

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. (John Dewey)

The current emphasis on high academic standards has highlighted the still large educational achievement gaps among the nation's racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. There is increasing awareness that the most important challenge in education today is eliminating these gaps, which often are identified as early as kindergarten and develop rapidly in the first three years of school (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999).

Between 1970 and 1990, substantial gains in achievement were made by minority groups. In the mid 1990s, the gap in average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading scores between White and Black 17-year-olds was about a third less than it had been in the early 1970s. However, minority gains have been modest in the 1990s; in some instances, ground may have been lost relative to Whites (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999). In addition, despite the fact that on all major indices, today's students either equal or outperform previous generations, socioeconomic status remains one of the most powerful predictors of students' academic achievement (Pearson, 1997).

While the generally high achievement of American children should be recognized, most educators and policymakers agree that in order to compete for middle-class jobs in today's "information age," students will need advanced verbal reasoning and problem-solving skills. They must be able to use basic literacy skills, as well as higher order critical-thinking skills: to analyze, compare and contrast, follow the sequence of an argument, and synthesize complex texts. In other words, schools are now expected to educate all students to levels of proficiency that, historically, only 25 percent of students attained (Allington, 1994).

This expectation has placed new pressures on schools, at a time when many families are struggling to balance the demands of home and work, and when high levels of poverty among young children continue to place a large number of children at risk for school failure. Yet, race alone puts a child at risk in our nation's schools. Going back to the 1960s, there is an extensive body of research showing that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at virtually all socioeconomic levels do not perform as well as their White and Asian counterparts. On the 1994 NAEP 12th grade reading test, at all parent education levels, African American and Latino students had lower average reading scores than Whites (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999).

Washington School Children

As in the rest of the nation, Washington's population of school children is becoming increasingly diverse, and this diversity is projected to increase even more in the decades to come. Children of color made up nearly 23 percent of Washington's children in 1998, up from 12 percent in 1980 (Washington Kids Count, 2000). Of all children in Washington's public schools in the 1999-2000 school year, 9.6 percent were Hispanic, 7.2 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, 5 percent were African American, 2.7 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native, and 75.3 percent were White (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.) (see Appendix A for a more detailed statistical picture).

Thirty-four percent of the Hispanic population and 24 percent of the Asian and Pacific Islander population live in households where the primary language spoken is not English (Washington Kids Count, 2000). In all, 169 languages are spoken in Washington's 181 school districts, with 88 languages spoken in Seattle Public Schools alone.

In the state of Washington, as in other states, a disproportionate number of economically disadvantaged and minority students continue to perform poorly on essential indicators of educational success. As reported by the state's education agency, these disproportionate numbers are historically reflected in a number of ways: poor performance on tests; overrepresentation in special education; high suspension and expulsion rates; high dropout rates; high crime rates; and limited parental involvement with school. Although progress has been made, current school-level data still show that far fewer Hispanic, Native American, and African American fourth-graders met standards on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) than did White children.

Percent of students meeting fourth-grade standards, 1999 - 2000

	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	African American	Native American	White
Math	18	46	19	25	47
Reading	39	67	48	47	72
Writing	21	50	25	23	43
Listening	46	61	52	54	70

The Unity Project

Recognizing that the level of family and community involvement in schooling is a strong predictor of student success or failure, the Unity Project was designed to facilitate strong family/school/community partnerships in order to increase the academic and personal success of historically underachieving students. The project began with a focus on the gap in performance of African American students, compared to Whites. In response to these concerns, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) staff asked leaders in education from around the state to bring their concerns to a forum.

The forum quickly expanded to include other ethnic groups. From these initial forums, which addressed racial and societal factors that affect academic performance, more formalized groups were formed. In 1997, OSPI brought together five distinctive groups (each made up of different

ethnic groups) designated to act as advisory “think tanks.” Made up of educators and community members of African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American backgrounds, and educators working in high poverty communities, the Think Tanks developed comprehensive action plans and strategies to meet identified needs in their respective groups. From the beginning, the focus of these plans was on improving the interaction with and among families, communities, and schools. The plans document the Think Tanks’ recommendations to achieve the overall project mission and purpose:

To assist OSPI to design and implement strategies that unite families, schools, and at-large communities into a high performance system that guarantees success for all students, particularly underachieving students.

