# Shining A Spotlight on Excellence:

USING DATA TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN DC SCHOOLS





#### ABOUT FIGHT FOR CHILDREN'S QUALITY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

Fight For Children's Quality Schools Initiative, an innovative awards program, encourages exploration, discussion, and implementation of high-quality practices and programs that can improve student achievement in DC public, charter, and independent schools. Its two main objectives are to acknowledge and identify quality schools that are improving student achievement, and to share their practices so that they may be replicated and expanded to benefit a broader student population.

On April 13, 2011, DC State Superintendent of Education Hosanna Mahaley joined Fight For Children at our annual Quality Schools Initiative Awards Luncheon to recognize four outstanding DC schools. Thurgood Marshall Academy, a DC public charter high school, and DC Preparatory Academy, a DC public charter middle school, each won Champion of Quality awards and a \$50,000 grant from Fight For Children. Cleveland Elementary, a DC public school, and Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School, a DC public charter elementary school, were each awarded Rising Star awards and a \$25,000 grant.

#### **ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION**

On Tuesday, September 27, 2011, Fight For Children, in conjunction with the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, held a Quality Schools Initiative Principals Roundtable to focus on the use of data-driven instruction to close the achievement gap in DC's K-12 schools. This publication is a summary of the presentations and discussion at the roundtable. Fight For Children is grateful to Accenture and Katherine H. Jones for attending the event, capturing the proceedings, and preparing this report at no cost for Fight For Children.



### Introduction

On Tuesday, September 27, 2011, Fight For Children, in conjunction with the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, held a Quality Schools Initiative Principals Roundtable at Thurgood Marshall

Academy (TMA) to focus on the use of data-driven instruction to close the achievement gap in DC's K-12 schools. TMA, which opened in 2001, was a 2011 recipient of the Quality Schools Initiative Champion of Quality award for its progress in using data to increase student performance. The first part of the half-day event focused on TMA and its successes to date. Then, a panel of leaders from other public and public charter schools in DC spoke about their institutions' experiences implementing data-driven instruction and addressing the achievement gap.

TMA is a law-themed public charter high school whose mission is to "prepare students to succeed in college and to actively engage in our democratic society." All of the school's 390 students are African American and 79% qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. TMA's students are increasingly successful according to city and national metrics, including scores on the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC CAS), the SAT Reasoning Test (SAT), and Advanced Placement (AP) exams, as well as high school graduation and college acceptance rates. For instance, in the 2009-2010 academic year, TMA students surpassed the AP passing rate of all DC Public Schools (DCPS) students and more than tripled the passing rate of African American

students in DC, demonstrating how TMA is truly closing the achievement gap for its students.

Roundtable attendees, who included principals, school board members, teachers, and education non-profit leaders, began the day with a tour of the school and then heard from student, teacher, and administrator presenters about TMA's approaches and accomplishments in data use. As Keisha Hutchinson, the school's Quality Assurance Manager, noted during the tour segment, all student subgroups in the school are trending upward in performance, and students are achieving increasing levels of success on AP exams. In fact, this past school year marked the first year that: 1) a student scored a 5 on an AP exam, 2) the AP exam passing rate was over 50% (score of 3 or above), and 3) at least 50% of the graduating class had taken one or more AP classes. The two main TMA presenters, Alexandra Pardo, Executive Director of TMA, and Brian Rohal, AP US History teacher, also focused particularly on the school's AP program and what TMA has done to improve student success.

After the school presentation, a panel of DC school leaders discussed the ways their schools approach data, and the successes and challenges they encounter. Panelists included:

- Caroline John Principal of Stanton Elementary School (Stanton ES) since 2010, when she was tasked with turning around this historically low-performing school. She was formerly the Founding Principal and Academic Consultant at Excel Academy Public Charter School in Washington, DC from 2007-2010.
- Lucretia Murphy Executive Director of the See Forever Foundation / Maya Angelou Schools, where she oversees the charter schools and school/transition center. She was previously the director of youth transitions for Jobs for the Future.

