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# Educational Policy Development For Closing The Black And White Achievement Gap

Markisha Mitchell

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Educational Policy Development for Closing the Black and White Achievement Gap

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

## Document Origination Statement for Digital Commons @ NLU

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 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. My previous research 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. This document attempts to develop instructional delivery systems and policies that will promote reform, specifically as it relates to closing the Black-White achievement gap in District Z. To that end, I argue for a comprehensive policy implementation plan that includes the critical issues District Z is facing, their identified needs, the pros and cons of implementation, and assessment and accountability measures.

## Preface

I did not have a real sense of the impact the color of my skin would have on my life until I graduated with my undergraduate degree and entered corporate America. Of course, there were situations that occurred on a regular basis that alluded to the fact that my skin color played a part in decisions or comments that were made, but it was not until years later that I reflected on those situations for what might have really fueled the outcomes. After graduating from college, I was hired by one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the United States as a pharmaceutical sales representative. It was while in this role that racist behaviors and comments towards me became overt. Comments that most people would never say aloud were spewed at me from white, male doctors as if what they were saying was common knowledge – comments about how my color 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 in 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 overwhelmingly 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.

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. 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. Across the state in which I live, over 70% of teachers are White and female and teach from an European model of education—one that has not changed much since the inception of public schools when Blacks were still subjected to racism and racist practices that prevented educational achievement. It is essential that we learn to teach the very population that schools were not created to serve. This paper will illuminate the struggles of Blacks in the area of education.

I now know that the opinions of the White male doctors with whom I interacted are just that—opinions. I know firsthand that Black children and adults can learn and excel under the right conditions. My initial research, *Program Evaluation for Assessing the Effectiveness of Tracking the Academic Growth and Attendance of Black Students in Closing the Black and White Achievement Gap*, explored the effectiveness of District Z's plan for closing the achievement gap. I now take my research a step further and am excited to share my acquired knowledge and experiences that support my personal and professional arguments for policy changes that, in my

opinion, are more of a moral obligation than a choice as it relates to closing the Black-White achievement gap.

Milner (2012) asks why so many educational researchers focus on outcomes rather than on the processes that lead to the outcomes? Issues related to opportunity are complicatedly multifaceted, process oriented, and much more nuanced than what an achievement gap explanation can provide (Milner, 2012). For this reason, I will discuss and recommend strategies that extend District Z's reach outside of the classroom walls, into the community. Strategies that will examine the lack of opportunities afforded to students and families and the impact on learning.

Moreover, I argue that results on outcomes such as standardized tests provide information about a particular, socially constructed way of thinking about what students know and need to know. However, these results report only one dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality. Still, there is not much debate in U.S. society and in education that people are diverse and that their situations and experiences vary significantly (Banks, 2001; Irizarry, 2009 as cited in Milner, 2012).

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## Section One: Vision Statement

I have been an employee of District Z for twelve years, six as an administrator and six as a classroom teacher. During my employment with the district, I've continuously observed an achievement or opportunity gap between students of color and White students. The term *achievement gap* refers to the learning deficits that students of color experience in math and reading, while *opportunity gap* is used to suggest that students of color are not always given equitable opportunities or access to meaningful curricular content and teaching using culturally relevant teaching strategies. I have seen evidence of both gaps throughout my tenure in District Z, but became most involved once I became an elementary school principal. It was then that I was able to interact with data from the balcony (Heifetz, Grashow & Linksy, 2009). In this case, from the balcony means examining data from an aerial view, absent of classroom and school site distractions. In addition to being privy to my classroom's data, now I could examine aggregate data from an entire school. Around the same time, our previous superintendent began publicly speaking out about the achievement gap to community members and administrators at the district and school level. He was transparent about the need to address and remedy the issues of inequality in education and opportunity facing our students of color. Conversations about next steps sprouted up around the school district. Although the message was communicated to the community through a board meeting, I do not think the dire need for change was clear, at least not to those most affected.

The intended outcome of the superintendent's focus on students of color was obvious – to close the opportunity and achievement gaps. What was missing was a framework for how this critical work would be accomplished. Assistant superintendents at the elementary school level decided that tracking the attendance and academic growth of each Black student would help

solve the problem. These action steps became a 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, tracking growth as it related to attendance looked different in each of the 42 elementary buildings, as did the communication with staff and parents and the method for reporting metrics to monitor progress.

The problem, as I see it, is twofold. First, the primary problem is that achievement and opportunity gaps exist between Black and White students in a district dominated by students of color (see Tables 1 and 2). Secondly, the district's response to the achievement gap is not being monitored for effectiveness, is not a part of our strategic plan, nor is it treated with any sense of urgency. It is also worth mentioning that the response does not include specific action steps based on an analysis of the achievement and attendance data. Tracking the data alone does not impact the gap.

Table 1

*School District Z Ethnic and Racial Composition*

<b>School District Z Racial/Ethnic Composition (Percentage)</b>					
	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
<b>White</b>	31	31	30	28	28
<b>Black</b>	7	7	7	6	6
<b>Hispanic</b>	50	50	51	52	53
<b>Asian American</b>	9	8	9	8	8
<b>American Indian</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Two or More Races</b>	2	3	3	4	4
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Omitted for confidentiality.

Table 2

*District Z PARCC Summary*

<b>PARCC Summary Composite (Math and ELA)</b>				
School District Z Achievement Gap Between Black and White Students			School District Z Achievement Gap Between Hispanic and White Students	
<b>2015</b>	35%		<b>2015</b>	28%
<b>2016</b>	32%		<b>2016</b>	25%
<b>2017</b>	29%		<b>2017</b>	25%

Source: Omitted for confidentiality.

A change is needed in the way district-level administrators view the achievement and opportunity gaps, their implications, and action steps to narrow the gaps. The gaps signal to stakeholders and the nation that District Z, where students of color make up two-thirds of enrollment, is not effectively educating a majority of its students. The gaps also say that a district that employs 78% White teachers is struggling to meet the needs of students of color and currently has ineffective practices in place to narrow the gaps.

A policy that focuses on the gaps specifically would provide a defined course of action for all stakeholders. All stakeholders would know exactly how future decisions regarding the achievement of students of color would be handled. The policy would serve as the district's litmus test; it would create standard, clear, and consistent expectations and action steps, all of which would be measured based on the expectations of the policy.

I am recommending that a policy or defined course of action regarding closing the achievement and opportunity gaps become a part of the district's strategic plan under the umbrella of student achievement. Currently, District Z cites two priorities under student achievement. The one most closely related to this work reads: "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" (omitted for confidentiality, 2015). The metrics for this objective are: 1) to increase the percentage of students who are college and career ready and 2) increase the percentage of students who feel safe at school. I suggest that the district add two additional metrics, specifically, "3) increase the percentage of underrepresented students who meet and exceed on standards-based assessments in reading and math and 4) decrease the achievement gap in reading and math between underrepresented and white students." Adding specific metrics to the district's strategic plan will add a layer of accountability for this growing problem.

During the formation stage of the policy, all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, and community members) would be informed of the achievement gap and the current implications on teaching, learning, and school and district culture. Parents would be invited to share their thoughts about the current status of the gaps and propose 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 gaps and for making suggestions for improvement in teaching and learning for underrepresented students. This task force would meet regularly to remain informed of progress and make suggestions for improvement. I am not suggesting this level of effort for all priorities of the district's strategic plan; however, when 58% of the student population, on average, falls behind

their White counterparts, something drastic and intentional must be done. The achievement outcomes and demographic trends described here foreshadow the significant challenges that lie ahead for America's public schools. Yet, despite ample forewarning, we face this educational future without political and educational research-based strategies in place and at the scale necessary to produce the highly-skilled workforce called for in the years ahead—unless we make a different choice. America's public schools will be required to educate an increasingly diverse student body and an increasing number of students from demographic groups that experience the largest achievement gaps (National Education Association, n.d.). Therefore, the strategies and interventions put in place must be researched-based. To be clear, they should be strategies recommended by organic, non-politically motivated thinkers of the industry like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Pedro Noguera, and Linda Darling-Hammond. These equity experts provide the often overlooked perspectives of the students and families that live the sensationalized lives of poverty, racism, exclusion, and inequality on a daily basis.

There is a popular saying: "What gets measured gets done." It means regular measurement and reporting keeps a person focused on a given task or priority. During regular measurement intervals, one would use data to inform decisions that improve results. For District Z, adding a measurement metric to its strategic plan would qualify the achievement and opportunity gaps for regular checks and progress reports to the board of education and community (Henderson, 2012).

Without this type of policy in place, we must ask, who is accountable for the failure of the district's underrepresented students? How can we coach teachers and administrators toward success if we do not have established, research-based district wide priorities and action steps? Lastly, what message would the district send to the families of students of color if no action is

taken? What is very clear from data is that what the district has been arbitrarily doing to close the achievement and opportunity gaps between White and Black students is not working. A policy stated within the strategic plan, with accompanying actions items and accountability, is necessary to truly see progress in this area.

I recommend that a policy and accompanying priorities and action items regarding closing the achievement and opportunity gap become a part of the district's strategic plan. The goal of the policy is to:

- Address the educational inequities Black students experience as a very real matter that impacts their academic performance.
- Eliminate blame and establish a shared responsibility for the gaps in performance.
- Ensure that schools with a majority enrollment of underrepresented students recruit and retain certified, qualified, and culturally proficient educators.
- Develop and/or revise curriculum to meet the multi-cultural needs of students. Include research-based instructional strategies that will be differentiated based upon student need.
- Develop whole-child programs and initiatives that recognize and address the outside-of-school factors, caused by injustice and discrimination, that negatively impact learning for Black students.
- Increase the percentage of underrepresented students who meet and exceed standards in reading and math.
- Decrease the achievement gap in reading and math between underrepresented and White students.

The approach to implementation of my policy proposal will be discussed later. The intended outcomes stated above will require District Z to confront the magnitude of the gaps and their

impact. The achievement gap is a warning symptom, not a diagnosis, of something gone terribly wrong within the educational system. Singham (2005) makes a similar argument in *The Achievement Gap in U.S. Education: Canaries in the Mine*. Canaries were used to gain insight into the conditions in the mine, not into the makeup of canaries or their habitats (Books, 2007). My proposal will offer District Z the opportunity to examine the mine instead of focusing on the canary.

