White 2015 and 2016 Achievement Gap			
2015 Gap		2016 Gap	
Grade 3	36.39	Grade 3	29.28
Grade 4	36.33	Grade 4	31.36
Grade 5	34.74	Grade 5	31.52
Grade 6	30.92	Grade 6	36.83
Grade 7	39.39	Grade 7	31.08
Grade 8	36.98	Grade 8	32.94

Figure 3 illustrates the composite (ELA and math) achievement gap percentages between

Black and White students in grades 3 through 8 in 2015 and 2016. According to Figure 3, the

overall achievement gap based upon 2015 and 2016 PARCC data indicate that all grade level

gaps decreased, except sixth grade. Third grade's gap decreased by 7.11%, fourth grade's gap

decreased by 4.97%, fifth grade's gap decreased by 3.22%, sixth grade's gap increased by

5.91%, seventh grade's gap decreased by 8.31%, and eighth grade's gap decreased by 4.04%. It

is important to note that although almost all of the grade level gaps decreased from 2015 to 2016,

White student achievement largely decreased as well. White student achievement decreased in

third, fourth, fifth, and seventh grades. Therefore, some of the perceived gap closing can be

attributed to a decrease in the performance of White students. In some cases, Black students

increased their scores and in some cases Black scores decreased. In the situations where White

scores decreased and Black scores increased, one might interpret that as gap closing. I do not. If

there was a flat increase of 2% meets or exceeds for Black and White students, the data would

indicate no change in the achievement gap. If White students demonstrated growth alone, there would be a decrease in the gap. If Black students demonstrated growth alone, there would be a decrease in the achievement gap. This begs the question, how do we really close the achievement gap, and do we do so at the expense of the growth in White student achievement? If White student achievement continues to grow at a steady rate, will Black students ever really catch up?

I decided to examine the PARCC achievement gaps more closely. Figure 4 illustrates the achievement gap differences by cohort, meaning I looked at achievement gaps between the same group of students as they moved from third to eighth grade. The cohorts reflect all of the grade level students who took the assessment in each year. The data does not account for mobility within or outside of the district. These are students, who according to PARCC, completed the assessment.

Figure 4

Cohort Achievement Gap, 2015-2016

Gap difference tracking from 2015 to 2016	
2015 Grade 3 to 2016 Grade 4	Gap decrease 5.03%
2015 Grade 4 to 2016 Grade 5	Gap decrease 4.81%
2015 Grade 5 to 2016 Grade 6	Gap increase 2.09%
2015 Grade 6 to 2016 Grade 7	Gap increase 0.16%
2015 Grade 7 to 2016 Grade 8	Gap decrease 6.45%

Even within the same group of Black and White students, moving through the educational system grade-by-grade, the gaps only decrease minimally. With gaps that hover around 30%, decreases under 5% have a less than significant impact on Black student achievement. Considering Figure 4, if the same group of students are receiving the same

education, what might account for the increases and decreases in achievement between Black and White students? What is or is not occurring in classrooms and schools that contributes to this issue?

As I mentioned earlier, District Z's achievement gap-closing initiative was twofold, and the first approach was to track the academic achievement and attendance of Black students. Let us now examine attendance. Figure 5 illustrates the attendance of Black, White, and Hispanic students during the same testing period, the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years.

