Closing the Achievement Gap: Key Policy Issues

The goal is to close the achievement gap. Economic status, race and culture should not be predictors of academic achievement.

To close the gap, school districts must direct resources to those with the greatest need and implement strategies to accelerate the learning of students who are underachieving. Closing the gap requires finding ways to close the readiness gap so that no children enter kindergarten significantly behind their peers. Serious attention must be given to creating learning environments that are intolerant of racism and exclusion and in which high expectations are held for all students. All students, especially low-achieving and disadvantaged students, must be taught by highly qualified staff in personalized learning environments. Curriculum and teaching practices must recognize differences in ethnicity, language and culture and teachers must be skilled in teaching students unlike themselves. An emphasis must be placed on literacy and mathematics. And, finally, reaching out to and empowering parents will be essential—schools cannot close these gaps alone.

The role of the school board is to work at the governance level to create the structure and policies for these reforms to occur systemically. In the following section, the key policy issues, guidelines for discussing these issues at the local board level, and recommendations for policy implementation are presented. Examples of what some school districts are doing to address each policy area are also presented.

The Task Force did not prioritize these policy issues. Each of the policy issues must be addressed to implement a comprehensive gap closing strategy. School boards are encouraged to review their current policies and practices to determine which of these policy issues should be priorities within their own district.

Allocation and Alignment of Fiscal Resources

Key Policy Issue — In Washington state, school districts are expected, for the most part, to improve student learning with existing resources. Given this reality, districts must make new, critical choices about the use of their resources and target those limited dollars where they will have the greatest impact.

According to Odden and Archibald (2001), several commonalities exist in the resource allocation practices of schools engaged in successful reform. These commonalities include:

- Schools allocate resources to where they are most needed and have the greatest impact on student achievement.

- Schools dramatically reduce or eliminate classroom pull-out strategies and implement other practices, such as one-to-one tutoring through extended day programs and instruction in small classes.

- Strategies implemented for low-achieving students, struggling students from low-income families, English language learners and those with mild learning disabilities are very similar and are delivered with pooled funds.

- An increasing number of districts eliminate or greatly reduce instructional aide positions and use resources to implement other teacher-provided instructional strategies to accelerate the achievement of struggling students.

Additional resources can also have a significant impact on student achievement when properly targeted. According to an NAEP study, resources must be allocated to specific programs, schools and/or grade levels and toward specific students to be most effective *(Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us, 2000).* Targeted class size reductions (for example, smaller class sizes only for schools with a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or smaller class sizes only at primary grades) are policies for boards to consider.

Equal does not necessarily mean equitable. Resources must be directed based on need. Weighted student formulas acknowledge that resources cannot be equally distributed if the needs of all students are to be met. Many districts allocate resources to schools in such a way that more funding per student goes to those schools with students with above average needs. For example, in Seattle Public Schools (www.seattleschools.org), about 60 percent of the district's state and local funding is allocated to schools on a weighted student formula, sending more money per student for special education, English language learners or students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Weighted student formulas can be used to address disproportional needs.

Questions to Guide the Policy Discussion

1. To what degree are existing resources used to achieve the greatest impact on student achievement? Are existing resources used to support research-based, best practices for closing the achievement gap?

2. How are resources allocated to different schools within the district? Do the schools with the most disadvantaged students have the level of resources they need to help close the achievement gap?

3. What board policies currently exist that perpetuate resource inequities? What board policies currently exist that create barriers to directing resources to students with the greatest need?

4. What are innovative models that other districts are using for aligning resources with the greatest needs?

5. How can the school district's allocation decisions be better aligned to improve student learning and close the achievement gap?

◆ Policy Recommendations ◆

1. Create a district and community culture that reinforces the commitment and belief that all district staff and the community members are responsible to, and accountable for, the education of **all** students at every school in the district. From this philosophical foundation, work with staff and the community in evaluating the use of existing resources and the degree to which resources are meeting the needs of students who must have their achievement accelerated to close the gap.

2. Complete an evaluation of current policies and programs intended to address needs of underachieving students and determine whether current resources are producing the desired benefits. Develop resource realignment policies that support programs based on valid research and results, and implement program evaluation methods and timelines for reporting back to the board on program effectiveness.

3. Investigate successful weighted student formulas used by other districts and determine their appropriateness in helping the district meet its gap closing goals.

4. Base resource allocation decisions on a well thought out strategic plan for closing the achievement gap, and target resources to meet the specific gap closing goals of the plan.

5. Review and evaluate the use of new funding sources, such as I-728 and Title I funding in terms of the alignment of these resources with the greatest needs. Consider allocation decisions other than per-student to direct and concentrate these resources where they will have the maximum impact on reducing the achievement gap.

What School Districts Are Doing

In the Federal Way School District (www.fwsd.wednet.edu), staff has created a way to reliably identify schools that are struggling to meet state and district goals for student achievement and are in need of extra support, assistance or intervention. Staff created a rubric, or scoring guide, that places schools along a three-point continuum. Schools are rated using achievement targets from the district's strategic plan, and a school's rating is used in allocating both fiscal and human resources. Strategic plan goals used for evaluation are:

- School meets or exceeds goals for WASL reading.
- 80 percent of the school's third grade students are reading at grade level as measured by the ITBS.
- School demonstrates continuous increase in student performance as measured by a 3-year rolling average on the WASL and ITBS/ITED.
- School increases the number of students meeting standard on STAR scores from fall to spring.
- School has an "opportunity gap" under ten percent of students achieving below the average of the top-ten comparable schools.

For schools identified as "intervention schools," increased staff is allocated to focus on increasing skills and reducing student-teacher ratios in grades K-2. In addition, an Instructional Team Member is allotted at least a full-day each week to the school to work with teachers, and the school may also receive additional funds depending on achievement needs.