## Section Two: Analysis of Need

The achievement gap exists largely between Black and White students. Research tends to focus on academic gains and losses between the two groups; however, as you will read, the gaps span across contexts in national and international arenas. Gaps between the progress of Black and Whites can be traced back to pre-colonial days when Africans were brought to the colonies as slaves. The man-made, dehumanizing perceptions of Africans and, later, African Americans have stood the test of time and continue to perpetuate segregation and racism in the realms of education, economics, social arenas, and politics. One reason these perceptions persist is because of the exaggerated, media-fed stereotypes that are ingrained into the minds of White America. These dehumanizing popular images about Black and Latino school children not only injure their self-image, but could hamper their capacity to overcome the achievement gap. The list of stereotypes is endless and injurious. Such persistent and unabated assumptions of mental incompetence make it even more difficult for Black students to overcome the contemporary achievement gap (Anderson, 2004). The need to address the gap is also a belief shared by Noguera and Akom (2000), who state that the consistency of such patterns [gaps] in almost every school and district in the country has the effect of reinforcing well-established assumptions regarding the relationship between race and academic ability and intelligence. Hedges and Nowell (1999) rationalize that if high levels of achievement are needed to excel in (or even gain entry to) an occupation, the fact that only one-sixth to one-tenth as many blacks as whites have high test scores may make it difficult to achieve proportionate participation. The historic marginalization of underprivileged students and the perpetuation of the status quo have served to benefit the same kinds of students for hundreds of years, while simultaneously ignoring the needs of low-income students of color and their families (Larson & Ovando, 2001). As a result,

these students often fall into a predetermined mold designed for academic failure and social inequity (Brown, Benkovitz, Mutillo, & Urban, 2011). Below, I have traced the implications of historic marginalization, reinforced stereotypes, and dehumanizing behaviors in five distinct areas.

### **Educational Analysis**

Blacks have long been viewed as mentally inferior to Whites. Even post-slavery, the perception still exists in the minds of many. Education has been one of the primary efforts where lowered expectations and standards for minorities can clearly be seen. The gap in achievement, which was preceded by the gap in opportunities, has placed Blacks at a disadvantage in the realm of education. For example, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011 Mathematics Grade 8 Assessment, Black students scored 31 points lower, on average, than White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). To provide context, the difference between NAEP Grade 8 mathematics Basic and Proficient achievement levels is 37 points, suggesting that, on average, Black students scored an entire achievement level below White students.

Looking beyond national assessments, the achievement gap is significant enough to register on international assessments like the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which reports the gap between the highest and lowest eighth grade scores in the United States is one of the largest among advanced countries; Black children, Hispanic children and poor children consistently achieve lower levels than their peers (OECD, 2005; Poliakoff, 2006).

Researchers, educators, and policymakers continue to seek to understand the reason for the gaps and to develop policies and strategies to reduce the magnitude of the Black-White student academic performance gap. These statistics are not new. Since the political end of

slavery, Blacks have struggled to catch up with their white counterparts in terms of access to a quality education. However, the systemic road blocks put in place throughout the nation have proved effective in preventing a level playing field for Blacks and Whites in education. It is generally accepted and literature has indicated that students from poor and minority backgrounds are more likely to attend schools where the curriculum is weak, teachers are ill-prepared, and the environment—if not outright dangerous—fails to support academic achievement (Poliakoff, 2006). Darling-Hammond (2010) adds that Black, Latino, and Native American students have less access to academics and college preparatory courses, but they attend schools that provide more remedial and vocational courses. Negative teacher beliefs and attitudes linked to complacency and a lack of effort toward raising the achievement levels of racial and ethnic minorities students have contributed to the achievement gap (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Pitre, 2014).

As a result, Black students have received sub-par educations, reached lower educational attainment levels, and received biased instruction and a lack of opportunity for advancement to higher level courses, like Advanced Placement (AP). By the end of high school, Black and Latino students' math and reading skills are, on average, about the same as those of White middle-schoolers (Education Trust, 2005). Haycock (2006) reports that while 75% of students from affluent families (those in the top income quartile) graduate from college by age 24, only 9% of students from poor families (those in the lowest income quartile) do. Unpreparedness and a lack of access to opportunities within and outside of school are systematically cultivated in high-poverty schools. The prevailing challenge is to look at the elements that have caused and continue to perpetuate the achievement gap.

Other critical implications of the achievement gap are poor teacher quality and increased and disproportionate discipline for Black students. Resmovits (2014) reported that Black students are suspended or expelled at triple the rate of their White peers, according to the U.S. Education Department's 2011-2012 Civil Rights Data Collection, a survey conducted every two years. The report notes that 5% of White students were suspended annually, compared with 16% of Black students. Black girls were suspended at a rate of 12%—far greater than girls of other ethnicities and most categories of boys. Considering that Blacks represent about 13% of the U.S. population, it is clear that they are expelled and suspended at a disproportionate rate. High suspension and expulsion rates translate into more time away from school, which means less instructional time, typically from an underqualified teacher, which leads to disenfranchisement of Black students in the educational setting. In addition to the increasing academic problems stemming from not attending school, there are a multitude of other issues facing older students with high absence patterns in urban schools. For instance, chronically absent students have higher dropout rates, antisocial behaviors, and unemployment rates (Broadhurst, Patron, & May-Chahal, 2005). Being suspended at a higher rate and being taught by less experienced teachers sets Black and poor students up to fail. Even when in school, Black students, who represent 16% of America's public school students, represent 27% of students referred by schools to law enforcement, and 31% of students arrested for an offense committed in school (Resmovits, 2014).

One of the most egregious implications of the achievement gap is low teacher quality and communication of educator expectations. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) stated, "The deficit model worldview is prevalent among educators. Unfortunately, the education system not only fails to enlighten students and educators about oppression and entitlement, but it further

institutionalizes the oppression of dominated cultural groups by its very structure and practice and resistance to change” (p. 84). Lindsey et al. (2009) goes on to discuss research that reveals that educators have different expectations for students depending on their race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. Teacher-student interactions based on lowered expectations lead to devastating consequences for students academically and in terms of their self-image. Lindsey et al. (2009) states that once educators are aware of how they make judgements based on entitlement and oppression and understand how those judgements influence their expectations and evaluations of students, then the discussion about how to fix their behavior can begin. If educators fail to have such critical reflective moments, students of color will suffer.

Harris (2011, p. 4) shares that the Black disadvantage in schooling extends to future educational attainment. For example, among adults aged 25 and older, twice as many Blacks (16%) dropped out of high school than Whites (8%), and only 19% of Black adults hold at least a bachelor’s degree compared to 33% of their white counterparts (U.S. Census 2009).

Discrimination in wages, promotion, interviews, and hiring are all implications of the achievement gap and have been justified by a sustained belief that Blacks cannot learn or do not have the capacity to amass skills in a manner similar to their White counterparts. Harris’ (2011, p. 41) research also showed that an overwhelming percent of Whites (80%) believe that Blacks have an equal opportunity to receive a good education. If this perception is still held by a majority of Whites, then what are the implications for the Black-White achievement gap? What might the implications be for district wide initiatives to address the inequities others know exists that have perpetuated achievement gaps? I believe that until and unless the White majority in power acknowledge and understand the barriers within and outside of school that contribute to

gaps in learning, gaps in opportunities, gaps in job attainment, gaps in income, and much more, then the cycle of inequity which includes the achievement gap will continue.

### **Economic Analysis**

I once read that wealth is generational and so is poverty. This means that if previous generations were wealthy or poor, then the likelihood that the next generation will experience similar wealth or poverty is high. Bowles and Gintis (2002) state that the extent of intergenerational economic status transmission is considerable. In the United States, knowing the income or wealth of someone's parents can be just as informative about that person's own economic status, as is knowing the person's years of schooling attained or score on a standardized cognitive test. This cycle perpetuates itself and makes it difficult for those who have not experienced wealth to gain it. Prior to World War II, White men were the primary recipients of public and private education. They set the “norm” and “tone” for how business is transacted in this country and how wealth is attained. White men were/are also in control of the government (federal, state, and most local), owners of the top largest corporate entities, and highly influential in the commercial real estate and housing development markets. Essentially, wealth equals economic power. Black people have largely not been given the opportunity to establish wealth or obtain education. While White men were establishing businesses, participating in government, and amassing riches, Black men were slaves. Once Blacks were no longer physically enslaved, systems were put in place to prevent them from elevating economically, establishing business, participating in government, purchasing property, or taking advantage of any of the other rights and privileges Whites experienced with ease. Rich (2017) expounds upon this by stating, “Released from slavery with nothing but the clothes on their backs and whatever skills they had managed to accumulate on plantations, African Americans

made the remarkable transition from being human capital to learning how to generate capital to support their families in a racialized system where they were too often met with the maximum opposition to their success” (p. ix).

The educational disenfranchisement of Black students/people is parallel to their economic plight. If Blacks are not afforded a quality education, experienced teachers, necessary resources, and fair disciplinary practices, then they are certainly not going to acquire a competitive edge in education, which further decreases their chances of consistent employment, sustainable income, and property ownership. Bowles and Gintis (2002) also assert that there are only a few income-generating traits (transmitted from parent to offspring) for which both economic relevance and similarity of parents and offspring have been empirically demonstrated. Among them are cognitive performance, level of education, and ownership of assets. The unfortunate truth is that through the implementation of widely accepted laws and practices like Black Codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, and other indignities, Blacks have been systematically prevented from developing in the latter two areas: level of schooling and ownership of assets. The achievement and opportunity gaps between Blacks and Whites perpetuates the economic disparities between the two racial groups.

Gosa and Alexander (2007) shed light on the often ignored educational difficulties of well-off Black students. In 1995, the children of Black parents with graduate-level education averaged 191 points lower than their White counterparts on the combined verbal-math SAT (884 vs. 1035) (Bullock, 1999). In 2002, the SAT scores of Black children in families earning more than \$100,000 averaged 142 points lower than those of similarly situated Whites (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2003). Most middle-class Black Americans, around 80%, are first-generation middle class, whereas White middle and upper class ties go back three or four

generations (Wilkerson, 1990). These education gaps at the top partly reflect socioeconomic differentials, but more so how race limits or constrains the life chances of Black parents and their children, including well-off parents and their children (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). Here is how Massey and Denton (1993) put it:

For blacks . . . high incomes do not buy entrée to residential circumstances that can serve as springboards for future socioeconomic mobility; in particular, blacks are unable to achieve a school environment conducive to later academic success. In Philadelphia, children from an affluent black family are likely to attend a public school where the percentage of low-achieving students is three times greater than in the schools attended by affluent white children. . . Because of segregation, the same income buys black and white families educational environments that are of vastly different quality. (p. 153)

Lynch and Oakford (2014) stated that between 2007 and 2010, as White households lost 36% of their wealth, Black household wealth fell 50%. Thus, by 2010, Black household wealth amounted to just 5% of that of White households, the lowest relative levels in many decades. Rich (2017) classifies this as the racial wealth gap – the economic divide that leaves Blacks with a fraction of the wealth of Whites. Depending on the source, Whites are estimated to have about 10 to 17 times the median wealth of Blacks. The wealth, academic achievement, and opportunity gaps are all tightly aligned and all lead to the daily inequalities Blacks face.

