

Closing Achievement Gaps in Diverse and Low-Poverty Schools:

An Action Guide for District Leaders

By Public Impact



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Executive Summary

Diverse schools still have large, persistent racial and economic achievement gaps. Lower-income, African-American, and Latino students lag behind their higher-income and white peers on nearly every measure of educational success. Students who attend low- and moderate-poverty or more diverse schools do better than those in high-poverty, racially homogeneous schools. But even in these diverse settings, achievement gaps are large and persistent, deeply rooted in the systemic racism and perpetual economic disadvantages that are so embedded in our nation’s institutions, including schools.

It doesn’t have to be that way. Researchers have deep knowledge about the causes of achievement gaps and approaches that help close them. Oak Foundation commissioned Public Impact to review more than 150 such studies conducted over the past 10 years. We examined approaches that had evidence of boosting outcomes for disadvantaged students without reducing availability of advanced instruction, for two reasons. First, when all students have help to leap ahead, all will need what schools today consider “advanced” instruction. Second, schools that serve all students well, regardless of background, build strong family and community support for and commitment to public education.

The causes of achievement gaps are multidimensional, and thus the solutions are, too: tackling the instructional, emotional, and practical needs of students, their families, and educators. **Districts serious about closing achievement gaps in diverse schools need an approach that includes both *what* strategies to pursue and *how* to put those strategies into action.** While research points to numerous strategies to help close achievement gaps in diverse schools (the “what”), districts must also attend to the “how”:

- **Committing publicly** to closing gaps and achieving equity, with clear, measurable goals
- **Engaging communities** actively in the effort, including families and students
- **Acting on commitments** by assigning responsibility and resources, setting clear timelines, and monitoring and adjusting to stay on track
- **Embracing accountability** for progress, both through internal systems and via public scrutiny

We recommend that district leaders use a package of research-based strategies centered on three complementary goals:

- **Outstanding learning for all**
 - *Guaranteeing excellent teachers and principals*, including redesigning schools to enable the district’s excellent teachers and principals to reach all students, not just a fraction.
 - *Ensuring access to high-standards materials* and learning opportunities.
 - *Using teaching methods and school practices that work*, including screening for and addressing learning differences, personalizing instruction, and responding to trauma.
- **Secure and healthy learners**
 - *Meeting basic needs*, including meals and reducing school transitions from housing changes.
 - *Fostering wellness and joy* via school-based health clinics, social-emotional learning, and other building blocks of academic success, and addressing mental health challenges.
 - *Supporting families* by understanding and responding to individual and collective needs.
- **Culture of equity**
 - *Addressing key equity challenges in schools*, including teachers matching their racial and other identities, access to advanced opportunities, culturally relevant assignments, and research-based, non-discriminatory disciplinary policies.
 - *Fostering community accountability* via shared leadership that truly empowers.
 - *Equipping individuals to act* by developing leadership and addressing implicit bias via consistent, ongoing anti-bias training.

If district leaders and their communities pursue these approaches, they can help equip low-income students and students of color to close gaps and succeed in large numbers.