

**Dalton, Georgia: A Case Study in the Educational Challenges and
Possibilities Created by Demographic Change**

Support Materials

Prepared for

The Institute on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity
Bringing It All Together: How Can Practice, Policy, and Research Advance English
Language Learner Achievement?

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by

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The dreams of Rigo Nunez: Defying the odds and fighting a stereotype, a young teen left home to: carve out a better life. After excelling in high school, he faced a hard truth.

Dalton - On a chilly morning in the heart of La Quinta, a Hispanic enclave along Fifth Avenue, one of Dalton High School's most promising students paced nervously beneath a poster of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Inside a small two-bedroom apartment, Rigo Nunez's brown, bony knuckles --- scarred from years of work in the fields --- turned white as he clenched a large manila envelope carrying a dream 12 years deferred.

It was a portentous moment. Normally stoic, the deeply religious honor student paced and fidgeted, unable to decide whether to open the package at home or in school.

"This is everything," he said. "I've worked for this since I was 5."

But Rigo was no longer a boy. In the mirror, he could see the scars on his hands, arms and face. The sunken eyes. A man almost twice his age. Then he'd remember the long hours selling candy on the streets, sweating in the migrant fields, wiping chicken wastes from his face on a poultry plant's assembly line.

During those 12 years, Rigo became much more than a child laborer. He grew into a scholar. Between work shifts, when his fatigued compañeros sipped coffee or slept, he would study, read, and compose poetry and short stories. He earned academic awards and became, as one teacher said, one of Dalton High's "most eloquent writers and brightest students."

Last spring, Rigo realized a lifelong dream when he flew for the first time, his prize for winning a countywide essay contest. Soaring high above Dalton in a single-engine, two-seat Cessna, he felt liberated from La Quinta, the mills and his past. Never again, he promised himself, would he return to that life.

So on this morning, he tucked the unopened envelope under his arm, grabbed his bookbag and headed out to catch the school bus.

Outside the graffiti-laden brick apartments that surround his home, Rigo watched the early morning shift change. Men with tightly cropped goatees and disheveled hair grabbed lunch boxes and scrambled out to start their cars. Teenagers returned home from graveyard shifts and shuffled into their homes, where they would decide whether to go to school that day or just go to bed.

Rigo looked at them with sadness and relief. He knew he might still be toiling in the mills beside them but for a routine traffic stop and a judge who sentenced him to mandatory attendance at Dalton High School. It was a punishment he grew to love.

Despite two years away from school, he rapidly became one of Dalton's academic standouts. Arriving as a freshman with a vocabulary of about 100 English words, he pushed himself through his English classes. Within two years, he made the honor roll and joined the National Honor Society. Teachers lauded his drive, his organizational skills and his probing mind.

"You can literally see the wheels turning with him," said English teacher Sherry Patterson. "He's definitely college material."

Arriving at school, with the envelope in hand, Rigo briskly walked past his classmates and sat down in the cafeteria near a glass showcase of soccer trophies.

Peering through wire-rimmed glasses, he tore open the package and began reading the document inside --- an application for admission to Georgia State University. It represented a ticket out of his eastside barrio, a chance to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming an aeronautics engineer and pilot.

But Rigo never made it past the first few lines: Social Security Number? U.S. Citizen Status?

In one swift moment, Rigo's world of hope and promise shattered.

"We're illegals. We're nobodies. The only thing that's legal here is our hands and sweat," he said. "I know I could be an engineer, but they only want me to work the mills."

Angry and confused, Rigo wondered what had gone wrong. Why could he go to high school and work the mills but not attend college? Why had teachers pushed him to study and get good grades so he could qualify for Georgia's HOPE scholarship and other college financial aid?

"Everything they told us . . . was a lie," he said.

Within days, Rigo discovered he wasn't the only one who felt betrayed. Several of the brightest Hispanic upperclassmen --- many with

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grades and Southern drawls comparable to their Anglo counterparts --- had run into the harsh reality of their illegal status.

"There's nowhere for us to go," said Josue Pena, a senior honor student, whose illegal status recently dashed his dreams of studying architecture at a U.S. university. "We'll always be second-class citizens here."

The students' dilemma stems from a combination of complex immigration laws, a misguided school program and the teachers' informal policy --- commonly called "the big lie" by Hispanic students --- of failing to tell illegal students that they're ineligible for U.S. colleges.

An estimated 35,000 to 40,000 Hispanics live in Dalton and surrounding Whitfield County, and about 75 percent are believed to be in the country illegally, according to INS officials in Dalton. But most illegal immigrants there have little fear of being deported unless they have a criminal background. Local immigration officials say they rarely raid mills anymore, spending most of their time handling cases of criminal aliens. Moreover, employers rarely are fined or prosecuted for failing to properly screen out illegal aliens with fake documents, INS officials say.

So Hispanic immigrants and their children continue to flock to the "Carpet Capital of the World," attracted by word of the \$400-a-week jobs.

Nowhere has the influx caused more problems than in the city's public schools, where records show two of every five students are now Hispanic. Soon they will comprise two-thirds of the student body. Immigrant children receive the same homework, pats on the back and dreams of college, although many of their teachers know higher education is impossible for them.

"I don't want to squelch their ambitions," said Judi Pontonio, coordinator of English for Speakers of Other Languages for Dalton public schools. "But it's getting harder and harder to tell them to stay in school."

The huge influx of Hispanic students has taxed the schools' resources and frustrated many teachers who were suddenly forced to deal with dozens of non-English-speaking students, many with limited past schooling.

"Everyone feels the frustration," said Jackie Gunn, a high school counselor for the past 13 years. "We have 16-year-old Hispanics arriving at fourth-grade levels and we are supposed to know what to do with them."

In the last five years, Dalton schools have pumped millions of dollars into bilingual education programs adapted to teaching Hispanic children the English language and other disciplines in both English and Spanish. In 1997, the school district launched and funded the three-year, \$1.2 million Georgia Project, which added 17 teachers from Monterrey, Mexico, to the schools' faculty.

But the program is based on the mistaken premise that most of these students can aspire to a higher education.

"We want these Hispanic kids to finish high school and go to college," said attorney Erwin Mitchell, the 75-year-old founder of the project. "Instead of dropping out of school to work or join gangs, they'll have the interest to graduate, go to college and become educated, productive citizens."

Mitchell's good intentions and the project's lofty goals seem to be backfiring.

"Hispanics feel hopeless because they see their best and brightest students stuck in carpet or chicken mills because they're illegal," said Vanessa Iza, a 23-year-old high school teacher from Monterrey. "Nothing we do here will change that reality."

Dalton school board Chairman Tommy Boggs, who supports the Georgia Project, said Dalton schools should not be blamed because undocumented students cannot attend college. "It's the students' fault. They came here seeking better opportunities," he said. "Our goal is to give them the best (kindergarten through 12th grade) education possible. Whether or not they can go to college is something we have no control over."

Still, he added, even if such students end up in the mills, they can move up the ranks much easier with a high school education. "Without one, they're doomed to work menial jobs their whole lives," he said.

Without a resident alien green card, which gives immigrants the right to live, work and study in the United States, undocumented college-bound students are not only ineligible for HOPE scholarships and in-state college tuition, but also risk being deported, barred from returning to the United States, and even sentenced to prison.

Social and economic problems already put many Hispanic students at a disadvantage. Now those problems, combined with the impossibility of a higher education, have caused a growing number of Hispanic students to fail courses, get suspended for misbehavior or drop out altogether. Dropouts, Pontonio said, make easy prey for drug dealers and gang recruiters.

"The people who didn't want an inner city in Dalton better not blink," she said, "because it's already here."

Gang violence, robberies, vandalism and an illegal drug trade has risen dramatically in the past five years, police said.

"I don't think anyone saw this coming, that we'd be dealing with these types of problems in a small town like Dalton," said Police Chief James Chadwick, whose force is investigating three recent gang shootings. About 250 teenagers and young adults in the city participate

in six gangs or wannabe gangs, three of which are Hispanic, he said.

While he and other city officials combat Dalton's social ills, school officials continue struggling to keep illegal Hispanics from losing hope and dropping out.