The Edmonds School District (www.edmonds.wednet.edu) has used a weighted student formula to allocate funding to schools for many years. The formula was first developed to provide a differentiated level of learning support to individual schools. The formula is used to allocate a portion of the resources to schools and includes funding for Title I, LAP and special education as well as the basic education dollars generated by special education students. Under the formula, all schools receive some level of support, but the level of support is determined by a needs assessment. Criteria for the elementary school needs assessment includes the following:

- Student enrollment
- Percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch
- Number of students scoring below the 25th percentile on district developed reading and math achievement tests
- Percentage of students not meeting standard in reading and math on 4th grade WASL
- Number of students with individual education plans (IEPs)
- Number of "ins and outs" to measure mobility

- Percentage of students who were enrolled at the beginning of the year and are still enrolled at the end of the year
- Percentage of limited English proficient students eligible for ESL
- Percentage of students living in non-two-parent families

Based on these criteria, schools are rank ordered using a formula to determine a composite score. The higher the actual score, the higher the need, and funds are allocated accordingly.

Quality Teachers and Assignment of Qualified Staff to Low-Achieving Students

Key Policy Issue Quality teachers are paramount to closing the achievement gap. School boards must ensure that all students have access to the most basic learning resource – quality teaching. According to Haycock (1998), the most important educational investment a state can make is in highly qualified teachers.

Extensive research from the Value-Added Research and Assessment Center at the University of Tennessee demonstrates that,

> Groups of students with comparable abilities and initial achievement levels may have vastly different academic outcomes as a result of the sequence of teachers to which they are assigned. Based on these results, students benefiting from regular yearly assignment to more effective teachers (even by chance) have an extreme advantage in terms of attaining higher levels of achievement. (Sanders and Rivers, 1996, p.6.)

The study also demonstrated that lower achieving students benefited the most, average students next, and above average students the least from increased teacher effectiveness. Effective teachers produced significantly higher gains in student achievement among low achieving students than did less effective teachers. Similar results were found in research conducted in the Boston Public Schools and in the Dallas School District.

Placing highly qualified teachers with students who are underachieving will have the greatest impact on closing the achievement gap. Districts must consider how teachers are assigned. This includes how they are assigned to schools in low-income neighborhoods versus more advantaged communities and how they are assigned to classrooms and programs that serve disadvantaged students versus those that serve achieving and highly achieving students.

School boards and administrators can improve student achievement through the professional development of teachers. Improving teacher quality must be addressed in policies that provide for on-going professional development. This includes teachers knowing how to use student academic performance data to improve the teaching and learning.

"In the hands of our best teachers, the effects of poverty and institutional racism melt away, allowing these students to soar to the same heights as young Americans from more advantaged homes."

— Kati Haycock, Director
The Education Trust
1998

The No Child Left Behind Act (www.nochildleftbehind.gov) requires that all teachers in core academic subjects be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-6 school years. The new law defines highly qualified teachers as those who not only possess full state certification but also have a solid content knowledge of the subjects they teach. High quality teachers must employ effective instructional and assessment strategies and methods in preparing students to meet state standards. Teachers must be able to do this for all the children they teach.

In providing professional development, key areas including pedagogy, content knowledge of subjects taught, use of assessment data to drive instructional decisions and understanding the needs of a diverse student population are paramount. An ongoing policy issue centers on providing teachers with sufficient time to develop these critical skills and knowledge.

The assignment of teachers and instructional aides is also a critical factor in closing the achievement gap. Project STAR in the state of Tennessee was a large-scale, randomized within-school research study focused primarily on determining the effects of class size. Secondary analysis addressed the use of instructional aides and the benefits of using assistants to improve student achievement. The results from STAR, as well as from other research studies, have found that, in general, instructional aides are not effective in improving the academic performance of students. Project STAR found no significant difference in student achievement between students in classes with instructional aides and full-size classes without assistants.

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. Do schools with the most needy students have the least experienced teachers? Are Title I/LAP and other programs for disadvantaged or struggling students staffed primarily with instructional aides providing learning support?

2. What practices are in place to recruit and retain qualified teachers? What is the district's teacher turnover rate, and how is this affecting the district's ability to meet the needs of low-achieving students and to have them served by the most qualified teachers?

3. What types of professional development do teachers need to help them be more culturally competent? For example, does professional development give teachers and other staff members opportunities to talk and learn about race and culture and the perceptions and biases they may have encountered growing up? Does professional development provide opportunities for staff to talk and learn about how race, poverty and culture affect teaching and learning?

4. Is professional development for implementing strategies to close the achievement gap on-going, supportive and effective? Do teachers feel empowered in planning and conducting their professional develop-

ment? As a result of training, are new strategies really being implemented?

5. Is there collaboration with the teachers' association to place the most qualified teachers with students who need to accelerate their academic performance and/or in schools with the highest percentage of children from low-income families or children of color?

6. What is the district's policy or practice for the use of instructional aides? What evaluation data is there that would inform decisions about the district's use of instructional aides for improving student achievement?

◆ Policy Recommendations ◆

1. Negotiate with the local teachers' association on assignment and transfer of teaching staff to maximize effective teaching where there is most need. Make sure that schools have an equitable distribution of highly skilled teachers.

2. Implement policies directing the superintendent to develop plans that move teachers to positions so they are teaching in their areas of endorsement or areas of expertise. Assist teachers in acquiring endorsements and training for assignments where they are needed.

3. Develop recruitment programs that include specific and concerted efforts to attract and place highly qualified minority teachers.

4. Investigate the district's current use of instructional aides to provide additional learning opportunities and/or remediation to struggling students. Give consideration to limiting or redirecting the role of aides in light of the research. Students who are not achieving benefit most with instruction from qualified teachers.

5. Review professional development programs to ensure that they address cultural competence. Require multi-cultural education training for teachers and administrators.

6. Create opportunities for teacher release time to be used for specific training in literacy and mathematics and in the development of teaching skills in how to make learning effective, individual and long lasting.

7. Develop policies and budget priorities for staff development that are aligned with the district's student achievement goals and objectives.

8. Develop policies and practices that support ongoing professional development for all staff and especially mentoring and coaching for new and struggling teachers.

What School Districts Are Doing

The Tacoma Public Schools (www.tacoma.k12.wa.us) operates "Project Quality," a partnership between the school district and the Tacoma Education Association to develop and support accomplished teaching standards that reflect high expectations for teaching and learning in every classroom. They also shape the district's recruitment, mentoring, professional development and evaluation activities.

