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- *The recipe for improving low performing schools is:*
 - *Strong and active school leadership*
 - *Exceptionally hard working teachers*
 - *Extensive, integrated early literacy programs*
 - *More time for students to learn*
 - *Proactive parent engagement*

- *The top priority for Illinois government must be to drive all new education funding to programming for early childhood education, early literacy programs, and early intervention for struggling readers.*

- *State policies must be adjusted to increase the availability of high quality teachers for low income schools*

- *Illinois needs a system for training, coaching, and supporting parents in low income neighborhoods.*



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issue: *Attack the Achievement Gap*

Glenn W. "Max" McGee

Editor's Note: This is another contribution, and perhaps the most significant, in *Policy Profiles'* continuing series on the problems confronting education in Illinois. In it, the immediate past Illinois state superintendent of public instruction tells how Illinois' most pressing educational problem – the achievement gap – has been solved in some schools and urges that their example be replicated across the state.

It is common knowledge that schools serving Illinois' low income neighborhoods do not perform as well as schools serving children from more affluent backgrounds. This is the achievement gap. Despite the nation's commitment to a quality education for all children, Illinois continues to tolerate a situation that is distinctly, unequivocally unfair.

All kinds of reasons are advanced for the existence of the achievement gap, including poverty, ethnic factors, family structure, children's motivation, teacher quality, and even parenting. *What is less well known is that a number of schools in the state's low income neighborhoods do produce graduates whose average learning levels are well above state and national norms.*

What accounts for the success of these schools? How have they overcome the achievement gap? Can other low income schools do likewise? This article provides answers to these questions.

What is the Achievement Gap?

The achievement gap is the aggregate difference in achievement between children from low income families and children from middle and upper income families. Because a disproportionate number of African-American, Hispanic, and Latino children are from low income families, the achievement gap is *also* the aggregate difference in achievement between children of color and their peers.

The achievement gap is the most critical problem facing Illinois education. It stratifies students' educational opportunities by family income, race, and ethnicity, and it debilitates the development of the state's future workforce. Like an insidious disease, it cripples our children's intellectual development while it spawns an underclass of drugs and gangs, sucking the hope and dreams from neighborhoods. The achievement gap is public enemy number one.

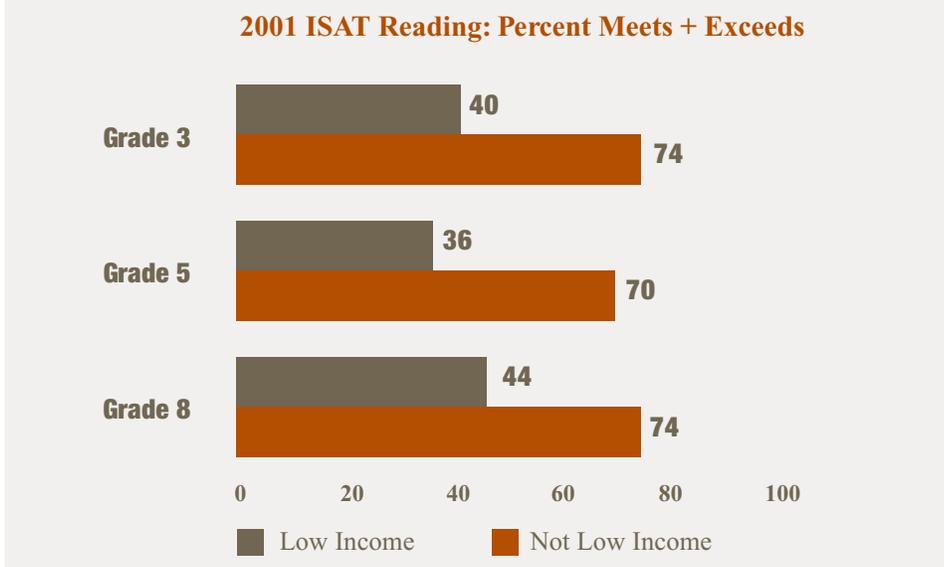
How prevalent is the achievement gap?