"We have to get them to graduate from high school," said Pontonio, whose office often doubles as a counseling room for despondent Hispanic students unable to go to college. "What do you tell students who come to you crying after they realize that their dreams of becoming doctors, engineers or teachers are not possible?" she said. "It's an absolute tragedy."

Discovering they are ineligible has been difficult for most of the students. But for Rigo, who has been struggling since he was 5, the news is devastating.

Selling gum after school

His life began on the hardscrabble streets of Uriangato, Mexico, about 120 miles west of Mexico City. When Rigo was 5, after his father left home to work in the United States and never returned, he was forced to work on the streets after school each day selling gum and carrying tourists' luggage.

His grandfather bought him model airplane kits, fostering his dream of being a pilot. At night, after working the streets, Rigo forced himself to stay awake and complete his homework.

"Some days I couldn't believe it," his brother Luis, 15, recalled. "He'd come in at 9 p.m., dead tired from working, and he'd still sit down and do his schoolwork."

For the next nine years, Rigo juggled his classes and odd jobs. His work ethic paid off. In sixth grade, he scored fifth-highest in an aptitude test among several hundred students from his state.

But an economic crisis in the early '90s made life in Mexico nearly impossible. He watched many of his friends leave school to work in factories for the equivalent of \$70 a week.

"It was depressing," he said. "There was no way I was ending up in a factory."

With the recession tightening its grip on his family, only one option remained: El Norte.

His mother frantically tried to talk him out of a trip to the United States.

"You'll go and disappear like your father," she said, crying. "We'll never hear from you again."

But in the fall of 1994, the skinny teen said goodbye and headed toward the border. With fruit, water, a few hundred dollars and a prayer card to Santo Nino de Atoche, the patron saint of travelers and prisoners, he began a grueling four-day journey north, trekking through the Sonora Desert into Arizona. In the United States, he traveled for 18 months, from Phoenix to Philadelphia to New York to Florida, picking cabbages, tomatoes and oranges on 10-hour shifts.

He wrote poetry and short stories to relieve the fatigue and homesickness. He wired most of his money home to his family; with what little he kept, he bought aviation magazines and books.

"I told myself that once I made enough money, I could return to school and then go to college," he said.

Rigo landed a job in a Dalton poultry mill with the use of a fake ID he picked up in Florida. But even the hefty salary --- almost \$400 a week --- could not relieve the depressing conditions. With fingers splayed, the 15-year-old boy picked up live chickens and hung them on passing hooks. If he held them too gently, they clawed his forearms. Too tightly, they soiled his face.

"All I thought was that Mexico couldn't be much worse than this," he said.

Two events changed his life. His mother remarried and moved the family to join Rigo in Dalton, and a speeding ticket landed him in court, where a judge ordered him to attend high school. With his stepfather working, Rigo organized his life, setting aside hours each week for homework, outside reading, and writing.

Attending college became an obsession. Each spring, when he saw seniors receiving Georgia's HOPE scholarship, he grew more hopeful. At home, he lectured younger brothers Jose, 16, and Luis on putting more emphasis on their studies.

"He showed us the scars on his hands and told us we'd end up in the fields or mills if we didn't take advantage of school," Luis said. "But we didn't listen. We just laughed at him." When high school classes started, Jose continued working the graveyard shift at a carpet mill. School became a low priority.

"School? What's the point?" Jose asked one recent afternoon, minutes after being ejected from class for misbehavior. "They put your real name on the diploma, and everyone I know works with a fake name."

Two weeks later, he dropped out for good.

Rigo's efforts to save Luis were met with the same indifference.

For months, Luis had been hanging out with gang members and skipping school. On Nov. 13, Luis' gang and another one met in a park in La Quinta. Words were exchanged. Two gunshots rang out and an 18-year-old Hispanic youth fell to the ground bleeding from his side.

"It got out of control," Luis said. "Rigo warned me that I'd eventually get in trouble, but I didn't listen."

Luis was never implicated in the shooting, but he was charged with

underage drinking and suspended from school.

He returned to school and hopes to graduate, but said his future lies in returning to Mexico and joining the army.

"There's not a lot for us here," he said.

After learning his own fate, Rigo's first instinct was also to return to Mexico. But he was an emigrant, a Norteno. Everything he heard was that Mexican universities give priority to students from Mexican high schools.

Mexican officials say the apparent discrimination in college admissions is actually a product of the country's population explosion, which makes it difficult for any student to obtain admission to college.

But Rigo and others believe he would be regarded as a traitor if he returned home. "Mexico screws its emigrants unmercifully," said Father Daniel Stack, pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Dalton, which serves about 1,000 Hispanics. Even if Rigo were accepted in Mexico, he knows he would have to work long hours to support himself.

INS officials say that for undocumented aliens like Rigo, remaining in Dalton and trying to get legal papers is impossible since they have no relative in America legally who could petition for their legal residency.

The immigration clock starts ticking, immigration experts say, after undocumented aliens turn 18. Without a legal resident green card, college-bound students are not only ineligible for HOPE scholarships and in-state college tuition, but also risk serious deportation sentences or even prison.

"There is not much (undocumented aliens) can do except pray for another amnesty," like the one granted in 1986 to illegal aliens living for many years in the United States, said Robert Divine, a Chattanooga immigration lawyer. But it's unlikely the government would grant such an amnesty again, he added.

Rigo knows Hispanic men who paid Anglo women to marry them and has contemplated doing the same, but they risk prison or deportation if they are caught.

He thought about purchasing bogus documents, but has dismissed the idea. Every university has officials who can cross-reference application materials with INS officials. Dejected, Rigo contemplated seeking a sports scholarship and joined the wrestling team. But within two days he broke his finger and was pressured by his family to get a job.

Now, under an assumed name, he spends his nights flipping hamburgers and deep-frying french fries.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "Right now, I feel like I'm back in the desert, trying to get to the United States to fulfill a dream. But every time I get close to the border, something keeps pulling me back to Mexico."

As the days grew colder, Rigo continued studying intensely and grew hopeful every time a new college application arrived. But like the first application, each one asked for something he did not have and he somberly stacked it in a neat row in his school locker behind his math and chemistry books.

He tried writing poems like he had during the depressive days in the migrant fields, but penning lines about his "earned destiny" and "getting just one chance" didn't help. Even when his high school's science department honored him with an award for outstanding achievement in December, he received it with mixed emotions.

The dream of college, which had sustained him for most of his life, appear to have faded. For the first time in his life, he is resolved that his struggle for higher education appears over.

"I'll probably end up in the mills," he said, pausing for a moment, as if the gravity of his words had not sunk in yet. For two generations, a university education was nothing more than a forlorn hope for his grandfather and uncles. Now, it seems that legacy will have to be embraced by yet another generation.

Rigo realizes his misfortune is that he was born on the wrong side of the Rio Grande. Had his mother crossed the border and given birth to him like tens of thousands of illegal aliens, he'd be a college-bound U.S. citizen today.

"But at least," Rigo said, "I can make sure that my children go to college."

Graphic :

HISPANICS IN WHITFIELD COUNTY

Demographics: Estimates of the Hispanic migration to northwest Georgia vary widely. The official 1997 census estimate is 4,581 Hispanics, or about one of every 20 residents of the county.

But the Immigration and Naturalization Service says the number should be about 40,000, or one of every three residents. The INS believes 75 percent of those immigrants are in the United States illegally.

Higher education: Until their 18th birthdays, illegal immigrants may attend public school. Federal law prevents school officials from asking them about their residency status. (Children are U.S. citizens if they are born in the United States, even if their parents are in the country illegally.) But undocumented immigrants no longer can enjoy the INS' unofficial "hands-off" policy once they turn 18.

An illegal alien who remains in the United States for six months after his 18th birthday can be deported and excluded for three years from seeking re-entry. One who remains for more than a year may not

re-enter for 10 years. Many deportees return immediately to the United States but at the risk of stronger penalties, including a possible prison sentence.

