

JANE E. POLLOCK SHARON M. FORD
MARGARET M. BLACK

Minding the
Achievement
Gap

the curriculum
the plan book
the grade book

**One
Classroom
at a Time**

Advance Uncorrected Copy --- Not for distribution

Minding the
Achievement Gap
**One Classroom
at a Time**



1703 N. Beauregard St. • Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA
Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600 • Fax: 703-575-5400
Website: www.ascd.org • E-mail: member@ascd.org
Author guidelines: www.ascd.org/write

Gene R. Carter, *Executive Director*; Ed Milliken, *Chief Program Officer*; Carole Hayward, *Publisher*;
Laura Lawson, *Acquisitions Editor*; Julie Houtz, *Director, Book Editing & Production*; Katie Martin, *Editor*;
Georgia Park, *Senior Graphic Designer*; Mike Kalyan, *Production Manager*; Cynthia Stock, *Typesetter*;
Kyle Steichen, *Production Specialist*

Copyright © 2012 ASCD. All rights reserved. It is illegal to reproduce copies of this work in print or electronic format (including reproductions displayed on a secure intranet or stored in a retrieval system or other electronic storage device from which copies can be made or displayed) without the prior written permission of the publisher. By purchasing only authorized electronic or print editions and not participating in or encouraging piracy of copyrighted materials, you support the rights of authors and publishers. Readers who wish to duplicate material copyrighted by ASCD may do so for a small fee by contacting the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA (phone: 978-750-8400; fax: 978-646-8600; web: www.copyright.com). For requests to reprint or to inquire about site licensing options, contact ASCD Permissions at www.ascd.org/permissions, or permission@ascd.org, or 703-575-5749. For a list of vendors authorized to license ASCD e-books to institutions, see www.ascd.org/epubs. Send translation inquiries to translations@ascd.org.

Printed in the United States of America. Cover art © 2012 by ASCD. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this book should not be interpreted as official positions of the Association.

All web links in this book are correct as of the publication date below but may have become inactive or otherwise modified since that time. If you notice a deactivated or changed link, please e-mail books@ascd.org with the words “Link Update” in the subject line. In your message, please specify the web link, the book title, and the page number on which the link appears.

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-1384-8 ASCD product #112005 n5/12
Also available as an e-book (see Books in Print for the ISBNs).

Quantity discounts for the paperback edition only: 10–49 copies, 10%; 50+ copies, 15%; for 1,000 or more copies, call 800-933-2723, ext. 5634, or 703-575-5634. For desk copies: member@ascd.org.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pollock, Jane E., 1958–

Minding the achievement gap one classroom at a time / Jane E. Pollock, Sharon M. Ford,
Margaret M. Black.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4166-1384-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Educational equalization—United States. 2. Academic achievement—United States. I. Ford,
Sharon M. II. Black, Margaret M. III. Title.

LC213.2.P65 2012

379.2'60973—dc23

2012000469

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Minding the Achievement Gap One Classroom at a Time

Introduction	1
1. Minding the Achievement Gap	7
<i>Educator Voice: Kathy Gwidt, District Administrator</i>	18
2. Solutions That Are Invisible in Plain Sight	24
<i>Educator Voice: Susan Hensley, Elementary Curriculum Specialist</i>	47
3. Students at Risk: Increasing Engagement Through Intentional Teaching	54
<i>Educator Voice: Jenn Sykora, High School Spanish and Health Teacher</i>	82
4. English Language Learners: Incorporating Language Standards as Goals	88
<i>Educator Voice: Julie Housaman, District Administrator</i>	112
5. Increasing Achievement in Special Education	116
<i>Educator Voice: Mark Bazata, High School English Teacher and Co-Teacher</i>	136
Afterword	141
Acknowledgments	143
References and Resources	144
Index	146
About the Authors	149



Introduction

JILL CULLIS, A HIGH SCHOOL GOVERNMENT TEACHER WITH 20 YEARS of experience, remembers her epiphany clearly.

“I am told there is a moment in every person’s career that forever changes the perception each of us has about what we’ve done in the past and what we can accomplish in the future,” she says. “For me, that moment took place the day that Andrew Romanoff, then the Speaker of the House in the Colorado legislature, came to my class to talk with my students.”

Jill describes her school community near Denver, Colorado, as “disadvantaged urban.” She had been told that during Speaker Romanoff’s visit, he would be discussing new opportunities for high school students and the critical importance of finishing high school. He said he sought to have an “honest conversation,” and Jill knew he would certainly get *that* from her students.

Because Speaker Romanoff was not the first politician guest speaker to visit the class, Jill expected him to offer newly packaged nostrums involving technology, flexible schedules, and maybe scholarships to attend college. Fairly confident, Jill waited for her students to tell the Speaker what they always told her: they were typical teenagers who lacked personal motivation, their parents were too busy to participate in or support school events, and the state incentives would only interest the students who were likely to graduate anyway. But instead of offering platitudes tied to scholarships, Speaker Romanoff had an announcement and a question. “We are working at the state level to intentionally close the achievement gap, especially for students in schools like

yours—with lower achievement and potentially high dropout rates,” he said. “So what I want to ask you is this: What makes students drop out? What makes students drop out here, at your school?”

Darien spoke out first. “School is boring,” he said. “*That’s* what makes students drop out. If you want us to stay in school, then the teachers have to change how they teach us. You come to class and the teacher talks or maybe gives you a test. Sometimes you know how well you are doing, but sometimes it is just a big surprise at the end of the semester.”