Consider the facts. We know from the 2001 Illinois SAT tests that:

- Children who cannot read at grade level by third grade are at a significant disadvantage for success in schooling and later life, yet only 40 percent of third grade students from low-income families meet third grade reading standards compared to nearly 75 percent of their classmates (figure 1).
- Basic mathematics is an important job requirement, yet fewer than one in five eighth grade students from low income families meets state mathematics standards compared to more than three in five of their peers.
- Writing clearly and concisely is a basic skill, yet not even one-third of eleventh grade students from low-income families meet state writing standards compared to almost two-thirds of students from middle and upper income families.

Given that more than two-thirds of our low-income children are boys and girls of color, the achievement gap becomes more pernicious. For example, at third grade, just one in three African American third grade students meet state standards compared to 75 percent of white students (figure 2 on page 3). Middle schools and high schools have not solved the problem. In eleventh grade, only 20 percent of African American students and less than 30 percent of Latino students met state

figure one The Achievement Gap: Income



standards in math compared to 65 percent of white students (figure 3 on page 3). In high school, approximately two thirds of white students pass the Prairie State Examination compared to about one third of African American and Latino students.

Not only is the size of the gap cause for alarm, so too are the numbers of children affected: the numbers exceed the **entire** populations of Rockford, Peoria, Decatur and Springfield combined. *A full 37.8 percent of the 2 million children in Illinois come from low-income families.* The data show that not even half of these children meet state standards, which means that *between 400,000 and 500,000 boys and girls from low-income families are victims of the achievement gap.*

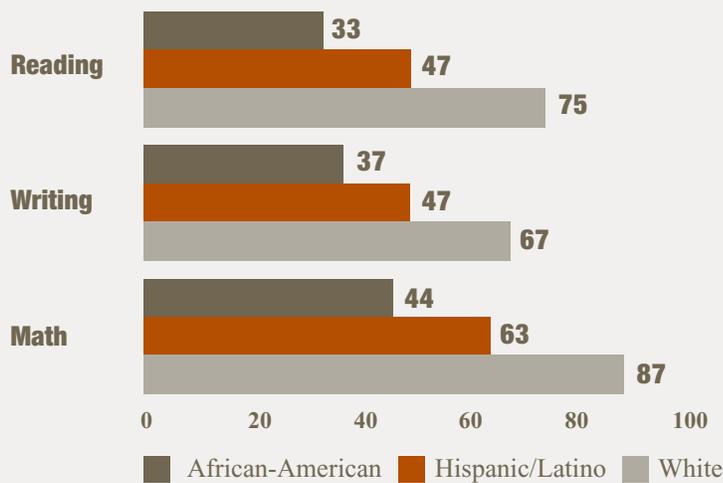
What is the cause of the achievement gap?

The achievement gap is not the fault of the students who are failing; it is caused by the schools, and by the system itself, both of which are failing students.

Figure 4 (on page 4) presents a compelling, terrifying tale. In Illinois, there are about 900 elementary schools whose low income children make up more than half of their enrollment. There are about 1,500 schools whose low income population is less than 50 percent. Fewer than one-third of the 900 schools in the first group – that is, fewer than 300 schools – have even half their students meeting third grade reading standards. Compare this to the fact that 96 percent of the 1,500 schools in the second group—approximately 1,440—have at least half of their third grade

figuretwo The Achievement Gap: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Race

Grade 3 ISAT - 2001 Percent Meets + Exceeds



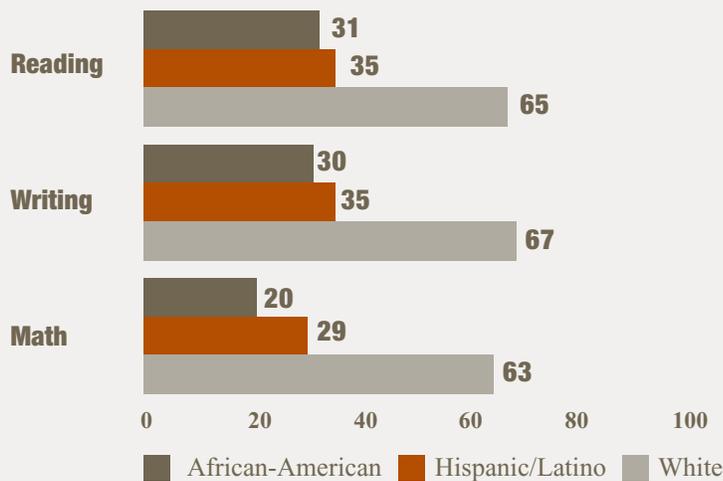
students reading at grade level. *Students who attend a school that is predominantly low income have little chance of success compared to students attending schools that serve a population with fewer low income families.*

Though the “achievement gap” is measured by test scores, it is not just about test scores. It is about opportunities and choices that some students have and others never will. The fact that the large majority of poor students, many of whom are African American and Latino children, are not meeting state standards is a disservice and a disgrace to our youth, our communities, and our state.