For illegal immigrants who attended a U.S. high school, it is extremely difficult to obtain a special visa to study in a U.S. college as a visiting foreign student. Typically, an illegal alien would have to leave the country for a year before becoming eligible for such a visa. Undocumented aliens are ineligible for financial aid.

Employment: Working in Dalton has become relatively easy for undocumented aliens. Most arrive with fraudulent identification documents (Social Security cards, birth certificates or green cards) or obtain them quickly from document vendors. Employers are required to use their best judgment while screening IDs, but "their best judgment can be quite varied," according to Dalton police Detective Mike Wilson, who works out of the local INS office.

The burden of proving an employer knowingly hired an undocumented worker lies on the INS. An employer convicted of knowingly hiring illegal aliens may face stiff fines and even a prison sentence, but such cases are extremely rare. Regional planners estimate that about 40 percent of the carpet workers in Whitfield County are Hispanic, but INS officials claim it's closer to 75 percent.

Many undocumented workers claim a number of dependents so that income taxes are not deducted from their paychecks. Social Security payments are withheld from their wages even though the workers will never qualify to receive Social Security benefits.

Map shows Dalton and Whitfield County in relation to Atlanta.

Map :

Map of the United States shows: Rigo's Route To Georgia

Rigo Nunez worked his way across North America, traveling more than 5,500 miles before his 15th birthday, to get from his home near Mexico City to a job in northwest Georgia. Here is his route:

AUTUMN 1994

Rigo leaves his home in Uriangato, Mexico, crosses the Sonora Desert near Nogales and arrives in Arizona. He spends two weeks in Phoenix.

LATE 1994

Rigo travels to Philadelphia to stay with a relative, then moves on to work in upstate New York, picking tomatoes and cabbages and later working in a tomato mill.

EARLY 1995

Rigo travels to South Florida to pick oranges and tomatoes.

AUTUMN 1995

Rigo obtains fake identification, moves to Dalton to work in a poultry mill. / Michelle Mack / Staff

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Jim Dyer, The dreams of Rigo Nunez: Defying the odds and fighting a stereotype, a young teen left home to: carve out a better life. After excelling in high school, he faced a hard: truth. What is left now of h., 01-24-1999, pp C01.



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May 31, 1999

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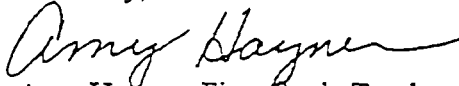
Dear Mr. Mitchell:

I regret that I will be unable to attend Wednesday's meeting regarding The Georgia Project. As a Dalton educator who has worked closely with Monterrey Teaching Assistants, I would like to comment on the possible reduction in number of teachers for the upcoming school year.

While my thoughts are only indicative of my personal experiences at Roan School, I feel that they are worth voicing because students' primary school years are crucial foundations for future success. At first glance, Roan's staff is diverse and many members are bilingual in English and Spanish. Yet, the majority of these bilingual staff members are paraprofessionals who lack training and certification in early childhood education. While our current bilingual staff members are crucial to the functioning of our school in relation to translation and communication, they are able to work instructionally with students with varying degrees of success. An insight into the developmental needs of young children is essential to meeting instructional objectives. In my experience, Monterrey Teaching Assistants at the primary and elementary levels are knowledgeable of issues in early childhood education. They also are trained in bilingual education and language acquisition. From this perspective, Monterrey Teaching Assistants are irreplaceable. It is difficult for local personnel offices to locate and hire candidates with these characteristics. This is why I feel strongly that the number of Monterrey Teaching Assistants needs to be maintained or increased to assist students and to serve as resources for teachers.

I appreciate you forwarding my ideas to those present at the meeting. I feel that the reduction in the number of Monterrey Teaching Assistants could be very detrimental to our continued success in serving ethnically diverse students. As always, thank you for your personal dedication to The Georgia Project and to education in our community.

Sincerely,


Amy Haynes, First Grade Teacher
Roan School

DALTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Vision-Mission Goals

1999-2004

*The vision of the Dalton Public Schools is
to be a model school community
where learning and teaching
exceed expectations.*

*The mission of the Dalton Public Schools is
to teach students to become successful
learners, critical thinkers and
responsible citizens.*

GOAL I:

By 2004 grades 3, 5, 8 and 10 will score in the 67 percentile (composite) on state-mandated, nationally norm-referenced tests and 75 percent of high school students taking Advanced Placement Tests will score 3, 4 or 5.

GOAL II:

By 2004 all schools will implement and model teaching strategies and expectations which contribute to citizenship development as measured by improved behavior in identified areas to include work ethic, community involvement, school activities, safety and cultural diversity.

GOAL III:

By 2004 all schools will implement and model teaching strategies and expectations which develop critical thinking skills as measured by academic achievement and appropriate choices with opportunities to demonstrate responsible decision making.

Statement of Delia Pompa, Director

Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs

Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor-HHS-Education Alliance

March 9, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to testify before you on the fiscal year 2000 budget request for Bilingual and Immigrant Education. My written statement – which I would like to submit for the record – outlines in detail the particulars of our request. I would like to take a slightly different tack with my oral testimony. Members of the Subcommittee may be unaware that this year represents the thirtieth anniversary of the Title VII program. To mark this important milestone, I would like to pose and answer three very simple questions:

- How has the population changed?
- Where does the money go?
- Does the program work?

HOW HAS THE POPULATION CHANGED?

Thirty years ago when the Title VII program began, limited-English-proficient (LEP) students were heavily concentrated in a few southwestern states and a few northeastern cities. Today, there is still a widespread perception that only Texas or California or New York classrooms serve LEP students, but that is no longer the case. Dalton, Georgia, the self-proclaimed “carpet capital of the world”, is not well known as a destination for immigrants to the U.S. And yet today at some schools in Dalton, two-thirds to three-quarters of students are Hispanic, many of whom are limited English proficient and most from families that have come to work in the area’s carpet mills and nearby chicken-processing plants.

In response to the challenge of educating the area’s new Spanish-speaking students, civic leaders, led by Dalton lawyer Erwin Mitchell, created the “Georgia Project.” Reverend Daniel Stack, a Roman Catholic Priest in Dalton and member of the Georgia Project Committee stated the following in a recent *Washington Post* article: “The leadership of the town early on had enough sense to recognize this population was awfully good for the economy.” Georgia Project founder Mitchell explained the project in these terms: “Ultimately, the aim of our school system is to make it possible for every student (be they native English or Spanish speakers) to become bilingual by the time of graduation.”

Dalton, Georgia represents one kind of demographic change going on around the country and highlights both the challenges and opportunities that an influx of LEP families and students can present a community. Those who call what is going on in Dalton “new” would only be half-right. The kinds of changes prompted by the Georgia Project in Dalton are certainly innovative and exciting. But what’s happening in Dalton is also, in a sense, as old as the American republic. For as long as there has been an

America, our communities have accepted, been confronted with, and have been renewed by newcomers who bring change, new life, and new opportunity to our schools, economy, and culture. That is why the Title VII program is more relevant today than it was when it was created 30 years ago.

Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee all have something surprising in common. In each of those states, the number of LEP students has DOUBLED in the last four years. Nationwide, the number of LEP students increased 60 percent between 1990 and 1997, bringing the total to 3.4 million LEP students representing over 150 different languages.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?

Let me now go to my second question: where does the money for Title VII go? It goes to Illinois and Wisconsin and Oklahoma and California and 41 other States and territories. The program funds 634 projects and, if the Congress grants our request for \$10 million in additional funding for Bilingual Education Instructional Services, could fund an additional 125 more projects in FY2000. As in Dalton, the most challenging moment for a school district is when large numbers of LEP students first arrive. That is when school leaders must confront how they will educate the new families and students. For this reason, in FY2000 the Department plans to emphasize two types of instructional services grants that often benefit school districts that have experienced a recent influx of LEP students and have little prior experience in serving LEP students. Those grants are the Program Development and Implementation grant and the Program Enhancement grant.

