

## Getting a Grip on the Gaps

Writing this Perspectives on a Sunday afternoon, I am grappling with the difficulty of closing the myriad gaps depicted in this issue.

From the nefarious achievement gaps, to the racial isolation in our increasingly segregated schools; from the digital divide that results in kids not having access to computers, to the poverty gulf that results in kids not having homes; from boys' reading difficulties and girls' problems with math, to the disparities among rural, suburban, and urban school needs—these gaps present baffling problems. Even though our authors suggest many practical and even inspiring solutions, the problems themselves sometimes seem as if they will never be conquered entirely. While we address one gap, another springs up.

In the middle of my reading, I receive two back-to-back, welcome interruptions—phone calls from friends. When they hear what I am up to, each friend quickly offers an opinion about the solution to learning gaps. Neither friend is an educator, and they are on opposite sides politically. But, surprisingly, they both urge me to write about the philanthropy of Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, who recently announced a gift of \$100 million to the school district of Newark, New Jersey. Each has a different take on this event.

Friend 1 is delighted with the windfall for Newark (she's from New York). When I demur about the influence of the “billionaire boys club” on education (using Diane Ravitch's term), she says, “Who cares where the money comes from or the motives for giving it? Think of all the good it can do.”

Friend 2 does not believe that the money will make a difference. She scoffs

that, once again, money will be “thrown at education without regard to changing attitudes.” Citing Bill Cosby as her hero, she believes that an attitude gap—lack of motivation and the will to succeed—is at the heart of most achievement gaps.

Ah, the attitude gap—or gaps. Talking about any kind of gap brings out polarized opinions. Recently when *Washington Post* education writer Jay Matthews (2010) suggested we “forget about the achievement gap,” he received about 20 pages of blog responses, some agreeing and some taking him to task. His point is that even when scores for black students in the District of Columbia went up, the public focused on the fact that the gap between blacks and whites had not closed. “We downplay the success of children in one group in favor of comparing their gains to others. . . . Why not work

at raising achievement for every child, in every demographic category, instead of obsessing about the gap?” he writes.

Another *Washington Post* op-ed writer sheds light on the psychology of effective interventions. In “Learn to Bridge the Class Divide,” Joan C. Williams (2010) warns that many social programs provoke fights between the “have-a-littles” and the “have-nots” and consequently are doomed to fail. “In a country where it is so difficult to pass any social program, it may seem sensible to focus on the neediest. . . . But politically that has proved shortsighted. . . .” What we need are universal initiatives that bring divided groups together, she suggests.

In his book *As Good as It Gets* (2010), education reformer Larry Cuban talks about the difficulty of sustaining even the most innovative reforms, let alone starting universal initiatives. He believes it will be necessary to engage in a concerted effort on many fronts and urges

that we combine school improvement with community resources to alleviate the effects of poverty and racial segregation. And not only does he believe in “lifting the floor for the lowest-performing schools,” but he also notes that we must “raise the ceiling for the schools in the uppermost tier of achievement.”

From massive infusions of money donated by successful entrepreneurs to an attitude adjustment for each of us, the suggestions abound. Our writers in this issue advocate looking at gaps as opportunities. Among their recommendations are providing equitable resources, high-quality education for all, intensive early literacy programs, well-planned after-school and summer programs, and social and health service coordination for families.

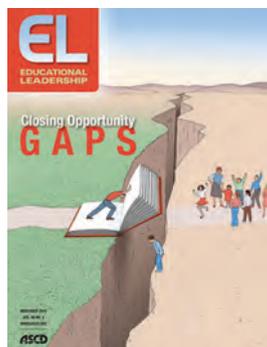
“Ambitious intervention can make a real difference,” Richard E. Nisbett (p. 15) writes, but he speaks also of small interventions that would cost little more than school as usual. “When it comes to reducing the achievement gap, don't think big. Think very big . . . and very small,” he writes.

Describing the efforts of schools that have successfully reduced gaps, Karin Chenoweth (p. 21) puts it this way, “Do whatever it takes to make sure students learn.”

### References

- Cuban, L. (2010). *As good as it gets: What school reform brought to Austin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Matthews, J. (2010, August 29). Class struggle: Forget about the achievement gap [blog post]. Retrieved from *The Washington Post* at [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/2010/08/forget\\_about\\_the\\_achievement\\_g.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/2010/08/forget_about_the_achievement_g.html)
- Williams, J. C. (2010, September 26). Learn to bridge the class divide. *The Washington Post*, p. B5

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