



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

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Closing the Achievement Gap: Best Practices—What Public Schools and Colleges Are Doing

In the past two editions of President's Focus, I shared information on local, regional, and national trends with respect to education and closing the achievement gap. Some of the trends can be troubling, disconcerting, and even frustrating. In this edition, I focus on the best practices of public schools and colleges that are making progress in this effort. They are turning the negative connotations of an "achievement gap" into a story of student equity and success. As you will see, these best practices take vigilance, resources, and commitment, but their impact turns previous consternation and frustration into hope and promise that they can be emulated and scaled up at the local, regional, and national levels, and, especially, in Montgomery County.

BEST PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Best practices in public schools occur at all junctures of a student's educational trajectory. They happen in the classroom, in the library, principal's office, and in the gym, to name a few. And they happen at all levels of education—elementary, middle, and high schools.

Detracking to Close the Gap

In an era of big data, a strategy envisioned almost a decade ago, "detracking," sounds like an anomaly as we so often seek to analyze every minute detail of what happens in schools. However, detracking—that is, *not* sorting students according to ability or past performance—helped break through preconceived notions of who could be successful at the high school level in New York. In Rockville Centre, New York, the school district took several detracking steps aimed at improving the district's performance on the state's Regents



Exam. The first step was the superintendent's decision that all students would study the accelerated math curriculum previously reserved for high achievers. The result was a tripling of the percentage of Hispanic and African American students passing the algebra-based Regents Exam, from 23 percent to 75 percent. Detracking continued across the middle and high schools until all students were taught the same high-track curriculum. Along the way, the district provided instructional support classes and after-school help four afternoons a week to students having academic difficulties. The graduating class saw 82 percent of African American and Hispanic students achieving Regents Diplomas—a rate above the statewide average for white or Asian students.¹

Using Data to Drive Individualized and Personalized Interventions and Services

South Park Elementary School in Colorado exemplifies two best practices: preschool at the elementary school, and an intentional use of teacher and staff time to address individual students' needs. To provide context of South Park's challenges, just over two-thirds of South Park's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 10 percent receive special education services, and two percent are English Language Learners.²

One critical factor in the success of the school is in its use of data. According to a report coauthored by the Donnell-Kay Foundation and the Colorado Department of Education, the interviewees noted: "Staff is among the best in the district in the use of data to drive instruction."³ Every Friday, students are dismissed early and the staff participates in "Data Fridays," when the time is used to review student data to identify those needing extra support and services. The staff reviews data every two weeks to examine progress and make adjustments to interventions. South Park also offers a half-day, four-year-old preschool program and a full-day kindergarten program to prepare children just entering the educational pipeline. The after-school program provides additional focused support for those falling behind.

South Park reflects three core elements for success at the earliest levels of education: a personalized approach to student success based on data; a preschool program at the elementary school that helps kids become more familiar with the school environment for kindergarten; and teachers and staff who work to ensure student equity and success.

Changing Curriculum to Increase Student Equity and Success

Central Elementary School in Connecticut was considered a failing school. It needed change, especially to its curriculum, which was not keeping pace with its community. Students were



performing in the 30th percentile in reading, writing, and mathematics on state and district assessments. More than 45 percent of the students received free and reduced lunch and the percentage of culturally diverse students jumped from 43 percent to 75 percent over an eight-year period with 30 percent of the students speaking English as their second language.⁴ In essence, its community was becoming more diverse and its curriculum was not changing with it.

To meet the challenges of all the students, both those considered part of the remedial band and those considered high performers, the school instituted several curricular and pedagogical initiatives. In addition to adding a global studies curriculum and after-school programs, Central Elementary added differentiated lesson plans. This encouraged teachers to move away from generic lessons and to focus on the learning needs of students individually or in smaller groups.

The model began with the core curriculum required by the school district and then incorporated strategies for differentiation. Once students acquired content-knowledge, differentiation opportunities helped them to better understand the information and assess their own work. Teachers used six strategies for differentiation to accommodate the students' varied needs and learning styles.

The results of differentiating the curriculum relative to global studies had significant positive outcomes. Analysis of the intervention uncovered gaps in achievement between students with differing socioeconomic status narrowed from 62 percent to 10 percent.⁵ In addition, the number of children from the lowest socioeconomic levels scoring in the remedial band was reduced by 28 percent, resulting in only four percent remaining in the remedial band. Students from higher socioeconomic homes also moved out of the remedial band, resulting in only three percent remaining at the remedial level.⁶ As you can see, the changes affected all socioeconomic strata and made significant progress in closing and almost eliminating the achievement gap.