The biggest problem any school district with significant numbers of LEP students will face is the shortage of teachers trained to teach students to speak English and help them learn their academic subjects. The shortage has been made more acute as school districts turn to reducing class size as a way of improving student achievement. As I mentioned in last year's testimony, the California Department of Education reported in that they faced a shortage of over 21,000 bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. The Title VII program is perhaps the most consistent source of new bilingual and ESL teachers. The Professional Development component of our program directly supports the training of over 4,000 teachers per year to help them teach English and help students achieve to high standards. And if Congress grants our request for \$25 million more for Bilingual Education Professional Development, we will help train 2,000 more teachers annually.

A perennial question—sort of a subset of “where does the money go?”—is: “What kind of programs do Title VII funds support?” Are they only “bilingual”—as is popularly understood—that require students to be taught in two languages? Are they “English immersion” programs that focus heavily on teaching students English before they learn anything else? Thanks largely to the last reauthorization of the Title VII programs, these questions are, I believe, almost irrelevant. Our grants focus on the students they serve and the quality of service, not on instructional approach.

Today, most Title VII grantees choose instructional approaches that blend instructional approaches, blurring old understandings of what projects are “bilingual” or “English immersion.” Especially for school districts faced with a new, diverse influx of

LEP students, these distinctions are unimportant. They just want something that works, something that can help teach students who come to school not speaking English.

Our "typical" systemwide or comprehensive project, if I can generalize for a moment, serves children of Spanish, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and American Indian language backgrounds. Because of the number of languages and students in a "typical" project, approaches to learning English are three-fold. Schools employ "two-way" bilingual education techniques that might combine English and non-English speaking students in a classroom that uses two languages. They might employ "transitional" bilingual education techniques that transition students from their native language into English. Or they might employ English immersion techniques that focus heavily on early exposure to English. And besides English proficiency, the "typical" project might focus on professional development, family education, educational technology, and the academic areas. The goal is always to help children reach high academic standards. My point here is that it is the schools, our grantees, who make the big decisions about how to address the particular needs of the particular mix of LEP students. This leads me to the third question I posed at the beginning of my testimony:

DOES THE PROGRAM WORK?

The quick answer is YES -- because we hold each and every one of our projects accountable by requiring them to report detailed evaluations on project outcomes, as required by the program's statute. I am pleased to report that the first analysis of our grantees biennial evaluations was completed in September 1998. The analysis culled information from the diverse approaches to testing student achievement and performed what is called a "meta-analysis" to ensure that results from different assessment instruments are meaningfully compared. A summary of the results is as follows: In ninety-one (91) percent of projects measuring written language proficiency, at least three-quarters of the students showed gains in English language proficiency. In 62 percent of projects measuring language arts achievement, in 63 percent measuring math achievement, and in 62 percent measuring reading achievement, at least three-quarters of the students showed gains in those content areas. Thus, students in Title VII projects ARE learning English and language and math. The authors of the meta-analysis conclude the following: "The results for these reports were fairly impressive, especially given that this is the first biennial report expected for these projects."

Our office now has in place a series of evaluations of our programs, both required and inspired by the Government Performance and Results Act, that are due in coming years. I plan to share results with the Subcommittee as they become available. I should state that our request for Bilingual Education Support Services is critical to continuing our evaluation work.

Of course, focus on a "typical" program necessarily obscures the unique activities of individual projects or schools. Each is so different. The Los Angeles Unified School District Dual Language Korean/English program at Cahuenga Elementary helps both Korean LEP and native-English speaking students learn two languages. Over four years, the Korean speakers in the program increased their English reading scores by 11 NCEs, and their math scores by 19 NCEs. The English speakers in the program improved their English reading scores by 14 NCEs. The Todd County School District, South Dakota grant at Okreek Elementary is being used to revitalize instruction and implement a

maintenance Lakota program. Ninety percent of the students in the school are limited English proficient, and most of them are not proficient in Lakota, their native language. During the course of the program, the students in the school have shown an increase of 6 NCEs in standardized reading achievement tests, and an increase of 9 NCEs in standardized math achievement tests.

The St. Louis, Missouri, School District project serves middle and high school students in 19 schools through the district. In fact, students in the program—who come from language backgrounds as diverse as Bosnian, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Somali—showed greater gains on standardized tests than their native English-speaking peers and were more likely to remain in school. At James Madison High School in Brooklyn, New York there are 25 different languages spoken by their 740 LEP students most within 3 years of their immigration to the United States. School staff worked to structure a bilingual curriculum for math, biology and chemistry with a technological focus. Ninety-four point nine percent of the students in the bilingual program regularly attended school compared to the 81.6% throughout the rest of the high school. There is no dropout rate for the school. The students agree that learning and working with the computer has helped them learn English and science better. The Mountain View School District in California has utilized their Title VII Grant to implement two-way bilingual programs, a combination of 50% LEP students with 50% non-LEP students. Over 650 LEP students are served within their elementary and middle school. The Mountain View School District reports that after two years, LEP students make statistically significant gains in oral English, overall English development and in math. Thank you for your time. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

**Virgin Islands Selected Teachers Actualizing Action Research for Reform in
Schools: Voices of Practice**

Effective Assessment of English Language Learners

Prepared for

The Institute on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity
Bringing It All Together: How Can Practice, Policy and Research Advance English
Language Learner Achievement?

April, 2000
Providence, Rhode Island

By

E. Donald Bouchard
LAB Liaison
Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory
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Virgin Islands Selected Teachers Actualizing Action Research for Reform in Schools: Voices of Practice

Background:

When one thinks of the U.S. Virgin Islands, one envisions swaying palm trees, calm turquoise waters, sounds of steel drums, and fine sandy beaches. The U.S. Virgin Islands are comprised of four islands: St. John, St. Croix, St. Thomas, and Water Island. These islands have a rich history that has been influenced by the Dutch, French, English, and United States, among others.

Apart from notions of a Caribbean paradise, the U.S. Virgin Islands are also home to an educational community that faces issues arising from cultural and linguistic diversity. Schools in the Virgin Islands are accustomed to receiving students from the West Indies, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. While the majority of second language learners are native Spanish-speaking, there are also a few students whose native language is French and Arabic. In addition, one important feature of language arts instruction that educators in the Virgin Islands face is the indigenous dialects or localized "patois". Educators in the Virgin Islands are challenged with developing proficiency in standard English for both new immigrants and indigenous populations.

In November 1997 a team of four bilingual/ESL teachers from the Virgin Islands attended the First Institute on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: Problem Solving through Action Research. Sponsored by the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB), the event was designed to introduce participants to action research and to invite them to initiate an action research project on issues that were of concern in their classrooms, specifically those relating to the education of English Language Learners (ELLs). This was seen as an exciting endeavor, in that traditional research does not often allow for the total engagement of the teacher in research. From the teachers' perspective, research initiated by a third party does not usually translate to classroom practice. Teachers' experiences, expertise and knowledge in what actually takes place in the classroom are often ignored and not taken into consideration. Most importantly, the questions are not asked by practitioners, therefore, many times the answers are of little consequence to teachers in their quest to become better at what they do.

The participating teachers began to look into the possibility of conducting their own research and invited other teachers to join them. Nine (9) participants embarked on this inquiry by selecting their research topic, preparing and submitting their application to the LAB and by selecting a name for their research group. In this case, the name Virgin Islands Selected Teachers Actualizing Action Research for Reform in Schools (VI STAARRS) was chosen. The application was submitted to the LAB at Brown and subsequently accepted for implementation. As a condition of acceptance, the team of selected teachers had to demonstrate support from school principals and superintendents.

Action Research

Action research is a systematic approach used in the investigation of a question, problem or topic that involves: 1) posing a question or identifying a problem, 2) collecting data, 3) analyzing data and 4) concluding recommendations to address the original question, problem or topic. Teacher researchers use action research to guide or improve their practice by also reflecting on what they are seeing in their investigations. Often, a literature search and review is included as part of this inquiry process.

Student assessment was selected by teachers as the topic that they would explore for the action research project. Due to geographic constraints, the team chose to explore the broad topic of assessment, individually, within the context of their classrooms and to meet periodically for sharing the stages of their investigation. The composition of the team was enhanced by including an action research coach, Dr. Anita Plaskett, school principal at a Professional Development School, and University of Virgin Islands adjunct faculty member. The use of an action research coach to work with classroom teachers is how other LAB selected projects were also assisted.