Racism in hiring, lower pay, and housing segregation also lends itself to economic disparities among Blacks and Whites. Although qualified, Blacks are less likely to be hired over their White counterparts and are still prevented (albeit discreetly) from purchasing and renting homes in certain areas. Affluence doesn't insulate Blacks from disadvantaging community conditions to the extent it does Whites (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Massey and Denton

(1993) show that, at any given level of family income, Blacks tend to live in neighborhoods with lower housing values and higher percentages of births to unwed mothers, and their children attend schools with lower achievement test averages. What those in power fail to recognize is that closing racial and ethnic gaps in achievement is not only key to fulfilling the potential of people of color; it is also crucial to the well-being of our nation (Lynch and Oakford 2014). The Connecticut Council for Education Reform (“Impact of the Gap,” n.d.) put it best:

Many low-achieving students drop out of school, forfeiting the knowledge they need to join a skilled workforce. Those who finish high school and go on to college or career training programs earn twice as much as dropouts and are far less likely to be unemployed. The difference in the net fiscal contributions of a high school graduate vs. a high school dropout in Connecticut is \$518,000 over that person’s lifetime. Clearly, closing the achievement gap would improve Connecticut’s economy and quality of life. For all of us. (p.1)

### **Social Analysis**

Van Laar and Sindanius (2001) examined the impact of negative stereotypes on what the authors refer to as “low status groups,” and how the stereotypes affect their motivation and achievement. They found the people tend to want to be associated with groups that are positively versus negatively valued. Social Dominance Theory (SDT) holds that dominant and subordinate groups are found in all modern societies, and, moreover, that societies are predisposed to form group-based social hierarchies with certain groups at the top of the hierarchy and others at the bottom (p. 237). Although all societies have hierarchies, the severity of the differences between the groups ranges from low to moderate to high. An example of extreme differences would be the American slave system. The social ramifications of the slave trade are

innumerable. Blacks were social outcasts. Even post-slavery, segregation was a legal and reinforced, social, educational, political, and economic system of preventing Blacks from progressing. Socially, Blacks were universally treated as less than human, ignorant, criminally predisposed, lazy, and incapable of learning. The detriment to the human psyche after decades of degradation is unimaginable (DeGruy, 2005). The racist socialization of Blacks began with slavery and continued throughout American history. Centuries of programming Blacks to have an inferiority mentality has taken its toll. From the beginning, Blacks were taught they were mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually inferior, thus rendering them ineffectual in their own eyes and the eyes of society. Such notions have continued to infiltrate all aspects of American life. DeGruy (2005) contends that Blacks have experienced a legacy of trauma: "The legacy of trauma is reflected in our behaviors and our beliefs; behaviors and beliefs that at one time were necessary to adopt in order to survive, yet today serve to undermine our ability to be successful" (p.117). Lived experiences get passed on from generation to generation in families and communities. Today, the Black community is composed of individuals who collectively share anxiety and adaptive survival behaviors passed down from generations of Blacks who likely suffered from "post-traumatic slave syndrome," a phrase coined by Degruy in 2005. It is almost impossible to quantify the impact slavery and the centuries of degradation and racism that followed have had on Black Americans. Even so, the ramifications are real and manifest in a variety of contexts that lead to a lack of opportunity, negative stereotyping, poverty, and vacant self-esteem among Black people.

From a cultural stance, Black families are marked by a duality experienced on a daily basis: "To be fully functional, they must develop the skill to function well within two different cultures, both Black and non-Black" (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985, p. 9). The European

framework supports an individualistic work ethic and relies on the assumption that effort and hard work ensure success, regardless of race (Buttaro, Battle & Pastrana, 2010). The Afrocentric framework supports a more communal, collaborative framework of success. The blending of the two may contribute to the development of a complicated horizon of dispositions in which attitudes of accommodation, competition, or exclusion come to shape the motivations and behaviors of Black teenagers which influence their future (Marshall, 1994). The impact of this duality on social and educational matters can lead to confusion, lack of motivation, and a negative adjustment in aspirations and expectations of success or achievement.

Boykin, Tyler, and Miller (2005) extend Marshall's (1994) research and add that the mass urban education model in American public schools was conceived to ensure conformity to the Anglo cultural ethos. This has resulted in attempts to bring school children of non-Anglo cultural backgrounds into conformity with mainstream cultural themes. When schools perpetuate and promote these themes, they are performing a cultural socialization function. The Afro-cultural themes, like movement expression and communalism, are not in alignment with Eurocentric schooling expectations. The outcome is the home culture of most Black students is not typically incorporated into their daily experiences at school. Boykin et. al (2005) summarized their findings by stating that they may have uncovered a crucial component to the dismal academic performance of low-income Black elementary students. In particular, the public classrooms with predominantly minority student populations are not culturally neutral terrains, which certainly carry implications for academic engagement and overall achievement motivation. The greater the difference in culture between students' homes and school, the greater the disadvantage those students face, as they must first learn and adapt to new codes and expectations (Tyson, 2003; MacLeod, 1995).

Social capital advantages are also often passed down from generation to generation in a similar manner as wealth. That is, if one generation does not have it, it is unlikely that the next will either (Buttaro et.al, 2010). The accumulation of education, wealth, and social status all contribute to privilege and the lack thereof in the achievement of Black and White students. Parental human and financial resources do not benefit children if they are not coupled with social capital, since it is the latter that could allow the children to "take advantage of whatever financial and human capital their parents possess" (Qian & Blair, 1999, p. 606).

Van Laar and Sidanius (2001) state that we need to know precisely how differences in social status translate into differences in academic outcomes. The authors found that the lack of economic, cultural, and social capital resources among people from low status groups contributes to the maintenance of the achievement gaps. Second, they suggest that the achievement gap is also a function of direct and indirect forms of discrimination by both persons and institutions. Lastly, the two suggest, incorrectly, that the academic achievement gap is due to systemic behavioral differences between children of low and high status groups. They add that these suboptimal behavioral patterns should be regarded both as a result of social subordination and a cause of continued subordination. The authors' final point suggests one of the causes of the gap is an inherent disposition of low status people to not behave in alignment with the dominant or high status group. They also seem to infer that the "less than satisfactory" behavioral patterns are a cause for continued treatment of low status people as inferior. Their final point illustrates the error and impact of institutionalized oppression of a group of people on society and how the false ideas are perpetuated, even by those in academia.

The relationship between culture and education has been extensively researched and discussed in literature. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) first used the concept of cultural capital to

analyze how culture and education interact. They believed that the causal argument is straightforward; Cultural capital, or societally valued knowledge of "highbrow" culture and cultural cues, is more likely to be manifested in families of high socioeconomic status (SES) and translates into a greater likelihood of educational success. Conceived as a mediating factor between social origins and educational outcomes, cultural capital is a useful conceptual extension of how social inequality is reproduced. Examples of highbrow cultural activities include visits to the museum; participation in extracurricular activities like dance, art, and music; cultural trips; cultural classes; and the like. The effects of cultural capital may vary, depending on the possessor. In the classroom, teachers may play a role in rewarding affluent students with high-brow cultural capital with more attention, assistance, and expectations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Black and low-SES students receive less return for cultural trips and educational resources than do their White and higher-SES counterparts (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). "Disparate racial and class returns for cultural and educational resources appear to be partially explained by micro political processes that are tied specifically to teachers' evaluations of students' efforts and more systematic relegation associated with tracking" (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, p. 171).

At the center of debates on minority students' achievement is the issue of culture. Scholars have argued that the cultural discontinuity between the students' homes and the institutionalized structure of schools is a significant factor in the underachievement and failure of minority and low-income students (Tyson, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977). Karolyn Tyson (2003) begs the question of why; for example, why would teachers systematically participate in the oppression of students such that a pattern of academic underachievement and failure persists among some minority and low-income groups? For younger minority students, the oppression

make take the form of continuous reprimands and being met with the school's disapproval, in its various forms, for actions that seem natural and appropriate in their home or other community contexts. For example, young students of color are often reprimanded for sharing lunch or snacks with friends at school, a practice very common in the Black community. Young Black children are often taught to take care of friends and loved ones; however, this practice does not always align with society's Eurocentric, individualistic expectations in the school setting. Adolescents, on the other hand, have a better sense of what schools want and the existing cultural divisions; however, this understanding does not mean those students have the ability to provide schools with those wants and thus, they become frustrated and angry (Tyson, 2003).

### **Political Analysis**

Educational politics is consumed by the achievement gap. From *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* to more recent measures of accountability and measurement, the hot educational topic of the time surrounds "the gap," specifically the racial gap (Onosko, 2011). The racial gap is a focal point for many politicians, as it appears to read well if one is to purport to be an advocate of educational equality. Unfortunately, many politicians are not at all informed about educational policy, or the real reasons behind the gaps in learning between students of color and White students. Furthermore, only 36% of Americans see the Black-White gap as a priority (Valant and Newark, 2016). So, where does that leave the political implications of the Black-White achievement gap? A 2012 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll reported 97% of respondents felt it was *very* or *fairly* important to improve urban schools, but only 62% would pay higher taxes to accomplish it. There is some evidence that Americans prefer race-neutral programs that target benefits to the poor rather than race-conscious programs that target benefits to racial minorities (Valant and Newark 2016). The political reality is that raced-based policy

proposals are unpopular. Knowing such, politicians are able to tiptoe around the real issues surrounding the achievement gap and appeal to the majority of people with vague statements and promises to improve education for all.

Lynch and Oakford (2014) reported that children of color are more likely to experience violence and have interactions with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. For example, Black children are 4.5 times more likely than White children to be apprehended for the same crime. These children are also more likely to have an incarcerated parent. Why? Does the color of one's skin make a person more predisposed to commit a crime? To be arrested? To have incarcerated parents? These are all life-altering circumstances that prevent an entire group of people from fully participating in society. In some ways, these "highly likely" experiences for Black people are directly linked to an outcome of achievement and opportunity gaps. The reason Blacks are more likely to commit crimes is because they are more likely to be unemployed (Lynch and Oakford, 2014). By backwards-mapping the circumstances, it is clear that Blacks are more likely to be unemployed because they are undereducated; and they are undereducated because of bias, preconceptions, and racism; and they experience bias and racism because the social construct of race has created the notion of an inferior group of people and perpetuated that thinking through media and movies. Race was socially constructed so that those in power remained in power by propagating false teachings about what they deemed as inferior groups of people.

Politics and politicians can fall victim to the thinking in the previous paragraph. Politicians have the power to develop policies that help address violence, reduce racial and ethnic bias in the justice system, eliminate unnecessary contact between youth and the juvenile justice system, support incarcerated parents, guarantee quality educational and training

opportunities for incarcerated youth, and influence, in a top down manner, the educational and opportunity gaps that lend itself to this vicious cycle (Lynch and Oakford, 2014).

Public policy can also be used to promote higher wages, higher employment, and higher family incomes, which have been proven to reduce educational achievement gaps. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that increases in family income improve the educational outcomes of children and can narrow achievement gaps. With more money and access, families will be able to place their children in supplemental programming outside of the school day and in the summer. I believe that when families of color are afforded an opportunity to receive a high-quality education, participate in the work force, and earn a competitive wage, we will see changes to our society as a whole. Politicians promise that an improved job market will bring an improved economy, educational system, and government. This cannot be achieved as long as the disenfranchisement and devaluing of people of color is acceptable.

### **Moral and Ethical Analysis**

The moral and ethical underpinnings of the Black-White achievement gap often get lost in the shuffle. It seems much easier to view the lack of opportunities and gaps in the education of students of color as a result of their own negligence. Milner (2015) stated that complacency is unacceptable for educators who are committed to improving education for all. He adds that neutrality is a conscious stance that works against social justice. Basically, educators are either fighting *for* equitable education for all students, or they are fighting *against* it. There is no neutral space in this work. From a moral lens, it is troubling that many teachers, administrators, and district-level staff are so easily able to remove themselves from the equation that produces achievement gaps. This is not to place blame on educators for the achievement and opportunity gaps; however, there is a level of responsibility that first must be owned and then addressed.