This past year, the Mukilteo School District (www.mukilteo.wednet.edu) completed a comprehensive review of its learning support program that relied heavily on the use of instructional aides in the delivery of instructional support to struggling students and English language learners (ELL). With an increasing number of students, including ELL students, students from low-income families and students with special needs, the program was serving a greater percentage of students. In some schools, the percentage of students served exceeded 30 percent of the school's student population. Program changes that will be implemented based on the review included (1) increasing reliance on the use of certificated teachers in the delivery of instruction to students so that the most qualified staff are serving the students in the learning support program who are the lowest achieving; and (2) reducing the number of instructional aides in the learning support program and ensuring that existing instructional aides implementing instruction do so under the direction of a certificated teacher with clear guidelines that clarify the role and responsibilities of instructional aides, classroom teachers, and learning support program personnel.

Teaching and Learning

Key Policy Issue New conceptions of teaching and learning exist in the current vision of schooling with its emphasis on high standards, principles of equity, and accountability. Teachers must teach to standards, use curriculum aligned to standards, provide clear and focused instruction, and assess student performance toward meeting standards.

Teaching and learning must give all students the opportunity to learn at high levels. Academic rigor plays a significant role. Rigorous academic coursework can mitigate the influence of the family's socio-economic status in a student's life. High expectations for all students means providing opportunities to interact with peers who share high academic goals. Access to all programs without educational segregation are methods to ensure opportunities for all students to learn at high levels. NAEP results clearly show that tracking or educational segregation, for example, has a negative impact on achievement. Those students who take more vocational classes have lower standardized test results than students who enroll in academic-oriented classes.

The Spokane School District (www.spokaneschools.org) conducted senior exit interviews this past year, and students in Advanced Placement and

honors classes stated that they felt prepared for their future, not because of the material covered but because of the "life lessons" of meeting deadlines, independent work and real-life applications used in learning, while most students in regular classes felt unprepared and asked for less busy work and memorization and more application-based learning.

Technology is the other key factor in the current teaching and learning framework. Recent ITBS scores showed that sixth graders who had a home computer scored 26 percentile points higher than those students without. Those with access to the Internet and/or e-mail scored 23 percentile points higher. Providing access to technology and integrating technology across the curriculum must be part of the teaching and learning framework at all grade levels.

Connecting students to learning through their passions and strengths is also critical to student achievement. Rigorous curriculum and academic focus does not mean a limited academic focus. The arts have an important role to play in a rigorous curriculum, and many districts are successfully integrating the arts across the curriculum. "The arts make sense to students because the arts allow them to connect with topics, issues, ideas on a greater level of understanding. The arts help students internalize and process their world." (Cynthia Chesak, Tukwila School District.)

Teaching English Language Learners. Instructional methods must also take into account students' first language. Closing the gap for English language learners (ELL) is a challenge faced by many districts. The research on English language learning is clear about what works. According to the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE), all students benefit from academic instruction conducted in their first language. Those English language learners who are taught in their first language end up being more successful in English-based instruction when compared to ELL who are not taught academically in their first language. CREDE also found that instruction for English language learners needs to be provided for at least four years and up to seven years for ELL learners to be at the same level as those students who are native English speakers.

Eighty percent of school districts in Washington state use ESL (English-as-a-second-language) pull-out for English language learners, but it is the least effective and most expensive program to implement. Pull-out programs tend to shift the responsibility for student learning to instructional aides and others. The most effective programs (in order of effectiveness) are:

- Two-way bilingual, dual language
- Late exit bilingual and content ESL
- Early exit bilingual and content ESL
- Early exit bilingual and traditional ESL
- ESL through academic content
- ESL pull-out

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. Has the district developed a teaching and learning framework for supporting standards-based education? Is the curriculum aligned to the standards and do teachers use classroom-based assessments to steer their instruction?

2. Is the learning framework focused on providing all students with opportunities to learn at high levels? Is the curriculum based on challenging content that requires application and demonstration of learning?

3. What policies and practices are in place that encourage and support minority and low-income students' access to, and success in, challenging courses, such as Advanced Placement, honors or International Baccalaureate classes?

4. To what degree do teachers' expectations for students in poverty, students of color or English language learners affect decisions about student placement or the tracking of students?

5. What is the instructional program model for English language learners? To what degree is ESL pull-out used as a program option? Do the schools provide English language learners with sufficient support for learning academic subjects?

6. How is technology used across the curriculum? What is being done to increase access to technology for all students?

7. To what degree does the district use programs like the arts to engage students and provide them vehicles for applying academic learning?

◈ Policy Recommendations ◈

1. Develop a board philosophy and set of principles guiding the implementation of standards-based instruction, curriculum aligned to standards and the use of best practices in classrooms.

2. Review current curriculum development and adoption policies and revise as needed to ensure that curriculum decisions are made to support standards and current trends in educational reform. Use equity checklists or rubrics in the review of all curriculum.

3. Implement policies that provide for a rigorous curriculum for all students. Ensure that all students have opportunities to enroll in honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.

4. Review the district's program structure and staffing for English language learners to determine its alignment with best practices and implement needed program changes with a focus on reducing ESL pull-out as the model for instruction.

What Districts Are Doing

Bellevue School District (www.belnet.bellevue.k12.wa.us) is working to raise standards for all students and lower the dropout rate by using Advanced Placement (AP) as an anchor for the overall improvement of student achievement. In six years, the district has gone from scattered AP course offerings to a district where all high schools offer a full AP or International Baccalaureate program and district curriculum development is tied at all levels with AP curriculum and tests. More than 70 percent of the district's current senior class has taken at least one Advanced Placement course.

Technology can be a great equalizer for students. The Bridgeport School District (www.bridgeport.wednet.edu) is a model for using technology to reduce the differences among students. Bridgeport went from 80 percent white in the mid-nineties to 86 percent Hispanic and at the same time experienced enrollment and funding declines. The district addressed these changes by retooling its schools with technology. Bridgeport began by getting donated computers to families and then working with AmeriCorps and Wilderness Technology to promote a "make it and take it" program in which students build a computer for themselves and take it home. With a federal grant, the district is connecting the school and homes to the Internet.

The Manson School District (www.manson.org) operates a successful dual language program at the elementary level. The program merges the most successful aspects of second language learning with a challenging academic program. Students will learn to read and write first in their dominant language and be part of the Manson Elementary Language Leveling program. They will learn about other subjects in English and Spanish. Instruction will be divided so that they will learn about half the time in each language. Lessons will not be repeated in each language but will build on one another.