Figure 5

Student Attendance by Demographic

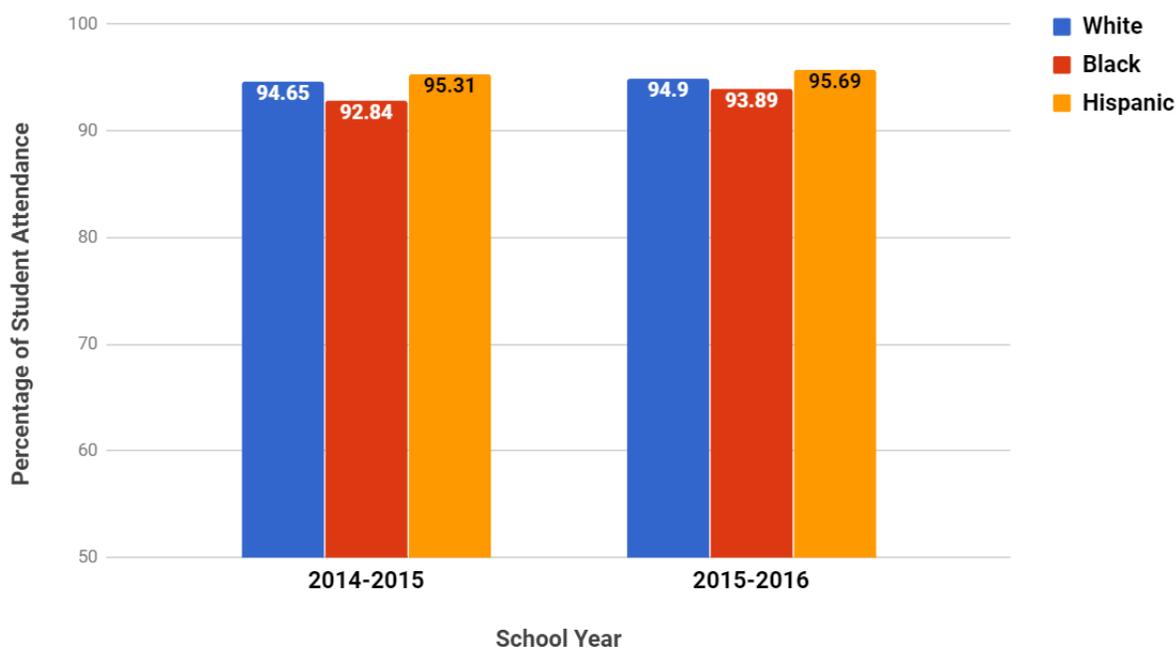Figure 5: Student Attendance by Demographic

Figure 5 illustrates that attendance for Black and White students was comparable for both testing years. The difference between Black and White attendance for the 2014-2015 school year was 1.81% and 1.01% for the 2015-2016 school year. I included Hispanic data in this chart

to illustrate that they have the highest attendance among the three groups, but still lag behind their White peers. Black student attendance was highest in 2016; however, the percent of students who met or exceeded standards was lower than in 2015. The same was true for White students who also experienced a decrease in the percent of students meeting or exceeding standards in 2016. This would indicate that there is not a significant correlation between the achievement and attendance of Black and White students on the 2015 and 2016 PARCC assessment.

Overall, the percentage of Black *and* White students meeting and exceeding standards decreased from spring of 2015 to spring of 2016, except for sixth grade White students who experienced a slight increase of 0.54%. Even with the decrease in the achievement of White students in 2016, the gap between Black and White achievement still hovers around 30%. Therefore, I would contend that District Z's tracking of the attendance and academic achievement of Black students did not narrow the achievement gap. The district will need to examine other factors that contribute to the gap and determine how best to address those factors within the district and community.

Section Six: A Vision of Success (To Be)

The goal of any learning institution is student achievement. For some students, particularly students of color, achievement may need to be supported using strategies outside of the traditional European model of education. Learning is not homogenous, meaning it is not the same for every student or every group of students. It is admirable that District Z's strategic plan intends for all students to be prepared for the 21st century; however, they have failed to acknowledge *who* their students are. District priorities and aspirations cannot ignore or exclude the over 60% of students who are Black and Hispanic. These students cannot be lumped into the "all students will achieve category." They present with specific challenges due to the inequities levied against them for centuries, inequities that have stifled their ability to reach their full potential in all areas of life. District Z's vision of success must specifically address an often ignored but very real issue— the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers. The following sections describe the environment of a future state in which the vision for success has already been implemented.

Context

The larger social and economic realm in which District Z employees work and students attend school is likely not to change significantly. The diversity of the student population will likely increase, as should that of the teaching staff and administration (school and district level). Ethnicities of the overall employee base would reflect that of the student population. The district's strategic plan would include specific aspirations and priorities for addressing the gap in achievement between students of color and their White peers. The strategies for addressing the achievement gap are research-based and measurable. The district would focus on educating the whole student and viewing students of color with a growth mindset that embraces differences.

Funding among schools would be distributed in an equitable manner that would attempt to level the playing field among those that have resources and those that do not.

My vision is to manage communication with families in a manner that meets their needs, is consistent, and is transparent. All families would be aware of the achievement gaps and the district's plans for closing them. Community partnerships would be established to support students and families with outside-of-school factors that impact student achievement like health care, tutoring, job support, before- and after-school care, housing, food, personal care, etc.