Educators must proactively reject the rhetoric dispelled from politicians and the elite who perpetuate the systems that sustain the gaps.

In a 2015 (Rothstein, 2015) commencement speech given to graduates of Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York, scholar Richard Rothstein, who received an honorary doctorate for his contributions to the field of education, attacked national education policy and insisted that we cannot ignore unsolved problems (segregation, lack of adequate housing and healthcare, underemployment, low wages, etc.). He stated that we can assure children's success simply by recruiting better teachers who have higher expectations for their students. To illustrate, Rothstein talked about the Atlanta educators who erased and corrected answers on their students' tests. He compared that behavior with the investigation surrounding the veterans' hospital administrators who falsified records to pretend that prompt appointments were scheduled when no doctors were available. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs who imposed a system of accountability, but not resources to meet his standards, resigned. But there were no prosecutions of the VA staffers who committed fraud. Nursing home administrators routinely submit false reports to Medicare that patient welfare standards are being met, yet none have been tried for altering public records. In contrast, the Atlanta judge, expressing moral outrage, claimed that his harsh sentences for educators—including years of jail time—were justified because the victims of cheating were students, and denied remediation because test erasures disguised their failures as teachers. As an educator, I know that it is unlikely that the students whose tests were amended would have received any additional support based upon their test results. The actions of the Atlanta teachers were unethical and illegal, but Rothstein pushed the graduates to consider the back story. He asked, is it unethical when teachers, even entire school systems, reallocate instructional time to concentrate on subjects that are tested? There are

no consequences for diminishing attention to civics, science, history, cooperative learning, critical thinking of all kinds, literature, the arts, physical fitness, or even mathematical reasoning. The inevitable narrowing of the curriculum is wrong, but not illegal.

At the beginning of each school year, teachers engage in data analysis and target students whose scores are just below passing as the recipients of interventions and special attention in order to increase the number of passing scores. Is this practice unethical? Rothstein contends that while this is likely considered unethical, as it narrows the intended curriculum for the benefit of accountability measures, it is not illegal. Rothstein goes on to mention how the graduates will be faced with mandatory test taking preparation, the suspension of students with behavioral issues just before the state tests, and pressure to get students to proficiency while no one worries about the students' stress, or homelessness, or lead poisoning, or abuse. All these are unethical practices, but not illegal.

Rothstein's comments to the graduates demonstrate that moral and ethical decisions surround educators and the system of education at large. The identification of the opportunity and achievement gaps were the precursor to the testing and accountability movement. Several of the ethical decisions facing educators and administrators in schools are a result of the gaps and failed testing and accountability reform measures. As I stated earlier, the ethical and moral implications of the achievement and opportunity gaps have been largely ignored. Educators must make the voice of inequity heard. Educators have an obligation to make decisions that benefit students, not public policy. There is no easy answer or immediate solution, but there must exist compassion, a willingness to eradicate the constructs of race, and a belief that we can, whenever we decide, change the system for Black students and all students of color.

Rothstein's final thought reflects on the importance of ethics in education: "Ethical choices do not consist either of civil disobedience that refuses to participate in an unjust system, or of obsequious compliance with corrupt orders. Ethical lives are comprised of compromises, of considering where to take stands" (Rothstein, 2015). The inequities in education and opportunities for Blacks are causes worthy of taking a stand. Refusing to participate in the system and blind compliance have not worked. A decision must be made to work within the system, consistently pushing for outward demonstrations of change.

### **Section Three: Advocated Policy Statement**

“The gap between the achievement of black students and that of white students is one of the most infuriating problems afflicting education. After all, it is clear that there is nothing intrinsic about ‘blackness’ or ‘whiteness’ that can be the cause of the gap. There are not genetic or other immutable traits that could conceivably be the cause of the gap. Thus the problem is manifestly one that can be and should be solved” (Singham, 2003, p. 1).

In the same vein, Milner (2012) encourages researchers to move beyond the achievement discourse. He cites teacher educator Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and explains that a perceived achievement gap is the result of other gaps that seductively coerce people into believing that an achievement gap actually exists. “Rather than focusing on a perceived achievement gap, from her analyses, Irvine recommended that attention should be placed on closing other gaps that exist in education that cause researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and administrators to believe there is an achievement gap” (Milner 2012, p. 697). Milner (2012) sites the following opportunity gaps: the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap. (Irvine, 2010, p. xii, as cited in Milner, 2012).

When we address the many other gaps that structurally and systemically exist in educational practice, achievement results can improve. We must expand our view of the achievement gap to encompass strategies to cease the intentional development of barriers to opportunities for students and families of color. School districts cannot combat these structures alone. It will require a significant shift in the belief systems of society-at-large.

Early American aspirations for an educated citizenry largely excluded Blacks. Slaves were provided no opportunity for formal education. Anti-literacy laws threatened to punish the slave and anyone linked to educating them. Post reconstruction, Black students were in segregated schools with minimal resources. Even after desegregation, Black students continued to face marginalization across all facets of education (Valant and Newark, 2016). Although the evidence and treatment of Blacks as it relates to educational disenfranchisement and racism has been well documented and discussed, Valant and Newark (2016) found that a large percentage of their survey respondents did not attribute the Black-White achievement gap to discrimination and injustice. The authors suggest that future work in this area might examine whether support for equity-focused education policies increases if more people are persuaded that discrimination and injustice play prominent roles in creating these gaps. If given the opportunity, I would question the authors about proposed methods of persuasion. It is my belief that the precursors to the achievement and opportunity gaps are situated within this country's moral composition. With issues of morality and ethics, I do not believe people can be *persuaded* to shift their belief paradigm one way or the other. The shift must come willingly with self-reflection, acknowledgement of biases, and a commitment to change.

Therefore, the work of any policy that attempts to address the Black-White achievement and opportunity gaps must first acknowledge that not all Americans are in agreement that these gap exist, not all Americans agree that the gaps are a result of decades of systemic racism, and not all Americans believe this issue should be fixed. There are also those who are aware of the existence of gaps, but do not care to address them. My proposed policy would then reach beyond the board rooms and address the curriculum, teacher quality and cultural proficiency, learning environment, whole-child programs, instructional strategies, and the obvious lack of

equity in education. Barton and Coley (2009) state that policies and practices that are likely to narrow gaps in achievement need to be broad and comprehensive if they are to check inequality at the onset of a child's academic career. Later, the author adds that a learning policy needs to be mindful of which variables can harm learning along the way, and what can be done beyond designing curriculum, setting standards, and establishing accountability. Richard Rothstein (2004) put it this way:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with the student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding—raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform. (p. 41)

As I stated in section one, I recommend that a policy and accompanying priorities and action items regarding closing the achievement and opportunity gap become a part of the district's strategic plan. Success in these action items will require the district to shift their current practices in many areas. In order to improve the social and economic conditions of the least privileged, those with privilege will have adjust their paradigms. The goals of the policy are to:

- Address the educational inequities Black students experience as a very real matter that impacts their academic performance.
- Eliminate blame and establish a shared responsibility for the gaps in performance.
- Ensure that schools with a majority enrollment of underrepresented students recruit and retain certified, qualified, and culturally proficient educators.

- Develop and/or revise curriculum to meet the multicultural needs of students. Include research-based instructional strategies that will be differentiated based upon student need.
- Develop whole-child programs and initiatives that recognize and address the outside-of-school factors, caused by injustice and discrimination, that negatively impact learning for Black students.
- Increase the percentage of underrepresented students who meet and exceed standards in reading and math.
- Decrease the achievement gap in reading and math between underrepresented and White students.

Historically, educational policy has represented the needs, values, and preferences of White Americans. This is particularly true since Blacks were not allowed to be educated and have continued to have their voices silenced or judged by the White majority. Largely, the education system, as it currently exists, does not represent the needs, values, and preferences of any ethnicity other than White/European. Some advancements have been made in the area of bilingualism, but the improvements were not made proactively in an effort to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking families, but due to pressure and necessity. The education students receive is based on a Eurocentric framework in all facets—the time of day school starts and ends, the historical perspectives represented in texts, the holidays allowed to be celebrated in schools, the instructional strategies, the curriculum, the articles/books read in class, and so on.

The goals I have shared unapologetically represent the needs, values, and preferences of underrepresented students and families. It is past time for districts and schools to start accounting for the needs of all students. A purposeful shift to a more inclusive focus will only benefit the nation as a whole. These goals are valid and appropriate for several reasons: 1) most

importantly, they are research-based and have been linked to achievement gap reductions in schools, 2) the goals are actionable, and 3) progress toward these goals will simultaneously decrease the gap and send a message of equity to all stakeholders that may improve community relations.

## Section Four: Policy Argument

In any educational debate, the moral and ethical compass of those involved would inherently lean toward the pros of implementing such a policy. Although I am obviously biased, I recognize that there are some that will disagree with my policy based upon their own set of moral and ethical beliefs. Here, I will explore the pros and cons of closing the academic and opportunity gap between Black and White students.

### Economic Analysis

McKinsey (2009) conducted research that explores the concrete economic costs of our current educational practices. “Estimating the economic impact of underutilized human potential is necessarily an imperfect process, requiring assumptions of the pace of educational improvement, the relationship of student achievement to academic growth and the nature of labor markets as workforce skills are enhanced” (McKinsey, 2009).

McKinsey found:

- Had the United States closed the income achievement gap so that between 1983 and 1998 the performance of students from families with income below \$25,000 a year had been raised to the performance of students with homes with incomes above \$25,000 a year, then the GDP<sup>1</sup> in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to \$670 billion higher, or 3-5% of the GDP.
- If the United States had closed the racial achievement gap and Black and Latino student performance had caught up with that of White students by 1998, GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher.

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<sup>1</sup> Gross domestic product is a monetary measure of the market value of all final goods and services produced in a period (quarterly or yearly). In this case, the author is referring to the GDP for the United States.

By underutilizing such a large portion of the country's human potential, the U.S. is less rich in skills than it could be. Therefore, American workers are, on average, less able to develop, master, and adapt to new productivity-enhancing technologies and methods (McKinsey, 2009).

Lynch and Oakford (2014) state that the benefits of closing the achievement gap amounts to much more than increased GDP. The current generation of children will be better off when they are adults because they will have higher earnings, higher material standards of living, and enhanced quality of life. Later generations will be able to grow up in families that offer enriching opportunities. I must add that the author's predictions are only plausible if systemic racism and its effects are no longer at issue.