Cultural Competence

Race and class inequities are deeply embedded in society's institutions. Institutions, just as the people in them, must be culturally competent. This means that schools and school districts reflect policies, practices and structures that promote equity and respect for diversity. It also means that educators must understand the culture of poverty. As explained by Ruby Payne, in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty,* children bring with them "hidden rules" and patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies and other patterns of the class in which they were raised, and many are very different than those operating in schools driven by middle class patterns and rules.

To close the achievement gap, there must be understanding of the impact of language, culture, race and poverty on student achievement. Students from

economically disadvantaged families and communities often have different basic values and needs, and it is these differences that often create conflict at school. Behaviors of students from cultures different from those of the teacher are often not understood and can be misinterpreted by school staff who have had very different life experiences.

The vast majority of teachers in Washington state are mono-cultural and monolingual while student bodies are increasingly culturally diverse, bilingual, and English language learners.

Students of color and students from poverty often bring experiences and an understanding of history and knowledge that they do not see represented in the teaching and learning taking place in the classroom. For example, relevancy of curriculum for American Indian students is questioned when they do not see their culture and languages represented in the curriculum.

All staff must be trained in how their own culture and behavior affects culturally and linguistically different students. These behaviors and cultural differences include how families perceive schooling, values and expectations of the culture and simple things, like gestures and mannerisms. Staff need the skills to teach children to be "bi-cultural," to succeed in school and the workplace while remaining culturally proficient in their homes and neighborhoods.

Attitude plays a key role in how individuals interact with each other. Biased attitudes of particular cultural and socio-economic groups significantly alter a school's learning environment. A negative attitude breeds a negative school climate, and positive attitudes send clear messages that all are valued. Care must be taken to not let biased attitudes establish different achievement expectations for students from different backgrounds.

Questions to Guide the Discussion
1. What dialogue on education and race have been held in the schools and communities? Do staff understand the impact of culture and race on learning? Have they been educated about the culture of poverty and its effects on learning?

2. What false assumptions are held about English language learners, children and families in poverty, and students who are culturally different? What false assumptions operate about parent's willingness to be involved in their children's education? What unresolved issues about race and class exist that are known to influence education?

3. How culturally competent is the educational system, board and staff? What can be done to be more culturally responsive?

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop and adopt policies that express the board's philosophy about equity and cultural competence. Affirm the board's philosophy about equity and excellence through a statement of core beliefs that is posted in all schools. Be explicit in the policy about undoing racism.

2. Join leaders in the community, including the faith-based community, to call for a dialogue on race and the culture of poverty. Form community study circles and book clubs to educate staff and others on different cultures and race issues.

3. Provide for and support ongoing professional development to ensure that staff are culturally competent and hold high expectations for all students.

4. As a board, meet with students on a regular basis to hear their voices and engage them in helping to create a learning environment free of racism.

What School Districts Are Doing

School boards can adopt aggressive policies about eliminating racism. The Tukwila School Board (www.tukwila.wednet.edu) recognized the increasing complexity of assuring equity and excellence and the destructive nature of racism by individuals and institutions, and sought to undo racism through the adoption of a school board policy. The board adopted five principles that commit the district to:

- Undoing racism and eliminating prejudice, bigotry and discrimination in schools

- Eliminating disparities in achievement and in the administration of discipline

- Providing educational experiences that reflect racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity

- Providing comprehensive training to staff to respond to diversity

- Ensuring a supportive school environment in which each student has an advocate

The Federal Way School District (www.fwsd.wednet.edu) created a task force that spent a full summer developing action plans to address its persistent academic achievement gap between black, Hispanic, American Indian and their white and Asian peers. An Office of Equity and Achievement was created and specific goals for closing the gap were developed.

Seattle Public Schools (www.seattleschools.org) developed the District Action Plan to Eliminate Disproportionality following recommendations from a district Action Committee on Disproportionality. The committee was formed in response to data showing African American students being suspended or expelled twice as often as white high school students and

three times as often as white students in middle school; significantly higher dropout rates for students of color; and much higher percentages of students of color scoring below the 25th percentile on the ITBS.

Throughout the entire school year, conversations on race will occur that began with an August symposium focused on the elimination of disproportionality. The district's action plan also addressed the need to implement strategies to address and eliminate stereotyping and other biases in special programs. The bilingual, highly capable and special education programs have been or will be reviewed.

Time and Opportunity to Learn

Key Policy Issue Time is a resource. A strong correlation exists between time on task and improved academic performance. On a national level, the Commission on Time and Learning has found that—

- Ensuring that all students learn to high standards will require flexibility and innovation in the use of common core learning time, as well as the rest of the time students spend both during and beyond the school day

- Increasing the amount and duration of intensive, engaging and challenging learning activities geared to high standards can increase student motivation and achievement

- The benefits of extending learning time, including common core instructional time, can be maximized by concurrent changes in curriculum and instruction, such as accelerated learning, and engaging, interactive instruction based on challenging content

To close the achievement gap, those students who are the furthest behind must have increased opportunity to learn to "catch up" and close the gap. The table below illustrates that if opportunity to learn in reading is held constant to meet the three-year 25 percent reduction goal in the number of students not meeting standard, most American Indian, black and Hispanic students will not meet standard until well past 2008.

Trend Needed to Meet 25% Improvement Goal — Grade 4 Reading													
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
American Indian	46.9	51.8	56.2	60.2	63.8	67.1	70.1	72.9	75.4	77.6	79.7	**81.5**	83.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	66.7	69.7	72.5	75.0	77.3	79.4	**81.3**	83.0	84.5	86.0	87.2	88.4	89.5
Black/African American	47.7	52.5	56.8	60.8	64.4	67.6	70.6	73.3	75.7	77.9	**80.0**	81.8	83.5
Hispanic	39.4	44.9	50.0	54.6	58.7	62.5	65.9	69.0	71.9	74.4	76.8	78.9	**80.8**
White	71.8	74.4	76.7	78.9	**80.8**	82.5	84.1	85.6	86.9	88.1	89.2	90.2	91.1

Source: OSPI, Research & Evaluation

If it is accepted that students in the lowest quartile will make only normal annual growth, those students will continue to stay in the lowest quartile, and the gap will never close. Students only "catch up" by making more than a year's worth of growth. Extended learning time and targeted remediation are the strategies needed to increase the rate of growth for students in the lowest quartile. Extended learning time can be in terms of longer school days, longer school years, after-school tutorials, Saturday enrichment, or summer school.