Team members included:

St. Croix District

Beverly Nesbitt
Joseph Chapman
Maria De L. Velasquez
Paulina Ramos

St. Thomas/St. John District

Juanita Canton
Beverly Benjamin
Bernice Samuel
Dahlia Adams
Gladys Collins

The individual topics or questions pursued included the following:

- 1) Does self-reflection promote effectiveness in classroom assessments?
- 2) Does modification of existing reading comprehension tests allow for academic success in language arts for a limited English proficient
- 3) Does paired reading with proficient English Language Learners result in greater reading and writing language achievement of less proficient ELLs?
- 4) Can the use of rubrics act as an effective assessment tool with ELLs?
- 5) Peer tutoring and Mathematics: An effective combination for English language learners?
- 6) The use of specific questioning techniques enhance deductive reasoning in students' comprehension of the scientific method
- 7) Importance of a placement test in the learning process of English language learners
- 8) Using writing portfolios in the ESL classroom
- 9) A view from the classroom: Student and teacher perspectives regarding classroom assessment

Teacher Stories

The following are two of the nine stories that emerged in the VI STAARRS project which will be represented by two teacher-researchers on the VISTAARRS panel presentation for the Institute on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity.

1. Does modification of existing reading comprehension tests allow for academic success in language arts for a limited English proficient student?

The first story involves a question of practice around administering a language arts reading program comprehension assessment and a policy around student assessment requirements at the school/district level. Paulina Ramos, a third year teacher in a multi-age classroom found that administering a reading comprehension assessment to language minority students with low literacy skills was problematic for both her low-literacy students and herself as a teacher. When she administered Themes One and Two of this test to her student, “Jane”, Ms. Ramos used no modifications and saw poor results (See Table 1). Ms. Ramos sensed the negative impact this “required testing” had on some of her English language learners. When Ms. Ramos inquired among her peers about the use of this reading comprehension assessment, she was told that all students must complete the assessment regardless of their literacy level. Ms. Ramos asked about the “policy” which required testing of all students regardless of their literacy level. She found this frustrating not only for herself, but had seen the frustration on the faces of her students and was concerned that the testing only made students feel like they were failures. Ms. Ramos saw the use of this assessment as a barrier to student motivation because her experience told her that students who believe that they cannot read well become discouraged and sometimes give up, seeing themselves as failures.

Paulina Ramos then inquired among her peers about the possibility of modifying the existing assessment instrument and whether it was appropriate for her to pursue a modified assessment with one of her students. Her peers advised her to try modification of the assessment in stages to better prepare the student for test-taking. Ms. Ramos worked with a fifth grade student, “Jane”. Over time, she saw that by modifying the test, she was able to break down the test so that her student understood how to look for answers, work on vocabulary development or other skills being assessed. As an example, Ms. Ramos reduced the options for multiple choice questions from four options to two, then added a third and then a fourth response until the student was selecting from all multiple choice responses (See Table 1). Ms. Ramos also read some of the passages to her student with follow-up comprehension questions. She saw that her student, “Jane” did have comprehension of the passage, but left to her own resources, the “Jane” would not have been able to complete the test independently.

“Jane’s” Reading/ Language Arts Assessment Results Before and After Modification

Table 1

Baseline Data – “Jane’s” Fourth Grade Reading Comprehension Scores:

No Modification

Theme One	35%
Theme Two	42%
Theme Three	60%
Theme Four	45%
Theme Five	60%
Average	51%

“Jane’s” Fifth Grade Reading Comprehension Scores

Theme One – No modification	38%
Theme Two – No modification	42%
Average	40%

Fifth Grade Themes Three through Six

Test done per skill not per theme

Characterization Skill	55%
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Modifications done for this skill:

- Read story, questions and answers four times
- Studied vocabulary words from story tested
- Answered from only two out of four possible answers

Predicting Outcome	70%
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Modifications done for this skill:

- Read story, questions and answers four times
- Studied vocabulary words from story tested
- Answered from only two out of four possible answers

Main Idea	68%
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Modifications done for this skill:

- Read story, questions and answers four times
- Studied vocabulary words from story tested
- Answered from three out of four possible answers
- Read only a paragraph for each question, not an entire story

Sequence	89%
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Modifications done for this skill:

- Read story, questions and answers four times
- Studied vocabulary words from story tested
- Answered from three out of four possible answers

Compare and Contrast	82%
Modifications done for this skill:	
Read story, questions and answers three times	
Studied vocabulary words from story tested	
Answered from all four possible answers	
Fact and Opinion	95%
Modification done for this skill:	
Read story, questions and answers three times	
Studied vocabulary words from story tested	
Answered from all four possible answers	
Cause and Effect	75%
Modifications done for this skill:	
Read story, questions and answers three times	
Studied vocabulary words from story tested	
Answered from all four possible answers	
Average	76%

While observing her student in taking the test after modifications were done, Ms. Ramos reported that she could see that the student was confident and felt successful. Ms. Ramos' goals as a teacher were "to allow her student to gain success, learn comprehension skills, increase vocabulary and make the mandatory language arts test as stress free as possible". Ms. Ramos reports that at the conclusion of her study that her student was still not reading at fifth grade level. However, she thinks that her student made gains and can build on the skills she has developed, while also working to address the gaps in her language proficiency.

Ms. Ramos believes that a student assessment policy that does not consider a student's language proficiency to be unfair to the students.

2) Using a Writing Portfolio in the English as a Second Language Classroom: Does Portfolio Assessment Enhance Proficiency in Writing While Making English Language Learners Self-Directed?

This story involves Bernice Samuel, a veteran teacher of twenty years, and seven students between the ages of 10 and 12, came from the Caribbean island of the Dominican Republic, except for one student from Denmark. Ms. Samuel has been an ESL teacher in a self-contained classroom for the past three years. All students were identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Students communicated in English using "survival English". All students had been assessed as functioning below grade level in both reading and language arts. Ms. Samuel writes: "The goal of the transitional bilingual program at the Lockhart Elementary School is to prepare English language learners to

make the transition to an all-English curriculum. Students receive instruction in their native language (Spanish) to enhance and strengthen their acquisition of the second language (English) and maintain the native language. Additionally, the goal of the program stresses that Ms. Samuel teach students as quickly as possible so that they do not fall behind their English speaking peers while they are learning English.”

The concern for Bernice was in adequately assessing the learning of her ESL students. She knew first hand that paper and pencil testing for ELLs does not provide a complete picture of what students are learning in the classroom. In order to address student assessment, Bernice Samuel explored the literature on authentic assessment and became interested in the use of portfolios because many educators had stressed the benefits of these over traditional testing. The literature on portfolios claimed that this type of assessment could be sensitive to students’ background knowledge and could motivate students to do their best. She assumed that a working portfolio would provide her with an on-going assessment of her students’ needs, strengths, and weaknesses. However, she mainly wanted a process that would demonstrate to parents, students and to herself that learning was taking place in her classroom.

Ms. Samuel chose to focus her portfolio development on writing, reasoning that it was better to try this process of assessment on a manageable (small) scale. The purposes for formulating the portfolios follow:

- 1) to assess student’s mastery of writing skills
- 2) to show student’s academic growth
- 3) to be knowledgeable of student’s strengths and weaknesses
- 4) to see a connection between writing and the content areas

Students received instruction on use of portfolios and how Ms. Samuel would look at student work to see signs of progress. Ms. Samuel struggled in determining what types of work she would collect for the portfolios. She also asked herself “What types of activities and assignments do I need to develop...(so that student work) will reveal what students know and which demonstrates an understanding of the instructional objectives being presented? Ms. Samuel indicated that she had to seriously consider how she structured her teaching to get students to demonstrate their learning to her differently than she had previously done.

She held conferences with students to discuss their work on a regular basis. Conferencing she learned is a critical component to the portfolio process. Students were encouraged to share their work. Students writing was critiqued and sometimes rewritten, depending on the nature of the assignment. Student reactions to writing assignments changed from reluctance to their wanting to write. Students became more aware of themselves as writers and were able to evaluate their work. Not only did Ms. Samuel’s students change, she changed in her outlook on her own methods of assessment.