Retention of Quality Teachers

The retention of quality teachers as a critical factor in effectively closing the achievement gap is another best practice. A report by the Value-Added Research and Assessment Center at the University of Tennessee noted:

...that lower achieving students benefited the most, average students next, and above average students the least from increased teacher effectiveness. Effective teachers produced significantly higher gains in student achievement among low achieving students than did less effective teachers. Similar results were found in research conducted in the Boston



Public Schools and in the Dallas School District. Placing highly qualified teachers with students who are underachieving will have the greatest impact on closing the achievement gap.⁷

The retention of quality teachers is of critical import for both students and teachers alike. Research abounds on positive effects of quality teachers on student outcomes. Likewise, when quality teachers are able to mentor inexperienced and new teachers, all of the stakeholders benefit. For example, quality teachers can share best practices, pedagogical insights, and classroom management strategies with their mentees. Whether it is quality faculty members at a college or quality teachers at the elementary grade levels, quality teachers are a critical factor in creating positive student-to-school relationships and helping students develop a sense of belonging, which is linked to persistence in educational research. As a nation, we would benefit from retaining quality teachers and recognizing them as they inspire students and new teachers alike.

BEST PRACTICES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

While leaders in K–12 systems have endeavored to address the achievement gap, efforts are also being made in higher education. Excellent sources with examples of such efforts in community college are recent winners and nominees of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, which are highlighted in the following sections. Some of these serve as inspiration for our own efforts; and some may sound familiar in being strategies you have seen already in place at Montgomery College.

College Readiness Protocol

El Paso Community College (EPCC) collaborated with the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and 12 local independent school districts in a program called the College Readiness Protocol to improve the process for helping high school students prepare for entry into college. This partnership provides a great example of a best practice. High school juniors and seniors are required to: (1) complete a joint admissions application to EPCC and UTEP; (2) learn about and prepare for the ACCUPLACER test; (3) take the ACCUPLACER test; (4) review scores with counselors; and (5) refresh skills and take the test again if needed. Some students also enroll in a summer bridge program to strengthen their basic skills.

Since the College Readiness Protocol was established, there has been a significant decrease in students in developmental programs at EPCC. The EPCC collaboration with feeder high schools and with the University of Texas–El Paso has better prepared high school students for the academic demands of



college. It reflects the value of partnerships and the creation of pathways for community college students to attain their bachelor's degrees.

Support outside the Classroom

In the 2008–2009 school year, about one-fourth of Eastern Maine Community College (EMCC) students taking a remedial math course advanced into a full college-level course. The college took steps to transform its tutoring and provide more individualized attention outside the classroom. EMCC created a Student Success Center and hired staff dedicated to providing academic advising, mentoring, and tutoring. The early response was promising: in its first year, the center logged over 4,500 hours of academic support services.⁸ The center has had an immediate and positive effect on student completion and success. By 2010–2011, the success rate of remedial math students advancing to a full college-level course almost doubled to 50 percent.⁹ The success of EMCC's improved support services shows that with a focused approach to addressing remedial math and providing adequate numbers of staff to directly address student needs, the gaps can be closed significantly for many students who struggle in math courses.

Collegewide Focus on Student Success

Not only has Indian River State College (IRSC) increased its affordability (it offers a \$10,000 bachelor's degree for aspiring teachers to teach STEM education), but it has increased the number of degrees and certificates awarded by 69 percent over a five-year period.¹⁰ This significant increase is the result of a continuous focus on the quality of instruction, student services, academic supports, learning environments, and innovative technologies to ensure that students complete a degree or certificate.

For example, IRSC has a program called Take Stock in Children. Take Stock in Children is a comprehensive program that helps at-risk, low-income children succeed by providing college scholarships, volunteer mentors, student advocates, case managers, early intervention, and other long-term supports. High standards, parental involvement, and community support are also crucial to the program's success. In the past 17 years, the program has helped more than 800 students. India White, a student in the program best exemplifies the impact of Take Stock in Children. Ms. White, who went from being a child in a homeless family with 10 children to currently serving as a math teacher in the public school system, reflected upon the program's impact on her life: "Without my mentor and Take Stock in Children, I would probably be on welfare for the rest of my life. I would have become a statistic," said India. "I went from being homeless to being a teacher."¹¹



Highly Structured Approach to Technical Programs

Joshua Wyner, in his book, *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*, featured Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI) as a model for student completion in technical programs. At LATI, students choose a program from a list of 30. After deciding on a program, students have a fixed course schedule and move through the program as a cohort. Essentially, students have a graduation plan on their first day of enrollment. Students do not have the opportunity to pick the wrong courses and they also do not get shut out of courses due to space limitations. Consequently, 76 percent of first-time full-time students completed degrees in three years.¹² LATI's approach challenged the notion of allowing students to choose their courses. Their findings suggest that students, especially those fresh out of high school, may not possess the appropriate levels of knowledge and or awareness to correctly select college classes. Fortunately, LATI's approach, which includes defined pathways for students, has demonstrated significant positive outcomes for student retention, persistence, and completion.