In-school instructional time must be used to accelerate achievement for those students in the lowest quartile. Grade-level reading should perhaps be the main priority in closing the achievement gap, and therefore receive a more significant share of the instructional day. A student who is two to three years behind in reading, for example, will require time beyond the time devoted to reading for the general population to come up to grade level. How time is used during the school day for these students must be examined. The best use of existing time may be the same number of school calendar days used in more strategic ways.

It is also important to ensure that opportunities to learn are carefully structured to provide additional time for targeted remediation without students losing out on learning taking place in the classroom. In a high-performing elementary school, in-class instruction is designed for mainte-nance of grade-level skills and exposure to grade-level material while the extended day program is for remediation. Schools that provide real-time remediation strategies so that students stay on track, keep students from falling farther and farther behind. Finally, targeted remediation and ex-tended learning opportunities should be implemented along with assess-ment systems that measure annual rates of growth, especially in reading and math. Level Tests that measure spring to spring achievement are used by many districts.

Questions to Guide the Discussion
1. How do the schools currently structure their school day and school year to maximize academic learning time?

2. Is modifying the calendar for learning something that should be discussed by schools in the district? How is the district addressing the challenge of summer learning loss for students?

3. What assessment procedures do the schools have in place to identify students in need of specific, targeted remediation?

4. What developmental and remedial learning opportunities do the schools currently provide during the school day, after school and in the summer? How are they staffed and are adequate resources targeted to those programs and strategies? What assessment data exists to show how successful these current programs are?

5. To what degree have new ways to increase academic learning time for students most in need been examined and implemented?

6. To what extent is the district providing extended learning opportunities for primary age students who are not reading at grade level?

7. What possibilities have been explored regarding the school calendar and modifications of the existing calendar? Are the opportunities to learn for students in need of remediation placed at the most strategic times throughout the year? What would the most effective academic calendar of 180 days look like?

◆ **Policy Recommendations** ◆

1. Develop and adopt policies that direct the resource of time to closing the achievement gap, including a clear focus on using extended time effectively based on assessment of students' needs. Allocate resources for remediation and acceleration of students' annual growth targeted to students in the lowest quartile.

2. Ensure that policies and practices establish clear links between the extended time programs and the regular academic program.

3. Implement policies that develop and use collaboration among schools, parents, and communities to widen the pool of resources, expertise, and activities available to extended day programs, such as recruiting parents and community members as individual tutors and mentors. Explore collaborations with traditional afterschool programs to provide extended academic learning opportunities.

4. Direct staff to search for outside funding to support extended learning opportunities, including state, federal and private sources.

5. In implementing new policies or practices to increase learning opportunities and time directed at closing the achievement gap, be sure to include a thoughtful evaluation plan to measure program effectiveness. Include assessments that measure rate of annual growth in reading and mathematics.
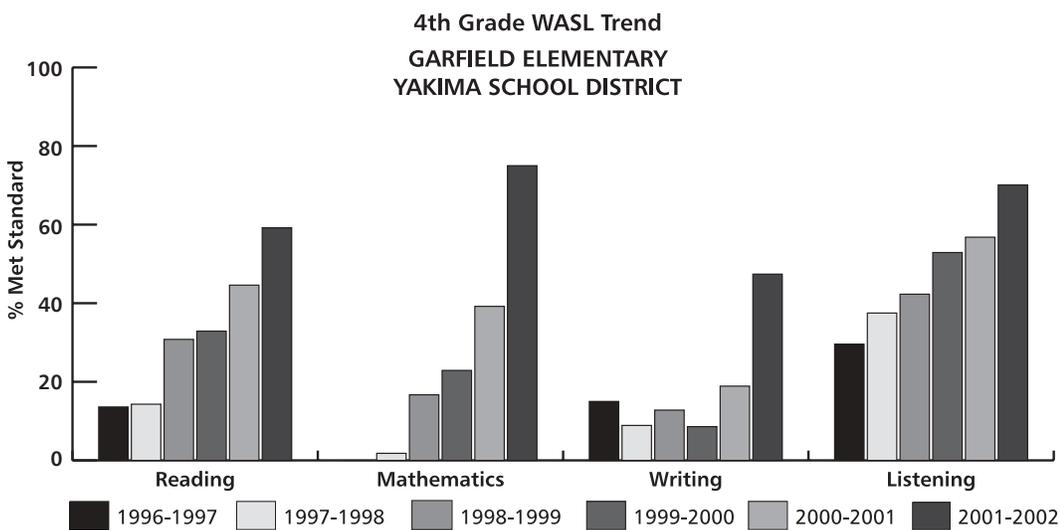
What School Districts Are Doing

The South Whidbey School District (www.sw.wednet.edu/schools/americorps/am_home.html) has expanded learning opportunities for students through partnerships with several community groups. The district and South Whidbey Youth Center have collaborated for many years to provide afterschool tutoring services to students. In addition to the afterschool tutoring provided by the youth center, the district has a strong partnership with AmeriCorps. The South Whidbey AmeriCorps members provide significant services to students, working with students and teachers

during the school day and after school to extend learning. AmeriCorps members:

- Tutor students one-on-one or in small groups
- Promote family literacy
- Engage students in cross-age and peer tutoring
- "Host" community volunteers serving as reading tutors
- Develop community partnerships to sustain reading activities

Grants from the U.S. Department of Education (www.ed.gov), and now from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (www.k12.wa.us) from the 21st Century Learning Center Program, have made it possible for numerous school districts in Washington to provide before and after-school learning opportunities. These discretionary grant funds are used by districts at elementary through high school to provide tutoring, enrichment, and safe and healthy activities for children far beyond the school day. Successful programs are well integrated with the school's curriculum and viewed by staff as an opportunity to extend teaching and learning.

