

President's Message

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

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The mathematics performance gaps between white students and their Hispanic and black counterparts are allowed to exist in the United States because there is no national will to eradicate them.

Despite the positive report card that students in grades 4 and 8 received on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), performance gaps among students have persisted during this era of curriculum reform and increased attention on assessment. Hispanic fourth-grade students averaged 212 points on the 2000 NAEP compared to scores of 198 and 206 points in 1990 and 1996, respectively. Black fourth-grade students scored an average of 205 points in 2000 compared to 189 and 200 points in 1990 and 1996. Meanwhile, white fourth-grade students scored 30 or more points above their classmates on these assessments.

Real disparities in the teaching and learning of mathematics are highlighted by the performance gaps. Among fourth-grade students, fewer than 40 percent of black students and 50 percent of Hispanic students demonstrated they could perform on the NAEP 2000 assessment at the basic skills achievement level. Eighty percent of white fourth-grade students performed at this level. But it is not merely an issue of scoring lower than whites. Hispanics and blacks are not reaching achievement levels necessary to guarantee their future success in mathematics and all that implies. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this fact has not caused us to take steps to eliminate performance gaps. The will to alter what we do has simply not been stirred.

We know much about closing the performance gaps, yet we don't act on what we know. We know that students do better in mathematics when their teachers are certified to teach mathematics or have extensive experience teaching mathematics. We know that students learn more mathematics when given the opportunity to study more mathematics and not be tracked out of high-quality mathematics content. We know students achieve more when supported by their parents or guardians. We know that students can achieve much more when much more is expected of them.

We are not surprised to learn what high-poverty, high-minority, high-performing schools do to help children to be successful. They make teaching black and Hispanic students a priority. They focus on students' performance as an index of their own success. Teachers set higher standards of performance for themselves. They establish high expectations for all their students and work together to devise strategies to make those expectations a reality.

High-performing minority schools look at the data. They become knowledgeable about what students bring to classrooms

and use the information to structure programs and approaches that try to benefit students. They make parents and the community aware of the data, and they work to enlist support by establishing goals toward which everyone can work. To help achieve the goals, early interventions are created to assist students who are not performing well in mathematics. Funds are targeted to help students who require early interventions.

Educators at high-performing minority schools strive to hire mathematics teachers and support staff that reflect the diversity of the students they serve. They recognize that students must feel a sense of belonging and that interacting with teachers and staff who share similar backgrounds is important. These schools work with parents. Specialists are often hired to help parents understand their roles in increasing students' performance in mathematics. After-school programs and Saturday tutoring sessions become important tools that high-performing minority schools use to help students be more successful.

Professional development is a vital aspect of achieving success in high-performing minority schools. Teachers receive opportunities to grow in their understanding of mathematics knowledge, mathematics pedagogy, and the role of culture in the teaching and learning process. Such professional development must be long-term, sustained, and designed to reflect the self-identified needs of teachers.

The most effective way to eliminate performance gaps is to create environments in which sizeable gaps never occur. This goal is especially important when we are considering the preschool mathematics experiences that children should have. As a nation, we must decide whether we want performance gaps closed or left open. Preschool experiences in mathematics and reading that properly prepare children for school can be created if we have the will.

The nation must require that all day-care programs become learning centers in which children's mathematics and reading skills are nurtured and developed. Furthermore, all children must have access to such learning centers, no matter where they reside, no matter if they are rich or poor, no matter what their ethnicity is.

When we focus our national attention on a common goal, we are capable of tremendous feats. The recent national tragedy of September 11, 2001, has reminded us all of that. If the need and desire are great, no price is too high to pay to make things better for all Americans. Clearly, where there's a will, there's a way.