Another documented pro of closing the achievement gap is the improved economic outlook for a majority of Americans. More than half of all babies born in the United States are children of color. Within three decades, more than half of the population will be composed of people of color. These children will play a vital role in our workforce and the sustaining of our economy. Eighty percent of these workers will be black or Hispanic (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

Boks (2007) stated that what most affects American education today is poverty and the well documented toll it takes on children, families, communities, and schools. A narrowing or elimination of the achievement gap through my proposed policy would have a long lasting positive impact on the economy of cities within reach of School District Z. The Children's Defense Fund (2014) reported the following statistics: More than 80% of fourth and eighth grade Black public school students cannot read or compute at grade level compared to less than 57% of White students. Only two-thirds of Black public school students graduated from high school in four years in the 2009-2010 school year, compared to 83% of White students and 94% of Asian/Pacific Islander students. Each school day, 763 Black high school students across the

nation drop out. Black students are more than twice as likely to drop out as White students. Consider what might a reduction by even half that number would do for the workforce, college/trade school enrollment, crime reduction, and reductions in the impact of underutilized human potential. Considering that there are over 10 million black children in the United States, even nominal improvements in the achievement and opportunity gaps would have significant impacts on not only how blacks fare economically, but on the nation's economic sector.

Economic cons to implementing specific and measurable actions and priorities to the district's strategic plan that will reduce or close the achievement gap between black and white students would include the financial investment necessary to increase Black students' proficiency. In a review of 28 studies conducted in 28 states, Mathis (2004) found that an average increase of 30% in spending on education would be needed to provide an adequate education for all students. Some might argue that the increase in workforce proficiency and the effective use of human capital may not outweigh the investment required on the front end. On the district level, hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours will be required to implement a strategic plan with fidelity to narrow the achievement gap. Those that have followed the gap over the last few decades know that additional per pupil funding has been provided to low-performing districts with large Black student populations and could argue that the additional funding is already enough. In a similar vein, some may argue that the proposed whole-child programs are costly and are not the responsibility of schools or districts. Parents should be able to locate and maintain proper health care without the assistance of the school. The outcomes of improved social services for Black families, regardless of their ability to repair centuries of systemic racism and oppression, do not outweigh the price of such programs. Finally, there may exist a disbelief that Blacks and Latinos are capable of contributing to the

GDP as estimated by McKinsey (2009). They may doubt that one can accurately estimate the skilled contributions of a group of people over time.

People opposed to strategic planning that involves equity in academic achievement for all students will argue that the schools are already giving enough finances and resources to Black students. If those resources not being allocated appropriately or are not effective, that is no fault of the educational system. The gaps exist largely because of factors outside of the school and should be addressed using resources outside of the school. Besides, the U.S. remains the world's largest economy despite racial and socioeconomic gaps that have existed for decades (Hardesty et. al., 2014). However, the United States' ranking is not poised to last. In order to maintain economic competitiveness, we must invest in one of its most important resources: its people. This was the strategy used at the onset of slavery—build an economic powerhouse through the use of hijacked people and free labor. As noted earlier, the White men who laid the foundations for this nation never intended for Blacks to be free, so investing in their education and productivity, outside of skills to benefit the plantation, was never considered. Now that Blacks are no longer physical slaves to the plantation, the United States needs to harness the talents and productivity of its people and improve the educational outcomes for its students. Given the projected increase in the number of children of color and the challenges they have faced, it makes imminent sense to get serious about the educational gaps that hold them back (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

### **Social Analysis**

Rothstein and Wilder (2005) argue that addressing the achievement gap is not the most important inequality to attend to. They contend that inequalities in health, early childhood experiences, out-of-school experiences, and economic security are also contributory and cumulative and make it nearly impossible for us to reify the achievement gap as the source and

cause for social inequality. These authors present a compelling argument; the achievement gap is not a diagnosis, but a symptom. The inequalities against people of color demonstrated outside of school are important and can be rectified, so that all students of color have a leveled playing field on which to start their educational journey. There is a moral argument to be made that all students should have the opportunity to develop their talents, regardless of their demographics and economic characteristics. Rothstein (2004) says:

If a society with such differences wants all children, irrespective of social class, to have the same chance to achieve academic goals, it should find ways to help lower-class children enter school having the same familiarity with books as middle class children have. This requires rethinking the institutional settings in which we provide early childhood care, beginning in infancy. (p. 17).

Ladson-Billings, in several writings, refers to the achievement gap as a debt. Ladson-Billings (2006) says that addressing the educational debt is the morally just thing to do. There are implications for the kinds of lives we can live and the kind of education society can expect from most of its children by addressing this debt. She encourages us to use our imaginations to remind us of the images of the cumulative effects of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind. I would contend that the use of our imaginations is not required. For centuries, we have seen the cumulative effects of systemic racism in all areas. The effects of slavery on Blacks are often ignored or lessened, in a manner similar to White privilege. We, all people, should be compelled to use all of our talents, knowledge, and skills to remedy this situation for the greater good.

When school improvement is not complemented by policies to narrow social class differences, students' chances of success are greatly diminished (Morsy & Rothstein, 2015). It is for this reason that my proposed policy reaches beyond the walls of the school. As educational leaders, we must seek and seize opportunities to layer socioeconomic deficiencies with academic support. Morsy and Rothstein (2015) add that highlighting the socioeconomic impediments to student achievement does not make excuses for the achievement gap as some defensively charge. Rather, it provides an explanation. What would equity in educational practices do for society? If all districts were intentional about deploying strategic and measurable action steps to improve the educational experiences for children of color and providing services to address the whole child, the effort can only yield positive results for all. However, the first and most critical step would be for those in power to recognize the root of the achievement gaps, exploring the situation from a historical perspective and then gaining an understanding of the barriers and systems that have been established in order to diminish the contributions of Blacks as well as their achievements. Americans who blame "failing schools" for the achievement gap are making a dangerous assertion (Rothstein, 2004). Their false assertion ignores how social-class characteristics in a stratified society may influence learning in schools. The influence of social-class characteristics is potentially so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well-trained their teachers and how well-designed their instructional programs and climates (Rothstein, 2004). Therefore, equity in services inside and outside of school is mandatory in order to narrow the Black-White achievement gap. To be clear, while Rothstein believes that society must be fixed first, I believe the two—societal inequalities and education gaps—can be repaired in tandem.

On the contrary, welfare critic and American Enterprise Institute fellow, Charles Murray, would argue "our ability to improve the academic accomplishment of students in the lower half of the distribution of intelligence is severely limited. It is a matter of ceilings" (Greene, 2007, p. 75). Murray goes on to state that even the best schools with the best conditions cannot overcome the limits on achievement that are set by the limits of intelligence of lower income people. Unfortunately, Murray's views reinforce the private prejudices held by many White Americans. His defeatist perspective is an example of a belief system forged by stereotypes and centuries of inaccurate, racist rhetoric.

Equity in educational practices will work. It will increase motivation, mental health, self-esteem, and connectedness for Blacks within a society rooted in the traditions of European Americans. Specifically, implementing a strategic plan to address the achievement gap will support a better educated, more skilled society. It will support the missions of districts across the nation to prepare all students for a global society.

On the contrary, Mano (2003) suggests that while specific actions targeted toward minority groups may be required in special situations, a better way to reduce or even eliminate the gap is not to focus on the gap at all, but to look elsewhere. The author suggests that an examination of the role that mathematics education plays in the future success of students might prove beneficial. Finishing a course beyond the level of Algebra 2 (for example, taking trigonometry or precalculus) more than doubles the odds that a student who enters college will complete a bachelor's degree. Mano (2003) adds that no student is ever a blank slate. They all come with preconceptions, and a teacher needs to learn which specific preconceptions exist for a particular topic and, instead of ignoring them, know how to use these preconceptions to teach students more effectively. The important point is that all these measures are good for *all*

students. One of the biggest pitfalls about much of the current discussion on how to eliminate the achievement gap is that it focuses on what should be done with minority students. This has the effect of making it look as if it is a minority problem (Mano, 2003). Mano also contends that framing the achievement gap as a “minority” problem causes the White majority to disengage from the discussion because they feel that it is not their problem. The discussion is also frequently framed as a competition for resources, where the resources given to fix the “minority problem” are taken away from teaching White children. Third, seeing the achievement gap as a minority problem breeds the suspicion that attempts to narrow the gap involve trying to “dumb down” the curriculum so that equality is achieved by reaching some sort of lowest common denominator. Finally, the whole enterprise of focusing on the gap as a minority problem tends to ignore the serious matter of the educational underachievement of many White students as well (Mano, 2003).

Mano’s comments remind me of the Black Lives Matter vs All Lives Matter movements. While I agree with several of his points, I must point out that the achievement gap is a problem that directly impacts the advancement of students of color. Focusing on what is “good for all students” is partially responsible for the situation we find ourselves in now. “All students” was never meant to include students of color. Ignoring the “who” and the “why” of the achievement gap and focusing on solutions that benefit all shows a lack of cultural acceptance, let alone proficiency.

The following statement presents a common sense rationale for policies that narrow the achievement gap: “As the children of the rich do better in school, and those who do better are more likely to become rich, we risk producing an even more unequal and economically polarized society” (American Teacher, 2012, p. 7). I cannot say whether doing better in school will lead to

one becoming *rich*, but it will increase their earnings over a lifetime; however, if gone unchecked, the achievement gap will likely continue to create stiff boundaries between the “haves” and “have nots.” Reardon (2013) adds that income gaps between those at the top and those at the bottom continue to grow, and those at the top are investing more than ever in extracurricular resources that benefit their children. The investments Reardon references are those that contribute to the opportunity gaps between Black and White children. The opportunity gaps largely contribute to the achievement gaps. Reardon (2013) also suggests that economic policies that reduce inequality, family support policies that ensure children grow up in stable, secure homes and neighborhoods, and early-childhood education policies that promote cognitive and social development should all be part of a comprehensive strategy to close the economic achievement gap.

### **Section Five: Policy Implementation Plan**

An EBSCO*host* search for articles on the Black-White achievement gap renders over 17,000 results. Recommendations from authors (Uline & Johnson, 2005; Banks, 2005; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Buttaro & Pastrana, 2003; Eubanks, 1999; DeGruy, 2005; Lindsey et al., 2009) range from health and wellness interventions, economic improvements, hiring of teachers and administrators of color, improved teaching practices cultural proficiency, focus on all students versus students of color, increases in financial support for schools, to a return to segregated schooling. In most instances, I agree with the statements made to support the authors' thinking. District Z's plan to track the attendance and academic achievement of Black students was not a researched-based plan. In fact, I have learned through my conversations with District Z principals that this expectation was not promoted district wide. I believe that one of the strategies for closing the gap in District Z includes a strategic plan with the following priorities and aspirations:

- Address the educational inequities Black students experience as a very real matter that impacts their academic performance.
- Eliminate blame and establish a shared responsibility for the gaps in performance.
- Ensure that schools with a majority enrollment of underrepresented students recruit and retain certified, qualified, and culturally proficient educators.
- Develop and/or revise curriculum to meet the multi-cultural needs of students. Include research-based instructional strategies that will be differentiated based upon student need.
- Develop whole-child programs and initiatives that recognize and address the outside-of-school factors, caused by injustice and discrimination, that negatively impact learning for Black students.

- Increase the percentage of underrepresented students who meet and exceed standards in reading and math.
- Decrease the achievement gap in reading and math between underrepresented and White students.

