

## University of Northern Iowa

### College of Education White Paper: What is the Achievement Gap? (1 in a series)

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The literature on the student achievement gap in the U.S. is extensive with many opinions; but there is consensus that there isn't a specific cause for the gap within our public schools. This series of white papers will focus on many issues associated with the achievement gap as well as networks of schools that are successfully dealing with closing the achievement gap. Examples include: 90 90 90 Schools; KIPP Schools; Dour Reeves Institute; parental involvement; student mobility factors; union contracts and seniority; time management; class size and teacher/student ratios; curriculum; teaching style; gender grouping; cultural competence; relationships; Daggett's Rigor – Relevance and Relationships framework; Rick Dufour's research; staff development; and principal and teacher leadership.

Students from low socioeconomic families are more likely to achieve at lower academic levels than their peers from higher socioeconomic levels. Most of our lower socioeconomic students are also usually minorities, creating an academic gap between minorities and their white counterparts. This is especially true for our African American and Hispanic students. Kindergarten teachers can almost always identify at-risk children regarding their academic readiness for school-how well their vocabulary is developed, ability to identify colors, and understanding of age appropriate math.

In my last superintendency in an urban district, the incoming kindergarten 2004 class of 800 students included 17 kindergarten students that couldn't identify their colors, had a very limited vocabulary, and couldn't identify numbers or count to ten. The students weren't disabled in the special education sense, but were academically handicapped and will take years to catch up with their peers. Approximately 60 percent of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The achievement gap is complicated-but as seen in other states-can be closed. Some "fixes" are easy-most are hard, and all take a major commitment from the school district, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community.

In the second white paper in this series, we'll explore how parental involvement can help close the achievement gap, and how schools can implement programs to increase parental involvement.