Ms. Samuel plans to continue using portfolios, but she already has plans for improving upon her recent experiences last year with them. She wants to formulate criteria in which portfolios can be used as the basis for exiting the ESL program.

Teacher-As Researcher Support

These are but two of the teacher stories on assessment of ELLs. The work of the remaining team, although not profiled in this document, is something which has actually benefited all of the team members as they have shared their inquiries with one another. Teachers worked very well together and often had warm rapport with one another. Action research became an activity that allowed these teachers to have conversations about the same topic, but to contribute individually to the knowledge gained and one another's professional development.

One must also factor into these stories the external technical assistance and support which facilitated this project. Anita Plaskett, principal at the Lockhart Elementary Professional Development School in St. Thomas, worked with the VI STAARRS as their action research coach. Nidia Tolentino, State Department ESL/Bilingual Education Coordinator, was in regular contact with teachers and school administrators. Ms. Tolentino assisted Anita Plaskett and Maria Sanes, LAB Liaison, in planning meetings, supporting, advocating for teachers, and generally assisting the team with clarifying their research questions.

Future directions and potential inquiry:

Has the use of action research benefited the teachers involved? If so, how?

What implications could action research have on school or district policy regarding student assessment in the Virgin Islands?

Is the voice of practice informing policy? If so, how?

How can research assist educators in addressing dialects while promoting standard English?



Government of the Virgin Islands of the United States

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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Telephone #: (340) 774-2810

Facsimile #: (340) 774-4679

A Message From The Commissioner

March 3, 2000

The work completed by the Virgin Islands Selected Teachers Actualizing Action Research for Reform in Schools (V.I. STAARRS) demonstrates that there are truly stars among us. These stars represent the dedication and commitment of the territory's teachers to all students in the Virgin Islands.

The results of their research on the "Effective Assessment of English Language Learners" is an excellent example of collaboration among educators who share common concerns and who are desirous of solving problems which affect the teaching/learning process.

This document contains the findings of action research conducted in Virgin Islands public school classrooms by public school teachers, reflecting individual classroom situations. The results illustrate the avenues available to teachers who seek practical solutions to obstacles which they encounter in their day-to-day classroom experiences.

Certainly our V.I. STAARRS are shining examples of the research which other teachers can conduct as we seek to address the many challenges facing the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

On behalf of the entire Department of Education, I salute the V.I. STAARRS.


Ruby Simmonds, D.A.
Commissioner

Government of
The Virgin Islands of the United States

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
STATE OFFICE OF CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION & ASSESSMENT

44-46 Kongens Gade

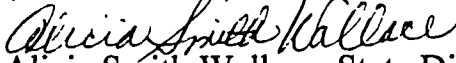
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Virgin Islands Selected Teachers
Actualizing Action Research for Schools
(V.I. STAARS)

FROM: 
Alicia Smith Wallace, State Director
Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

RE: **ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

DATE: March 1, 2000

It is with great pride that I write this letter of support for your efforts. When you began this project, you felt a sense of trepidation; yet, we knew what you wanted to accomplish. You forged ahead, even recruiting others in support of your project.

When I attended your seminar last December where you presented the results of your action research, you kept me captivated with your presentation. Your work was thorough, of great significance, well-organized, and effectively presented. The Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment is proud to have collaborated with you in this project. Your commitment and professionalism were evident in your presentations.

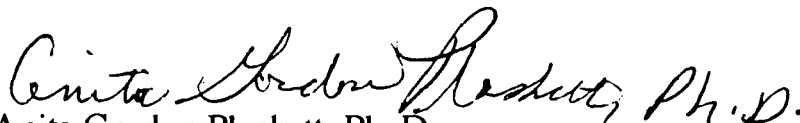
I offer my congratulations for a project well executed and for the selection of your team to showcase your project at the LAB at Brown's Pell Seminar. If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to ask.

Action Research Process

This project reflects two and a half years of collaboration, reflection, risk taking and professional growth. The VI STAARRS (Virgin Islands Teachers Actualizing Action Research for Reform in Schools) have identified the assessment of English Language Learners (ELLs) as a collective concern and, as a result, conducted action research to seek answers to those burning questions that impact on the daily determination of what their students know. Their professional responsibilities are diverse. Some are elementary teachers; others are secondary teachers; some teach all subjects; others teach one subject; some only supplement already existing programs; others provide all services in a self contained classroom. Nonetheless, these educators sought common ground and developed a support system for each other. They served as peer reviewers as they fine tuned their specific area of investigation. Consequently, the learning process was a continuum that strengthened the team effort.

The VI STAARRS' experiences and results with this project are well documented and have been shared with the decision makers of the Virgin Islands Department of Education with the anticipation that some systemic change can occur with how we assess our ELL students.

It has certainly been a pleasure to work and learn with these dedicated professionals. Action research does empower teacher excellence. It is my hope that the VI STAARRS' contribution to the existing body of knowledge catalyzes further reflection and transformation among those who have the opportunity to read this document.


Anita Gordon Plaskett, Ph. D.
LAB at Brown Researcher

April 5, 2000

Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers

By Debra Viadero and Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

Shaker Heights, Ohio

Last of a four-part series

Once a month or so, a group of African-American juniors and seniors at Shaker Heights High School trades T-shirts and jeans for dress shirts and ties.

The Achievement Gap

The buttoned-down attire is meant to strengthen the message these young men want to send to their younger, less studious schoolmates in this integrated Cleveland suburb. Look at us, they are saying: We are black, we are smart, and we are proud.

The Minority Achievement Committee, or MAC scholars program, is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. On average, they start school trailing behind white and Asian children and never catch up, lagging on national tests in every subject—sometimes by four grade levels.

A new sense of urgency about the problem is prompting educators and policymakers around the country to try a variety of tactics, some quite costly, to narrow the academic disparities dividing racial and ethnic groups. Class sizes are getting trimmed, teachers are receiving special training, and preschool programs for minority children are expanding.

Schools are opening access to high-level classes and cajoling more minority students into taking them. Districts are shopping for schoolwide-improvement models, and policymakers are raising the academic bar for students and teachers.

In Houston, educators even bargained with local real estate companies to align the terms of apartment leases to match the school year so that children's educations wouldn't be disrupted when families moved. But no one knows for sure which of those methods work best.

"Some strategies for investing resources in disadvantaged children are substantially more productive than others," writes L. Scott Miller in his 1995 book on the subject, *The American Imperative*. "There is little evidence that any existing strategy can close more than a fraction of the overall achievement gap."

That, scholars and minority advocates say, is why solving the problem requires combining strategies and mobilizing resources at every location along the path to adulthood: homes, neighborhoods, college campuses, and, perhaps most important, K-12 schools.

"Just because schools didn't cause the problem doesn't mean they can't solve it," said Meredith Phillips, a co-editor of *The Black-White Test-Score Gap*, a 1998 book on the subject.

What's more, some advocates say, if public schools can't solve the problem in this era of increasing school choice, minority families may be increasingly inclined to look elsewhere.

Breaking Stereotypes

The achievement gap spans socioeconomic boundaries, cropping up in cities, in rural towns, and in well-to-do suburbs like Shaker Heights.

A 1996 study in this 5,600-student district found some troubling achievement disparities. While blacks constituted more than half the enrollment at Shaker Heights High at the time, they accounted for fewer than 10 percent of the top-achieving students, but 90 percent of those at the bottom.

"There shouldn't be an achievement gap," said Audie Simon, a senior in Shaker Heights High's MAC scholars program, created by students 10 years ago with strong support from the district. "Because there is, we've all got to put our heads together to make a change."

Part 1 "Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," March 15, 2000 : Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education.

Part 2 "Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations," March 22, 2000 : Why do the achievement gaps persist? Some blame it on teachers; others say too much TV. In a Korean-American community, parents take no chances when it comes to their children's education.