Yakima School District (www.ysd.wednet.edu) has operated one school on a modified school calendar for a number of years, with two other schools in their first year on a modified calendar. Research regarding student achievement of students attending schools with modified calendars shows that students retain more and there is less re-teaching. For the lowest achievers, greater gains appear to be made by students in modified school calendar programs compared to students in similar schools operating on a traditional calendar. Yakima's Garfield Elementary has demonstrated success by improving achievement using the modified calendar. The chart below shows the school's improvement through rising WASL scores in all areas.

4th Grade WASL Trend
GARFIELD ELEMENTARY
YAKIMA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Legend: ■ 1996-1997 □ 1997-1998 ▨ 1998-1999 ▨ 1999-2000 ▨ 2000-2001 ■ 2001-2002

Learning Environment

Key Policy Issue A school's learning environment has a significant impact on student achievement. The learning environment provides the conditions and climate in which learning takes place. It affects expectations, perceptions and behavior of both students and teachers. School environments that foster high expectations and respect spawn resilient youth who are engaged and self-motivated.

"School can be a culturally foreign place for many students and for others it is a place where they are invisible. Small schools and personalized learning environments are proving to be significant in increasing the academic achievement of high school students." (Tom Vander Ark, Executive Director; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.)   Personalized learning environments are characterized by staff who demonstrate caring and who value student experiences and strengths. They treat all students as smart and capable. As expectations rise by adopting rigorous standards, educators must also be steadfast in the belief that all students can learn, and must provide personalized learning environments that support students in that achievement.

School size appears to play an important role. According to the recent longitudinal study by the National Institute of Health, schools become more bureaucratic and connections between staff and students become less personal as school size grows. In fact, according to the study, school size is more significant than class size in terms of student connectedness.

A learning environment that supports learning at high levels is also an equitable school. National and Washington state data show that many schools have uneven discipline standards that result in students of color being suspended and expelled at higher rates. Clearly, if students are not present, they cannot learn.

Effective schools have environments that deliver equitable counseling and guidance, support services, and citizenship experiences that support equity and diversity, promote resiliency, and increase self-understanding and positive identity development for all youth. Effective schools are characterized by connection, cohesion and safety. Resilience promoting strategies and asset-based models focused on assets like school engagement, positive perceptions of teachers, and greater expectancies for success are related to higher academic achievement.

According to Ruby Payne, author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty,* the key to achievement for students from poverty is relationships. "When students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine times out of 10 has to do with relationship – a teacher, counselor or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals." (Page 143.)

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. Have the schools' learning environments been assessed? How? Is it known if students and staff perceive their school to be a positive place to learn? Do students view their teachers as approachable and caring? To what degree are students connected to their school and engaged in school activities?

2. What do discipline statistics say about practices? Are certain groups of students over-represented in discipline actions taken?

3. What is being done to counteract the negatives of large school size? To what degree is the district exploring restructuring to smaller schools or creating smaller learning environments? Is the district considering school size in both short and long term facility planning?

4. Is staff educated in the asset building model and risk and protective factor research and are they applying this information in their practices?

5. What is the staff's attitude toward students? Do staff members pre-judge students and their potential based on race, culture or economic status?

"Independent of race, ethnicity, family structure and poverty status, adolescents who are connected to their parents, to their families and to their school community are healthier than those who are not."

— Reducing the Risk: Connections that Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth

◈ Policy Recommendations ◈

1. Track discipline reports and analyze discipline data to determine if patterns exist that reveal differences in discipline along racial, cultural and socio-economic lines. Revise policies and/or procedures and provide staff training to make needed changes based on findings.

2. In district and school improvement plans, include specific goals and indicators of achievement associated with effective schools, such as (a) a caring and supportive school culture; (b) valuing and incorporating high expectations for all students; and (c) assessing improvements in student attendance, staff attendance and student involvement in school athletics and activities. Measure school climate.

3. Implement policies for a personalized learning environment in every school in which every student has a mentor or an adult advocate.

4. Implement policies that require schools to conduct periodic assessments of school climate through analysis of student attendance, discipline actions, and staff turnover and through surveys of students, staff and parents.

What School Districts Are Doing

Mead Middle School, in the Mead School District (www.mead.k12.wa.us), is implementing an alternative middle school with a grant it received from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. With a Gates Foundation grant the school will combine with the alternative middle

school grant to allow Mead Middle School to accelerate the creation of smaller, more individualized teaching and learning environments. Two schools are emerging—one alternative district-wide school for students with special circumstances, and one "new" middle school.

Royal Middle School (www.royal.wednet.edu), in rural Grant County, is reinventing itself with a focus on reading and is creating a personalized learning plan for every student. The school is ensuring that each student has the attention of a caring adult by starting an adult advocate/mentor program. Students will have the same mentor group throughout their three years in middle school.

Readiness Gap and Early Intervention

Key Policy Issue Success in school is influenced by numerous factors including what happens before children come to school and what occurs while they are in school. "While the board's legal responsibility is to the K-12 system, there is a large body of research that suggests higher levels of achievement will not be possible for all students if we limit our focus to what happens in school." (Brumbaugh,1997). Researchers report that many minority and disadvantaged students enter kindergarten developmentally behind their peers and that gaps in achievement grow as they continue in school. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a five-year difference in literacy related skills exists among children entering kindergarten with some children already independent readers and others having the skills of a typical three-year old.

To address this readiness gap, school boards need to work to extend high-quality, academically focused early childhood education to children at-risk of school failure. School boards can advocate and partner with community agencies to get more children of color and low-income families participating in pre-kindergarten programs. Priority should be on language and reading skills targeting preschool through primary age children. **The earlier the intervention, the more likely the achievement gap for individual children will be closed.**

In addition, policies that support full-day kindergarten can provide an effective early intervention when targeted at meeting the needs of students who enter kindergarten not having had quality preschool experiences or enriched language stimulation (Hopkins and Katims, 2002). A longitudinal study of a full-time kindergarten program in six Edmonds schools funded by the Better Schools Fund was conducted by Hopkins and Katims who found that "for all 17 skills measured, a higher percentage of first-grade students who had previously attended a full-time kindergarten met or exceeded target than students who had previously attended a half-time kindergarten program."(page 13.) These differences continued when the students were given the second grade oral reading assessment a year later.

Many districts have opted to use I-728 funds to support full-day kindergarten programs.

