

Closing the Achievement Gap: Adopting a Youth Development Perspective

Across the United States, educators are under intense pressure to raise the achievement scores of their students and to close the achievement gap so that there is no disparity measured by ethnicity, income, or disability. The achievement gap is defined as “the disparity between white students and other ethnic groups and between English learners and native English speakers, socioeconomically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged, and students with disabilities as compared to students without disabilities” (California Department of Education 2009).

In California there is a 31 percent achievement gap in English–language arts and an 18 percent gap in mathematics between African American students and white students. The achievement gap between white and Latino students is 21 percent in both English–language arts and mathematics (California Department of Education 2009).

The achievement gap consists of more than differences in test scores. There is also a disparity in the factors that influence achievement, such as caring relationships, high expectations for students, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Students with a record of low academic achievement also have fewer protective factors. The gap must be closed for reasons of both equity and economics. California needs educated adults to work in tomorrow’s workforce. “Even traditional jobs will require workers with a broader, deeper and more flexible portfolio of skills” (U.S. Department of Commerce 1999).

Schools have tried many strategies to close the achievement gap but have still made only modest progress. One promising means of closing this gap is for schools to strengthen the factors that influence achievement by adopting youth development strategies. Youth development is “a strength-based approach focused on meeting the developmental needs of the whole child rather than repairing deficits.” Youth development means reaching out to *all* students, including those who are traditionally associated with lower test scores or academic failure. In fact, youth development can help these students even more than others.

The Relationship Between Youth Development and Achievement

Youth development and learning are complementary processes. Research has identified school connectedness, developmental assets, resilience, and protective factors as major areas of youth development. The factors

¹See *Getting Results*, Update 1 (1999) for detailed research about youth development.

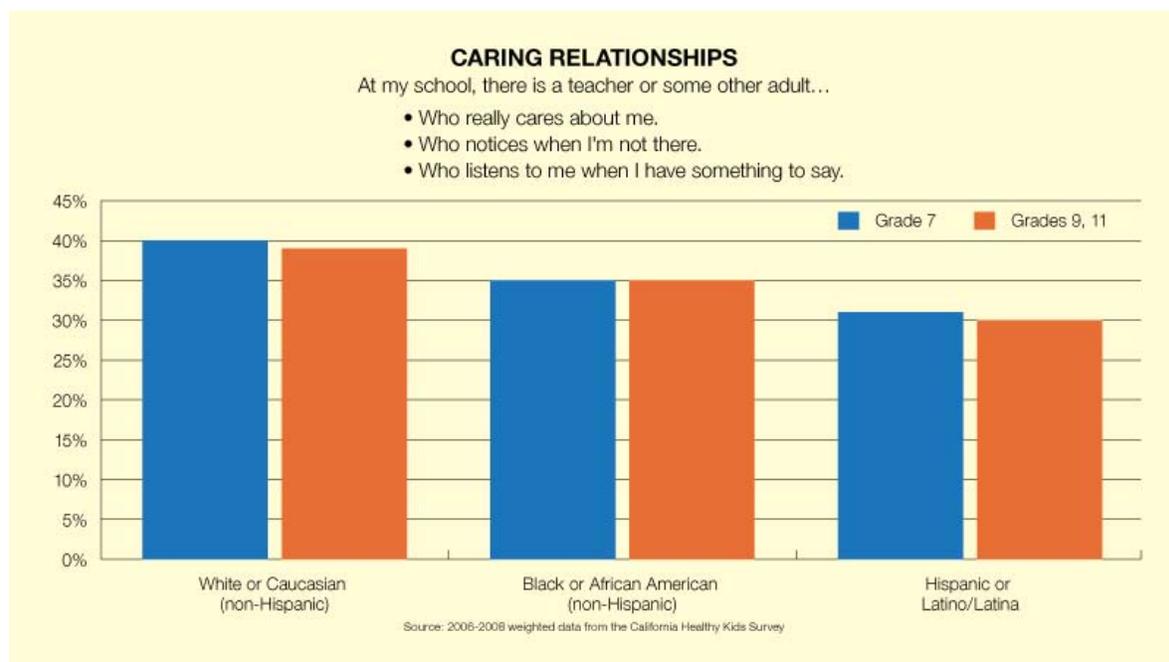
that contribute most strongly to academic achievement are caring relationships, high expectations for students, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Those factors protect students from unhealthy behaviors. Students reporting the greatest percentage of caring relationships, high expectations in school, and meaningful involvement had the highest scores on the SAT-9 reading, language arts, and math tests (Austin et al. 2007).