Equity and Developmental Education

The City University of New York's (CUNY) collaboration with several community colleges is helping to close the achievement gap for some of the most underrepresented students. CUNY created a program called CUNY Start, which enrolls students needing remediation in 15–18 weeks of intensive instruction for 25 hours per week. In one such intensive semester, CUNY Start participants complete developmental education that would normally take several semesters. The results demonstrate that 55 percent of the participants earned reading proficiency, 62 percent gained writing proficiency, and 54 percent improved math proficiency. More than 25 percent of students needing remediation in all areas completed the program with no further developmental education needs.¹³ That is an amazing accomplishment! Again, a strong, prescriptive program of developmental education can give students exactly what they need to get them through to credit level programs and on a degree pathway.

LOOKING AHEAD—MONTGOMERY COLLEGE'S BEST PRACTICES

These best practices are just a few of the several innovations being tested, implemented, and analyzed at schools and community colleges across the country. In my next President's Focus, I will review the progress of Montgomery College's Closing the Achievement Gap Implementation Team and its 46 recommendations for increasing student equity and success. A number of these recommendations are modeled on programs of other community colleges, while others are unique and distinct to our community.



As student equity and success are primary focuses of our College's mission, we will need to reaffirm our commitment to student completion, to meet students where they are, and help them achieve success as they define it. Additionally, we will need to increase academic, community, and corporate partnerships. We will also need to increase the number of mentors and peer advisers available to students. This will take strengthened dedication, a more personalized approach, and cost more in time and money—but this is what it will take to uplift our entire community. There is no quick fix. Yet, our commitment to this work will be unwavering and matched by our commitment to own the work required to both close the achievement gap for our students while simultaneously increasing student performance and completion levels.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. What can Montgomery College and its K–20 partners learn from the cited best practices?
3. How do you see our local businesses, partners, and residents assisting in closing the achievement gap?

Sources

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² Profiles of Success: Eight Colorado Schools that are Closing the Achievement Gap. Amy Berk Anderson and Dale DeCesare. Donnell-Kay and Piton Foundations and the Colorado Department of Education. Page. 12. <http://www.piton.org/Documents/ProfilesofSuccess.pdf>

³ Profiles of Success: Eight Colorado Schools that are Closing the Achievement Gap. Amy Berk Anderson and Dale DeCesare. Donnell-Kay and Piton Foundations and the Colorado Department of Education. Page. 12. <http://www.piton.org/Documents/ProfilesofSuccess.pdf>

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⁵ Closing the Achievement Gap With Curriculum Enrichment and Differentiation: One School's Story Margaret Beecher and Sheelah Sweeny. *Journal of Advanced Academics*. Volume 19. Number 3. Spring 2008. Page. 525. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ810785.pdf>

⁶ Closing the Achievement Gap With Curriculum Enrichment and Differentiation: One School's Story Margaret Beecher and Sheelah Sweeny. *Journal of Advanced Academics*. Volume 19. Number 3. Spring 2008. Page. 526. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ810785.pdf>

⁷ Closing the Achievement Gap: Key Policy Issues. Washington State School Director's Association. Page 21. <https://www.wssda.org/Portals/0/Resources/Publications/agt04.pdf>



⁸ EMCC Becomes Leader in the Achieving the Dream Network. September 24, 2014.
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⁹ “Eastern Maine Community College getting better at improving students’ performance in math”. *Bangor Daily News*. Nell Gluckman, <https://bangordailynews.com/2014/09/24/news/bangor/eastern-maine-community-college-getting-better-at-improving-students-performance-in-math/>

¹⁰ Indian River State College Named Top Ten Finalist for 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. September 4, 2014. <http://www.irsc.edu/newsandevents/newsandevents.aspx?id=4294974879>

¹¹ Success Stories: India White. Indian River State College Foundation.
http://www.irscfoundation.org/p/68/success-stories#.VGkic0tH_wI

¹² Wyner, Joshua S. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*. Harvard Education Press. Cambridge, MA: Page 15.

¹³ Wyner, Joshua S. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*. Harvard Education Press. Cambridge, MA: Page 49.