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. What policies currently exist that support partnerships and effective transition between preschool and child care programs and K-12 schools?

2. What policy and program benefit analysis has been conducted to determine whether the district should provide full-day kindergarten?

3. Does the district determine each student's level of reading and math readiness in the fall of kindergarten and have spring math and literacy targets to use in determining which students need early intervention?

4. What early intervention programs are in place? What programs are needed?

5. What can the school board do to impact decisions about early childhood education and readiness to learn?

6. Can the district expend resources for high quality pre-school, at least for at-risk learners?

"The single most important thing that can be done [to prevent retention] is to teach students to read well in the early grades and to stick with the effort instead of waiting to do something when they enter fourth grade."

— Lorrie Shepard
University of Colorado

◈ Policy Recommendations ◈

1. Implement policies that require early assessment of reading and mathematics, with intervention programs aligned to reading and math targets for all students who have not met the necessary level of reading and math readiness.

2. Develop policies that create clearly articulated practices between elementary schools and preschools, child care agencies and family organizations that support readiness to learn.

3. Provide the community leadership to develop awareness of the issues and needs of young children and families, including the need to close the readiness gap.

4. Establish a board liaison position with the local network of early childhood service providers and work to develop joint policies that support preventative programs and early intervention.

5. Support family literacy programs and incorporate family literacy into school-based programs for students in K-3 from disadvantaged homes and those who are English language learners.

6. Develop policies to support full-day kindergarten for students most in need or in schools with high percentages of students from low-income families or English language learners. Consider the use of I-728 funds for full-day kindergarten programs.

What School Districts Are Doing

Kennewick School District (www.ksd.org) has implemented an early intervention program based on the belief that by helping children come to kindergarten prepared, there is much less need for remediation. The focus of the program is "Kindergarten Readiness" and is implemented in collaboration with the Reading Foundation. It provides the necessary pre-literacy acquisition that guarantees successful readers. The goal is to make all parents aware of how important it is to read to their children from birth through third grade. At the heart of the program is a simple media-driven message: "The most important twenty minutes of your day is reading with your child." The foundation also has parenting modules for kindergarten readiness.

Research based on longitudinal data from the Kennewick School District as reported by the National Children's Reading Foundation (www.readingfoundation.org/local/local foundations.asp) found that "students at risk of failure can be identified in the first months of kindergarten by deficit pre-literacy skills" and that these same children can be re-identified at first, second and third grade on the basis of their low reading skills. This research makes a strong case for the Reading Foundation's recommendation to increase the number of children entering kindergarten with basic pre-literacy skills.

The Lakewood School District (www.lwsd.wednet.edu) is working to improve literacy skills for preschool children in low-income families. With an Even Start Family Literacy grant the district is focusing on improving literacy in the home while making parents "full partners" in their children's education. The goal is to increase the literacy skills of young children and assist the adults in the children's lives in their own education and self-sufficiency. The district is partnering with the Snohomish County Literacy Coalition, Snohomish County Health District and Snohomish County Human Services.

Parent Involvement and Community Collaboration

Parent and community involvement goes well beyond volunteering in the classroom. Involvement means parents supporting their children's education by reading to them at an early age, finding opportunities to learn and explore at home and in the community, placing a high value on education and ensuring that children are well fed, well rested and at school on time every day.

Family stability is clearly associated with student achievement. On the 2002 questionnaire responded to by third and sixth grade students taking the spring ITBS, students in both third and sixth grade who were enrolled

in more than one school during the year, scored on average 19 percentile points lower than students who did not experience those changes.

Research shows that parent involvement is a complex activity, especially among low-income families (Lewis, 2001). These parents often see a limited role for themselves in their child's education and their involvement in the school.

The voices of disenfranchised parents and community members must be heard and they must be empowered as advocates for their children. Engaging families in culturally appropriate ways is critical to establishing these partnerships.

Community engagement is increasingly important as the general public expects more from their schools. The challenge is to engage the community in ways that support student achievement and continuous improvement. Community engagement must occur at all levels, not just at the individual school level. District-wide community engagement is necessary to secure broad-based support for district goals and initiatives, including district decisions about allocation of resources which may vary from school to school based on need.

School boards that engage the community in visioning, strategic planning and in other meaningful decision-making roles generally find greater community support for the schools. As school boards work to eliminate the achievement gap, this partnership becomes even more important. There are many examples of districts successfully inviting the community to participate in program planning and service delivery. Many districts successfully tap the resources of the community to provide extended learning opportunities, meet the needs of students who are not achieving and address cultural and language differences. The National School Boards Association (NSBA) has published a helpful guide to assist boards – *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement,* available at www.nsba.org.

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. How can community-based organizations, municipalities, social services and other agencies assist the school board in addressing the achievement gap?

2. How is the board educating the community and parents about standards and the WASL to gain community support for them as a valid means to show real student achievement?

3. To what degree are parents taught about how the school system works and how to be an advocate for their children?

4. How is the district addressing language differences in parent engagement practices? Are the strategies effective?

"Parents exposed to homelessness and currently residing in a shelter or transitional housing around the Jackson community were interviewed. Parents told interviewers that (1) they see all too well what is happening to their children through homelessness; (2) they were concerned about how poorly their children are doing in school; and most important, (3) they were desperate to see their children be able to succeed. Parents greatly feared their children using drugs, becoming gang involved or getting pregnant, but they did not know how to prevent it. Nor did parents believe that they were capable of helping their children be successful in school or in life. Parents had a sense that it was better to let other people care for their children and that it was best to stay away, as if they were not good enough to be involved in their children's care or schooling. They clearly did not see themselves as a resource to their children."

— Kathy Burgoyne
Community in Schools
Snohomish County

5. To what degree are parents and community partners listened to for understanding how they experience the district and schools?

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✦ Policy Recommendations ✦

1. Develop and adopt a board philosophy about family outreach and involvement, including respecting family cultural values and norms and using family strengths as the focus of parent involvement practices.

2. Consistently use a variety of forms and means of communication to parents and the community and ensure that communication is provided to reach parents who do not speak English.

3. Measure the effectiveness of the district's current outreach strategies and parent involvement programs. Develop methods to continuously evaluate and hold the district accountable for effective parent involvement and community engagement. Be ready to make changes if strategies and programs have not demonstrated themselves to be effective.