In the future, cultural proficiency is the norm. District staff will participate in ongoing, embedded development and will value the collective differences of staff and students.

Culture

If I could attach one term to the district's future culture, it would be *value*. In this future state, students, families, and staff are all valued for their respective experiences and ethnicity. Absent are the negative perceptions of families and students of color. They are replaced with a true, demonstrable belief that all students *will* learn in the right conditions. The district addresses matters of social injustice that impact students head-on. In the future, all staff own their biases, prejudices, stereotyped thinking, and the impact on student learning and community relationships. All stakeholders are aware of the opportunity and achievement gaps—the elephant in the room has disappeared. Staff speak openly about their progress toward closing the gaps and welcome the accountability. Transparency is at an all-time high and all voices, even dissenting ones, are sought out. The advocacy of students of color is real. Although uncomfortable at times, teachers seek to understand familial situations that are different from theirs instead of making assumptions.

District Z works diligently to recruit and retain staff who are aligned with their vision of equity. Staff members hold each other accountable to culturally proficient standards and those who do not embrace the culture are now the outliers.

Conditions

Now that leadership has developed a measurable, strategic plan for decreasing the achievement gap and improving the cultural competency of staff, authentic opportunities now exist for conversations about race, poverty, and academic achievement. All staff can discuss the gaps without shame or embarrassment. Teachers, building-level leadership, and district employees dedicate time to analyzing student achievement data by ethnicity and developing action plans to address the needs of students. A noticeable change will be present in the schools' visible appearance. In the past, it was almost impossible to make assumptions about the students who attended a certain school. Now, school hallways will be filled with pictures, student work, murals, quotes and experiences of people who reflect the students that attend the school.

Structurally, schools will be less segregated, as boundaries will be revised to allow for more diverse student populations. Darling Hammond indicates that poor minority children are more likely to attend schools staffed with the least qualified teachers (as cited by Bae, 2017). Therefore, District Z has two options: 1) modify segregated school boundaries or 2) ensure that all classrooms, regardless of their zip codes, are staffed with highly qualified teachers, thus positively impacting teacher turnover rates and student achievement.

Competencies

Teacher and leadership competencies improve teaching and learning. With district developed priorities in place to address the gaps between Black and White students, teachers can now focus on research-based instructional strategies that will improve learning for students of

color. Delpit (1995) says the problems we see demonstrated in schools by Black and other

oppressed children can be traced to a lack of a curriculum where they see intellectual

achievements of people who look like them. Noguera & Akom (2000) adds that missing from

the debate is how children come to perceive the relationship between their racial identities and

what they believe they can do academically. Therefore, curriculum-centered professional

development will include multicultural literature alternatives and other facets of diversity that

will develop a sense of connectedness and relevance for students. Cultural competency training

will be ongoing and implemented in a job-embedded manner. Teachers will build their capacity

to effectively analyze data by ethnicity and incorporate strategies that will lead to the increased

achievement of students of color.

Most importantly, a philosophical and moral discomfort with the status quo will move

District Z to take a much-needed stance against social injustices that impact student learning.

The cognitive dissonance that existed in the past and allowed the White majority to accept the

gaps will cease. Leadership will realize the importance of educating all students for the benefit

of society at large and the individual students the district serves.

Section Seven: Strategies and Actions for Change

The goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap is an adaptive challenge with some technical aspects. Adaptive challenges can only be "addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses and generating the new capacity to thrive anew" (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009, p. 19). The adaptive challenge facing District Z requires new learnings to understand the problem and the potential solutions. Heifetz et al. (2009) contend that what people really resist is loss, not change. In this case, teachers might want to hold on to teaching strategies, their perceptions, how they interact with families, or their familiar and time-tested routines for building relationships with students. District leadership will have to be careful to frame the change process so that effective components and other essential elements are preserved. Adaptive leadership is about "will plus skill" (Heifetz et al., 2009). District Z will have to demonstrate both will and skill successfully in order to close the achievement gap.

The future of District Z will also require a new phase of accountability systems that prevent subgroups consisting of thousands of students from falling behind and remaining there. Bae (2018) says that raising student achievement in two subject areas is no longer the sole focus of school-based accountability. PARCC data, disaggregated by ethnicity, is the start of the conversation for District Z. From there, leadership will need to develop a plan that 1) extends instruction beyond basic skills (which will never close the gap), 2) promotes a growth mindset, and 3) provides access to resources that support learning and the development of the whole-child, in an equitable manner, inside and outside of the school. All of these accountability measures are adaptive and require a continuous improvement mindset versus one of compliance.

