Families hold the key to increasing African American achievement in schools

In recent decades progress in addressing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps between African American and Latino students and white and Asian American students has been painfully slow. William Jeynes has conducted two meta-analyses examining which factors reduce this achievement gap, and the extent to which to parental involvement helps African American students perform well in school. He finds that faith and family factors help to reduce the achievement gap by up to 65 percent. Rather than simply pumping billions of dollars into school-based solutions for improving educational outcomes, he argues that politicians need to take a broader minded approach, and consider policies which recognize the importance of family involvement in improving educational outcomes.

There is no question that over the last half-century and more, the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap has been one of the most pressing debates in American education. Ronald Roach recently asserted that, “in the academic and think tank world, pondering achievement gap remedies takes center stage.” Specifically, African American and Latino students trail white and Asian American students in average school outcomes. Progress on reducing the gaps has been agonizingly slow in spite of the fact that the United States has practiced programs of affirmative action, often offered teachers giving instruction in the inner cities 20 percent more than they would make elsewhere, and poured countless billions of additional dollars into urban education. Affirmative action, in particular, gives African Americans and Latinos in particular major advantages over their white counterparts, in terms of gaining entrance into America’s best colleges.

In spite of all of these efforts, racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps have remained largely intractable. The achievement gaps did narrow to some extent during the late 1970s and the 1980s. However, the narrowing of the differential in test scores in the 1970s was due to the fact is that test results during this decade were generally slumping badly for American youth of all races and the results of white children were going down a good deal faster than for African American students. Although technically the gap declined the answer to bridging the shortfall is not for the scores of other students to decline. Many educators attribute the progress in this area in the 1980s to the President Reagan’s Back to Basics Movement, because research indicates that that when disadvantaged children are exposed to the basics, which their more affluent counterparts generally receive in and out of school, academic differences abate.

Results from meta-analyses provide real hope

The results of two meta-analyses I conducted have provided real hope that the achievement gaps can be substantially reduced. These studies examined 1) what factors best reduce the achievement gap and 2) the extent to which parental involvement helps African American students perform well in school.

The first meta-analysis yielded two particularly important results. First, the findings confirmed the results of numerous other studies that indicated that non-school factors have much more of an impact than school variables on bridging racial and socioeconomic differences. Second, the two sets of factors that had the largest impact in bridging differences in scholastic outcomes by race and gender were family-based and faith-based in nature. Moreover, the power of these factors was so great that when highly religious African American, as well as Latino, children who were from two biological parent families, the achievement gap totally disappeared. Faith factors alone (without considering the family variables) and family factors alone (without considering the faith variables) reduced the achievement gap by between 60-65 percent.
The second meta-analysis indicated that African American parental involvement has a strong relationship with high scholastic outcomes. The extent of parental involvement’s influence is roughly one half of a grade point, e.g., the difference between a 3.0 and a 3.5 GPA.

The profound impact that parental engagement has on African American educational outcomes is especially noteworthy, given that the overwhelming majority of African Americans are raised in a single parent household. The research literature is clear that parental engagement is greatly facilitated when the mother and father are both in the household.

The results of the parental involvement meta-analysis are noteworthy especially because the study specifies the components of family involvement that have the most ameliorative effects on students. Among the aspects of this engagement by mothers and fathers that had the most positive impact on school outcomes were parental expectations, parental style (of raising children), and participation in school activities.

A new approach to addressing the achievement gap is needed

It is patent from the results of the meta-analyses that leaders need to inaugurate a new and much broader approach to alleviating the persistent disparities in educational outcomes by race. For over half a century, the primary initiatives to accomplish this goal have been almost solely educational and economic-based in nature. What we now have is a situation in which educators seek educational solutions, economists employ economic solutions, psychologists utilize psychological approaches, and so forth. Moreover, politicians seriously consider only the economic and educational proposals. The results of the meta-analyses suggest that this insular approach to the achievement gap by academics, politicians, and others is unwise. The findings of these studies indicate that one of the primary reasons why previous attempts to bridge unwanted differences have fallen short is because the focus of these interventions was very narrow. The studies also demonstrate another important reason why past efforts to reduce the gaps have fallen short; these initiatives did not emphasize factors that were actually the most important. Few proposals to reduce scholastic gaps involve strengthening the family and drawing from the empowering that personal faith creates.

Admittedly, one of the reasons why America’s leaders have emphasized pumping billions of dollars into improving African American educational outcomes and other school-based solutions is that these options are probably the
The achievement gap is too important an issue to not act on the evidence
The results of the meta-analyses are clear. Family and faith factors are important to consider and act upon, if one is to see a contraction of the achievement gap. Sadly, heretofore many leaders have dismissed faith and family variables as not primary ones. However, the results of the meta-analyses are undeniable. The extent to which a child experiences a stable family and a sense of purpose has a dramatic impact on how they do in school. It is time to more fully acknowledge this reality and act accordingly.

This article is based on the paper, ‘A Meta-Analysis: The Relationship Between Parental Involvement and African American School Outcomes’ in the Journal of Black Studies.

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William Jeynes is a Professor of Education at California State University, Long Beach, and a Senior Fellow, at the Witherspoon Institute, Princeton, NJ. His research interests cover a wide range of issues that include education, psychology, economics, history, religion, and sociology. His multidisciplinary approach has helped enable him to develop special relationships with the US and Korean governments. He has done a considerable amount of quantitative and qualitative research on how to bridge the achievement gap, parental involvement, religious commitment, historical trends, school choice, family structure, religious schools, discrimination, bullying, reading instruction, and public policy. He has written for the White House and for both the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations.

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