

Best Practices for Closing Achievement Gap Outlined in New Study

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An analysis of eight Colorado schools that are successfully closing the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more affluent peers could serve as a guide for other schools with high poverty rates struggling with low educational attainment and high dropout rates.

In education circles, it's become known as the Colorado Paradox.

Fully one-third of the state's adults over the age of 25 have completed a bachelor's degree, one of the highest percentages in the nation. Yet below average achievement and low graduation rates are persistent problems in school districts statewide.

The association between poverty and lower educational attainment means that poor children and children of color generally do worse in school than their more affluent peers. Closing this achievement gap has long been the focus of education reformers and will continue to be a top challenge in coming years, particularly as the population of Latino and foreign-born students is projected to increase dramatically.

Depending on how it is calculated, the graduation rate in Denver and in other urban districts in the state is somewhere between 30 percent and 50 percent. The dropout rate for Latinos -- 8.2 percent according to the Colorado Department of Education -- is the highest of any group and nearly double the state average.

"I would say it's abysmal, but I want to qualify that by saying it has always been abysmal," said Van Schoales of The Piton Foundation. "Sometimes you read articles that imply there was some golden age when poor kids and Latino kids were doing well in the system. But they have always done poorly in Denver just like they have done poorly in L.A., Chicago and elsewhere."

But there is hope, and studies show -- including a new report of success stories in eight Colorado schools -- that no matter the socioeconomic status of students, with hard work, schools can raise achievement across the board.

A **new study** funded by the Donnell-Kay and Piton research foundations in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Education identifies 10 common characteristics of schools where students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (a common poverty indicator) score above the

state average on assessment tests.

The 10 traits of successful schools identified in the study are:

- Culture of high expectations and accountability for all students
- Intensive use of data and targeted assessments
- Individualized support for struggling students
- Active involvement of teachers in school leadership, decision-making
- Substantial time for planning and professional development
- Strong core academics but not at the expense of arts and humanities instruction
- Stable and consistent leadership
- Small learning groups
- Flexibility to use resources to support student needs and school culture
- Economically integrated student body

"This is about what can happen when folks are able to beat the odds and the lessons that can be learned from that," said Education Commissioner Dwight Jones at a press conference Tuesday to announce the report, "Profiles of Success."

"We know what works in schools, and it's really nice to have this study to back it up. These schools will be great models," added Jones, who said he will create a best practices guide for school districts based on the report's findings.

By looking at standardized test (CSAP) scores from 2004-2006 in all grades for reading, writing and math, researchers identified 39 schools across the state where low-income students perform better than the state average. The field was then narrowed to eight schools -- a mix of traditional and charter schools, all with significant percentages of kids receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

"One of the most important things is the personal connection with adults," said Shoales of the study's findings. "American schools are designed where kids are known very well in the elementary years, but there's an assumption that as kids get older they need less supervision and support. We see that schools work well when adults are always in the kids' faces -- in a good, supportive way, but also to straighten them out when necessary."

Jones indicated that he supports increasing school autonomy, as recommended by the report. A bill currently moving through the state Legislature would allow schools to form "innovation zones" by submitting proposals for alternative academic and administrative plans, which could include waivers from some regulations, including union provisions.

"The people closest to the work have the best information to make a difference in their school. They should have the flexibility to do the work that makes sense," he said.

But in the meantime, way too many students are doing poorly and dropping out. Low achievement among Latino students is an epidemic problem, and many districts in the state, including Denver Public Schools, are majority Latino. Over the next 40 years the nation's Latino

population is expected to triple, which means many schools will be looking very closely at reports like the one released yesterday.

"Unless we change the way our schools are organized and the way in which we support kids, dropout rates are going to grow rather than diminish," Schoales said. "The issue is that poor kids don't graduate and aren't reading writing and doing math as well -- how do we have schools and school systems that can support these kids?"

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