



TERESA D. HILL

**THE
INSTRUCTIONAL
LEADER'S
GUIDE
TO CLOSING
ACHIEVEMENT
GAPS**

**Five
Keys for
Improving
Student
Outcomes**

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Introduction

On Friday, March 13, 2020, school superintendents throughout the state of Illinois received an urgent email. They were directed to join a statewide conference call that afternoon with the governor of Illinois. On the call, the governor thanked the school superintendents for their hard work and service to students. Then he issued an executive order calling for all Illinois schools—public, private, and parochial—to close on Tuesday, March 17, 2020.

Similar conversations took place throughout the United States as the COVID-19 pandemic raged. Illinois students would not return to the classroom for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. By the summer of 2022, children in Illinois had missed an average of six months of schooling and had participated in almost a full year of remote learning. This ranged from quarterly packets of worksheets that families could pick up from school and have their children complete at home to full days of synchronous learning activities from home using online meeting applications such as Zoom.

It was not until fall 2021 that most students returned to full-time, in-person schooling. Things were not the same. Hundreds of thousands of children lost parents or other family or household members during the pandemic. Children of all ages were deprived of social interaction, meaningful outside experiences, friendships with peers, and social skill development. Families experienced extreme financial instability, economic insecurity, and mental health challenges.

Children who lived in unsafe home environments could get no reprieve. Without school, there was no safe place to go during the day, and no one was present to report any harm done to them. Even those in safe, loving homes were more likely to experience food insecurity and homelessness, as well as the intense fear of illness and death that gripped households throughout the

United States. The pandemic and the United States' response to it broke our system of schooling (flawed though it was).

So, when in fall 2021 the U.S. Department of Education decided to move forward with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it was clear to all those who work in education that the immense effect of the pandemic on children and communities would be evident in the results. Nevertheless, when the scores were released in fall 2022, they were met with exclamations of surprise and outrage. Reporters, researchers, politicians, and policymakers from all sides of the political spectrum decried the drop in test scores and declared that schools must do better. The U.S. Secretary of Education released a statement saying, "The time is now. This is our moment. It's up to all of us to raise the bar in education" (Cardona, 2022).

The 2022 NAEP scores were entirely predictable. Student performance in reading and math fell in every U.S. state (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b). The achievement gap grew because the scores of low-income students and Black and Hispanic students fell more precipitously than the scores of white and middle-class students. Unsurprisingly, states with higher percentages of students in these groups saw larger score declines than other states. In addition, students with lower beginning percentile ranks experienced a larger decline in scores than students starting out at higher percentile ranks. This means that learners who were already struggling lost more than those who were previously high performing.

The 2022 NAEP data were yet another manifestation of an old problem. Schools are seen as a panacea for all manner of societal problems. Educators and leaders are expected to raise the achievement of all students, regardless of the circumstances and conditions in the community and society. Achievement gaps are grounded in long-standing community and societal inequalities. Those inequalities are exacerbated by societal crises.

After the pandemic, just as before, educators, leaders, and policymakers must tackle the same recurring questions:

- How do schools meaningfully raise student achievement for all students, regardless of community and societal circumstances?
- How do schools eliminate achievement gaps that are grounded in long-standing community and societal inequalities?
- How do schools improve outcomes for all students in all communities?

Why Did I Write This Book?

Combating the achievement gap is the focus of my life's work. I have served with and enjoyed the company of many outstanding and dedicated educators. I have gotten to know sweet, funny, intelligent children from all walks of life. I have worked in settings in which students, families, and classrooms were well resourced and educators could focus their energies on anything that interested the students.

However, in my more than 25 years as an educator in public school settings, I have never found a job so trying, exhilarating, exhausting, and satisfying as working directly with students for whom a lifetime of opportunities depends on the quality of education they receive in my classroom, school, or district. As a result, I have spent most of my career working in schools where the vast majority of students could be described as school dependent.

In these settings, the achievement gap and its effects are ubiquitous. Whether it was a school made up entirely of students in poverty, like the primary school in Illinois where I began my teaching career, or like the elementary school in Bloomington, Illinois, where I served as principal and where half of the students were at risk and the other half had every advantage, dealing with the achievement gap and the ideology that perpetuated it was more or less the same. As a teacher and later as an education leader, I had to learn, develop, and teach strategies to combat that ever-present gap.