- Maria Tukeva Founding and current Principal of the Columbia Heights Education Campus (CHEC), which was formed by the 2008 merger of Bell Multicultural High School and Lincoln Multicultural Middle School, making it the first integrated middle-high school venture in DCPS history.
- Michael Cordell Chief Academic Officer of Friendship Public Charter School (Friendship PCS), which
  operates six charter schools and one partnership school in DC, in addition to three turnaround schools
  in Baltimore, MD. He was formerly the Principal of Friendship Collegiate Academy.
- Shantelle Wright Founder and Head of School of Achievement Preparatory Academy (Achievement Prep). Prior to establishing Achievement Prep, she completed the Building Excellent Schools (BES) fellowship program.

Panelists not only represented a variety of school types, but also demonstrated different levels of progress in implementing data-driven instruction. Topics during the panel discussion and Q&A included best practices, successes, challenges, and community attitudes. The panelists' comments, as well as information about TMA, are organized into a series of actionable steps in the following section.

## **Becoming a Data-Driven School**

Throughout the day, presenters' remarks on their experiences seemed to collectively point to a series of steps required to successfully implement data-driven instruction and impact the achievement gap. These steps are:

- Collect data
- Establish the capacity to analyze and use data
- Develop expectations for data use amongst stakeholders
- Implement and reevaluate data-driven instructional methods
- Continuously motivate and support stakeholders

The various schools represented were at different stages of implementation, but each had unique perspectives to share with audience members and with each other on the opportunities, best practices, and challenges associated with becoming a data-driven institution.

#### **Collect Data**

The most fundamental component to the process of becoming a data-driven institution is collecting data. While implementation of data-driven instruction may reshape the data that is collected, many schools that have not yet reached implementation are already collecting data through sources such as standardized tests, attendance records, and grades. Schools like Stanton ES, which is just entering its second year of the school turnaround process, has laid a foundation for data-driven instruction by collecting accurate and consistent information on student behavior and performance. Caroline John said that information on things like uniform compliance and homework completion has been important for the school leadership, as they help to establish a starting point for transforming the school at the community level.

Some schools, on the other hand, are using data to drill down to individual students' challenges and strengths. Lucretia Murphy said that the Maya Angelou Schools have a plethora of data on every student – from the number of meals students receive at home, to their test scores, to their attendance. Unlike, Stanton ES, which is still primarily working to use data to influence behavior at the school community level, schools like the Maya Angelou Schools are focusing now on using data to create change at the individual level.

This amount of data also enables the school to see student progress longitudinally, rather than in isolated snapshots of behavior and achievement.

Schools collect data from a variety of sources. Typical sources mentioned by the panelists include weekly quizzes, benchmark assessments, DC CAS results, and exit data, as well as SAT and AP exam scores, college acceptance rates, tests and academic papers at the high school level. Additionally, Alexandra Pardo of TMA highlighted that it is important to consider anecdotal and qualitative data points, such as classroom observations and student interactions, in order to get the full scope of a student's strengths, weaknesses, and full potential. TMA uses both these anecdotal notes and hard assessment data to develop its AP placement recommendations and rosters, for example. She said that a student would never be considered for an AP class solely based on his/her GPA. This strategy underscores that while data is important, it should not become a substitute for knowing students on a personal level.

# **Establish Analytic Capacity**

In order to make use of the data schools are collecting, they need to develop data analysis capacity, particularly through staff training and other supporting teaching conditions. All of the panel participants described some type of staff training in place at their schools, which can also be a critical way to address the frequent challenge of staff hesitancy or intimidation in response to the phrase "data-driven instruction". Professional development (PD) sessions can focus on how to employ data in the classroom to create instructional action plans, on how to assess the fidelity of action plan implementation, and on how to use the new data tools that many schools, such as the Maya Angelou Schools, are adopting. Many schools have hired data coaches to lead the way on these professional development initiatives.