On the heels of the data analysis, District Z will need to dedicate quality time to professional development that will improve instruction. It is clear from the data that teachers are meeting at least 50% (average percent of students that meet and exceed standards) of White student's instructional needs. But what about the over 85% of students of color and the other 50% of White students? School improvement efforts must focus on instruction. Effective teaching requires teachers to be able to assess what students are taking from instruction and adapt their instruction to meet the differing needs of students (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 2008). District Z's professional development will have to include opportunities for teachers to engage with the data, learn how to develop an instructional plan to meet students' needs, implement formative assessments, gather data to inform instruction, and assess again. This process will occur within state benchmark assessments in order to improve teachers' understanding of what students know and are able to do as it relates to standards. Professional development on instructional best practices will occur in tandem with cultural proficiency workshops.

"In order to be responsible for educational needs, school leadership should be able to develop a strategic plan for school management through conducting program evaluation" (Kim, 2011, p. 304). I have conducted a program evaluation of the district gap-closing initiative and provided recommendations. Reeves (2009) suggests that the first step in the change process is to determine which activities to *stop* doing before taking on a new challenge. In the case of District Z, I would recommend they immediately stop tracking the attendance and academic growth of Black students. This strategy has not proven to be effective. Next, District Z will need to identify stakeholders and their interests. In this case, stakeholders are the students, teachers, principals, families, board members, cabinet leadership, and the superintendent. The district will

need to consider each group's priorities and personal investment in the change strategy. I would

suggest that the district create a task force that includes representation of all stakeholders with

the focused task of developing a strategic plan for closing the achievement gap by creating

measurable action items and plans for communication with stakeholders. This task force would

meet regularly to ensure that the focus on improving student achievement (considering inside

and outside of school factors) remains a priority. The task force would develop activities with

clear objectives linked to the focus of closing the gap. On a regular basis, maybe at the

conclusion of each quarter, the task force would assess outcomes to determine if they are moving

in the right direction. Leadership team members, responsible for specific components, would

report their progress—success and challenges and any proposed modifications.

It is important to note that in order to solve such an adaptive challenge, the leadership

capacity of administrators will have to be a priority. Leadership is practiced in the details and

must be learned close to the population it serves. Regular on-the-job coaching is essential for

success (Heifetz et al., 2009). District Z must ensure that leaders are capable of fully

understanding the adaptive challenges of closing the gap and are committed, open minded, and

able to relay the values and shifted belief system to teachers, students, and families. The authors

add that when something bad happens or a mistake is made, the news should be acknowledged

and the event debriefed for its lessons to provide an opportunity for all to learn (Heifetz et al.,

2009).

It has become a common understanding that a shared vision, values, and beliefs

contribute to improvement in student achievement. The same holds true for stakeholders. I

believe that when a district begins having constructive conversations with all stakeholders, things

improve for students. In that same vein, the manner or mode in which communication of the

vision, values, and beliefs is communicated is critical. For example, mailing information to parents and guardians in a district with high-mobility may not be a good idea. Emailing information to families that have low access to Internet and computers may also be a grave mistake. District Z will have to communicate their new efforts in a manner easily accessible to their specific families and community members. I would suggest having this conversation with the achievement gap task force I mentioned earlier. The parents/guardians and community members who sit on the task force will be able to give an idea of the best ways to communicate the district's revised vision, values , and beliefs. Given what I know about District Z, I would propose text messaging, Instagram posts, and flyers being given directly to parents/guardians at pick up and drop off. Obviously, social media is a popular mode of communication and, in my opinion, having information placed directly in your hands is a proven method for disseminating information. Giving information directly to parents also opens the door for follow up conversations and helps to establish relationships. Communication with families must be ongoing and relevant. When families feel that they are welcomed to be involved, they are more likely to make their voices heard. Creating a communication plan will inevitably create challenges for District Z, but it can be accomplished through the use of effective communications and the family and community engagement departments.