Although much has been written about the achievement gap, practical guidance for educators and leaders on the front lines is rare, and we need it now more than ever. When I consider all the public discussions about closing the achievement gap, raising student achievement, reforming schools, and ending academic disparities, I find that few have moved beyond naming, blaming, and shaming schools to actually address the needs of students in meaningful and practical ways.

Moreover, much of the public discussion around school improvement and closing achievement gaps has featured the voices of those who have never been responsible for doing the work, including economists, sociologists, and politicians. To address the issue, these individuals can only recommend or use the tools they have at their disposal—and these include only blunt instruments, such as standardized tests, learning standards, and accountability requirements. Blunt instruments have often worked *against* the goal of improving student learning because they were designed to provide an impetus for rapid

change, whether or not that change results in improved student outcomes. There is a familiar saying that goes, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you treat everything like it’s a nail.”

Discussions around school reform have also historically blamed families and communities. Communities of color, in particular, have been questioned about their parenting styles and the extent to which they value education (Lee & Bowen, 2006). The existence of an achievement gap has been seen as an outgrowth of this perceived difference in values.

Some discussions have accused educators, either directly or indirectly, of being uncaring, racially biased, self-serving, or just plain lazy. (This is not to say that racial bias does not exist in education; schools reflect society at least as much as they shape it.) Well-meaning educators and leaders have been excoriated for conditions that have existed in schools for generations.

In other discussions, researchers have drawn a clear line linking poverty to low achievement (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Samuels, 2019). Some have posited that because low achievement and the achievement gap result from poverty, schools cannot, or should not be expected to, close the achievement gap. Others have argued that the only way to address low achievement and the achievement gap is to focus on mitigating community poverty and other out-of-school factors (Wages, 2018).

In all these discussions, as well as in achievement gap research, little emphasis has been placed on engaging frontline educators and leaders in authentic, meaningful, and collaborative discussions around practical steps to raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. There is too little emphasis on ensuring that schools have the capacity to meet the needs of all children. There is precious little emphasis on making meaningful improvements to student learning in real schools while striving to raise student test scores. Educators who feel a sense of urgency to address the achievement gap must rely on research and policy discussions that are mostly focused on describing the achievement gap and discussing its intractability.

Policymaker discussions about low achievement and the achievement gap often focus on concerns about low expectations for some or all students. Frequently, discussions have turned to the importance of “raising the bar.” This translates into developing new and more challenging learning standards and raising the test scores required to demonstrate proficiency.

None of these approaches provides meaningful support or guidance to educators, policymakers, leaders, or communities seeking to improve student

outcomes. Instead, they have contributed to a declining sense of efficacy—the belief that the actions one takes can cause meaningful change—among those who educate children.

The purpose of this book is to address the aspects of improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap that have received far too little attention. I wrote this book to gather into one place the tools that educators need to improve student outcomes and close achievement gaps. The Five Keys are integral to this process, and they are as follows:

- Key 1: Meaningful assessment
- Key 2: Language and literacy
- Key 3: Experience and exposure
- Key 4: Consolidation of knowledge
- Key 5: Perfect practice

Why Did You Pick Up This Book?

I can only imagine that you picked up a book about improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps because you, like me, have dedicated your career to educating children. Perhaps, like me, you have spent your life serving in schools and communities where students are school dependent and often underserved.

Perhaps you have sought out schools where you knew you could make a difference by improving education for students living in poverty, students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, or myriad other groups of students who have traditionally been underserved in schools. Or seeing the great disparities that became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have decided to focus on the academic struggles and fundamental inequities that affect students of all backgrounds in schools.

You may be a district or system leader or a school leader. You may be an instructional coach, a department leader, or another type of teacher leader. You may be an education policymaker or thought leader. Whoever you are, and whatever your reason for seeking to improve outcomes and close achievement gaps on behalf of students, welcome to the team! This book is for you.