Some schools, like Achievement Prep, even hold summer sessions to train teachers before school begins each year. Wright said that this four-week session helps to make teachers more comfortable using data and prepares them for being successful at using it in the year ahead. Achievement Prep's leaders want teachers to know how students need to perform, and how to evaluate this performance, in order to be competitive and to close the achievement gap. Schools may also hold regular PD sessions throughout the year. Several presenters mentioned having cross-subject PD sessions where teachers (and sometimes administrators, and other school staff, such as counselors) work to interpret student and test data and plan instruction based on its significance. These regular PD sessions build capacity into the school schedule for teachers and staff to plan instructional methods, to analyze data, and to re-plan course material according to student needs (as evident in the data).

While professional development on data analysis and implementation is important, there are other supporting conditions that must exist to establish the proper data analysis capacity in teachers. Firstly, it is the responsibility of school leaders to limit the amount of data that teachers see and work with (kind of like a car dashboard would, Cordell said). Giving teachers too much data can distract them, and they may lose sight of which information is actually important for their instructional plans. Secondly, school administrators must ensure that teachers are content matter experts, not vaguely trained in the subject they teach (e.g. someone trained in U.S. history teaching Geography). At TMA, for instance, teachers teach the subject in which they are licensed, and teachers are AP certified before teaching an AP course. Teachers with content expertise

are better equipped to understand how to shape and deliver instruction based on students' capabilities, misconceptions, prior knowledge, and challenges, all of which are revealed in the data.

## **Develop Expectations**

Tied into PD, which informs staff on how to use data-driven instruction, schools must also develop expectations to tell stakeholders why data-driven instruction is important and what the goals and

expected outcomes are. This first component, explaining the significance of data use, can be achieved through messaging and information sharing. In terms of messaging, Murphy

emphasized the need to tell the data "story" in a way that is tailored to the audience and that makes the process less intimidating. For example, she said that school leaders should, "ask teachers to attend a professional development session on taking assessments into action plans, rather than a professional development session on data-driven instruction." This language clarifies the role of data in furthering teachers' existing work and objectives. As Wright and Cordell emphasized, strong leaders with clear, appropriate messaging can help to encourage adoption amongst teachers and other staff by making them feel like they have the support and capabilities to make it happen.

Proper messaging to students can also be a strong way to develop expectations at a school. TMA senior Taylor and junior John said that they knew that their teachers were challenging them academically in order to prepare them for AP tests and that even if they did not pass the AP exam, they would be better prepared for college. These students' attitudes toward the test and the hard work of both TMA's students and teachers showed the consistent "college-prep" messaging that the school leaders have infused into the community. Senior Shamir said that the school leaders and teachers "have high expectations of its students from the very beginning." As a result, TMA students learn to engage with testing and test data and strive to perform at a higher level.

Information sharing was also mentioned as a strategy for setting expectations with staff and students. A few panelists described sharing pieces of data and their meaning with students and their families, who are becoming more interested in performance goals and what students need to do to achieve them. Sharing information can create a sense of urgency around the problem of the national achievement gap and can stimulate engagement in solving the problem. This type of data sharing can also be important within the school staff community. At Stanton ES, the administration shares data collected each month with teachers to allow them to comment and provide feedback on what they think the information's significance is. Tukeva agreed with this strategy, saying that she talks to teachers about the data by asking questions like: "What does this make you think? What additional information do you need? What implications does it have for our staff and our students?"

Goal setting is also a best practice of developing expectations, as it lets stakeholders know what the anticipated outcomes of implementing data-driven instruction are. Tukeva said that in order to "give the data a purpose" at CHEC, she and other school leaders have tied metrics to the school's mission statement, which is to have 100% of students leave the school prepared to succeed in college. CHEC staff measure progress to this goal (the mission) by assessing student performance on tests like the DC CAS, the SAT, and AP exams, as well as quality and progress of students' portfolio assessments.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The portfolio assessment is a project that each student uses to track his/her progress, to set individual goals for performance and learning, and to present his/her work to the school administration and staff. TMA uses a similar project for its students.