“School reform isn’t making it,” says John Pope, OSPI Program Administrator, continuing:

We know that the involvement of traditional families in their children’s education has a positive impact on student achievement. But minorities are underutilized. Few people have been reached through school outreach efforts and few have benefited. Education has to become a conversation in the household. The strategic plans within and between minority communities document aspirations. The educational system needs to address these aspirations. The plans should be given to the communities themselves and used as a tool for organizing and informing people, not to organize and advise the state. If the plans are part of the office, that’s not enough. They need to be part of the community. These are our schools; we elect our school board. It has to be bottom up.

Among the objectives of the Unity Project are:

- 90 percent of the 1999 kindergartners will read at grade level by third grade
- All students will have an Academic Improvement Plan that is developed by students and families and supported by teachers

Initially, each Think Tank identified three to seven demonstration schools that have a high percentage of historically underachieving students. OSPI staff provides onsite technical assistance and support to these schools. In addition, OSPI encourages Think Tank members to each adopt a school—to make a personal conviction to get to know and support the school, and respond to their needs in the project. Currently there are 28 demonstration elementary schools, representing all areas of the state.

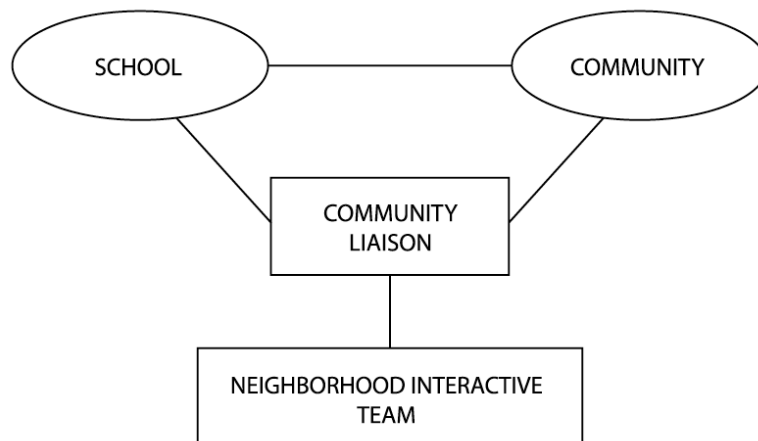
Over the last year, teachers and other school staff, parents, and community volunteers have had opportunities to work in teams and to network with each other at OSPI-sponsored practitioner workshops, conferences, and forums. At these gatherings, teams share effective strategies, as well as challenges, and develop action plans to improve teaching and learning (see Appendix B). According to Principal Dixie Husser at David Wolfle Elementary in North Kitsap:

The workshops help you focus; we work in our own teams, but we share with other teams. Rather than create a whole new plan with new goals, we worked the plan into our school-wide learning improvement plan. The goal is to combine our Unity work

with existing projects. Teachers are overwhelmed as it is and under a lot of stress; we didn't want to just add more to their plate.

In addition, principals from the 28 elementary schools have had opportunities to meet and share concerns and action plans. This year, a Multiethnic Think Tank was formed to discuss the sameness of need across all think tanks and to look at issues with the goal of influencing policy at the state level. OSPI assists with the organizational vision, and has organized a meeting of policy stakeholders. While working with the 28 demonstration schools will remain a priority over the next year, a major emphasis for this school year will be on community mobilization, including forming partnerships with faith-based organizations and other community groups.

In order to help communities organize and improve their relationships with schools, OSPI has formed partnerships with the Corporation for National Service-AmeriCorps and World Vision. Community Liaison positions will be created and piloted in seven of the Unity Project demonstration schools this year, as illustrated by the graphic below. The persons serving in these positions will be Corporation for National Service members, and ideally they will be indigenous to the community. In order to enhance their links to the community, the liaisons will not be hired or supervised by the schools; rather, they will be responsible to Neighborhood Interactive Teams made up of nine to 11 neighborhood residents. As Corporation for National Service members, the Community Liaisons will be eligible to receive money to pay for college and a small living allowance.