I have some good news. You are embarking on some of the most important, meaningful, and fulfilling work that we do in schools. By engaging in a comprehensive process and implementing the Five Keys, you will make a difference for students in the short, moderate, and long term.

Unfortunately, there is also some bad news. As many of you know, this work is complex. It requires a shared sense of urgency and efficacy, as well as a level of capacity that is uncommon in our schools. In addition, the work of improving achievement and closing achievement gaps is not a one-time process. *There is no finish line.* As long as outside-of-school factors affect learners, we will need to continually implement the Five Keys.

First, Some Background

Before exploring the Five Keys, let's take a moment to understand some key vocabulary and background information that will assist us with this work.

Urgency, Efficacy, and Capacity

Effectively addressing the achievement gap requires that educators and leaders possess a sense of urgency, efficacy, and capacity. Some have worked diligently to develop the first of these, urgency. Educators have been motivated in both positive and negative ways to confront achievement gaps. The urgency of closing the achievement gaps in education has been promoted as a moral imperative, an economic necessity, and a political initiative (Hill, 2017).

Recently, researchers have provided extensive guidance on building the second of these—a sense of efficacy in schools. Numerous researchers have done outstanding work on the power of collective efficacy to improve student achievement (Donohoo et al., 2013). A review of research concluded that the effect size of collective efficacy among teachers is significantly higher than other factors, including socioeconomic status and prior student achievement (Hattie & Zierer, 2018).

The key element that is missing here is ensuring that educators, leaders, policymakers, and schools *have the capacity* to implement the strategies, changes, and structures that will improve outcomes for all students. For the purposes of this book, I define capacity as the knowledge, skills, understanding, and resources necessary to achieve a desired result.

If we know we need to address low student achievement and disparities in student outcomes and if we know we can produce meaningful change by working together, we then need to ask, What should we do differently? How should we do it? *The Instructional Leader's Guide to Closing Achievement Gaps* is designed to support educators as you answer those questions and implement improvements in your own unique settings.

Spheres of Influence

Unlike other discussions of school reform and the achievement gap, this book focuses entirely on tools, structures, and decisions that fall within the sphere of influence and direct power of educators and school systems. Numerous out-of-school factors contribute to low student achievement and significant achievement gaps. However, as a longtime educator, school leader, and natural control freak, I long ago learned to focus on the things I can control.

The main reasons for the long-standing existence of achievement gaps fall into two categories: sources and perpetrators. The *sources* of the achievement gap are differences, disparities, and deficits that set students up for lower achievement in school. Although the sources vary by school, community, social group, and sometimes individual, we can see some common sources in various settings.

One example of a common source of achievement gaps is a disparity in receptive and expressive vocabulary. Education researchers call this *the 30-million-word gap*. The disparity between young children in low-income environments and those in middle-class environments in terms of their receptive and expressive vocabulary appears to be one of the sources of a gap that shows up as early as prekindergarten (Golinkoff et al., 2019).

Other sources of achievement gaps can be specific to a given context. For example, in Flint, Michigan, in 2014, an entire community of children was exposed to lead in their household drinking water. In 2005, in New Orleans, Louisiana, many children were displaced because of Hurricane Katrina. Events such as these have short-, moderate-, and long-term effects on student learning and achievement (Yoran & Shapiro, 2022). For years into the future, educators and leaders can track the differences in student outcomes and learning disparities that such events have caused.

Perpetuators of the achievement gap are disparities that maintain or widen gaps that already exist. I use the term *perpetuators* instead of *contributors* because these perpetrators not only contribute to existing gaps, but also ensure the continuation of disparities as students progress through school.

Perpetuators of achievement gaps often come in the form of structures found in or outside school. These include tracking by perceived ability, disparities in discipline, and ineffective curricular choices. Perpetuators within schools are one of the reasons that achievement gaps often grow during a student's school years.

Closing achievement gaps requires addressing both the sources and the perpetrators of those gaps. If we eliminate the sources, but the perpetrators continue unabated, students will start out on an equal footing and then fall behind as they move through school. If we eliminate the perpetrators but fail to address the sources, students may grow unimpeded through their years of schooling. However, because they started out behind, a significant disparity in outcomes may persist.