But can the achievement gap be closed?

figurethree The Achievement Gap: High School

Grade 11 PSAE - 2001 Percent Meets + Exceeds



Despite long strides made toward racial and economic equality in Illinois, our educational system, our educational and legislative leaders, and our state policy makers have yet to attend to the needs and the educational rights of poor, minority children. The primary reason for not addressing the achievement gap may not be scarcity of funds or lack of political will, as has been posited in the past. It may be because no one really knew what to do.

We now know what to do and what will work because we have examples of success throughout our state. The remainder of this article will explain what some Golden Spike schools have done to close the achievement gap, and how their success can be replicated to eradicate “public enemy number one.”

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figurefour

The Achievement Gap: Schools

Percentage of schools with more than half the students meeting 3rd grade reading standards

Schools with:

More than 50% low income students



Less than 50% low income students



0 20 40 60 80 100

What schools have closed the gap?

Ample evidence exists to show that children of poverty are capable and can readily meet or exceed state learning standards, especially when given appropriate school and community support. In a comprehensive research study, I explored the policies, programs, and practices of the 59 Golden Spike schools—high poverty, high performing elementary schools – that have closed the achievement gap just as the golden spike driven into the railroad bed in Promontory, Utah, closed the “gap” between the east and west more than 130 years ago.

Specifically, these schools are noteworthy because they have a sustained record of high performance or academic improvement. During the last three years, these schools enabled at least two-thirds of their students to meet state standards. Located all across Illinois, these face challenges similar to

those in the other 850+ high poverty schools, yet they have enabled their students to achieve academic success.

How have they managed to close the gap?

Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study uncovered some important commonalities among these schools. Five keys were most critical.

One: Strong and active school leadership built on high expectations and aspirations for all students. The principal (or lead teacher) creates a culture of success with a common belief that all children can and will learn. The principals work hard at being visible and they lead by example. They exhibit and demand mutual respect between teachers and students.

The principals think strategically. They are well-read and current, and they are perceived as knowledgeable. Staff meetings are mini-workshops, giving teachers a chance to be professionals. They understand the demands of working with low-income students and run a tight ship, ensuring that student misbehavior does not interfere with learning.

The leaders are resourceful. In lean financial times, they strive to preserve proven programs and resources at all costs. They understand and “walk the talk” of hiring and keeping good people. They aggressively pursue grants to fund programs and practices and then stick with those programs long after funding expires.

They share a remarkable work ethic and have positive, collegial relationships with staff and students. “We work hard but we have fun,” recounted one teacher. The principals have earned a reputation for doing “whatever it takes” to help students, including house calls with teachers. The teachers rely on them to set the tone with parents.

They focus on results based on high expectations for teachers and students. They help teachers deal with state mandates and model the belief that every child can succeed. They recognize and commend excellence in teaching and learning as well as student behavior.

Empathy for their teachers’ tasks is evident, but several remarked how their “no excuses” policy is accepted by teachers. They encourage innovation and they have the courage to take on the bad teachers. Many are model teachers themselves.

Two: Exceptionally hard working teachers who have a profound commitment to the idea that every child can achieve and thus are unwilling to let any child fail. They are skilled in using student assessment data regularly and frequently as a source for improving their own instruction. Though extraordinarily compassionate, these teachers are not about to accept excuses for low achievement or lack of effort; rather, they incorporate a significant range of strategies and use a vast array of resources to help each individual child. Positive messages abound, whether in personal interactions or displays on the walls.

Many classrooms have substantial classroom libraries that have been endowed primarily with the teachers' personal funds. Contrary to the climate in many public schools, good teaching is admired and respected, and good teachers are emulated, not belittled or ignored. The accomplishments of the Golden Spike teachers can be categorized as truly heroic.