“I have to agree,” Alicia said. “We come to school, but some of our teachers—I don’t want to say this, but they seem to get excited only if they can take points away from us. Sometimes there are students who just don’t do anything in class, and the teacher tells them ‘they have a choice,’ meaning that they are choosing not to work. I don’t think those kids know how to do the assignments. Sometimes the teachers tell them they should have learned it before, but they didn’t. After a while, the teacher just moves on ahead, leaving them behind, and that is just the way it is.”

Raul spoke up a bit timidly, saying, “I also think that some teachers are happy as long as we give the right answers or stay quiet. Sometimes I do have something to say, but I don’t get the chance, so I just sit quietly.”

For Jill Cullis, *this* was the moment that changed everything.

“Until then,” Jill says, “I had been proud of consecutive years of ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in my evaluations and my two Teacher of the Year awards. But when I heard what my students had to say about class, knowing they could very well have been describing me on some days, I admitted to myself that I was the only person responsible for planning and delivering the instruction in my classroom, and that maybe I had been abdicating my responsibility to teach better.

“Please understand that I am not of the opinion that instruction needs to compete with the latest video game, but I knew that I, too, had students earning *Ds* and *Fs*, and saw some of my students looking bored during my instruction, and I had heard myself say those phrases before, like, ‘You should already know how to take notes.’ I realized that even though I did plan lessons and teach every day, it had not occurred to me that I should have intentionally worked to close the achievement gap every day in every class. Most of the students in

my classes are academically at risk because of language or low income, but I truly believe that it took that moment, listening to my own students, to realize that I needed to do something about achievement without a reform, without an initiative, but simply by changing my own planning and delivery. I just had to find the right tools.”

The persistent presence of underachieving students, students who graduate from high school ill-prepared for college and the workplace, and students who do not graduate at all confirms that we must continue to find new solutions. While politicians secure taxpayer support and funding for these efforts, and policymakers seek ways to reinvent and redesign schooling for the globally oriented 21st century, teachers can apply current research and use practical techniques to help academically at-risk students make vital progress.

Today’s research shows that what works in schools to advance student achievement is intentional teaching. Stated more directly, most education reform funding and attention is directed toward improving education by changing school factors, such as structures, schedules, and curriculum materials. However, as we will see in this book, it is the teacher effect—demonstrated through instructional planning and actual teaching and assessment practices in the classroom—that is the single most powerful measure influencing student learning in schools today. It is within every teacher’s reach to be a great teacher, rather than just a good teacher, and to close the achievement gap for academically at-risk students one classroom at a time. To do so, however, teachers will need to reexamine and adjust their teaching and assessment habits. Like Jill explained, being willing to take responsibility and then action means finding out about and applying research about what works.

This book is the fourth in an unofficial series aimed at improving student learning that began with *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) and its look at nine instructional strategies shown by research to raise student achievement. Five years after coauthoring *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Jane E. Pollock (“Janie” to friends and in these pages) concluded that although teachers and administrators were reading about the nine high-yield strategies, discussing them in book studies, and focusing on them for

staff development, this familiarity with the strategies was not translating into widespread student learning gains. The problem, it seemed to Janie, was that teachers learned about the strategies but did not deliberately adjust their teaching habits to incorporate the strategies; more important, teachers failed to recognize that the high-yield strategies were techniques students needed to learn, and that teachers needed to teach students how to use the strategies every day in every class.

In 2007, Janie addressed this issue when she wrote *Improving Student Learning One Teacher at a Time*, a book that introduced a lesson-planning schema known as GANAG. An update of Madeline C. Hunter's Mastery Teaching schema, published in the 1970s, the GANAG schema guides teachers to intentionally incorporate the nine strategies into daily classroom learning activities. Two years later, Janie and Sharon M. Ford wrote *Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time* (Pollock & Ford, 2009), which focused on how principals and instructional coaches could use GANAG in supervision to provide more useful feedback to teachers about how to effectively incorporate high-yield strategies in preparation and delivery of instruction. Janie and Sharon have worked with individual teachers as well as school and district administrators who are eager to share about the gains they have made by following the approaches presented in these two books—how (usually over the course of a single school year) they have raised test scores, met adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, and raised ACT scores, and how they have sustained these gains in following years.

A few years ago, Margaret M. Black (“Peggy”) suggested that Janie adapt GANAG to increase engagement and achievement for English language learners (ELLs), students with learning disabilities, and other academically at-risk learners. When specialists working in pull-out resource rooms and inclusion classrooms used GANAG, students showed gains in achievement and teachers improved communication among themselves and with students and parents. It confirmed what each of us—Janie, Sharon, and Peggy—had believed: the GANAG schema had the potential to help any teacher reach any student and, in effect, close the achievement gap on a classroom-by-classroom basis.

Minding the Achievement Gap One Classroom at a Time offers both classroom teachers and specialists guidance based on research and practice that

works for all ages, all curriculum areas, and all student populations, but is especially effective in helping academically at-risk students, including students who are English language learners and who receive special education services. The approaches we share involve teachers intentionally changing their teaching habits to (1) deliberately provide learning goals; (2) teach students to interact with these goals by tracking their own progress; and (3) purposefully use and direct students to use high-yield learning strategies that maximize feedback as a way to further all students' engagement. Based on research and the successes we have seen, we believe such changes in teaching practices can raise achievement and develop more self-regulated and better-prepared students.