Part 3 "Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools," March 29, 2000 : Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families may offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part 4 April 5, 2000 : There are no sure answers, but some experts say better teaching, smaller classes, the right schoolwide improvement program, and fairer allocation of resources can shrink achievement gaps. A Houston-area district has some answers of its own.

Coverage of urban education is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

He and his fellow scholars are walking arguments against a peer culture that sometimes belittles academic success. Studies since the 1980s have identified a tendency among some African-American students to accuse high-achieving black students of "acting white"—especially if they also use standard English or associate with white classmates.

"A lot of black kids have in mind that we just got to go to school and get our C's and D's," said MAC scholar Jaronn Lawson. "If we could just break that perception, they'd see there is no such thing as 'acting white' or 'acting black.'"

To change those attitudes, the scholars work as nags and mentors to underachieving 9th and 10th grade African-American males. The younger students, known as "potential scholars," start out with less than a C average. If they can push their GPAs into the B-plus or A-minus range, they may become eligible to enter the elite ranks of the MAC scholars. A similar program began three years ago for girls.

"I see these people, they're making it. They're minorities, and their GPAs are high," said Justin Priest, a "potential scholar" who's in 10th grade. "I think I could just work hard and buckle down, and I could do the same as they are." Mr. Priest's GPA, in fact, inched up from 1.48 last year—roughly a D-plus—to 1.71, or a C-minus, the first semester of this school year.

Need for Research

Making it cool to be smart is a strategy that may be catching on nationwide. High schools in Detroit, Evanston, Ill., and other cities around the country all have student-grown clubs much like the MAC scholars. On the national level, the National Urban League two years ago created the Thurgood Marshall Achievers, an honor society for black students, male and female, in grades 3-11. The Lake Success, N.Y.-based Institute for Student Achievement is a growing nonprofit organization that brings groups of professional educators into schools to augment existing services. One of the group's strengths is that it envelopes at-risk students in a network of support that focuses on academic and personal improvement.

"The program takes you out of the mainstream and helps you concentrate," said Kimberly Ferguson, a 24-year-old graduate student at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Va. As a high school student in New York City, she was part of the institute's program. "We had all the same goals," she recalled. "We sat down together, and we developed study habits."

But solid research on programs that try to point disadvantaged students toward college is lacking, said Patricia Gándara, a researcher at the University of California, Davis. She found, however, that the most successful programs provide careful monitoring and guidance and target a particular racial or ethnic group.

Ultimately, all such programs have to encourage more minority students to take the tougher academic courses in which they are badly underrepresented now. Studies show that the biggest predictor of whether young people will go on to earn bachelor's degrees is the academic rigor of their high school coursework.

Some urban schools, though, do not offer a full menu of Advanced Placement classes and other challenging courses. And the general instruction those schools provide can be thin gruel compared with the meatier academic fare at well-off schools.

To force schools to provide better-quality instruction for all, Texas in 1994 began a statewide accountability system that requires schools to go beyond raising students' overall average scores on state exams. Texas schools have to show separately that the average scores of their white, Hispanic, and African-American students are all increasing. If not, schools face the threat of a state takeover.

As a result, the percentages of black and Hispanic students passing the state exams grew by 31 percent and 29 percent, respectively, between 1994 and 1999. The passing rate for white students, in comparison, rose by a little over 18 percent. Some school systems, such as the Aldine Independent School District, are close to eliminating the gaps in some schools.

The Texas approach is one of the most widely cited in the country for addressing lingering problems with minority achievement. But that approach, which also requires students to pass a high school exit test to graduate, is not without its detractors. The graduation test was unsuccessfully challenged in federal court by Hispanic advocacy groups and Hispanic students who had been denied diplomas. They contended that the test violated the constitutional and civil rights of non-Asian minorities because the percentages of those students passing the tests were still disproportionately low.

Texas' experience and that of other states, such as Massachusetts and North Carolina, suggests that raising standards with high-stakes tests presents a trade-off in the campaign to improve minority achievement. While test scores may rise, so, too, could the numbers of blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans who are "pushed out" of school.

If students are going to be punished for failing, minority advocates say, schools should first make sure that they provide equal educational opportunities for all.

"They have gone about the process of raising standards in an ass-backwards way," said Hugh B. Price, the president of the National Urban League and an outspoken advocate of efforts to raise minority achievement. "Students need more time on task [and] better teaching," he added. "We're not talking about that and we are facing challenges."

Studies show that students in schools with high minority enrollments tend to have teachers who are less qualified than their counterparts elsewhere. ("Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced." March 22, 2000.)

Research showing that good teachers make lasting imprints on student achievement is prompting states and districts to raise requirements for new teachers and beef up professional development.

Class Size, School Size

Even well-trained teachers need manageable classes, however. When Tennessee undertook a statewide experiment in the

1980s to reduce class sizes in the early grades, researchers were pleasantly surprised to learn that while all students learned more in classes of 13 to 17 students, the benefits were greatest for minority students. After kindergarten, the gains black students made in smaller classes were typically twice as large as those for whites.

Similar results have emerged in Wisconsin, where a smaller experiment to limit class sizes in kindergarten through 3rd grade to 15 pupils has been under way for four years. During the 1997-98 school year, researchers found, the black-white test-score gap in program classrooms shrank by 19 percent. In regular-size classrooms, the gap grew by 58 percent.

"That's a good example of something that not only raises all kids' achievement, but also fuses the gap because it raises lower-performing kids' achievement more," said Ms. Phillips, an assistant professor of policy and sociology studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Other research has shown that smaller schools are also effective in raising the achievement of minority students. Some states and districts are turning to "whole school" programs with documented success at improving minority achievement. Two such programs—Success for All, which focuses on teaching reading to disadvantaged students, and the School Development Program, aimed at forging relationships between school staff members and parents and at promoting social as well as academic development—have won high marks for effectiveness from two different national panels.

But research on the vast majority of comprehensive models for school improvement is more mixed. Even less is known about the effectiveness of popular supplemental programs, such as after-school tutoring, Saturday schools, and summer enrichment programs.

"One thing we do know, however, is that many of the high-achieving students from all racial and ethnic groups are beneficiaries of extensive formal and informal supplementary educational opportunities over time," write the members of a task force organized by the College Board to look at minority achievement. Korean immigrant families in Los Angeles, for example, use such programs to create what some call "a parallel education system" for their children.

"None of us has achieved systemic success," said Thomas Fowler-Finn, the superintendent of the Fort Wayne, Ind., schools. He leads a network of 27 urban school systems formed last year to collaborate on eliminating academic disparities. "We've all achieved success in limited areas."

'It Begins With Data'

Fort Wayne's efforts reflect a trend by urban school systems to measure the success of reform efforts against the goal of narrowing achievement gaps.

The 30,000-student district began by taking a new look at race. "The goal had been to reach integration, but there were no goals to reach achievement," said Mr. Fowler-Finn. "We are now at the second goal, where the question of achievement must arise."

The district has shrunk the disparities in graduation and dropout rates in recent years, but white and black students remain separated by 30 or more percentage points on some exams.

In an effort to narrow those differences, the district has begun examining achievement-gap trends, as well as disparities in disciplinary action and differences by race on student surveys of school climate. An intense focus on early literacy, quarterly assessments, and a districtwide core curriculum also have helped push test scores of African-American students up.

Boston has also made closing the achievement gaps between white, black, and Hispanic students a districtwide goal.

In addition to setting high standards in every subject, the district now has five-year improvement goals for each of its 130 schools. The 64,000-student district also reviews achievement by race and gender each year and assigns intervention teams to review low-performing schools.

School leaders have been trained in teacher observation and in using test data to improve instruction. "It begins with data and a willingness to disaggregate data so you know what's happening with different groups of children," said Boston Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant.

Money helps as well. The Boston system will spend \$26.5 million by the end of this school year on summer school and other efforts to improve children's skills in the key transitional years of 2nd, 5th, and 8th grades.

"This is starting to take hold," Mr. Payzant said of the effort, which began in 1998. "I'm not naive, though," he added. "It doesn't mean that everyone who says every child can learn is acting on that belief."

