

Problematizing the “Problem” of Racial Achievement Gaps

Alumni of Color Conference

Harvard Graduate School of Education

Circe Stumbo, Deanna Hill,
Adrian Allison, and Stephen Price

February 23, 2008



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this PowerPoint presentation, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and West Wind Education Policy, Inc., it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or West Wind. Please send any comments to westwind@westwinded.com.

Overview

- Defining the “Problem” of Racial Achievement Gaps
 - Circe Stumbo, President, West Wind Education Policy, Inc.
- How Critical Race Theory Helps Us Problematize the “Problem”
 - Deanna Hill, Policy Analyst, West Wind Education Policy, Inc.
- So What Do We Do? Exercising Anti-Racist School Leadership

Overview

- What Roles Can State Leaders Play?
 - Adrian Allison, Executive Director of Urban Policy, Ohio Department of Education
- What Roles Can District Leaders Play?
 - Stephen Price, Superintendent, Middletown City Schools

Discussion

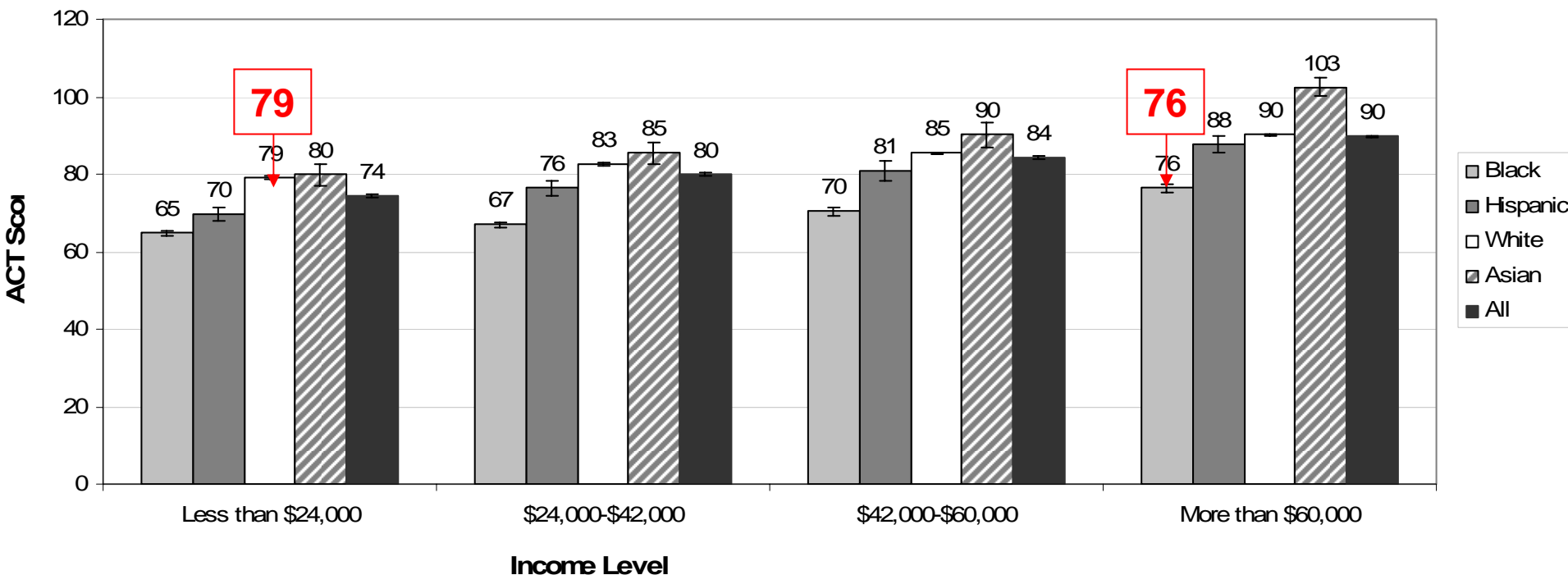
- How do you talk about racial achievement gaps? What words do you use when you talk about racial achievement gaps?
- What are you doing to close gaps? What are others doing?