We begin in Chapter 1 by pointing out that neither the achievement gap nor efforts to close it are new developments. The purpose of this discussion is to demystify reform efforts and sensationalized educational crises. Efforts to raise achievement levels of *all* children in the United States stretch back hundreds of years, and many of these reforms have appropriately focused on school structures. Using recent research that testifies that the most effective way to improve student achievement is to shift reform attention away from structural school factors toward the classroom, we emphasize the importance of teachers reexamining their instructional planning and assessment practices in order to help all students raise achievement every day in every class.

Chapter 2 discusses how tools easily available to every teacher—curriculum documents, a plan book, and a grade book—can be coordinated through GANAG to boost student learning. We discuss ways that teachers can exponentially increase the effectiveness of feedback by revising their usual planning and delivery habits. The design of GANAG cues students to use high-yield strategies to reach specific curriculum goals—both lesson content and lesson skills—and GANAG gives teachers an intentional way to connect the curriculum to their plan book and their grade book.

Chapter 3 addresses academically at-risk students who don't "do school" well and appear unmotivated. We propose a solution to increase engagement and promote master learning: the use of interactive notebooks in concert with the phases of GANAG and the nine high-yield strategies. The "interactive"

quality of the notebook redefines how feedback can change the engagement of otherwise passive learners.

In Chapter 4, we take a closer look at English language learners, a critical subgroup of academically at-risk students. ELLs constitute a growing population of children in U.S. schools. This chapter deliberately addresses the “Gs” of GANAG—goal setting and goal review—in both the planning and delivery of instruction. We point out that English language learning standards are available in every state, and teachers can use them intentionally as the learning objective rather than as just a checklist to assess students. Adapting GANAG to include both content and language goals allows EL specialists and general education teachers to deliberately monitor student progress toward both language acquisition and content goals during pull-out or inclusion classroom time.

Chapter 5 discusses GANAG for special education teachers and introduces an adaptation called GANAGPlus that increases and improves communication and instructional coordination between co-teachers. Blending co-teaching methods with the phases of GANAG allows for synchronized teaching and assessment. In addition, any student in a pull-out or resource classroom also benefits when the teacher organizes his or her lessons to intentionally provide instruction and frequent feedback toward progress on curriculum goals, which are the underlying steps of the GANAG schema.

We appreciate the efforts made by all educators to mind the achievement gap and are especially grateful to those who have provided the “Educator Voices” between the chapters of this book. Often classroom teachers and specialists can “say it best” in their own words, and here they do, sharing experiences about how concepts we present are working in real classrooms and schools. The insight they provide is a valuable part of the conversation.

All educators who read this book should be able to reaffirm their belief in the power a teacher has to improve student learning. We know that every teacher can actively mind and close the achievement gap, one classroom at a time.

1

Minding the Achievement Gap

“CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IS MORE URGENT TODAY THAN EVER before, and dramatic success is possible. Academic excellence is difficult to achieve, but is not a controversial goal,” writes economist Ronald Ferguson in *Toward Excellence with Equity* (2008, p. 284). Countless agencies produce vast amounts of literature focused on the notable disparity that exists between the educational achievement of white and minority students (primarily black and Hispanic). Much of this literature shares Ferguson’s sentiment that closing the achievement gap is an urgent national imperative. We think it is, too.

We agree with Ferguson that group-proportional racial equality in achievement is an important goal for the nation, but we are mindful that significant learning gaps exist for other populations of students, too, including those who are living in situational or generational poverty, those who are not proficient in English, and those who have disabilities and receive special education services. We further agree that making it possible for every student in the United States to achieve academic success is an uncontroversial goal—and a compelling one for every educator in every classroom, every day.

Centuries of Schools in Crisis

As urgent a priority as closing achievement gaps seems today, the penchant to propose broad educational reform to close the educational achievement gap has been around for a very long time. The Massachusetts Education Law of

1642, for example, required that parents or guardians see to it that their children could read and write (in order to follow the laws and know the principles of their religion). This was less a reflection of the value that colonists placed on schooling than it was recognition that surviving in the New World required certain sets of skills and knowledge. The Law of 1647 later required towns with 50 families or more to build a school and hire a schoolmaster to teach children to read and write. In just five years, the colonists realized that there was an achievement gap and that the solution was to create schools for all children in the town to attend.

Another example, 200 years later, reveals another achievement gap. In 1845, the results of the first standardized test administered to 500 students in Boston distressed Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, who concluded, “What little students knew came from memorizing the textbook without having to think about the meaning of what they had learned” (Rothstein, 1998, p. 17). Mann proposed a way to close the learning gap he saw: improve teacher preparation so that all students had access to schools with highly qualified instructors.

In *The Way We Were? The Myths and Realities of America’s Student Achievement*, Richard Rothstein (1998) covers 100 years of U.S. school reform efforts aimed at tackling “educational crises” like the one Mann noted. Many of these crises seem strikingly contemporary to a modern reader—from poor literacy in New York during the Great Depression, to inadequate knowledge of world geography in the 1940s, deficient understanding of mathematics in the 1960s, subpar critical thinking skills in the 1970s, and a lack of workplace skills in the 1980s, all the way up the present-day perception that students do not have the 21st century skills they will need in a global, knowledge-based economy.

Some of the recent explorations of key gaps in the educational attainment of U.S. students include *Democracy at Risk* (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008) and *A Stagnant Nation: Why American Students Are Still at Risk* (Strong American Schools, 2008). We suspect if Rothstein were asked to comment on the urgency insinuated by new reports describing achievement gaps, he might quote Will Rogers, as he did in his 1998 book, saying, “The schools ain’t what they used to be and probably never were” (p. 17).

✧ Time to Reflect ✧

How does knowing that rhetoric about “educational crises” dates back to the colonial era affect your perspective on the current achievement gap?