The Rochester, N.Y., schools launched an attack on achievement gaps last fall by targeting money for smaller classes in grades K-6, after-school tutoring, intensified teacher recruitment, staff training, and expanded information centers for parents.

Clifford B. Janey, the superintendent of the 38,000-student system, also wants to change the way educators view their jobs to focus more on broader goals. "If employees are fixed on the notion of 90 percent job and 10 percent mission," he said, "the results will not push us to the level of performance kids deserve."

Involving Parents

Research shows that factors outside school, such as household income and parents' education, can predict school success, too. That is not to say, many experts believe, that schools can wash their hands of those influences.

Pedro Noguera, an education professor and researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that educators and

policymakers should get over the often-repeated idea that minority parents don't value educational performance. "Many schools assume that, and then they are off the hook," he said. "I've never heard a parent say, 'I don't want my child to get an education.'"

He argues that low-income parents, especially those from immigrant families, need information in a friendly, trusting atmosphere. Teachers can also help parents by providing clear instructions on what to do with their children, from practicing vocabulary lists to reading certain passages.

"The more specific [the information is], the more likely the parents will be able to provide it," Mr. Noguera added. "And if a child is behind, let parents know."

Perhaps most important, Mr. Noguera contends, is that parents must visit their children's schools. That, he explains, sends the message that what happens in school is important. He offers educators an easy way to get parents to show up: "Anytime you ask kids to perform, parents will come out. Use that as a hook."

Rosetta Moses-Hill, the director of the Allen County Local Education Fund in Indiana, which includes Fort Wayne, has another technique for bringing low-income parents to her agency's Reading Recovery training program. It pays them.

Not only does the nonprofit agency provide babysitting, a meal, and homework assistance for the children, but it also gives parents a certificate for \$100 in groceries if they attend the three two-hour sessions.

Some 150 parents have finished the training since it began last fall. "Parents attend all sessions, and we pay dearly for those sessions," Ms. Hill said. "But when they come out, they can identify reading techniques that can help their kids become better readers."

For example, she said, parents are taught not to scold children for missing words or forgetting what they read, and to limit television time. "Well-intended parents can do the wrong thing and make them hate reading," Ms. Hill said.

Help From the States

Curbing television time is also the goal of several children's organizations, including the National Association of Elementary School Principals in Alexandria, Va., and the Child Welfare League of America in Washington. Both organizations have endorsed National TV-Turnoff Week, April 24-30.

The annual event started in 1995 and is sponsored by TV-Free America, a Washington-based advocacy group. According to data compiled by the group, American 12- to 17-year-olds watch an average of 20 hours of television each week, roughly twice the level that some experts say can begin interfering with academic achievement. And black and Hispanic students, on average, watch even more television than their white and Asian-American counterparts.

Schools are also looking to their state capitals for support in closing gaps in achievement. And, with more attention being focused on the social costs and the persistence of those gaps, lawmakers are showing new willingness to talk about race and achievement.

State Sen. Jeanne Hopkins Lucas of North Carolina promised a vigorous discussion this year in her state on differing achievement levels between white and minority students. She and several other legislators recently met with top university officials on the issue.

"There will be a great deal of dialogue," the Democrat said in a recent interview. "We need to ask what universities need to do to better train our children."

With those talks, however, come inevitable debates over remedies and resources, especially for costly but promising ideas such as reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, and expanding early-childhood programs.

In a recent study, the Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corp. cited the Carolina Abecedarian Project as one of the most promising preschool education models. But the program, which stresses language skills, costs \$11,000 per child.

Jim Watts, the vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, predicts that state lawmakers in his region will tackle questions of minority achievement during this year's legislative sessions simply because the issue is getting easier to discuss. That is a good beginning, he said, even if the tough questions about money lie ahead.

"I think there were possibly well-founded fears a decade ago among black caucus members and legislators that putting this information on the table would reinforce age-old stereotypes about black children and learning," Mr. Watts said. "But this is an era of raised expectations."

On the Web

Learn more about the [Aldine school district](#).

The [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), also called "The Nation's Report Card," tracks achievement of students in fourth, eighth and twelfth grades, in a variety of subjects.

PHOTOS: At Worsham Elementary School in Aldine, Texas, teacher Martin Cortes works with a student. The Houston-area district has made progress in raising test scores of its African-American and Hispanic students.
—David Fahleson

The MAC scholars at Shaker Heights High School in Ohio encourage younger schoolmates to take challenging courses.

—Bruce Zake

Pedro Noguera of the University of California, Berkeley, says low-income parents need more information and help from schools.

—Jane Scherr

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Fall 1999

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Dissecting My Classroom

A Teacher Experiments With Action Research

By Julie Nora

Before being sent to an action research conference by my department head more than a year ago, I hadn't given much thought to what educational research could teach me about my own busy classroom. Researchers, it seemed, imagined a reality quite different from my own. Rubrics, flow charts, and scaffolding offered me little in the way of keeping my students engaged or of personally gauging how many of my lessons led to serious learning.

My attitude changed when I joined several colleagues at an action research conference in November 1997. As a tool to help teachers ask questions about their everyday work, action research promised something a little different: a chance to study my own practices and the proficiencies of my students with an eye toward what worked and what didn't . . .

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Education Notes

Volume 1, No. 2

November 1999

The Challenge of Improving Reading

"I can think of no higher purpose than passing on literacy and the love of reading to the next generation of Americans."

— US Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Reading and literacy are more than just skills. They represent a means of participating in the exchange of the ideas, feelings, and information that define a thriving society. But too many children in America's schools—38% at the fourth-grade level, according to the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress—score below the "basic" level of reading (NAEP, 1999). (See related charts, page 3 and 4.) Their struggle with reading blocks them from making the most of their education and they often emerge from school poorly prepared for their roles as citizens and employees. Without question, literacy in general and reading in particular are the most complex and important challenges American schools face.

What are the sources of the problem?

It might seem a simple matter for schools and families to raise student performance in reading, and there are certainly many actions that can influence student literacy for the better. But difficulties with reading often have complex causes.

Environment plays a crucial role in a child's early years as brain cells are formed, and sensory environmental stimulation affects the structure and organization of neural pathways (Cole & Cole, 1989; Myers, 1992). Parents need to be their children's first teachers if their children are to start school successfully. Preschool programs with parental involvement—like Head Start—appear to be more successful generally than those without parental involvement (Myers, 1992). (See also "Library cards for infants," page 6.) The window for developing reading competence is smaller than previously thought—so small that first-grade reading performance is now a predictor of reading proficiency for the rest of life. New research indicates that pre-natal health and experiences soon after birth, particularly in the first three years of life, dramatically influence brain development.

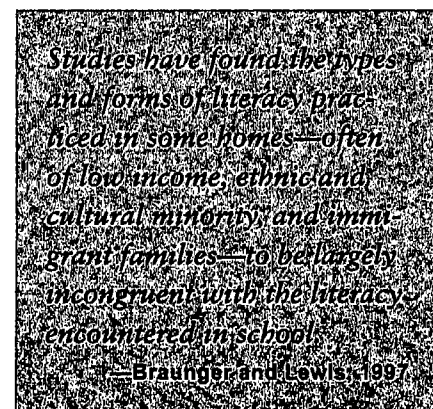
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The Longest War: How Best To Teach Reading

Without question, teaching the beginning reader to acquire phonemic awareness and competence is the key first step, without which other reading abilities cannot develop. Learning the sound-letter correspondences and connecting them to words already known in speech is the most effective way to "crack the code" in any language. Current research, aided by advances in technology that facilitate precise measurement of eye movements and brain activity, confirms that the gateway to normal and competent reading acquisition is phonemic awareness, an ability that is best developed through direct instruction (Spector, 1995; Pugh, 1999). There is also no doubt that the so-called "balanced approach" of also teaching children to read for meaning and using high-quality children's literature leads to reading competency.

Despite these findings, the "reading wars" rage on between "meaning-first" (whole language) and phonics-first beginning reading methodologies. The wars date back

continued on page 2



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Growing Toward Systemic Change:

Developing Personal Learning Plans at Montpeller High School

***David Gibson
with John Clarke***



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