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Laying the Foundation

Identifying Needs

*The needs of one child
often reflect a larger need
for other children in the nation.*

MEET WILLIAM

William has an IQ of 100, loves to be around his friends and just "hang out," and is a basketball fan during basketball season and a fan of football when that season arrives. Sports are important to him. Both of his parents work outside the home to give him and his brother and sister the advantages they never had. His teachers say that he is shy in class and has a hard time achieving. When the school day is over he becomes more outgoing and social.

Let's peep in on William in class on a day that is special for him. The day is special because he has been chosen to be the class "Leader for the Day." As we watch, he has a lift in his step and appears motivated as he walks to the front of the line to lead the group to music class. Later in the day he exhibits pure joy when he is captain of the kickball team at outside playtime. His classmates respect his athletic ability while he is on the playground. We see a different William, however, when the students are back in the classroom working on academics. He lacks excitement, and his peers tend to ignore him.

During reading class, William has a story about whales. William whispers to the boy beside him that he watches programs about whales on cable TV. He seems interested in the topic. The lesson begins with his teacher directing the students to

begin reading the story silently after she has given a brief overview about what whales look like and where they live. She tells them in her overview that the story for the day is about a large humpback whale, named Willie, who is worried because he does not have as much hair today as he had a month ago, or even last week. William begins to read as directed, but as William looks at his book, it is apparent to us, the unseen observers, that he is having difficulty reading the story. He makes a grimacing movement with his mouth when he comes to a word that isn't part of his background knowledge. We surmise that he doesn't have the necessary skills to decode the strange words. By the time William struggles through the first page, he gives up "reading" and just pretends to be completing his assignment. As we look at William from our unseen vantage point, it appears to us that he has developed a real skill in looking at a page and making it look to others as if he is on task.

The class discusses the story, but William does not participate. The teacher must know that he didn't read anything, because she does not call on him to answer any of the comprehension questions. The rest of the students don't acknowledge that William is there, either. As we look in on our scene, we get the idea that this is the norm for William, the class, and the teacher when group participation is expected.

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Today, William fell behind the majority of the children in his class in skill attainment. The next day's lesson will probably be more of the same, meaning that William will continue to accumulate days where he falls farther and farther behind in his academic achievement. He may be two weeks behind now, or he may be as much as a year behind—or even more—in the continuum of skills for his grade level. The degree to which he is behind will depend on the number of days that he has been in school during the current school year and when the instruction that he received in previous years began to be a mismatch for his instructional level and style of learning. William isn't aware that he is not achieving at the desired level of learning. All he knows is that he is glad when it is time to go home at the end of the school day. Sitting in the classroom is no fun at all!

Educators with any experience have seen a William. He may be either gender or have another name, belong to a different ethnic group, live in another place, or be in a different socioeconomic group. Whatever the subgroup, the problem for all the Williams is the same. They are a part of a vacuum, or gap, which exists between what should be learned, based on grade-level standards, and what is actually learned. All of our Williams are students trapped in the *achievement gap!*

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The achievement gap means different things to different people. It is given, a definition in a variety of resources, including the Education Trust, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), the Center on Education Policy, and the Educational Research Service (ERS). The Policy and Program Service addresses the topic specifically in their Longitudinal Assessment of

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). Educational journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan,* the *Journal of Staff Development,* and *Educational Leadership* have published numerous articles on the achievement gap. Entire conferences have been organized around the topic in an effort to help educators understand the broader implications of the concept, and task forces have gathered to study the disparities in achievement for various subgroups.

One definition for the achievement gap that is heard most frequently refers to "the achievement level of poor, minority students as a group, who score lower in student achievement measures than do middle-class, nonminority students" (ERS, 2001). There is another school of thought (Burkhardt, 2002) that holds that the achievement gap isn't restricted to just poor and minority students. This definition incorporates the concept that the gap cuts across income and geography and includes middle-income and upper-income students in suburban schools who are found to have deficits in learning.

The definition preferred here maintains that the achievement gap is primarily a problem of attainment—not of race, ethnicity, or innate ability. There are many poor and minority students who perform at high levels. As a matter of fact, all subgroups have a full range of achievement from high to low. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB Act) acknowledges this definition, addresses the substandard performance of all children, and then gives educators a charge to erase the achievement gap. If the gap is in the urban community, academic attainment must increase. If the area is suburban or rural, standards must be met. No group is to be excluded. This includes socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally diverse students.

The gap in achievement among different groups of students that ushered in the twenty-first century (Haycock, 2001a) must be eliminated. We knew how to narrow the gap during the 1970s and 1980s. We should be able to do it now. The Williams whom we know wouldn't be having the attainment problem they have now if schools and districts would close their knowing-and-doing gap in curriculum and instruction, align their policies and practices with research on what works (Marzano, 2004), and address substandard performance of all students, regardless of race, gender, or geography. It would make no difference that our William lives in an area of the city that has been neglected for a number of years and is now undergoing urban renewal. The fact that he is a regular education student without an attendance deficit should be more important to his status than the fact that he falls behind on a daily basis. The slippery slope of failure that currently profiles William's potential should be eliminated and replaced with incremental steps to academic success.

William is an indicator of the need for a deep change at many levels. The level closest to him is the district where his school is located. Let's examine some data from the district and use this information to expand our understanding of William's need.