Unnecessarily Ambitious Reforms

Rothstein’s research touches on two particularly noteworthy issues. First, he affirms that evidence repeatedly shows achievement levels in the United States to be better than they have been in years past, but he adds that good news does not necessarily make for good news stories. Second, Rothstein expresses apprehension about what he refers to as political “hyperventilated rhetoric.” He contends that repeated speech making about the dire state of U.S. education leads to the crafting of unnecessarily ambitious education reforms rather than to the implementation of thoughtful, effective plans. Because the populace believes schools are performing so unsatisfactorily—so much more poorly than “they used to”—educators and politicians are designing broad reforms that look very different from targeted reform aimed at making generally satisfactory schools better and helping those students who really are at risk of academic failure. Rothstein goes on to quip, almost apologetically, that people who pay to fund schools might need to perceive a situation as a crisis before they are willing to act.

Empiricist Gene Glass, best known for originating the concept of meta-analysis in the fields of psychology and education, is careful to point out that *schools in crisis* is a not a new concept: “Criticism and reform of the education of young people was old when Quintilian (35–95 A.D.) was young” (2008, p. 4). Glass argues that inflated impressions of a crisis in education can have detrimental consequences, influencing choices for reform initiatives at the national level that trickle down to guide local decisions and budget expenditures.

When we read commentary about schools today not performing “well enough,” there is often an implication and sometimes even a direct assertion that subpar schools put national prosperity at risk. Both Glass and Rothstein

argue that the relationship between education and the economy is far more complicated than the simple picture painted by school critics. More critically, they point out that myths about school failure can lead to ill-conceived reform measures that set up the public to conclude that the public school system is irretrievably broken and cannot be fixed.

From Rhetoric to Targeted Change

It is important for educators to reaffirm that closing the achievement gap is not a recent effort in the United States; it is more accurately seen as an ongoing challenge—one that is now our turn to tackle, with both the wisdom of historical perspective and the scientific insight of research informing our approach. As we seize this opportunity, we must remember that exaggerated rhetoric leads to wide political or radical reform action that tends to burn out before the next political reform. When it comes to achieving significant, long-term learning improvement for students, smaller, more targeted changes are what work best, and teachers can play a vital part in those changes every day (Marzano et al., 2001).

✧ Time to Reflect ✧

In what ways does the current narrative about the achievement gap at the national level affect local school decisions about the steps to take to improve student learning?

Mind the Gap to Close the Gap

The pithy phrase “mind the gap” has been popularized by the London Underground railway to help passengers heed the uneven space between the subway door and the station platform. Although engineers tested various solutions (such as rebuilding and adding bridges), they decided the best course of action was to teach passengers to automatically step across the breach. So

there are billboards and robotic voices that admonish commuters to “mind the gap.” Having learned to do so, commuters carry on with their daily business, and there is no need to look to engineers to perform a massive and costly transformation.

When it comes to improving education, although the difference between “closing” the gap and “minding” it may seem inconsequential, the terminology represents a critical change in perspective—encouraging empowered educators to make subtle changes in their work rather than wait for communication about broad-based, top-down initiatives that may have little to do with the reality that they see. “Closing the gap,” in addition, seems unintentionally negative and generally admonishes the school or district to “fix” what may be low achievement “created or caused” by the school. “Minding the gap,” on the other hand, suggests attentiveness or thoughtful action.

Teachers Can Change the Valence

Sometime shortly after being sworn in as president in 1801, Thomas Jefferson wrote to scientist Joseph Priestley about various possibilities of “innovation.” In a biography about Priestley, Stephen Johnson (2008) notes that in the 1800s, “innovation” was a negative term, because new development was seen as detrimental to the existing order. Jefferson and Priestley, however, used the term to mean “a looking forward, not backward, for improvement.” The negative connotation of “innovation” was transformed to a positive. As Johnson puts it, “The change of valence of the word [innovation] over the next century is one measure of society’s shifting relationship to progress” (p. 198).

In this book, we present information and ideas that we hope will inspire educators to change the valence of the word “gap.” If teachers consider an achievement gap as an opportunity to make an improvement, then they will find ways to shift the progress of improving learning for all students.

Teachers can mind the gap they see in their classrooms. They can, with self-initiative and without delay, adjust their instructional and assessment practices rather than wait a year for the next data retreat or until the end-of-term or end-of-year test results confirm that learning gaps exist. Most school-based

efforts undertaken explicitly to “close the gap” focus on analyzing summative test results from annual external measures and making generalized judgments on the status of population groups. Because the scores typically come late in the school year and long after the tests are actually administered, data analysis about the actual scores themselves is generally the most we can do at that point in time—a reality that leaves many administrators and teachers feeling powerless because the students have moved on to another grade level and the data usually confirm what was already known. This is why educators face the arrival of test scores with a certain fatalism.

Many educators know that once external test scores arrive, it is too late in the school year to help specific students who have fallen short of learning goals make the gains they need in order to catch up. In contrast, teachers who mind the gap in their own classrooms know which students are not performing well and can adjust their practices accordingly, making intentional instruction and formative assessment decisions that improve both lesson planning and daily teaching. Minding the gap suggests action that is taken during instruction to support and keep students from falling into a pattern of low achievement or disengagement. Effective teaching, with ongoing adjustments for student learning throughout the year, allows teachers to continue moving forward with academically at-risk students.

✧ Time to Reflect ✧

What are the advantages to changing the conversation from “closing” the gap to intentionally and voluntarily “minding” the gap?