District Z's current aspirations, priorities, and measurable goals do not specifically address the achievement gap between its Black and White students (See Figure 1). The district has chosen a more universal route to address achievement. A route that addresses an increase in academic areas for all students. When school improvement is not complemented by district and governmental policies to narrow social class differences, the impact on perceived racial differences is perpetuated and often observable in the classroom, thereby diminishing students' chances at success. The chart below illustrates District Z's existing Student Achievement aspirations and priorities.

Figure 1

*Student Achievement Aspirations and Priorities*

<b>Aspiration:</b> 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.	
<b>Priorities</b>	<b>Measureable Goals</b>
A) We will implement and support a challenging, standards-based curriculum across all content areas.	<p>Priority A.1: Increase the percent of students who are prepared for kindergarten.</p> <p>Priority A.2: Increase the percentage of students who are prepared for high school.</p> <p>Priority A.3: Increase the percent of students who are college and career ready.</p> <p>A.4: Increase the percentage of students who are bilingual and biliterate.</p>

<p>B) 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.</p>	<p>Priority B.1: Increase the percentage of students who report there is an adult who cares about them at school.</p> <p>Priority B.2: Increase the percentage of students who feel safe at school.</p> <p>Priority B.3: Increase the percentage of students who feel it is important to come to school every day.</p> <p>Priority B.4: Increase number of schools implementing Multi-Tier System of Support with fidelity at tiers 2 and 3.</p>
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District Z’s first step is to address the educational inequities Black students experience as a very real matter that impacts their academic performance and eliminate blame for the gap. This process must begin with a vision of equity from the superintendent, the board members, and the superintendent’s cabinet. Through workshops, likely facilitated by an outside company, cabinet and board members would take a deep dive into the district’s academic data by subgroup. They would explore “whats” and “whys” of student performance. They would be asked difficult questions about their beliefs and what message current actions send to all stakeholders. The outcome of these ongoing workshops would be to make the problem –obvious by taking away excuses, removing the “elephant in the room” and viewing the gaps as legitimate and real. Additionally, participants would become comfortable with having open and honest conversations about the need to make adjustments. Fear of blame would be diminished and a solution-oriented pathway would be established.

After the cabinet and board have spent significant time digesting the achievement gap data, I would present them with Figure 2 (See below), which includes additional aspirations and priorities for student achievement that address the gaps in learning between Black and White students.

Figure 2

*Proposed Additional Student Achievement Aspirations and Priorities*

<b>Aspiration:</b> We will increase the percentage of students of color who meet and exceed standards in reading and math. We will decrease the gaps in reading and math achievement between students of color and white students.	
<b>Priorities</b>	<b>Measurable Goals</b>
A) Ensure that schools that serve a majority of students of color will recruit and retain certified, qualified, and culturally proficient educators and leaders.	<p>Priority A.1: Expand current recruiting efforts to include ethnically diverse colleges/universities and recruitment fairs.</p> <p>Priority A.2: Develop ongoing retention initiatives that increase the capacity to educate students who may hold different sociopolitical, sociocultural and socioeconomic perspectives.</p> <p>Priority A.3: Increase the percent of school staff who mirror the ethnicity of the student population.</p> <p>Priority A.4: Increase the tuition reimbursement for staff who successfully complete coursework in cultural proficiency/urban education.</p> <p>Priority A.5: Increase the percent of parents and teachers who identify teachers/staff as culturally responsive.</p>
B) Develop and revise curriculum to reflect a multicultural view of the world.	<p>Priority B.1: Increase the number of texts that represent diverse cultures.</p> <p>Priority B.2: Incorporate methods of communication and learning that maintains the integrity of students' cultural experiences.</p> <p>Priority B.3: Increase the percentage of students who see people "who look like them" represented in learning.</p> <p>Priority B.4: Create thoughtful learning communities that include collaborative planning time, sharing of instructional strategies and best practices to support multicultural experiences for students.</p>

<p>C) Implement whole-child initiatives that address the outside-of-school factors, caused by injustice and discrimination, that negatively impact learning for students of color.</p>	<p>Priority C.1: Increase the number of community partnerships with organizations that provide assistance with healthcare, food, housing, and academic support.</p> <p>Priority C.2: Develop a school counseling framework that involves addressing of the environmental barriers that impact students’ social and academic development, an understanding of equity and empowerment and focus on students’ strengths.</p> <p>Priority C.3: Increase the number of district staff who engage in meaningful dialogue with families in order to understand their needs and concerns.</p>
<p>D) Address the social and educational inequities students of color experience and establish a shared responsibility for the impacts on achievement.</p>	<p>Priority D.1: Analyze disaggregated student achievement data (by ethnicity) at the end of each semester. Identify strengths and areas of opportunity in teaching and learning.</p> <p>Priority D.2: Develop comprehensive action plans based on analyses that include SMART goals.</p> <p>Priority D.3: Communicate findings and action plans with all stakeholders.</p>

These added layers of aspirations and priorities underneath the umbrella of student achievement would support collective ownership of the opportunity and achievement gaps in District Z. Implementation of this plan will address the social, emotional, and academic needs of students of color. An unintended but welcome outcome of this work will be the positive impact of the culture of the district and its schools. Wilson (2009) defines cultural traits as “shared outlooks, modes of behavior, traditions, belief systems, worldviews, values, skills, preferences, styles of self-presentation, etiquette and linguistic patterns” (p. 15). If school districts would shift toward shared visions of high academic achievement for students of color, while simultaneously meeting the social justice needs of families from an inside-out approach with individuals who are deeply committed to change, success would be imminent.

Cultural proficiency enables educators, schools, and districts to respond effectively to people who differ from one another. It is a way of embracing a worldview and a perspective that

are the basis for how one moves in our diverse society (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Most importantly, it is required for District Z to move forward with the proposed addition to their strategic plan. The strategic plan identifies “where we are going.” In the sections below, I will discuss “how we will get there.”

### **Needed Educational Activities and Staff Development**

The foundational staff development activities would be developed based upon current district data about gaps in achievement between students of color and White students. The data would be presented in a raw, unprocessed format to allow for authentic implications to be derived. One of the goals here is to allow district staff to assess its culture, achievement, and implied beliefs and determine how the schools affect students and their communities. Wagner and Kegan (2006) state that “...data are used to capture the hearts and minds of individuals to understand the problem and cultivate urgency for the hard work ahead . . . data must be persuasive on logical and emotional levels, touching individuals about the humanity of the effort so as to create and sustain energy” (p. 139).

Lindsey et. al (2009) suggest the use of several surveys to gauge current organizational values and cultural competence (self-assessment) and the use of his Cultural Proficiency Continuum<sup>2</sup> to assess situations that have taken place throughout the district. It is important to note that this preliminary work would be facilitated by an outside contractor/organization to decrease bias and increase credibility.

A gap data analysis, discussion of implications, overview of the history of the gap, and completion of self-assessments will prepare staff for the personal and deeply introspective work

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<sup>2</sup> The Cultural Proficiency Continuum provides language to describe unhealthy and healthy values and behaviors of persons and policies and practices of organizations. The continuum can help assess the limitations of current practices and plan for learning and use of effective practices. Movement along the continuum represents a shift in thinking from tolerating diversity to transformation for equity (Lindsey et. al 2009, p. 61).

required to move toward the closing of the achievement and opportunity gaps. District teachers and leadership will engage in ongoing professional development facilitated by the consultant group based upon the identified needs of the district.

Priority A, regarding the recruitment and retention of culturally proficient educators, will require human resource professionals to expand and/or adjust their view of the abilities of people of color. Reform of the school system constitutes a necessary condition for reforming the talent training system (Songhua & Wang, 2012). They will have to use their culturally proficient skills to connect with ethnically diverse candidates. Researchers contend that the cultural and demographic gap between teachers and students in U.S. schools is a serious problem demanding concerted and collective action if we are to improve the academic achievement of diverse urban students (Waddell & Ukpokodu, 2012). The call to diversify teaching staff is paramount. A diverse and culturally sensitive teacher workforce can help narrow the academic achievement gap that exists among students from various backgrounds and serve as models for teaching children to live in multicultural environments (Eubanks & Weaver, 1999). To this end, District Z human resource employees should expand their candidate pool to local high schools, current paraprofessionals, mid-career adults, and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Once qualified, ethnically diverse candidates are hired, District Z will need to implement initiatives to retain them. Considering that over 70% of the district's teachers are White, some new teachers may be shocked to realize they are the only adult person of color in an entire school. I know this feeling of isolation all too well, as I was the only Black adult (the building principal) in an elementary school in the district, where I served for four years. In my day-to-day interactions, I rarely saw any adults who looked like me or shared my lived experiences. Programs to retain ethnically diverse candidates may include after-work social gatherings or

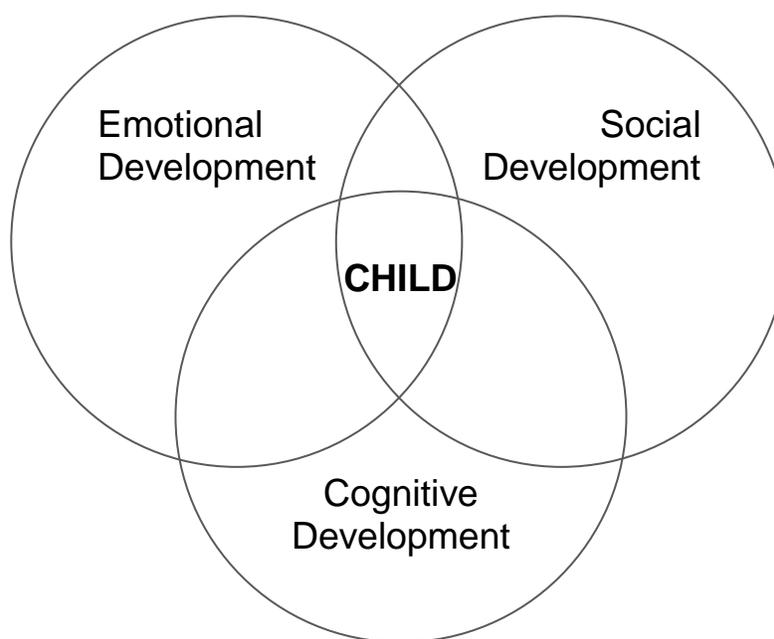
mentorships with other ethnically diverse candidates. The goal would be to support the new teachers while simultaneously allowing current staff opportunities to connect with each other and provide wisdom and insight to newcomers.

As it relates to Priority B, develop and revise curriculum to reflect a multicultural view of the world, Banks (2005) described multicultural education as an educational type in which students of different genders, races, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds were to be afforded the same opportunity of success in education. The aim of this type of education was to guarantee equality of opportunity, to solve the problems arising from cultural conflicts, and to support students in developing empathy so as to recognize their mutual cultures, and in so doing, increase their academic success (Tonbuloglu, Aslan, & Aydin, 2016). Banks adds that the application of multicultural education is related to both the competency of the teacher and the adequacy of the education program. District Z's proposed work in the area of cultural proficiency (discussed earlier) will complement the movement toward multicultural curriculum implementation. Providing students with a true multicultural education is a skill that will have to be taught to curriculum writers, teachers, and school administrators. Teachers will have to develop their skills so as to foster an atmosphere of respect, empathy, tolerance, and democratic consciousness; in so doing, they will be able to consider diversity as a source of richness. Furthermore, they will gain the opportunity to allow students to view their surroundings and the people around them and appreciate their differences while improving their abilities to listen to others (Tonbuloglu, et. al, 2016). To this end, I propose that District Z invest in training for teachers and administrators that will increase their capacity to view diversity as a positive attribute, expose them to strategies for incorporating multicultural texts and conversations, and provide avenues for obtaining the necessary resources to be successful. This training will need

to be ongoing, in tandem with the cultural proficiency training modules, as the two are tightly aligned; embracing one opens the door for the other. The outcome of this work would be a common historical narrative centered on the intersection of different cultural groups and the struggle for civil rights. In this approach, traditionally marginalized groups would be positioned *within* as opposed to outside of the nation's common history (Wilhelm, 1998).