Three: Extensive, integrated early literacy practices and programs including supplemental tutorial support in phonics, fluency, and comprehension for struggling readers. Most schools also carve out substantial blocks of uninterrupted time for classroom reading instruction. "Early literacy is a must," said one teacher. "Kids come to us not knowing their first and last names, not knowing their shapes, not knowing sounds. They have an impaired vocabulary and have had little exposure to books or any print."

Although there is not one common, or even prevalent, reading series or curriculum, there are strong program commonalities. A large number of schools use Four Block reading. Four Block involves using the entire morning to teach four language arts components every single day: guided reading, self-directed reading, writing, and working with words. Reading instruction in these schools has a strong emphasis on phonics, fluency, and vocabulary development along with comprehension.

Reading Recovery is another popular and highly effective model to help children who cannot read well. To keep children reading and immerse them in texts, several schools use Accelerated Reader or the Star Reader program. Supplemental reading instruction software is also used in several primary grade classrooms.

Four: More time for students to learn, especially after school or during the summer. Although this article is not a quantitative study of academic learning time, I obtained substantial interview and observational data regarding its importance and the efforts of teachers and principals to maximize it. Many schools scheduled activities as a team so as to maximize large daily blocks of uninterrupted time. They even strove to minimize transition time between classes and even between lessons.

After school activities were a critical component of many schools' success. Thousands of children in the Golden Spike schools participated in at least one after school activity each week, and some participated on a daily basis. Whether a club to teach photography or prepare for the ISAT, students had

many opportunities. In poor communities, parents do not have the resources to promote after school activities even if they are available; consequently, after school learning time matters a great deal.

Also, summer school was used to extend academic learning time for a high percentage of students. Participation in four- to six-week summer school reading or mathematics classes was the norm. Principals emphasized that summer is not just for academics, but also for immersion in field trips, classes, and activities for enrichment and enhancement. Emphasis was placed on experiences and activities that may be common for middle class families, but not for children of poverty.

Five: Proactive parent engagement and sustained support for parents seeking to improve their own literacy. The study found support for the conclusion that parenting practices almost certainly have more impact on children's cognitive development than preschool programs. *Indeed, changing the way parents deal with their children may be the single most important thing we can do to improve children's cognitive skills.*

In low income schools, some children entering kindergarten do not know letters from numbers, some don't know their last name, and most have a minimal working vocabulary. Even in the lower grades, some low income parents who care about their children do not have the time, knowledge, or stamina to help their children.

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The staff of the Golden Spike schools realize that they cannot do the job alone, that parent engagement is essential. They extend exceptional effort in working with parents and communicating their expectations. They clearly describe what they need to do to assist their children with homework and with being prepared to learn each day. Frequent communication flows from school to home in the form of positive notes, homework folders, and newsletters.

Despite union contract working hours, many teachers in these schools make the time to conduct home visits and home conferences or to be at school very early or very late to meet with parents. Many Golden Spike school teachers and principals readily share their home phone numbers and e-mail addresses with parents as well.

Can schools teach parents how to parent?

More than a few schools reported success in teaching parents how to parent. In North Chicago, a Family Support Team puts on parent training workshops. In Peoria, they actually show parents how to have a meal and interact with students. They show them how to set up a structure for success. John Jay School in Elk Grove Village has theme-based after school learning programs for students and parents together. Ziebell School in Posen-Robbins has a lending library for parents.

At one school, the teachers wear buttons at parent conferences saying “I’m

Number Two” to get the parents to realize who their child’s number one teacher is. “Parents,” noted one superintendent, “Do not have a sense of how important they are, and the teachers would like to see hospitals giving out videos and books to new parents to help them learn how important it is to be sure their children have a proper diet and are nurtured, cuddled, and read to.”

Principals and teachers extend themselves to make school a comforting, welcoming place. Each school finds a special way, whether it is offering meals, holding a dance, having a “make and take” workshop, or offering English lessons. Parents are honored guests at the many classroom and school ceremonies and celebrations. Golden Spike schools do a lot of celebrating, and parents are invited to join in the festivities.

What else might be done?

There are other good ideas used at some, but not all, Golden Spike schools. For instance, many have developed their own individual accountability system and aggressively implemented *school improvement plans that emphasized changing instruction to meet students’ needs*. Several had abandoned traditional “one shot” or “individualized” staff professional development activities and instead focused on *creating a common professional development experience for all teachers*. As a “community of learners,” teachers worked together to acquire new strategies and methods.