Effective Schools

Most teachers will admit that there are students in their classes who could perform better. Some of these “academically at-risk” students have disabilities or emerging language skills, while others may be described as unmotivated—derailed by

boredom or by a lack of background knowledge that makes learning obstacles seem insurmountable. Having students who persistently fall short of the prescribed learning outcomes contributes to teacher frustration, which is only compounded when these teachers continue to use strategies that do not get results rather than investigate new practices that might increase student achievement.

The Effective Schools movement of the 1970s launched an admirable charge to improve learning led by teachers and administrators within the profession. Many “best practices in teaching” lists emerged during this time, most advocating increased student involvement in learning guided by teachers engaged in some form of professional development that encouraged collaboration and reflective self-evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Education professionals have since built on this foundation, incorporating many of these best practices into more recent efforts to focus student learning on curriculum goals and use instructional strategies proven to bring gains in student learning.

More recently, Steven Covey (1989) has written extensively about the habits of successful people, and one tenet that applies here is a tactic he calls “sharpening the saw.” In one anecdote Covey shares, a person saws a load of wood using a dull saw. Another person who has been observing the laborious task suggests that the first person should “sharpen the saw.” But the first person declines, contending that “If I stop to sharpen the saw, I won’t get the work done.” Covey recommends that each of us find a way to “sharpen the saw” in our own lives or professions, because it is a way to renew, preserve, and enhance oneself. One simple way for teachers to sharpen their pedagogical saws is to look to research, which reveals that what works in schools to advance student achievement is intentional teaching, dependent on teachers’ willingness to reexamine planning methods, instructional practices, and assessment habits in order to determine how to help all students make gains, especially those characterized as academically at risk or underachieving.

The Power of the Teacher Effect

According to John Hattie (2009), author of *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement*, many national reforms advocated as

ways to close the achievement gap (e.g., reducing class size, offering out-of-school curricula, providing more scheduled time for teachers to meet) are worthy innovations. But, he points out, the research repeatedly shows that reforms like these, focused on school and schedule structures, do not lead to significant student achievement gains. The effort invested in implementing structural adaptations would be better invested in Covey's "saw sharpening"—in teachers improving the ways in which they make the learning goals and success criteria clear to the students, using direct instruction that includes high-yield strategies, and providing effective and frequent feedback to the learners. According to Hattie, it is the *teacher* effect on student achievement that education reform efforts ought to focus on, not the school effect.

In his compendium of studies related to student achievement from 1995 to the present, Hattie (2009) observes that many teachers do sincerely try to use new techniques every year, but that "research concluded that any typical innovation a teacher uses can be expected to change average affective and achievement outcomes by 0.2 and 0.4 standard deviations" (p. 12), which Hattie deems between a small- and a medium-sized gain.

What this means is that teachers have been introducing new strategies for years (which is good), but most new techniques result in only nominal gains; those interventions need to be able to compete with the powerful effect that out-of-school factors (home influences, resources, demographic characteristics) have on low-performing students or marginalized populations. What's more, when teachers who do try a new approach find, at the end of the school year, that their low-performing groups have not made the hoped-for gains in test scores or grades, these teachers tend to drop the strategy and introduce a new one the following year.

Many educators have experienced a similar large-scale "bandwagon" approach in which every teacher in the school or a district is expected to implement one strategy to increase student achievement in a marginalized population. When the end-of-the-year test scores do not indicate gains, everyone collectively tries another new strategy. The result, as many teachers have told us, is "initiative fatigue" combined with the disappointing fact that their pedagogical efforts produced no significant student achievement gains.

Hattie's research corroborates the contention that shifting attention from the school to the individual classroom teacher is the key to lasting and significant changes in achievement. When a teacher deliberately seeks and implements innovations that incorporate high-yield strategies (those boosting outcomes by 0.4 or more standard deviations), students with marginalized achievement levels will show proficiency gains that trump negative out-of-school factors (p. 9). This conclusion underscores points made earlier in this chapter: shifting improvement efforts from the school to the classroom and changing automatic teaching habits, including the ways daily lessons are prepared and delivered, are imperative. Teachers can sharpen their pedagogical saws by (1) improving the ways in which they make learning goals and success criteria clear to the students, (2) planning for and using direct instruction that includes high-yield strategies, and (3) providing effective and frequent feedback to the learners.

✧ Time to Reflect ✧

How could your school use Hattie's findings to improve student learning?

A Light That Has Dimmed

On Edweek's *Teacher Magazine*/Living in Dialogue blog, teacher-leader Anthony Cody (2009) shared this observation:

According to test score data released today, California students have increased their ability to pass state tests so that fully half of them are proficient in English (up from 46 percent a year ago), and 46 percent are proficient in math (up from 43 percent a year ago).

However, the achievement gap remains as wide as ever, with only 47 percent of African American and Latino students performing at a proficient level in English. This does not come as any shock to most educators. For all the emphasis on closing the gap, little has really changed for these students.

One thing seems clear: Eight years of "shining a bright light" on the achievement gap seems to have made very little difference.

Anthony Cody is right to point out that years of “shining a light” on the achievement gap have done fairly little, so far, to close that gap. Schools embrace new school-improvement measures on a regular basis, yet, as indicated by research, innovations tend to be structural (e.g., addressing the schedules, working conditions, and extracurricular activities) and make very little impact on academic outcomes, especially for students who are academically at risk.