Attentiveness to the psychosocial adjustment and school engagement of academically at-risk students are the keys to academic resilience. School-based initiatives that actively shield disadvantaged children from the risks and adversities within their homes, schools, and communities are more likely to foster successful academic outcomes (Borman and Overman 2004).

Of great concern, however, is recent research showing that students who are falling behind academically lack these protective factors. For example, “African American students, regardless of their academic performance and the demographics of their schools, are more likely to give low ratings to their schools in terms of academic expectations, caring and mentoring relationships, and staff fairness” (The Education Alliance 2006).

Caring Relationships. Students who report caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school have more positive academic attitudes and values, are more satisfied with school, are more engaged in academic work, and attend school more and learn more. Young people who have at least one healthy relationship with a teacher or other caring adult have a sense of hope and are less involved in destructive behaviors.

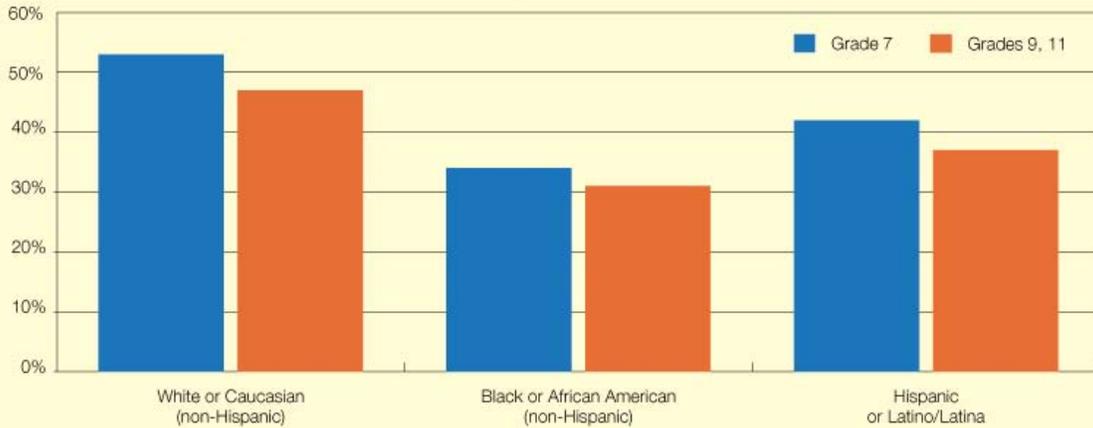
But here again there is a gap. White students—particularly in the critical middle-school years—are more likely to believe that teachers care about them, while Latino students are least likely to say they experience caring from the adults in their school. White students are also more likely than African American and Latino students to report feeling connected to their schools.



SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school?

- I feel close to people at this school.
- I am happy to be at this school.
- I feel like I am part of this school.
- The teachers at this school treat students fairly.
- I feel safe in my school.