Priority C is to implement whole-child initiatives that address the outside-of-school factors, caused by injustice and discrimination, that negatively impact learning for students of color. I will begin this section of the implementation plan with a quote from Noddings (2005): "...students are whole persons—not mere collections of attributes, some to be addressed in one place and others to be addressed elsewhere . . . needs cannot be rigidly compartmentalized . . . The massive human problems of society demand holistic treatment" (p. 10). Noddings' statement can be interpreted to mean is that we cannot separate the child from their community. We cannot separate the child from his lived experiences. Institutions including health/medical, education, housing, and employment must work together to remedy the issues children encounter in today's society.

Figure 3

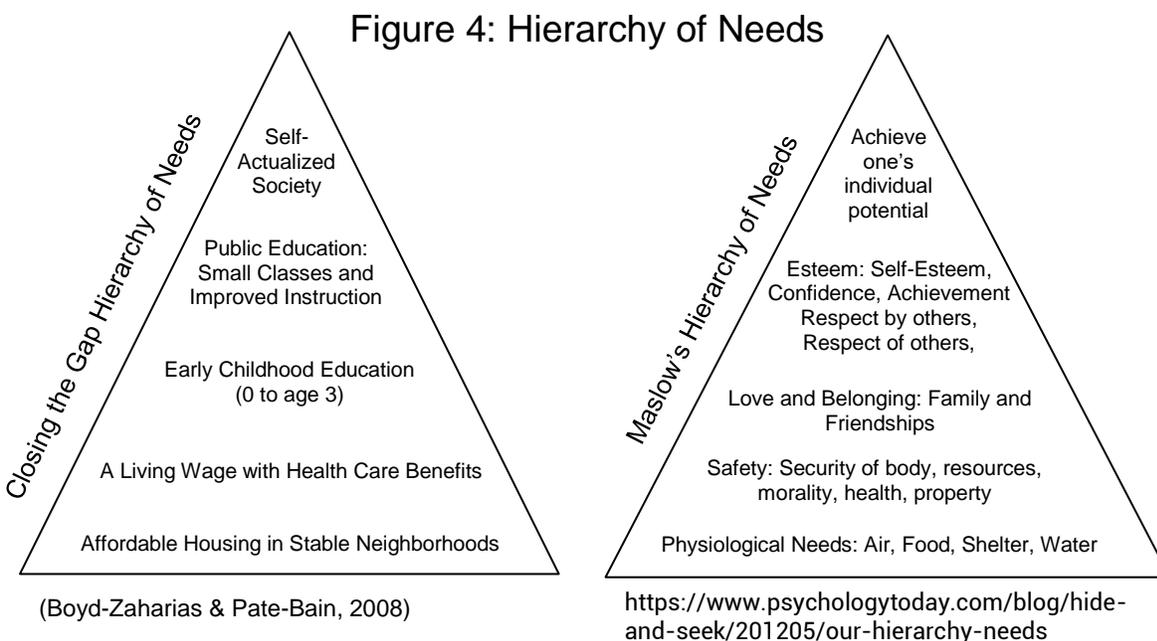
*Proposed Whole-Child Approach*

District Z's whole-child approach will examine the intersection of the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Slade and Griffith (2013) suggest adopting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework. Maslow's theory asserts that when a human's basic needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization) are satisfied, they are more likely to become engaged in school, act in accord with school goals and values, develop social skills and understanding, contribute to the school and community, and achieve academically. When those needs fail to be met, students are more likely to become less motivated, more alienated, and poorer academic performers (California Department of Education [CDE], 2005; Slade & Griffith, 2013). While I largely agree with Maslow and the CDE's interpretation of his theory, I must add that the goals and values of the school/district must reflect the cultures of the student population, not just those of those reflecting Eurocentric norms.

As the one of the largest school districts in the state, District Z has the power to leverage relationships to benefit students and families. I would suggest that the district examine its current community partnerships in each area (social, emotional, and cognitive) and revisit those agreements to determine what adjustments can be made to meet the needs of students as it relates to Maslow's hierarchy. Boyd-Zaharias and Pate-Bain (2008) also discuss Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a starting point for reducing the Black-White achievement gap. They identify affordable housing in stable neighborhoods, living wages with health care benefits, and early childhood education opportunities as key areas that, if improved, will increase the achievement of students of color in schools. At the top of their revised hierarchy is small class sizes, improved instruction, and then self-actualization.

Figure 4

#### Hierarchy of Needs



If District Z were able to leverage its resources and relationships to assist with the development of the foundational levels of each triangle, it would certainly be a step in the right

direction toward educating the whole child. Local organizations that provide services in the lowest categories (food, shelter, housing, health care, safety) could collaborate with schools to provide information and on-site resources. District staff, particularly counselors and administrative staff, would learn through this process how to support families within their schools. They would be encouraged to bring local agencies into the schools. Teachers would engage in conversations with families and offer more than just strategies to help at home, but a comprehensive offering that encompasses the social, emotional, and academic needs as well as those lower-level needs outlined in Figure 4. This effort would need to be supported and pushed through schools to the community by district level leadership. As I have stated before, closing the gaps requires attention to issues of race and poverty. It is inevitable that if school districts continue to ignore the precursors to the gaps—those foundational levels of Figure 4—we will remain in the cycle of inequality.

Priority D, address the social and educational inequities students of color experience and establish a shared responsibility for the impacts on achievement, is intricately weaved into the three other priorities. As the district works toward cultural proficiency, providing a multicultural education, and addressing the whole child, it will address the social and educational inequities that students of color experience. However, one of the most important measurable goals stated in my revised strategic plan is to share the data and plans with all stakeholders. In order for any strategic plan to be effective, the beliefs that support it must be shared by all stakeholders (board members, leadership, staff, parents, community members). The aspirations should be reflected in the schools' climate and culture, curriculum and instruction, family and community engagement, leadership, and professional development. Aligning the priorities with these critical areas is mandatory to the school improvement process: the gap closing process.

### **Communication, Timing and Budgeting**

How then to effectively communication to all stakeholders? The engagement of parents/guardians of Black students in their children's schools can be restructured through the use of comprehensive and culturally relevant programs and collaboration (Latunde & Clarke-Louque, 2016). Moore and Lewis (2012) add that "when urban teachers rely too heavily on print communication and middle-class forms of interaction and discourse, low income [Black] communities are marginalized" (p. 255). Urban schools can facilitate involvement by creating formal and informal, traditional and nontraditional communication opportunities. Both sets of authors are suggesting that communication with parents should include methods relatable to today's parents and that "fit" with their lifestyles. When District Z begins planning how to disseminate their revised strategic plan to Black parents, they should consider visiting local churches and spreading information through local Black Facebook groups. The district will have to reject its desire to only mail information home or send flyers with students that may never reach the parent. Sending text messages that invite parents to attend strategically timed and placed (i.e. accessible location) meetings would also potentially increase message delivery. The goal is to ensure that parents are equipped with knowledge about the gaps, the district's plans to narrow those gaps, and how parents can help. The message should reinforce the focus on education of the whole person and cultivation of people as human capital worthy of investment. Epstein (2011) says that good partnerships (parent, community and family) encourage questions and debates, and withstand disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after conflicts and differences have been resolved. It is my hope that after District Z involves and effectively communicates with families, the school-family-community partnership will become stronger. Epstein's Framework of Six Types of

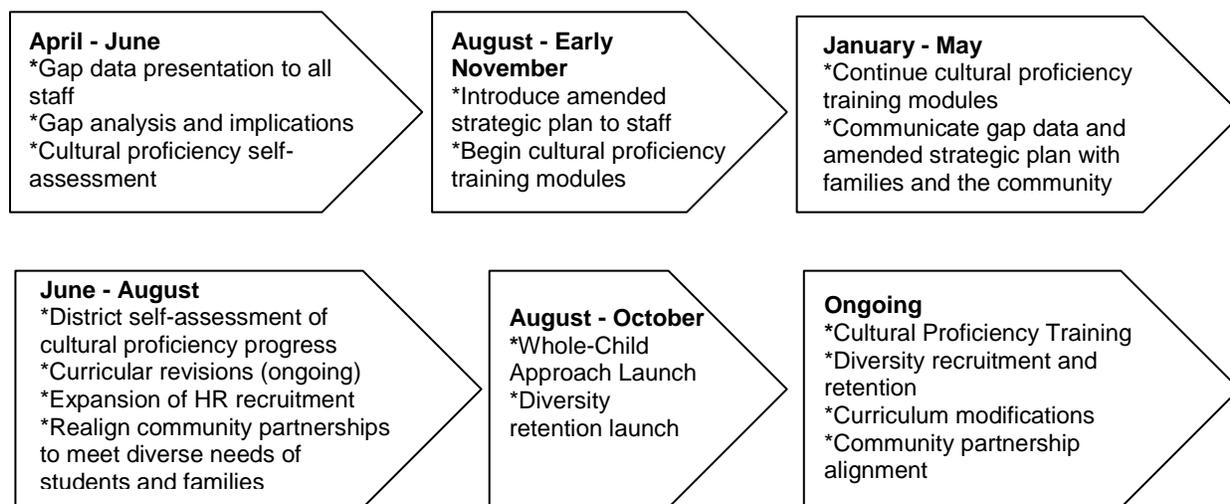
Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership (2011) outlines examples of practice in each of the six areas. As it relates to the area of communication, she recommends clear information on all school programs, reforms, policies, and transitions. If District Z openly and honestly communicates information about the gap so that parents may receive it, the outcome for students is awareness of their own progress and actions needed to maintain or improve grades (Epstein, 2011). For parents and families, the outcome might be increased understanding of school programs and policies, monitoring and awareness of their child's progress, responding effectively to students' problems, interactions with teachers, and ease of communications with school and teachers. Epstein's work proves that acknowledgement and ownership of the achievement and opportunity gaps students of color experience can lead to positive outcomes.

Communication with district staff and board members would be embedded into regularly scheduled cultural proficiency trainings. As I stated earlier, staff would review the raw data about achievement in the district, aggregated and disaggregated by ethnicity. The data would be at the forefront of all of the workshops, meetings, and action planning toward school improvement. Communication with district staff would need to be consistent and comprehensive, with messages that include clear descriptions of each facet of the action steps, and require stakeholder input/feedback. There will need to be a plan in place to directly address naysayers, while encouraging those who have bought in the vision for equity.