In an effort to consolidate District Z's strategies and actions for change, I have included a chart in Appendix C. The chart represents specific strategies that will move District Z toward closing the achievement gap. Success for District Z in this area is attainable. The positive outcomes for students and families are worth the effort. I am more fearful of the consequences if District Z and others like it do not address the problem than I am of the mistakes that may be made while making efforts to improve achievement for students of color. The time for

incremental change has passed; we cannot afford to nibble at this issue for the next decade. It is time we heed the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Save us from the patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice (as cited in Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 2008, p. 44).

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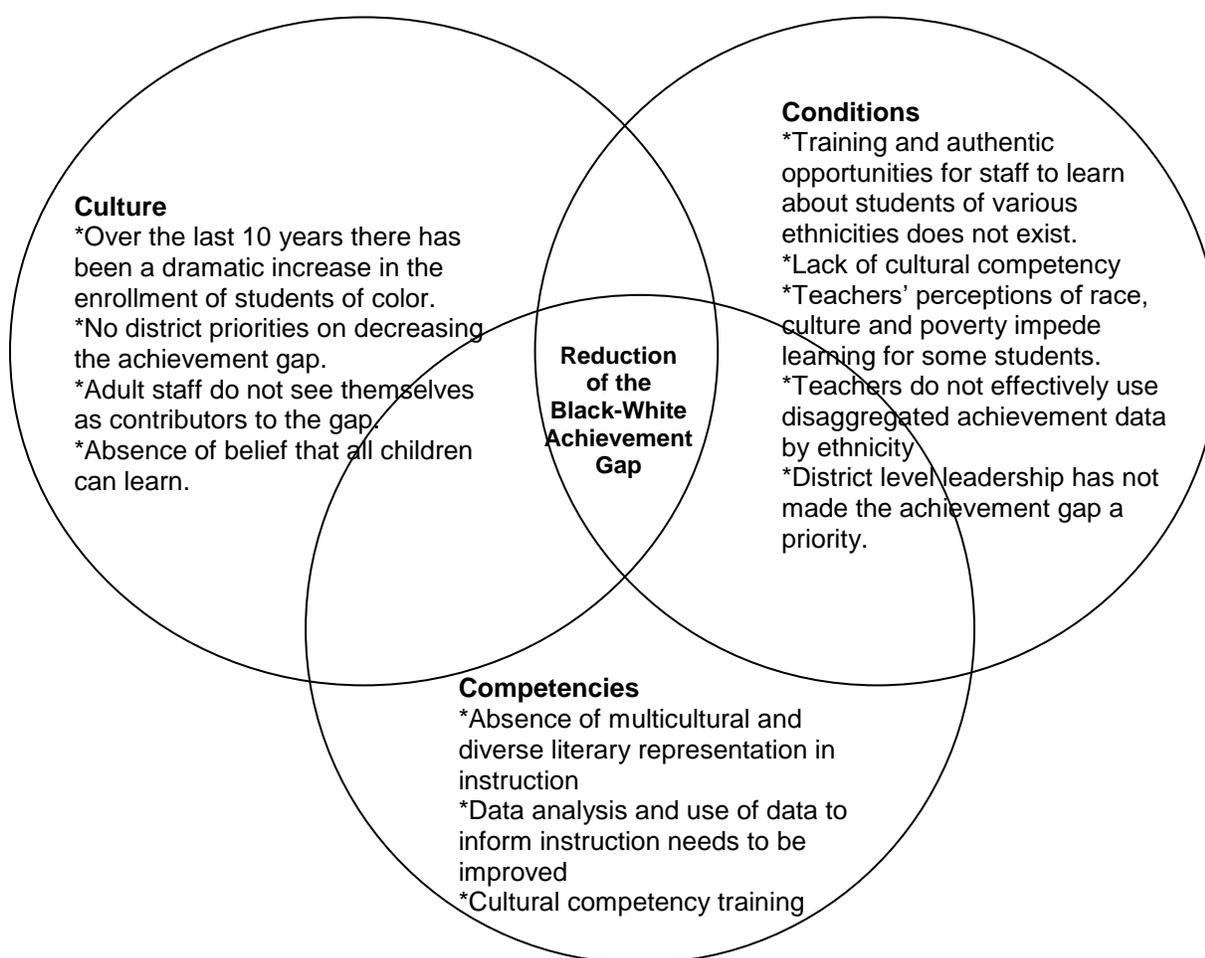Villegas, A. M. (1988). School failure and cultural mismatch: another view. *Urban Review*, *20,* 253-265. doi:10.1007/BF01120137