Also, it should be noted, the Golden Spike schools tended to be smaller and have a lower mobility rate than other

high poverty schools. This is important to note for urban schools, especially in Chicago, which have much larger enrollments than other schools.

Finally, most of the Golden Spike schools attended to health, safety, and security needs of the students. They provided healthy breakfast, lunches, and after school snacks. They have doctors and dentists come to school or even provide transportation to doctors and dentists. Even more than state learning standards, the achievement gap can be narrowed by eye glasses, dental work, vitamins, and good health.

What policy recommendations are suggested by the Golden Spike schools’ success?

Seven specific, immediate, and imperative policy recommendations are suggested by the success of the Golden Spike schools:

1. *Improving the achievement of low-income students must become the state’s top priority for our new governor, the General Assembly and all groups concerned with education improvement. Additionally, the State Board of Education must first focus on improving the most needy schools, even if it means leaving the other schools alone.*

2. *Drive all new education funding to programming for early childhood education, early literacy programs, and early intervention for struggling readers. These are essential and will save significant dollars in the long run. Teaching all students to read by the time they leave third grade will significantly*

reduce enrollment in (and thus the cost of) remedial and special education programs. Moreover, abundant research, not to mention the experience of thousands of our own students, proves that children who have high quality education experiences from birth through grade three are far less likely to drop out of school, wait longer to have children, and maintain their skills throughout schooling.

3. *Adjust state policies to increase the availability of high quality teachers for low income schools.* Several kinds of policy changes are needed. Realizing that the leaders and teachers in the Golden Spike schools need a different set of knowledge and skills, new programs and incentives to train and support those working with low income students are essential. The existing, mandated professional development system for schools should be recast to provide school wide team training and create and fund extensive training for all school personnel who work with the low income children. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to prepare teachers for working with children of poverty in low-income schools and assure that they know how to teach reading. State policies should be changed to provide significant incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers in these schools.

4. *Improve school health services in low income schools.* Needed changes include: (a) expanded school food service, community health access, and parent education programs in low income schools; and (b) mandate compulsory health insurance for children in such schools. A few cents a day for

vitamins and a few dollars for eyeglasses and dental care are among the most cost effective methods for closing the achievement gap.

5. *Fund these recommendations by reallocating current funds that contribute to inequities solely to needy schools, and supplement these funds with a tax increase which targets all new funds to low income schools.* For example, schools in Kenilworth and Cairo currently receive the same amount of money for purchasing textbooks, but have vastly different available funds per pupil for support of education. The policies and practices sustaining this inequity and others need to be changed. Opposition to a tax increase that targets the new money only to needy schools will be much more difficult to oppose politically. With such targeting, a tax increase might have a chance of success.

6. *Create a state accountability system that uses multiple measures of determining school performance and improvement, that rewards schools that have closed the gap, and that does not tolerate continued poor performance.*

7. *Develop a system for training, coaching, and supporting parents in low income neighborhoods.* Illinois would be well advised to learn both from its own schools and from studies by the U.S. Department of Education, which have noted the critical importance of early literacy initiatives. They have found, for example, that:

Children who are not talked to or engaged in rich language interactions with their parents are going to have low levels of vocabulary and

conceptual development, and this will affect their later reading and academic achievement...Reading scores in the tenth grade can be predicted with surprising accuracy from knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten.

As a child's first teacher, a parent needs to learn how to nurture, how to develop a child's vocabulary, how to provide the experiences that will enable their children to learn and grow. Although two existing programs, Parenting Project and Illinois Early Learning, have been successful, their use is still too limited.

What will it take to close the achievement gap?

To close the achievement gap, everybody – local school district superintendents and school boards; the education partners (IFT, IEA and the Management Alliance); legislators from both parties and both chambers; and our leaders, Governor Rod Blagojevich, Senate President Emil Jones and House Speaker Richard Madigan – must make it the top priority of their education agenda. *It will require more money, but, more importantly, it will require uncommon courage and a collective will.*

Together, they must attack the achievement gap with the same passion, teamwork, and tenacity as those who closed the nation's geographic gap between east and west back in the 1860s. As Stephen Ambrose noted, "It took brains, muscles, and sweat in quantities and scope never before put into a single project—most of all, it could not have been done without teamwork." So let's get to it.

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