Source: 2006-2008 weighted data from the California Healthy Kids Survey

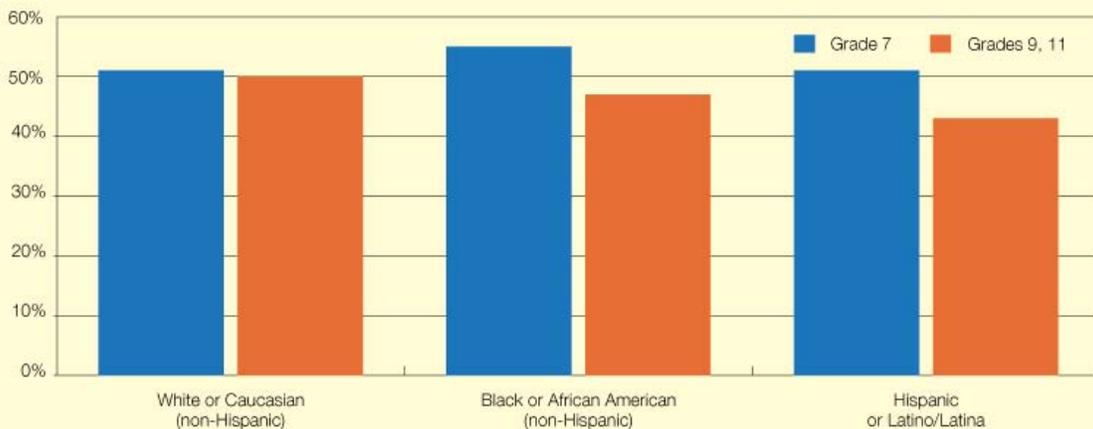
High Expectations. Consistent direct or indirect messages that convey to a young person that he or she can and will succeed in achieving a goal communicate a belief in a young person’s innate worth. Messages of high expectations for young people are related to stronger school connectedness, better grades, and low alcohol consumption. White students are more likely to report high expectations, while Latino students are least likely to.

Meaningful Participation. Involvement in relevant, engaging, and interesting activities; opportunities for responsibility; and contribution at home, at school, and in the community lead to improved chances for young people’s positive and healthy development, including

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult...

- Who tells me when I do a good job.
- Who always wants me to do my best.
- Who believes that I will be a success.



Source: 2006-2008 weighted data from the California Healthy Kids Survey

improvements in academic achievement and positive work behaviors. However, once again white students are more likely to report involvement in meaningful activities than African American and Latino students in the seventh and ninth grades; by the eleventh grade, white and African American students report more involvement than do Latino students.

What Schools Can Do

- Apply youth development principles in our schools, and apply them fairly to all students.
- Conduct a school climate survey to find out how students, staff, and parents perceive the school climate and whether there is a sense of connectedness and thus resilience among students. Learn more about the school climate survey at <http://cal-schls.wested.org/>.
- Create a more democratic school and classroom environment: ask students their opinions on issues and classroom problems; have students create classroom rules and procedures; involve students in curriculum planning; and so on.
- Establish a high-quality after-school program or refer students to one. Such programs provide a safe and supportive environment, relationships with caring adults, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Research shows that participation in a program with these features positively correlates to better school attendance, more positive attitudes toward school work, higher aspirations for college, higher quality homework completion, less time spent in unhealthy behaviors, and improved grades.

References

- Austin, G., T. Hanson, G. Bono, and Z. Cheng. 2007. *The achievement gap, school well-being, and learning supports*. California Health Kids Survey Fact Sheet Issue 8. Los Alamitos, CA: WestEd.
- Austin, G., J. Nakamoto, and J. Bailey. 2010. *Racial/ethnic differences in school performance, engagement, safety, and supports*. California Healthy Kids Survey Fact Sheet Issue 9. Los Alamitos, CA: WestEd.
- Borman, G. D., and L. T. Overman. 2004. Academic resilience in mathematics among poor and minority students. *The Elementary School Journal* 104(3): 177–95.
- California Department of Education. 2009. *A framework for closing California's achievement gap: Executive Summary (P-16 Council Report)*.
- The Education Alliance. 2006. *Through different lenses: West Virginia school staff and students react to school climate*.
- Getting Results, Update 1: Positive youth development: Research, commentary, and action*. 1999. Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- U.S. Departments of Commerce, Education, and Labor; National Institute of Literacy; Small Business Administration. 1999. *21st century skills for 21st century jobs*.
- What does Getting Results say about youth development?* 1999.