What this tells us is that educators need a different, brighter light. School and district leaders can support teachers best through initiatives to change individual teachers’ pedagogical habits. Studies show that a teacher who seeks professional feedback about instructional practices can produce strong gains, even in classrooms with students who previously performed poorly (Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006). Teachers and principals who work in tandem to change automatic teaching habits see greater gains in student achievement (Pollock & Ford, 2009).

Each Teacher Holds the Key

We agree with Glass and Rothstein, who suggest that steadfast, minor changes made by teachers at the classroom level are the real key to long-term improvement in student learning. High school teacher Jill Cullis, whom we heard from in this book’s Introduction, would probably agree as well. She asserts that the best thing that happened to her disadvantaged students was that after two decades of teaching, she decided to learn to teach better. Within a year of her “momentous epiphany,” the achievement scores of students in her class had increased an average of 20 points.

“In the past,” Jill says, “I could ignore the lofty goals we heard in meetings year after year about ‘closing the gap’ because they always sounded like mandates for administrators, whereas the tasks teachers were asked to accomplish in data retreats often simply confirmed that our students were not performing well. But we already knew that.

“Minding the gap the way I do now is unusual because I don’t honestly think anyone really expects the classroom teacher to be the factor that closes the achievement gap; everyone assumes it takes a national or state reform

effort. But now I have the tools I need to attend to student achievement daily in my classroom. It's a matter of being much more mindful of student responses and perspectives, of planning for and assessing changes in their learning, and teaching students how to assess their own learning.”

Teachers are the most important factor in student success, but only if they deliberately use teaching practices to change students' low performances. In the next four chapters, we will take a closer look at specific techniques that all teachers can use to mind the gap within their existing classroom structures to help students of all abilities, regardless of the challenges they face, become more successful learners.

✧ Time to Reflect ✧

What can you do, as a teacher or an administrator, to mind the gap?

In some ways, we are at a crossroads in time in education; at this opportune point, we can use the knowledge of historical trends and perceived gaps in learning combined with the firm directions where research can point us in order to effectively educate *all* students. We have opportunities to make thoughtful decisions that will lead to targeted change in classrooms rather than attempting broad-based district and school reforms that may not promote student learning and close achievement gaps. Teachers have an essential role to play. By attentively focusing on improving classroom instruction and student learning outcomes, they can effectively mind, and thus close, achievement gaps.



Educator Voice

Kathy Gwidt, District Administrator

Part of Kathy Gwidt's job as Director of Teaching and Learning in the School District of New London in Wisconsin is to guide administrative teams through the classroom observation process. During that process, she and others listened to students describe their successes and how they fell short of achieving academically. Kathy and her colleagues now realize the power and value of common language and effective feedback. It has led them to effectively mind the gap by classroom, not by school.

“How Could This Happen?”

“Being the student I am, I never thought I would make it into advanced math.”

When asked what he meant by this comment, Corey, a high school junior, explained that he was “not one of the smart kids.” We knew that Corey had a 1.0 grade point average (GPA), but from the time of our introduction, I was struck by how little that label seemed to fit this articulate young man. He confidently shook my hand, eloquently conversed about his middle school years, and defined “the smart kids” as those who had their agenda books signed and who regularly participated in class. Corey also told me that back in his elementary days he had been extremely successful in advanced-level math, a class in which homework was not graded, but quizzes and tests were. Corey explained that he never did the homework for this class but had maintained an A anyway. “Dream come true, right?” he snickered.

Corey's voice is representative of academic underachievers whom we interviewed in an effort to increase overall achievement in our district by better understanding student perception of grades and report cards. I talked with Corey and high school juniors who were identified by their GPAs as either *academic achievers* (those with GPAs ranging from 3.5 to 4.0) or *academic underachievers* (those with GPAs below 1.0). Although much research exists about grading and reporting, literature addressing student perception on the topic of achievement was limited, and I was committed to adding student voices to the plethora of research already published.

What our efforts to understand student perspective on achievement taught us was that we educators have a tremendous opportunity to mitigate achievement differences, regardless of genetic or environmental factors—and the way to do that is by shifting our focus from “closing” achievement gaps to “minding” them at the classroom level, with each individual student.

Corey was what I would describe as an introspective underachiever. He was thoughtful, independent, and confident, but achievement in school was not his primary concern. He was not a disruptive student; in fact, he was reserved and rarely spoke during class. Teachers generally were frustrated with Corey, seeing his unwillingness to participate in class or complete homework as a puzzling lack of responsibility on his part.

During our interview, Corey became a voice and a solution instead of a cipher. He continued to tell the story of his school experience, returning back to his unlikely presence in elementary school advanced math. His teacher had explained to him that his assessment scores were the highest in the class. When I asked how he had felt when his teacher told him this, Corey replied, “I sort of felt like . . . see, I knew [that] I knew that stuff, and I sort of had hope that school would make sense to me. Other years, teachers would just give me bad grades, and that was it. I look back and know I tried a lot harder [in the advanced math class].”

Continuing, Corey shared that by midyear, other students and even other teachers did not think it was fair that he could pass the class without completing homework, which, although not graded, was still “required.” In response to complaints, the decision was made to move Corey to a regular math class—one in which homework was both required and graded. This class involved Corey

repeating a lot of content he had already mastered, but it added the responsibility of homework. Corey did his homework in this class, and the department eventually moved him back to his original advanced course. Upon his return to the class, however, Corey once again stopped doing homework, and within a short period, he found himself back in a regular math class.

Corey's take on this? "While I bounced back and forth [between classes], I failed to learn, or missed bits [and pieces of instruction] that went on in both classes. I feel that missing that has had a big impact on my life."