4. Advocate and provide resources for home visits, especially to the homes of children entering kindergarten. Getting into their homes is a proven way to help families have a better understanding of the school's expectations and for staff to better understand families and cultures.

5. Provide opportunities to enhance family-teacher relationships and to help parents build a sense of community and partnership with other parents.

6. Provide meaningful opportunities for parent and community participation in site teams, advisory committees and other decision-making groups.

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What School Districts Are Doing

The Finley School District (www.finleysd.org) adopted the GIMME FIVE program that asks every parent to provide a minimum of five volunteer hours within the school year. In the first seven months of the program, Finley had representation from 38 percent of its parents and 937 total volunteer hours. GIMME FIVE is a highly successful program that brings a diverse group of parents into the learning community.

The Family Partnerships in the Seattle Public Schools (www.seattleschools.org) seeks to increase the ability of schools to form effective partnerships with all families. Each Family Partnership school utilizes the family involvement framework from John Hopkins University (www.scov.csos.jhu.edu). The framework includes six types of involvement that help educators develop comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnerships. The framework can be used by schools as a guide but each school should choose those practices within the framework that

help achieve the school's goals and meet the needs of its students and families. A description of each type of involvement follows:

Type 1 – Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

Type 2 – Communicating: Inform families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

Type 3 – Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

Type 4 – Learning at Home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

Type 5 – Decision Making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

Type 6 – Collaborating With the Community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.

The overall purpose of Seattle's Family Partnerships is to improve student achievement. Parent and community involvement is the means, not the end. The purpose of addressing parenting skills is to help families navigate the school system and achieve family literacy, not trying to change cultural or family practices.

A key is establishing systems that support parents, as well as students, and to empower parents to support children's learning. Relationship building is the first step to building trust so that parents can identify the services they need and the district can better meet their needs. One prospect is to co-locate services in the schools. Another strategy is to sort school enrollment by home language and then use all means of making contact, including holding meetings where the families are, not necessarily at school. The idea is to create cross-cultural competence for school personnel and for families.

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment and accountability are critical to closing the achievement gap. Assessments are the tools used to hold schools and districts accountable for student achievement. The state assessments (WASL and ITBS/ITED) are only one component, however, of an overall assessment system. Schools that are implementing successful reforms have comprehensive assessment systems for evaluating student achievement at

the classroom, grade level, school and district levels, including use of data to inform and individualize instruction, provide feedback to learners and make program and resource decisions. The use of Level Tests to measure annual rate of growth in reading and mathematics are currently used by several districts in Washington state.

The state of Tennessee's assessment and assessment information management system provides for linking teachers to achievement of students in their classroom and for measuring gains students make during the school year. According to researchers at the University of Tennessee's Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, "if equity is defined as the opportunity and realization of each student to make appropriate academic growth each year, then expectations for educators and students can be set in terms of academic growth rates" (Rivers and Sanders, 2000). More important, research has demonstrated that growth rates are primarily a function of schools and teachers. Therefore, assessment systems should allow districts to evaluate and monitor the variability among schools and teachers and use these data to address the variability in teacher effectiveness and also to avoid assigning students to multiple ineffective teachers.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act 2001 (www.nochildleftbehind.gov) increased flexibility will be accompanied by much greater accountability. States, districts and schools will be held accountable for the improvement in academic achievement of all students and for all students achieving proficient standards in core subject areas. Starting in 2002-3, states will be required to annually assess the English proficiency of English language learners. All students in grades 3-8 will be tested annually in math and reading/language arts and at least once in grades 10-12 beginning in 2005-6. Results of these indicators will be the primary indicator of whether schools and districts are making adequate yearly progress. By 2007-8, students will be tested in science at prescribed grade levels.

In addition to these testing requirements, the NCLB act will require school districts receiving Title I funding to issue a report card including:

- Achievement results in math and reading
- Achievement results separated by race/ethnicity, disability, socio-economic level, gender, migrant status, and English language learner
- Graduation rates
- Number and names of schools identified as needing improvement because of insufficient annual yearly progress
- Teacher qualifications

WSSDA's *Hot Topics* issue of July 2002 provides a comprehensive summary of the requirements for districts under the new No Child Left Behind Act (wssda.org, under "Hot Topics").

Finally, accountability must also include a continuous and vigilant effort to achieve equity, reduce disproportionality and guarantee equal access to quality through changes in policies and practices and a continuous review of the district's progress. Boards must set clear goals to close the achievement gap, hold staff responsible for meeting those goals and set a time line for goal accomplishment. Establishing a structure, such as an office of equity and achievement, is recommended, as is regularly scheduled, public reporting of progress.

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. Does the district disaggregate data and report it in such a way to help schools, teachers and the community understand the achievement gap?
2. How is the district assessing annual student growth and using assessment data to determine which students need to have their academic achievement accelerated?
3. Do the schools address the achievement gap in their school improvement plans?
4. How is the district assessing progress and using the data to close the achievement gap?
5. Is the present system for evaluation or placement of students denying students access to challenging academic coursework?

◆ Policy Recommendations ◆

1. Develop and adopt policies that require schools to measure the growth of students from their individual starting places but set goals that assure that each child reaches standard.

2. Establish measurable goals for closing the achievement gap for each school and for the district as a whole and report progress to the public on a regular basis.

3. Use measures to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies implemented by schools to close the achievement gap.

4. Establish a comprehensive data management system to provide continuous feedback for improvement and assist the district in its work to close the achievement gap. This will require data systems that can disaggregate data by race, gender, socio-economics and primary language as well as assessments that measure annual rate of progress.

What School Districts Are Doing
The Lake Washington (www.lk-wash.wednet.edu) and Vancouver (www.vansd.org) school districts have made significant investments in

technology and professional development to effectively use real-time data as part of the teaching and learning process so that teachers can address the individual needs of their students. In Vancouver schools, staff developed an assessment system internally to access student data and disaggregate it by several factors. They are working on real-time entry of data and access by classroom teachers. Lake Washington invested in a commercial assessment system that is standards-based and allows teachers to correlate classroom work or tests with state standards and then immediately disaggregate the data to analyze student performance. Parents and students can access data, and student work can be stored.