



## **The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University** *Toward Excellence with Equity*

### **Projects, Fall 2009**

The Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University is a university-wide effort initiated by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to focus academic research, public education and innovative outreach activities toward eliminating achievement gaps.

The mission of the AGI is to bridge research and practice by framing issues, producing and disseminating research and distilling implications for decision makers in an emergent movement for excellence with equity.

The AGI director and faculty co-chair is Dr. Ronald Ferguson, Senior Lecturer in Education and Public Policy, Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), and Senior Research Associate at the Wiener Center for Social Policy. The other co-chairs are Richard Murnane, Juliana W. and William Foss Thompson Professor of Education and Society, HGSE; and Charles Ogletree, Jesse Climenko Professor of Law and Director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, Harvard Law School.

#### Schooling and Instructional Quality

The "**High School Value Added**" project is a collaboration with the Massachusetts State Department of Education. Using data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test for 8th and 10th graders, the AGI is identifying high schools that produce the greatest two-year learning gains for each of several subgroups in reading and English language arts.

The "**Instructional Leadership**" projects build upon the value added work. For example, the June 2009 annual AGI conference featured sixteen high schools, including eight from Massachusetts, making exemplary progress at raising student achievement. A conference report will distill the presentations and draw implications for instructional leaders. In addition, the AGI will conduct case studies in a selected group of schools identified by the value added project. Efforts by schools where students with disabilities made large gains are a special focus.

"**Measuring Instructional Quality.**" The AGI is working with the Tripod Project for School Improvement and a number of partners to construct teacher quality measures from student survey responses. These measures will be used in research on predictors of student learning gains.

#### Parenting

The "**How I was Parented**" project has conducted more than six dozen extensive interviews with Harvard students on how they were parented. The focus is on ways that parents contributed

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to Harvard students' development as learners and human beings. Students interviews during the spring of 2009 were from the Harvard Kennedy School and the Graduate School of Education. Interviews with students from other parts of the university will continue through the fall semester of 2009. Reports from the project will contrast and compare the parenting styles that students from a variety of backgrounds have experienced and report students' perspectives concerning both good and bad experiences.

The AGI "**Love-to-Read**" survey project was inspired by a participant in the AGI Parent Leadership Network, seeking reading suggestions for his children. Using survey responses from students at Harvard and other universities, the AGI will compile annotated booklists from which teachers, parents, and children can select books that respondents report helped inspire their passion for reading. A particular emphasis is to identify works that help adolescents better understand issues of racial, gender, and social class identity. Related to the survey, the AGI is organizing a **Home Literacy Practices** project focused initially on a research review of past efforts to influence literacy-related activities at home. The findings from this review may influence activities to be organized under the umbrella of the AGI Parent Leadership Network.

The AGI began convening the **AGI Parent Leadership Network** in September 2008. Researchers and parent leaders from communities in several states meet every four months at Harvard to learn about relevant research, trade ideas, coach one another, and share examples of their own leadership. Presentations and discussions have covered topics ranging from home-learning lifestyles, to ways of helping schools and holding them accountable. The AGI Parent Leadership Network's main purpose of is to equip parent leaders with ideas and energy for helping others in home communities to help ALL our children succeed. An aspiration is to organize both action and research projects spanning a number of the participating communities.

### Youth Culture

The "**Conspiracy to Succeed.**" Adolescents desire few things more than social acceptance. However, as individuals, they have quite limited power to reset rules by which social acceptance is granted. Schools participating in the *Conspiracy to Succeed* invite students and adults to combine their power in an effort to reset the rules – both formal rules and informal social norms – that affect behaviors at school and help to determine success not only in school, but for a lifetime. Two dozen schools from several states have registered to join the conspiracy at the kickoff in September 2009. Some of the most impressive examples of activities and progress from participating schools will be featured at the AGI annual conference at Harvard University in June 2010.

### Institutional Supports

Harvard Graduate School of Education's Dean of Faculty Bob Schwartz and project director Bill Symonds are collaborating with the AGI on a project entitled **Pathways to Prosperity**. This project responds to a need for better developed pathways from adolescence into the adult world of work. A report is under production documenting the scope and nature of the challenge that the

project aims to address. The project is helping mobilize leaders in several metropolitan areas to improve the pathways in their regions.