I was left wondering how much of the entire scenario of underachievement was a function of our school policies inadvertently contributing to Corey "falling through the cracks." By not doing his math assignments, he was deemed to be "not performing well," but at the same time, he *could* perform the math. The actions taken to "help" Corey didn't motivate him the way the school had intended, didn't support his knowledge or performance, and may have led, as he believes, to further detrimental consequences. How many other academically at-risk students were our habitual practices hurting more than helping?

"That's the Way We Have Always Done It"

I work with exceptional educators who are dedicated to improving student achievement. Most have spent their careers attempting to balance shifts in the educational pendulum. We embrace a philosophy of continuous improvement and can clearly point to data that indicate learning gaps exist. We have worked diligently to comply with state and federal mandates, and according to all reports, we have done so successfully. Yet we know there are academic underachievers who have been alienated from a system that, even though unintentionally, does not embrace them.

We understand the history of grading and reporting, as well as current practices in these areas, but little appears to have changed to accommodate student needs. Despite research that encourages change, we have continued to teach, grade, and report in much the same way that we were taught, graded, and reported on as high school students. As we look at Corey, and at other

students with similar stories, we know we cannot wait for grades and end-of-year data to confirm that learning gaps exist. Instead, we must be willing to grasp the value of adjusting classroom practices that improve instruction and ultimately achievement. To effect this change, we understand that we must acknowledge links between student perceptions and the context of everyday practice to avoid patterns of low achievement or disengagement.

A Switch to Minding the Gap

Traditions of grading and reporting of grades have remained sacred in the history of American education, so it would not have been a surprise if the staff and administrative team had remained satisfied with initiatives such as report card revisions or a change in grading and reporting policy. We were not. We knew that we needed more than structural change to realize sustained improvement; we needed change in the instructional practices at the classroom level.

Our staff had been working to develop clear learning targets, and principals embraced the GANAG framework in an effort to apply a common language to feedback that was provided to teachers during observations. Yet these strategies seemed to be applied inconsistently. Although teachers may have been stating the goal at the start of their lesson, for example, they weren't always teaching to it. And although there had been an immense amount of training provided to teachers, there was still plenty of confusion over how high-yield strategies could consistently be applied in a lesson. Classroom observations indicated the application of the strategies was minimal.

This is when we realized that we, the administrative team, needed the training as much as our teachers did. We needed to better understand just how we could provide effective feedback that encouraged teacher autonomy and empowerment. Instead of dissecting lessons with teacher groups, we asked Janie Pollock to work in tandem with principal teams to help us understand the power and value of classroom observations, common language, and effective feedback. Principals intently watched for examples of the nine high-yield instructional strategies shown by research to boost student achievement. By sharing observational experiences, we began to improve the quality of our

feedback to teachers, and teachers began to seek it out. Principals approached conversations more confidently as they met with teachers to discuss how the high-yield strategies fit into the GANAG framework. We had discerned that this dialogue could make a positive difference in classroom instruction, but we recognized that this contribution was only part of the success being realized.

It has been the individual classroom teacher who has made a positive impact on learning in ways that we had not imagined. In our walkthroughs, we now routinely observe how teachers are working to find better ways to include high-yield strategies that engage students and enrich lessons. One way this is apparent is in the way teachers communicate goals. Before, we might have seen teachers post or ask students to write down the goal of the day; now we are seeing teachers provide the opportunity for students to understand the goals and to personalize them.

Here's an example shared recently by one of our observers, a middle school principal who entered a classroom while the teacher was in the midst of a lesson opener. The principal selected a student and asked him what the sentences prominently displayed on the board were. That was the lesson's goal, the student replied, and the class worked to understand a new lesson goal each day. Continuing, the principal asked if the student knew the answer to the questions within the goal. "Well, no, I don't," the student responded. "Not yet. That is what we are trying to learn."

Based on what we see, when students in our district walk into a classroom, they look for the lesson goal that's been written on the board and then begin talking about what they are about to learn. Within the first few minutes of the class period, they record the lesson's goal in their notebook and, in many cases, use an objective score sheet to document the effort they plan to put into their learning; they will revisit the goal at the end of the lesson. In this way, teachers help make the connection between effort and achievement, and the result is more students beginning to take control over their own learning. We see students who have a clear understanding of learning goals because they actively communicate with their teachers about what they are learning.

These improvements have not happened overnight, and we realize that there is plenty we need to continue to do to engage students in ways that

correlate to improved student achievement. What is evident is that the initiative of the classroom teacher is allowing ongoing adjustment in instructional practice that will ultimately result in improved student achievement.

Although we are in the beginning stages of this journey, gains in achievement are evident. We will continue to work tirelessly to support and empower teachers through practices that alter pedagogical habits, because we realize that it is ultimately thoughtful change at the classroom level, rather than broad, sweeping reform at the district level, that is truly making the difference. We can now confidently work to close the student achievement gap, because we are finally properly minding that gap.