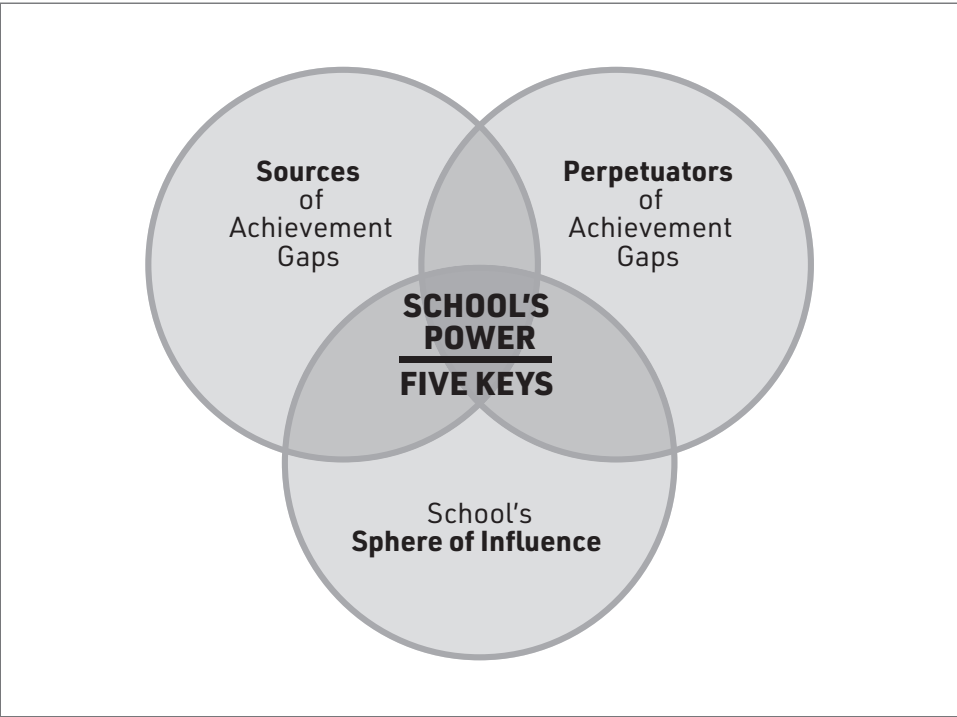
Perpetuators of the achievement gap can also contribute to the failure of plans undertaken to eliminate those gaps. Perpetuators often cause disparities in students' ability to make use of the opportunities provided, even if educators see those opportunities as identical to those provided to other groups. For example, when teachers provide students with the opportunity to receive after-school tutoring and support, the students' ability to participate is affected by their home schedule and their ability to get transportation home. In another example, all students may have the opportunity to sign up for advanced classes (such as advanced placement or International Baccalaureate), but if students did not develop the prerequisite skills in elementary and middle school, it is very difficult for them to enroll and succeed in the courses.

To effectively tackle the issue, we need, first of all, to develop an awareness and understanding of the sources and perpetrators of low achievement and achievement gaps. It is important to note, however, that schools struggle when asked to address sources and perpetrators over which they have little influence or control.

Second, we need to identify the sphere of influence of schools (see Figure I.1). In what areas do educators and leaders have the power to influence student outcomes? Schools' spheres of influence are broader than one might think. During the school year, many educators spend more waking hours with children than their parents do. What students experience in school can rapidly change their learning trajectories.

Although I don't want to minimize the powerful out-of-school factors that affect student outcomes, educators, leaders, and policymakers must nevertheless locate where the sources and perpetrators of low achievement and achievement gaps overlap with the power and influence of schools. This is the *zone of power* in which educators can make meaningful and lasting change—and where the Five Keys to improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps reside.

FIGURE I.1 A SCHOOL'S ZONE OF POWER



Improving Outcomes and Closing Gaps

As denoted by the title, this book focuses on improving student outcomes. These include assessment and test scores, but they extend well beyond these basic measures to improving student learning, educational attainment, and societal access and providing meaningful access to opportunity. A student who never masters higher-level math has no meaningful opportunity to become a doctor, regardless of their desire, effort, skills, or talent. The only way to ensure meaningful access to such opportunities is to ensure that students develop the skills they need.