Appendix A

Baseline Four Cs Analysis: As-Is

Context
- Racially diverse district: 50% Hispanic, 31% White, 8% Asian, 7% Black, 3% Two or more races, and 1% American Indian
- Strategic plan includes the preparation of all students to compete in a global society
- There is an existing gap between the academic performance of Black and Hispanic students and their White peers. The gap between Black and White students in math was 41%. The gap is reading is 37%.
- Overall, 78.3% of the teaching staff is White; 69.1% are students are of color; 62.2% of students are low-income.

Culture
*Over the last 10 years there has been a dramatic increase in the enrollment of students of color.
*No district priorities on decreasing the achievement gap.
*Adult staff do not see themselves as contributors to the gap.
*Absence of belief that all children can learn.

Reduction of the Black-White Achievement Gap

Conditions
*Training and authentic opportunities for staff to learn about students of various ethnicities does not exist.
*Lack of cultural competency
*Teachers' perceptions of race, culture and poverty impede learning for some students.
*Teachers do not effectively use disaggregated achievement data by ethnicity
*District level leadership has not made the achievement gap a priority.

Competencies
*Absence of multicultural and diverse literary representation in instruction
*Data analysis and use of data to inform instruction needs to be improved
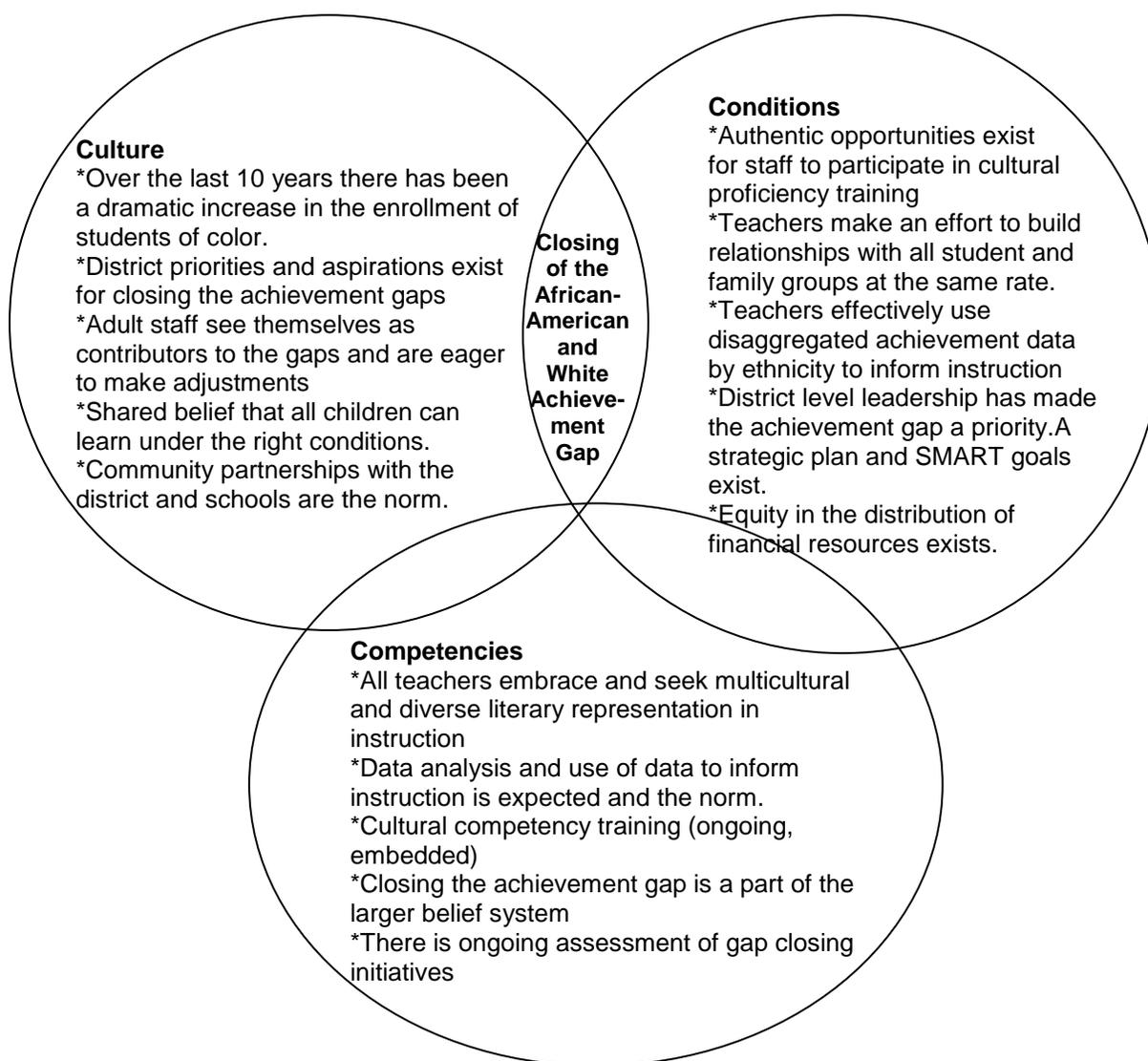*Cultural competency training