Our Work Started with Traditional Achievement Gap Investigations

- Our goal was to “close racial achievements gaps while raising the achievement of all students.”
- The data on race were compelling...

High Income African Americans Score Lower than Low Income Whites

Average ACT Scores by Parental Income and Race/Ethnicity in Ohio, School Year 2005-2006



We asked educators who had made a commitment to participate in a year-long program on racial equity, “What does the term ‘racial achievement gap’ mean to you?” Sixty-three participants—including teachers, administrators, school board members, and community members—responded. We grouped their words by topics as follows.

What is the Gap?

- Disparity
- Difference
- Discrepancy
- Situation
- Distance between
- Lack of

Source: West Wind Education Policy, Inc. (Sept. 2007).
Participant Survey, Item 2A.1 (n=63).

Where is the Gap?

- in Achievement
- in Performance
- in Learning (amount, level)
- in Outcomes
- in Growth
- in Success

Only one person said the gap was in “Access.” A second person said there is a gap in “Opportunities.”

How Do We Measure the Gap?

- Standardized Tests
- Assessments
- Written, multiple choice tests
- Achievement tests
- Outcomes
- Gifted/AP Rates
- Graduation Rates
- Disciplinary Rates

No one said we measure such things as “resources.” No one said we measure “experiences of hostility and racism.”

Source: West Wind Education Policy, Inc. (Sept. 2007).
Participant Survey, Item 2A.1 (n=63).

What It Means to Define the Problems This Way

- This is significant because the way we talk about a problem does several things:
 - It locates the source of the problem, which defines the solutions we consider.
 - It conveys messages to others about what is going on.

How We Have Been Defining the Problem

That is, the way we have been talking locates the problem in the students themselves.

The problem is, in essence, one of *underachieving students*.

How This Defines Our Solution Set

If the problem is underachieving students, the solution is *remediation*.

- This allows us to focus on “fixing the kids” and not fixing the system.
- This allows us to shift the burden/blame onto students, their parents, and their communities.

The Messages This Conveys

- Worse yet, it reinscribes dominant stories of the intellectual inferiority of students of color.
- These stories are borne out of the mythologies that undergirded the development of an American democracy that tolerated slavery.

Critical Race Theory

- The policy responses in this tradition—with its focus on deficit language—is highly problematic.
- Critical Race Theory (CRT) helps us to make sense of how we got here and how we might transform the system.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

- CRT is interdisciplinary.
- CRT places race/racism at the center of analysis.
- CRT recognizes race as a social construct but addresses race as “real” in the sense that law/society treat it as such (anti-essentialist/essentialist tension).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

- CRT insists on recognition of the social and historical context of racial subordination.
- CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and education (naming one's own reality, voice, counter-storytelling).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

- CRT has an activist agenda to transform and redeem the law and education (not just to critique and deconstruct it).
- CRT works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of eliminating all forms of oppression.

CRT Analysis of Achievement Gaps

- How we frame the problem of “achievement gaps” reinforces the dominant story of the intellectual inferiority of students of color.

CRT Analysis of Achievement Gaps

- The dominant framing of the achievement gap does not require us to look at historic inequities in the system.

CRT Analysis of Achievement Gaps

- Without counterstories, we believe myths—allowing us to shift the burden to parents, families, and communities of color, and avoid implicating the system.

CRT Analysis of Achievement Gaps

- Yet, implicating the system is precisely the work we must engage in.
- By this, we do not simply mean that we must look at the unequal distribution of resources.

Problems and Solutions

- That is, as we move from defining the problem as *underachieving students* (the solution to which is remediation)...
- ... to the story of *underserved students* (the solution to which is targeting resources)...
- ...we still fail to uncover the formal and informal forces at play that inscribe mental models about the value and deservedness of people of color.

Misguided Strategies

- Thus, because our strategies do not transparently address the fact that the narratives many of us thought we were using strategically to subvert the status quo, those strategies end up reinforcing and reproducing it.