World Vision, a faith-based organization that works worldwide, will aid these seven demonstration schools by providing school supplies and other materials, and funding for several programs including tutorial programs and parenting classes. World Vision will also implement a program whereby students and parents earn points that can be redeemed for rewards, such as shoes, backpacks, or clothing. The goal of this reward system is to help parents to be more effectively involved in their child's education. For example, one school held a school supplies carnival where children earned their supplies through participating in games and contests. Families attended the carnival with their children, and were able to meet with other parents and teachers. The event also served as a kick-off for recruiting school volunteers, including families and community members.

According to project spokespersons, two major strands run throughout the Unity Project:

- Nothing can be counted as progress in a community until the families and community play a significant role in helping its children become well-served, show healthy development and steady, sustained advances in school achievement
- Families and communities must be empowered to expand their capacity to develop and implement strategies that enable schools to produce highly capable, successful, and productive students

About This Study

In this qualitative study, NWREL staff has spent the past year documenting promising educational strategies and practices throughout the state of Washington, with particular emphasis on the Unity school/family/community partnerships. Interviews, classroom observations, and examination of school documents were used to gather information on the perspectives of school and university personnel, students, families, and community members. Our questions and data gathering addressed such topics as resiliency, family and community involvement, effective literacy practices, cultural continuity, professional development, and, above all, expectations and aspirations for children's education.

Qualitative research is located within the Max Weber tradition that emphasizes "verstehen," the interpretative understanding of human interaction. Qualitative researchers are concerned with "what their informants are experiencing, how they interpret their experience, and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live" (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982, p. 47).

Over the past year, a diverse team of NWREL staff and members of Washington communities conducted more than 75 in-depth interviews with Think Tank participants, university consortium staff, school personnel, families, older children, and community members. We utilized a semi-structured interview approach, designed to provide a framework within which respondents expressed their own understandings in their own terms. In this way, multiple perspectives were included and explored. Questions for interviews with Think Tank participants, school personnel, families, and community members included:

- What are your beliefs about the purposes of education?
- What are your aspirations for the children in your community?
- What do you think are the main factors that lead to children's school failure and success?
- What do you think are some of the reasons for the underachievement of some minority groups? What are some of the solutions?
- What do you feel are the most pressing professional development needs of teachers?
- What educational experiences related to children's culture and home language should the school provide? What *does* the school provide?
- What do you consider effective family involvement and family support strategies, activities? What kind of activities, strategies does your child's school offer? What do you think are the barriers to effective practice?

- What are the ways that this school is a caring community? What can schools do to become more of a caring community? What are some of the barriers to creating a caring community?

About This Document

In addition to documenting promising educational practices and perspectives of those interviewed, we also include a discussion of research relevant to educationally disadvantaged and culturally diverse students. Research on school restructuring has identified a number of commitments and competencies that lead to improved outcomes for children, including:

- Careful attention to children’s emotional development in a challenging and responsive curriculum that enhances children’s natural curiosity, builds upon present interests, and helps all children meet high academic standards
- Professional development that emphasizes reflective study of teaching and learning
- Culturally responsive and inclusive teaching
- A focus on language and literacy in the early years to build a strong foundation for all learning
- Strong family/school/community partnerships

In the following chapters, we explore all of these topics. Throughout these chapters, we include detailed descriptions of promising educational practices in Washington schools, as well as barriers to implementing these practices. In order to provide a format that allows easy access to information by busy practitioners, we have used sidebars to present summaries of promising practices, research, and conversations with selected interviewees. These materials are intended to encourage those involved in designing and implementing home/school/community partnerships and authentic learning experiences in the classroom to engage in dialogue and reflection—activities essential for thoughtful learning.

While we focused our interviews on schools and communities participating in the Unity Project, we have also included the views of school personnel and community members throughout the state. The stories and viewpoints of families, school personnel, Tribal elders, Think Tank and community members are woven throughout the discussion of research, ensuring that concrete examples are provided to link research with practice, and that a wide range of perspectives is included.

Cummins (1986) suggested that “a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is that the relationships between teachers and students and between schools and communities have remained essentially unchanged.” The Unity Project attempts to alter these relationships by encouraging and supporting strong and equitable school/family/community partnerships. We hope that the aspirations, concerns, and stories of all those who graciously agreed to share their views with us will inform, not only school reform efforts, but also the efforts of the Unity Project to create a more just and caring society. As Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor (1991) observe, “Interpretivist research empowers by connecting people together to hear each others’ stories. Interpretivism pursues social justice one story at a time” (p. 497).