Appendex B

Baseline Four Cs Analysis: As-Is

Context
- Racially diverse district: 50% Hispanic, 31% White, 8% Asian, 7% Black, 3% Two or more races, and 1% American Indian
- Strategic plan includes the preparation of all students to compete in a global society, with a specific emphasis on priorities and aspirations for closing the Black-White achievement gaps
- If a gap exists between Black and White students, it is minimal. Comparable percentages of both sub groups meet and exceed standards on state and district tests
- There is an increase in the hiring of staff members that represent the ethnicities of the students they teach

Culture
*Over the last 10 years there has been a dramatic increase in the enrollment of students of color.
*District priorities and aspirations exist for closing the achievement gaps
*Adult staff see themselves as contributors to the gaps and are eager to make adjustments
*Shared belief that all children can learn under the right conditions.
*Community partnerships with the district and schools are the norm.

Closing of the African-American and White Achievement Gap

Conditions
*Authentic opportunities exist for staff to participate in cultural proficiency training
*Teachers make an effort to build relationships with all student and family groups at the same rate.
*Teachers effectively use disaggregated achievement data by ethnicity to inform instruction
*District level leadership has made the achievement gap a priority.A strategic plan and SMART goals exist.
*Equity in the distribution of financial resources exists.

Competencies
*All teachers embrace and seek multicultural and diverse literary representation in instruction
*Data analysis and use of data to inform instruction is expected and the norm.
*Cultural competency training (ongoing, embedded)
*Closing the achievement gap is a part of the larger belief system
*There is ongoing assessment of gap closing initiatives

Appendix C

Strategies and Actions Chart

Strategy	Action(s)	Stakeholder(s) Responsible
Gain a full understanding of the Black-White achievement gap	1. Analyze district and state assessments to qualify the gap. 2. Examine school data to understand the contexts in which the gaps occur 3. Examine what has been done to close the gap and determine effectiveness. Stop the tracking of Black students' attendance and academic achievement.	District and school level leadership, Board members
Communicate the gap findings to all stakeholders along with a plan of action	1.Submit a "call to committee" to establish an achievement gap task force with representation from all stakeholder groups 2. Host town-hall meetings a various school locations 3. Communicate meeting times/locations through text and social media.	District level leadership, all stakeholders
Build the leadership capacity of administration	1. Ensure that building and district administration understand and value the adaptive nature of closing the gaps. 2. Ensure a shared vision, values and beliefs about students of color and their achievement.	District level leadership

Incorporate ongoing and relevant professional development for teachers	1. Gain an understanding of where teachers are in their understanding of the gaps 2. Provide PD at their level in an ongoing manner. 3. Allow teachers time to process and engage in reflection about their contributions to the gap 4. Provide PD on instructional best practices	All district and school administrators, teachers
Develop accountability systems	1. Develop specific priorities and aspirations around closing the gap 2. Develop measurable goals and regular check points for progress monitoring	District Task Force
Modify curriculum to incorporate diverse and multicultural representations	1. Research and incorporate diverse representations in literature, text, school structures (hallways, etc.)	Teachers, curriculum department, building leadership
Hire highly qualified teachers in all schools, particularly those that serve students of color	1. Hire teachers who have been identified as highly qualified. 2. Retain quality teachers at schools with high populations of students of color.	Human Resources