This book also focuses on closing achievement gaps. Note that I say *gaps* instead of *gap*. Schools must address the sources and perpetrators of achievement gaps that fall within their sphere of influence. This is the school's zone of power to make meaningful and lasting change.

Vocabulary

Each chapter includes a list of key vocabulary, along with a list of chapter objectives. In addition to this chapter-specific vocabulary, I use key vocabulary throughout the book, specifically *achievement gap* and *disparities*.

The term *achievement gap* has been used to describe the disparity in academic performance, achievement, and attainment among defined demographic groups. On nearly every measure of educational achievement, children who are labeled as “low income” (most often defined as those who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch) underperform children who are viewed as middle class. This disparity in achievement has shown up on every large-scale standardized test of academic skill in the last 100 years (Hill, 2017).

Similar differences in student performance, achievement, and attainment surface when comparing Black and white students, Hispanic and white students, and native English speakers and English language learners. Researchers, policymakers, and some educators and leaders have questioned the accuracy of the term *achievement gap*. For a time, the term *opportunity gap* was favored because it seemed to highlight the importance of equality of opportunity (Hill, 2017). However, it also seemed to absolve society of any responsibility for outcomes. If everyone has equal opportunity, then the repeated failure of particular groups has to be due to their lack of effort or other deficits on their part.

I use the term *achievement gap* because it's the most widely used and understood term among educators, leaders, and policymakers. It denotes a focus on not just the opportunities provided, but also the outcomes achieved.

The term *disparities* refers to the measurable differences in outcomes among comparable groups of individuals when the differences are not based on group membership. For example, the fact that doctoral degree holders have significantly more education than high school graduates is not a disparity because the basis of group membership is the education level. However, data that show that the percentage of Hispanic doctoral degree holders is significantly lower than the percentage of white doctoral degrees holders in the same age range indicates a disparity in the attainment of doctoral degrees between Hispanic people and white people.

How to Use This Book

Use this book to think differently and strategically about your work on improving student learning and closing achievement gaps. Every strategy listed falls within the sphere of influence and the direct power of schools.

My goal is to build capacity among educators and leaders to ensure that all schools have the tools to change the trajectory of student achievement and support the best possible student learning outcomes. The book is designed to guide you through a step-by-step process where you will

- Develop a deep understanding of the achievement gaps in your setting, including the sources and perpetuators of those gaps (Chapter 1).
- Prepare yourself and your dedicated team of educators and leaders for the capacity-building work ahead (Chapter 2).
- Closely examine the five most meaningful and effective strategies—the Five Keys—for improving outcomes that fall within your school’s sphere of influence (Chapters 3–7).
- Develop and implement a practical, real-world action plan to make change on behalf of your students (Chapter 8).

Chapter 9 is a Policymaker’s Brief that provides guidance on ways they can assist educators and leaders in doing this work.

This book is designed for the reader to work through the process from the beginning to the end. However, if you already have a clear understanding of the gaps that exist in your school or system and have made a systemwide commitment to address those gaps, you might decide to move directly into examining the Five Keys. Whether you start at the beginning or jump in at the Five Keys, take some time to prioritize and strategize next steps. The final chapters will guide you through that process.

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About the Author



Teresa D. Hill, EdD, is an educational leader with 26 years of experience working with students, educators, and leaders. She has devoted her career to combating achievement gaps. Her motto is “All children can learn . . . period.” Teresa started her career teaching a kindergarten class of 31 students in an urban school. She served as an assistant principal, a principal, and an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Teresa embarked on her current role as superintendent in South Holland, Illinois, in 2012.

Teresa holds a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and doctoral degrees in elementary education and educational administration from Illinois State University. She has consulted with multiple school districts and presented at district, state, and national conferences across the United States, helping schools improve outcomes for underserved students. She is the author of *Every Closed Eye Ain’t Sleep: African American Perspectives on the Achievement Gap* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011) and *Combating the Achievement Gap: Ending Failure as a Default in Schools* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

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