Too Many Children Left Behind

How Can We Close the Achievement Gap?

**APPROACH ONE**

**Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability**

Larger numbers of low-income, minority students are falling behind their peers each year. If this nation is to flourish in the twenty-first century, we cannot afford to lose so much potential ability. The most promising strategies for closing this achievement gap include establishing the expectation that virtually all students can meet higher academic standards and making teachers and school administrators accountable for how well their students do.

**What Can Be Done?**
- Raise teachers’ expectations of low-performing students.
- Set minimum standards of academic competency for teachers.
- Encourage low-income and minority students to take courses that prepare them to enter college.
- Publicize test score results for all schools in the district to let communities know how their schools are performing.
- Teachers and principals who are not getting results should be let go.

**Trade-Offs**
- Establishing high standards that all students are expected to meet will require continuous testing.
- Expecting more from low-income students may involve teachers in a number of social support activities such students need to improve their academic performance.
- A curriculum focused on helping children pass achievement tests may reduce emphasis on music, fine arts, sports, and other skills that are not measured by tests.

**What Critics Say**
- When teachers are forced to “teach to the test,” they cannot make the best use of their skills, and real learning suffers.
- Studies have shown that the home environment is the most important factor in predicting how well children will do in school.
- Although, overall, test scores continue to improve, the gap between minority and nonminority student achievement remains wide.
- Inner-city schools with inadequate facilities and overcrowded classrooms cannot expect their students to do as well as those in school systems that provide computers, science labs, and up-to-date textbooks.

**APPROACH TWO**

**Close the Spending Gap**

Public schools with predominantly poor and minority students are most often located in districts that have the fewest resources. Buildings are falling apart. They lack basic facilities and equipment. And good teachers most often choose to work elsewhere. If we expect to close the achievement gap, we must close the resource gap. Funding and other resources must be more equitably distributed in order to give all children an equal chance at success.

**What Can Be Done?**
- Provide better incentives and more support for highly-qualified educators to teach in low-performing schools.
- Allocate more funds to school districts with serious deficits, as states like Kentucky and North Carolina have begun doing.
- Restructure school-funding systems, which, in most states, now depend on property taxes—a system that badly shortchanges schools in poor neighborhoods.
- Lobby state legislators to increase education spending. Maryland recently doubled school spending, in part by raising cigarette taxes.
- Involve parents in mentoring and tutoring programs to help boost performance.

**Trade-Offs**
- Significantly increasing school funding for all schools will likely involve more state taxes.
- Most plans for equalizing school funding without raising taxes involve taking money away from districts with higher tax rates and giving it to districts that do not raise enough to support their schools adequately.
- Although poor school districts may be able to attract highly-qualified teachers, they may not be able to keep them.

**What Critics Say**
- We have been throwing more money at public schools for years with negligible results. Money is not the answer.
- A focus on providing resources for schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods would de-emphasize the need to diversify their student bodies, and perpetuate a separate system of education.
- Charter schools are the answer for many failing students, some critics say. These schools also serve to spur public schools to improve. Home schooling is another option.
- Other critics favor voucher programs that make it possible for underachieving students to attend private schools.

**APPROACH THREE**

**Address the Root Causes**

School-reform schemes will only treat the symptoms, not the root causes of this troubling problem. The real problems here are poor housing, poor nutrition, poor health care, and poor parenting. If we are to close the achievement gap, we must address the socioeconomic problems that handicap children long before they get to school and continue to keep them lagging behind.

**What Can Be Done?**
- Developers, planners, school officials, and other policymakers should develop strategies for more affordable housing and diverse neighborhoods.
- Universal pre-kindergarten and kindergarten would go a long way in closing the achievement gap.
- School districts should provide health screening when children enter school and periodically thereafter.
- Schools must develop innovative partnerships to get parents involved with their children’s school.
- In some areas, schools have become community centers, open every day to provide community support services, such as health clinics.

**Trade-Offs**
- Tackling the socioeconomic causes of academic failure will involve much more research to pinpoint the specific factors that affect children’s performance in school.
- Bringing all our resources to bear on improving the lives of children before they enter school will likely result in the continued neglect of many underresourced schools.

**What Critics Say**
- Addressing daunting social issues like housing needs is very costly. High levels of funding are not likely to be available to the communities that most need them.
- There is no guarantee that this approach will be of any use in improving school performance of poor minority children.
- Approach Three calls for unnecessary government interference in the lives of poor minority families.
- This approach has the worthy aim of reforming society at the expense of seeking practical solutions to specifically educational problems.