Systemic Racism

- We need a new way of defining the problem—specifically, the problem is not the gap in student performance but ***systemic racism*** that perpetuates inequities.

Systemic Racism

- When the problem is defined as systemic racism, the solution is ***anti-racist school leadership*** and ***courageous conversations*** about race.

What Can Leaders Do?

- Conduct Courageous Conversations About Race
- Create Learning Organizations and Engage in Systems Thinking
- Exercise Anti-Racist School Leadership

Analyzing a System

- **Anyplace* School Equity Plan 2007-2012**
- The Anyplace School District does not discriminate against pupils on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, creed, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, or physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability or handicap in its education programs or activities. The goals, objectives and actions in this plan are designed to address the needs of any and all of these populations.

* Excerpted from an actual district equity plan accessed January 13, 2008, on the www. To request the citation to the original document, please contact West Wind Education Policy, Inc., at westwind@westwinded.com.

Analyzing A System

Goal One: Apply the skills, methods and strategies necessary to assure that classroom practices are free of discrimination and bias.

Objectives:

- To have a positive impact on the behaviors of educators and students in order for them to coexist with tolerance for all persons.
- To conduct instruction in such a manner that all students are given the opportunity to develop their potential and aspirations.
- To demonstrate the use of inclusionary language.

How Leaders Can Move Forward

- Convene a cross-cutting, multi-racial Leadership Team and focus on equity
- Engage in professional development
- Examine the role and presence of whiteness and white privilege
- Analyze your system—not only quantitative indicators but also the ways students and their families and communities experience school
- Find allies, engage students and communities

Reflection

- How is the world described in the way we talk about the achievement gap?
- What stories have we been telling about the patterns we describe?
- Where does the problem reside in our stories about the patterns?
- What are some alternate ways of looking at the patterns?

For More Information

- **Deanna Hill**, Policy Analyst, West Wind Education Policy, Inc.
1700 South First Avenue, Suite 17, Iowa City, IA 52240
deanna@westwinded.com
- **Circe Stumbo**, President, West Wind Education Policy, Inc.
1700 South First Avenue, Suite 17, Iowa City, IA 52240
circe@westwinded.com
- **Adrian Allison**, Executive Director of Urban Policy, Ohio Department of Education
25 South Front Street, Columbus, OH 43215
adrian.allison@ode.state.oh.us
- **Stephen Price**, Superintendent, Middletown City Schools
1515 Girard Ave., Middletown, Ohio 45044
sprice@middletowncityschools.com

Save the Date!

The Summit *for* Courageous Conversation: Achieving Racial Equity *and* Excellence in Education

September 28-October 1, 2008

New Orleans, Louisiana

More information is available at

www.pacificeducationalgroup.com

West Wind
EDUCATION POLICY

Save the Date!

The 9th Annual White Privilege Conference

April 2-5, 2008

Springfield, Massachusetts

More information is available at

<http://www.uccs.edu/~wpc/>

West Wind
EDUCATION POLICY

West Wind Education Policy, Inc.

P: 877-354-9378 > **F:** 319-248-0222

Email: westwind@westwinded.com

Address: 1700 South First Avenue, Suite 17
Iowa City, IA 52240-6036

www.westwinded.com

Extra Slides

Why do we need a framework?

- We don't share a common and compelling direction **or** shared sense of current reality.
- We disagree about the cause of major problems in the system.
- We lack the skills to talk about race.
 - Nelda Cambron-McCabe

Four Agreements

- Stay Engaged
- Speak Your Truth
- Experience Discomfort
- Expect and Accept Non-Closure

Six Conditions

1. Focus on personal, local and immediate
2. Isolate race
3. Normalize social construction & multiple perspectives
4. Monitor agreements, conditions and establish parameters
5. Use a “working definition” for race
6. Examine the presence and role of “Whiteness”

Developing Anti-Racist School Leadership

- We are working to develop local capacity to investigate racial inequities like the inequities evident in student achievement data—and to go beyond.