WILLIAM'S DISTRICT

To understand if there is an achievement gap in William's district, it will be easier—for the purposes of our discussion—to focus on the core subject of

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Figure 1.1 William's District

District Totals	Number	Percent
Number of Schools	90 51 Elementary 14 Middle 13 High School 12 Special Education	
Grades Served	K–12	
Number of Students K–12	53,000	
• White	44,997	85.0%
• African-American	6,500	12.2%
• Hispanic	900	1.7%
• Asian	502	0.9%
• Native American	88	0.2%
• Pacific Islander	13	0.02%
Economically Disadvantaged	17,575	33.0%

reading. This is not done to intentionally exclude other core subjects. Rather, we focus on reading because our earlier observation of William was, in part, during his reading class. By choosing to look only at reading, we will have a continuity in our thinking as we analyze the data at the local level.

A few numbers will begin our cursory examination of the district's general data. These numbers may be seen in Figure 1.1.

William's district uses a variety of instruments to measure students' academic growth, including nationally normed achievement tests and several local assessments, such as districtwide tests for reading. As a system, the district consistently scores above state and national averages. In fact, it is the highest-performing large system in its state; however, a disaggregation of the data reveals a problem that has not previously been noticed.

There are 2,935 students systemwide who read in the first quartile in grades 2–5, the only elementary grades tested in William's district. The district includes 51 elementary schools, and 1,345 of the 2,935 students, or 46 percent, attend one of the 10 inner-city schools. That is almost one-half of the district's reading problems in only 20 percent of the schools. Seventy-six percent of the 1,345 students are economically disadvantaged, and all ten of the inner-city schools receive Title I funds. The number of African-American students in the lowest quartile in reading in those schools is 1,785 (61 percent), with Hispanics numbering 416. William attends one of these schools.

Given the data to review, the district's administrators, specialists, and a data team realize that the information they have been hearing and reading about

the achievement gap is more than an array of factors and findings that happen in other places. The data take on a new meaning as they speak to them from the paper in their hands. The educators note also that there is reason to be concerned about the learning in the remaining 41 schools. Their data indicate that they are affected, too. The data tell us that there are 1,590 (54 percent) students attending the 41 schools in the rest of the district who read in the lowest quartile, with an average of 38 students per school and nine students per grade. These students will need an intervention to meet their needs. William's district will not ignore the needs of the inner-city youngsters, and will not ignore the lack of attainment of the students in the lowest quartile in the rural and suburban areas.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Armed with new information, the district's leaders acknowledge that there is a severe achievement gap, greater in some schools than in others, and they make a commitment to "erase the failure" of these youngsters. The administrative team knows that there is expertise within the district to develop a plan to significantly reduce, or even eliminate, the deficit that is found in this stubborn gap. With intentionality, they decide to plan, implement, and evaluate all the elements that research suggests are necessary to impact an area of need.

The information that follows in this book will guide you through the development of the plan, with the express purpose of giving you a tool to use if you have a similar need. The strategies within each chapter can also provide information to support the chapter's focus in an area of need other than the achievement gap. For example, Chapter 3, "Selecting Educators," includes a dynamic plan for the selection process. That plan is appropriate for any area in education, not just for selecting personnel to work in a program that addresses the achievement gap. At the end of each chapter is a template for you to use reflectively to analyze your system's needs and develop an action plan. It is expected that this book will inform your thinking and give you the tools that you need to adapt, not adopt (Thompson, 2005) strategies that will bridge the achievement gap and enhance learning opportunities for students in your circle of influence.

I have come to believe that every child can learn the next thing that follows the last thing they learned. This acquisition of learning by all students can happen with proper assessment, appropriate cognitive strategies, effective instruction, targeted curriculum, quality professional learning, and a passion to see others succeed. The learning is, above all, about making a difference in the life chances for all students, including the disadvantaged (Fullan, 1999). There is, therefore, an innovation described in this book that will make it possible for you to tackle the mandate of achieving parity in achievement across diverse groups of students. There is a structure built into the model to help bring order out of the chaos of the achievement gap. There are also tables, charts, and worksheets to support you in your nonlinear journey as you acquire new knowledge and develop new strategies to address an old problem. The model is simple in its presentation but complex in the results that it brings. Read it. Study it. Then find a

team in your system to make the model live for you. You owe it to the learners in your system.

MAKING IT "LIVE" FOR YOU: A PLANNING TEMPLATE

1. Complete the following sentence stems:
   - The articles or books that I have read about the achievement gap include . . .
   - The Web sites that I have found with relevant information include . . .
   - My knowledge of the topic that I already have includes . . .
   - The definition of the achievement gap that will be used in my district is . . .

2. Complete Worksheet 1.1 (see page 174 in the Resources) with general information about your district.

3. Complete Worksheet 1.2 (see page 175 in the Resources) with testing resources available in your district.

4. Complete Worksheet 1.3 (see page 176 in the Resources) with the testing data from your system.

5. Complete Worksheet 1.4 (see page 177 in the Resources) by doing a school-by-school analysis of the subgroups.

6. Complete Worksheet 1.5 (see page 178 in the Resources) with names of district administrators, subject-area specialists, and data specialists who can help plan the intervention strategy that will be used in your district.

7. Complete Worksheet 1.6 (see page 179 in the Resources) with questions that you have at this point in your deliberation.

8. Prioritize your next steps in Worksheet 1.7 (page 179 in the Resources).