References and Resources

- Arkansas Department of Education. (2010). *Arkansas curriculum frameworks*. Available: <http://www.arkansased.org/educators/curriculum/frameworks.html>
- Civic Enterprises & Peter Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison.
- Cody, A. (2009, August 19). Living in dialogue: California scores rise, but gap remains [blog post]. *Education Week Teacher Online*. Retrieved August 4, 2011, from http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2009/08/california_scores_rise_but_gap.html
- Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project [website]. Available: <http://www.commoncore.org>
- Common Core State Standards Initiative [website]. Available: <http://www.corestandards.org>
- Council for Exceptional Children [website]. Available: <http://www.cec.sped.org>
- Covey, S. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly successful people*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Echevarria, J. (2006). Helping English language learners succeed. *Principal Leadership*, 6(6), 16–21.
- Echevarria, J., Vogt, M. E., & Short, D. (2004). *Making content comprehensible for English language learners: The SIOP Model* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Edmonds, R. (1979, October). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership* 37(1), 22.
- Ferguson, R. (2008). *Toward excellence with equity: An emerging vision for closing the achievement gap*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Forum for Education and Democracy. (2008). *Democracy at risk: The need for a new federal policy in education*. Washington, DC: Forum for Education and Democracy.
- Friend, M., & Hurley-Chamberlain, D. (n.d.). *Is co-teaching effective?* Retrieved August 4, 2011, from <http://www.cec.sped.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=7504&CAT=none>
- Fu, D. (2004). Teaching ELL students in regular classrooms at the secondary level. *Voices from the Middle*, 11(4), 8–15.
- Gersten, R., & Baker, S. (2000). What we know about effective instructional practices for English-language learners. *Exceptional Children*, 66(4), 454–470.
- Glass, G. V. (2008). *Fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips: The fate of public education in America*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Guskey, T. R., & Bailey, J. M. (2000). *Developing grading and reporting systems for student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Harper, C., & de Jong, E. (2004). Misconceptions about teaching English-language learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(2), 152–162.

- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006). *Classroom instruction that works with English language learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Hunter, M. (1982). *Mastery teaching*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Johnson, S. (2008). *The invention of air*. New York: Riverside Books.
- Kirshenbaum, H., Napier, R., & Simon, S. B. (1971). *Wad-ja-get? The grading game in American education*. New York: Hart.
- Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming grading*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Mathews, J. (2009, August 17). Age-old problem, perpetually absent solution: Fitting special education to students' needs. *Washington Post*. Retrieved August 4, 2011, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/16/AR2009081601805.html>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2011). *Education at a glance: OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (10th anniversary ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pascale, R., Sternin, J., & Sternin, M. (2010). *The power of positive deviance: How unlikely innovators solve the world's toughest problems*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Payne, R. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Pollock, J. E. (2007). *Improving student learning one teacher at a time*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Pollock, J. E. (2012). *Feedback: The hinge that joins teaching and learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Pollock, J. E., & Ford, S. M. (2009). *Improving student learning one principal at a time*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Pressley, M., Gaskins, I. W., Solic, K., & Collins, S. (2006). A portrait of Benchmark School: How a school produces high achievement in students who previously failed. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(2), 282–306.
- Rothstein, R. (1998). *The way we were? The myths and realities of America's student achievement*. New York: Century Foundation Press.
- State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (n.d.). English Language Development Standards. Retrieved December 3, 2011, from http://www.k12.wa.us/migrant_bilingual/eld.aspx
- Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (1998). Teaching is a cultural activity. *American Education*, 22(4). Available: <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1998/TeachingWinter98.pdf>
- Strong American Schools. (2008, April). *A stagnant nation: Why American students are still at risk*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://broadeducation.org/asset/1128-a%20stagnant%20nation.pdf>
- World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment. (2011). *WIDA's Can-Do descriptors by grade-level cluster*. Retrieved August 4, 2011, from http://www.wida.us/standards/CAN_DOS/index.aspx



About the Authors

Jane E. Pollock, PhD, is the director of Learning Horizon, Inc. A former English as a Second Language teacher, general classroom teacher, and school administrator, she consults long-term with schools worldwide to improve student learning, instructional practices, and supervision. She is the author of *Improving Student Learning One Teacher at a Time* (2007) and *Feedback: The Hinge That Joins Teaching and Learning* (2012) and the coauthor of *Dimensions of Learning Teacher and Training Manuals* (1996); *Assessment, Grading and Record Keeping* (1999); *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2001); and *Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time* (2009). She is a faculty member for ASCD. A native of Caracas, Venezuela, Janie earned degrees at the University of Colorado and Duke University. She can be reached at learninghorizon@msn.com or through her website, www.improvestudentlearning.com.

Sharon M. Ford, EdD, is a former special education and general classroom teacher with experience working with colleagues to develop IEP goals and help students achieve them. She most recently served as an assistant professor in the department of Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Colorado at Denver, where the primary focus of her work was school leadership to promote the professional development of K–12 teachers in all kinds of classrooms, including inclusion and resource classrooms. Sharon has also worked in a state department of education, supervising mentor teachers in numerous school and classroom

settings. She has also advised doctoral and master's degree students and taught courses for graduate students seeking licenses as school principals and superintendents. Sharon's work has been published in refereed journals, including the *Journal of School Leadership*, and she is the co-author, with Jane E. Pollock, of *Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time*. She is the regional representative for a seven-state area to the Professors of Secondary School Administration, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and is president of the Colorado Association of Professors of School Administration. Sharon earned degrees at the University of Colorado and at Whittier College in California. She can be reached at sharonf3@me.com.

Margaret (Peggy) M. Black is the director of the Center for Diverse Student Learning. Concentrating on the areas of integrating service delivery models with an emphasis on English language learner programs, Peggy works with schools to increase the efficiency of program development for sustained growth in student learning. Influencing effective teaching for the 21st century is the core of her consulting and professional development work. Before assuming her current post, Peggy was a director in a regional service agency, a policy advisor to the Wisconsin governor's office, a school board president, and a classroom teacher. She is an adjunct faculty member at various universities. Peggy earned degrees at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and National Louis University. She can be reached at margaretblack.wi@gmail.com.