I once read that to focus on too many things is to focus on nothing. To eliminate the potential for scope creep, I have intentionally kept narrowed the focus of this section of District Z's strategic plan. If the district implements the priorities mentioned above with fidelity, there will be a narrowing of the achievement gap. Two of the final critical components to implementation of this policy are timing and budgeting. In the world of education, there never

seems to be enough time. Teachers and leaders always complain about the lack of time. The challenge with implementing new policies then becomes how to create the illusion of more time. How do we as leaders shift the perception of time, so that the staff does not shut down at the mention of policies, programs, and initiatives? The answer is twofold: 1) We remove old programs no longer in use or deemed ineffective and 2) we strategically focus on the timing of new programs. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the latter. I would recommend that District Z introduce the new strategic plan in mid-April. I chose April because, in most cases, state and district benchmark testing has concluded, celebrations of achievement are weekly events, morale is high, and teachers typically experience the least amount of stress. See Figure 5 for details about the strategic plan timeline.

Figure 5

*Strategic Plan Timeline*

The strategic plan and the implementation of its components will lay the foundation for change in District Z. The process must be managed in a strategic and cautious manner. Securing buy-in from all stakeholders will certainly assist with the change process; however, it is not mandatory, as it is important to have the right people in the right place. Those not in alignment with the direction of the district will naturally find employment elsewhere or eventually fall in line. It is important that steps are not missed, as moving ahead too quickly may create barriers to success. The ‘ongoing’ items are what will sustain District Z in their journey towards equity, especially instructional practices. Sharratt and Fullan (2009) share case studies of school districts with elaborate strategic plans and poor outcomes, noting, “The failure is that the strategy lacked a focus on what needed to change in instructional practice. In Chicago, teachers did focus on standards, but in interviews they “did not articulate any deep changes in teaching practices that may have been underway” (p. 23). Furthermore, “instructional goals were articulated more often in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality,

that is what the schools do to help students achieve” (p. 29). District Z will have to maintain a laser focus on what takes place in the classrooms. Teaching practices impact learning. The other priorities will work as supports and together students and families will achieve success.

It is difficult to provide specific information about the projected budgetary needs of the amended strategic plan. Crane (2006) says that high-level consultants like strategic planners or management coaches will charge per project. Per project pricing can fall upwards of \$10,000 per project. In a previous role, I learned that one professional development presenter earned \$200.00 per hour. Although I am not aware of the amount, I know that District Z has an allocation for professional development. The district would also have to account for curriculum materials, human resource travelling to support diversity recruitment, and teacher substitutes for during-the-school-day training sessions. The financial impact of the amended strategic plan would be a part of the district’s annual budget.

### **Section Six: Policy Assessment Plan**

Reeves (2007) suggests that schools conduct consistent and frequent (at least monthly) analyses of student performance, teaching strategies, and leadership practices. Schools and districts should regularly ask, “Is it working?” in reference to their current practices. Staff members should challenge themselves to make correlations between their professional practices and increases in student achievement (Reeves 2007). I would add that every initiative schools and districts undertake should be grounded in data, as should each activity they discontinue. If District Z implements this strategic plan and its accompanying aspirations and priorities for student achievement, its success will largely depend on follow up and follow through, also known as accountability measures. For this reason, I recommend district-level administrators responsible for implementation and monitoring of plan components meet every four to six weeks, at minimum, with cabinet members to report successes, challenges and proposed modifications. During this meeting, leaders will review and discuss their individual reports, and then make decisions on whether the action steps and associated outcomes are completed, ongoing, deferred, or eliminated due to key changes in the environmental scan and/or circumstances beyond the district’s control at that time (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011). Leadership will develop short-term goals and timelines within the larger framework of the priorities in order to keep accountability action specific. Sullivan and Richardson (2011) also suggest that strategic plan success become a part of leadership’s evaluation. In short, individual performance-based outcomes utilized in any performance appraisal process ought to be aligned with individual responsibilities and target goal outcomes in the strategic plan. I agree with the strategy proposed by Sullivan and Richards (2011), which adds a concrete level of accountability that likely increases effort. As we said earlier, what gets measured, gets done.

New accountability systems of the post-NCLB (No Child Left Behind) era define student and school success along a broader array of outcomes that promote deeper learning and the attainment of relevant skills necessary for success in postsecondary education, the workplace, and life. In the past, a school's sole objective was to raise achievement in reading and math. Schools should be and are expanding their view of achievement to include social-emotional learning achievement beyond mastery of basic skills—a whole child approach. District Z school-level accountability measures would include family and community partnership metrics, staff diversity in proportion to student diversity ratios, level of curriculum (revised) implementation, cultural proficiency metrics, and standardized assessment achievement.

In an effort to keep stakeholders informed and engaged, Aloi (2005) suggests that institutions “ensure that the processes and results of planning and assessment are transparent and highly visible. Routinely make and explain data-driven decisions. Communicate often and through multiple channels” (p. 6). District Z's family and community engagement (communication) department will have to be thoughtful and strategic about communicating updates to stakeholders. Given the current societal climate, coupled with the district's demographics, it is important that progress toward equity is celebrated. In addition, school principals would be required to assess the physical environment of their schools by asking the rhetorical question, “If adults conducted a walk-through the school while children were not present, would they be able to ascertain any information about the students?” Schools would be held accountable for creating an environment that represents the ethnically diverse student population. District-developed metrics would be put in place to ensure school-level accountability. Similar to district-level administrators being held accountable for implementation at their level through regular check-in meetings and evaluations, principals

would also be held to the same standard. Principal check-in meetings would be held in a “feeder school pattern.” This means that principals from all of the elementary schools that feed into a certain middle school would meet along with the feeder high school. Meeting in a collaborative group setting would allow for the exchange of ideas, successes, and challenges. It would also reinforce a “we” concept and shared responsibility for the work.

District Z’s redesigned school accountability system promotes the use of a more robust set of indicators to measure student achievement and school performance beyond the narrow focus on improving students’ test scores. These indicators will be used to identify strengths within the system. For example, the district may choose to highlight successful policies and practices that schools have implemented that have shown increased student learning and development. The indicators will also be used to identify areas needing improvement within the system and determine which schools need support and intervention (Bae, 2018).

This revised strategic plan and accountability system focuses on a broader definition of learning and student and school success. A focus on continuous improvement involving all stakeholders will build consensus and improve partnerships. This way, accountability will be viewed as a positive for all—a way to measure progress toward an agreed upon set of values that move us closer to equity in teaching and learning.

### **Section Seven: Summary Impact Statement**

“Low achievement and high dropout rates among poor and minority students continue to plague U.S. society. And we say ‘plague’ purposefully, because these children are our children, and our nation will profit by or pay for whatever they become” (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 208, p. 40). It is our moral imperative to ensure that all children have access to high quality education and erase the social and economic inequities that exist between White Americans and people of color. The achievement gap is an outcome of centuries of discrimination, systemic racism, and barriers to opportunity. As this paper has shown, the response to inequality is complex. Education reform is one of many steps in the right direction.

Some believe the centuries-old European model of education is the best and only way, and that anyone attending an American school needs to conform and submit to the “American way” of doing things. Unfortunately, many of these people are in positions of power: school board members, politicians, CEOs, etc. Given the ethnic, economic, and social diversity of District Z, I am positive that owners of dissenting viewpoints will voice concern and even opposition to this proposed plan. It will be the charge of District Z and its 60% of students and families of color to speak up and educate those who oppose change. Supporters of this amended strategic plan will have to be brave and confident in the research supporting the needs of students and families of color. This proposed policy (amended strategic plan) is altogether appropriate and necessary. Without it and others like it, we are leaving the future of this nation in the hands of groups of people who have been intentionally marginalized in every area and blocked from educational, economic, and social opportunities for advancement. They represent the majority (people of color) in this nation, and their lack of developed human capital will be our fault. The same level of intentionality that has been devoted to restricting access for people of color now

needs to be applied to practices of equality. Closing the achievement and opportunity gaps is the right thing to do. Any policies—social, educational, economic, or otherwise—that do not explicitly address issues of inequity are part of the problem.

The values of all Americans are at the center of this proposed policy. Some may ask how that can be, when the policy is focused on improving the achievement of Black students specifically. In short, that is a valid question but needs to be put into perspective. The founders of this nation and writers of the U.S. Constitution never intended for Blacks to be more than property, and certainly did not intend or expect for them to be equal to White citizens. However, Moore and Lewis (2012) contend that none of us can afford to be bystanders, as the racial achievement gap reflects a *national* failure to equalize educational opportunity. Consequently, both children and the democracy suffer (Books, 2007). President Lyndon B. Johnson stated in a 1965 address at Howard University: “You cannot take a man who has been in chains for 300 years, remove the chains, take him to the starting line and tell him to run the race and think that you are being fair” (Miller, 2005). Ladson-Billings (2006) asks us to consider the moral debt that the current system has created. Further, who is responsible?

We are a nation of one. As Americans, we take pride in our democracy, our freedoms, and our belief in the American Dream. Unfortunately, we have left some groups behind and as a consequence, one country after another has begun to surpass the U.S. in the proportion of workers entering the workforce with the equivalent of a high school diploma or higher (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Education and the economy are connected. If not solely for moral reasons, we should be compelled to act out a selfish need to flourish as a nation.

The vision that supports the proposed gap closing policies is one that calls for us to eliminate educational inequities. I must clarify that eliminating educational inequities is not relegated to school staff. Delpit (2012) says it this way:

The second purpose of education, I believe, is to build bridges across the great divides, the so-called achievement gap, the technology gap, class divisions, the racial divide. If we do not find a way to bridge the divide between the haves and have-nots, between white and black, between native and immigrant, then we are ensuring our ultimate demise. We are all part of the whole, and no part can be affected without affecting the whole (p. 6).

This effort requires a comprehensive examination to address the factors that have created the educational inequities. Therefore, incorporating a whole-child approach—examining social, emotional, and cognitive development and improving access to community resources and opportunities—is mandatory. The aspirations and accompanying priorities I discussed are consistent with this vision. The work I propose District Z undertake is actually contrary to some district strategic plans, in that it is more focused on inputs as opposed to outputs. While I am passionate about closing the achievement gaps, I am most concerned about altering belief systems, embracing diverse cultural representations, and achieving equity. The inputs discussed in this policy—an investment in diverse staff, curriculum modifications, cultural proficiency training, and leveraging of community partnerships—will inherently decrease achievement gaps between Black and White students.

As I stated earlier, this work will benefit all of society. Dr. Rudy Crew, former superintendent of the Miami school system, once said that if we are not able to give all of our citizens a future, then the disenfranchised will either implode and destroy themselves or explode

in our own front yards and most assuredly destroy us (Delpit, 2012). I propose that as a nation, we not accept the latter. Schools alone cannot “fix” the achievement gaps and its causes. A shift in the way we understand, discuss, and develop strategies for reducing the gap is vitally important. Poverty-related factors cannot be ignored. Schools and districts are situated in the context of local communities which places them in the unique position to impact the whole-child by implementing practices and structures that will increase the academic performance of students of color, close the achievement gap, and, most importantly, outwardly and unapologetically endorse equity.

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