Other schools, such as Achievement Prep, have adopted other states' more rigorous standards for planning and benchmarking purposes in order to better prepare teachers and students for high performance. Several panelists mentioned that just creating strong standards is not enough, however, and that schoolteachers and leaders must be held accountable in order to make goals successful. Several schools mentioned using strong messaging to communicate the responsibility that school staff has to make changes in the performance of their students.

Despite the ambitious goals that school administrators and teachers may have, however, presenters noted that they need to be cognizant of the fact that closing the achievement gap through data-driven instruction takes time. Wright underscored this point, saying that she has been working to give her team the big picture, but also to make it measurable and attainable by breaking goals and tasks down into small improvements. After all, she remarked, "If everything's an emergency, then nothing is."

## **Implement and Reevaluate**

Once schools have collected data, built staff and infrastructure capacity, and set expectations, they can begin to implement data-driven instruction. This step can often be the most difficult part of the process, and issues determining timing and breadth of focus seem to be common obstacles. Murphy described the difficulty of translating data into action as trying to figure out "which gap [to address] in which order at which time," while John asked other panelists how to "know which data lever to pull in order to achieve change." One way by which schools can help overcome these obstacles is collaborating with other schools further ahead in the process, like TMA, and adopting these schools' best practices. Wright highlighted the ability to do just that as one of the advantages of being a new school (Achievement Prep is only four years old). From the start, her school has been able to incorporate data-driven instruction and best practices of fellow institutions.

One of these best practices shared by panelists was to focus on the "cuspers," those students which are not very far behind relative to benchmarks and to the rest of the class. Doing so helps to achieve the greatest gains in performance improvement and to create a more level playing field in the school by bringing struggling students up to the average performance of the school's students. Schools may make this focus part of their PD training, or bring in help from outside organizations, like CityYear, in order to provide additional support for these students.

Another important component of implementing data in the classroom is to find a way to create differentiated instructional strategies for students of all learning needs and abilities. This obstacle is why individualized attention on students and teachers is important. Cordell stated that principals need to "know every student and every teacher." Moreover, Pardo attributed much of TMA's AP placement successes to the fact that she and the other school staff do not just look at a student's GPA, but also consider the other types of aforementioned "anecdotal data."

The existence of varying learning abilities and educational levels in student populations also underscores the criticality of instructional evaluation and re-planning. Teachers need to analyze data in order to understand student performance and points of confusion. Cordell explained that when student assessments show that students did not understand the material the first time around, teachers need to understand why they did not grasp it and to use this information to shape instructional methods to re-teach it. Administrators can support this type of reevaluation through PD sessions described earlier.

In short, what these presenters and schools demonstrated is that the implementation of data-driven instruction is not a stopping point. Being a data-driven institution is a continuous process. Administrators and teachers involved in this type of school should never stop collecting data, analyzing it, planning and reevaluating instructional methods and materials, and collaborating with each other. Schools will achieve the most success from data if it is constantly reinterpreted to understand the individual students in the classroom at that moment, and their specific needs, abilities, and challenges.

## **Continuously Motivate and Support**

Successful use of data-driven instruction to lower the achievement gap requires sufficient support of stakeholders – teachers and staff, and students and their families – throughout the process. For staff, positive feedback is an important component to this process. Cordell said, "[Principals] can't get frustrated by the data. You have to provide positive feedback and celebrate improvements so that staff members understand it's safe to fail." Since closing the gap can take time, positive reinforcement can sustain energy for implementation by highlighting the progress that has been made. Celebrating success can also be important for students. At TMA, for example, there is a plaque in the school that announces which students receive a passing score on an AP exam, and Mr. Rohal has a chart in his classroom listing students who received a 100% on the weekly reading quiz.

In addition to encouragement, teachers and staff need the financial support to obtain the materials they need to do their jobs. TMA, for example, makes a financial investment in resource books, technology, etc., to ensure their classrooms are well-supplied and their teachers have access to the tools they need to implement instructional plans and engage students. The administrators also budget for things like pizza and snacks for additional study sessions teachers may hold.

On the student side, administrators and teachers can support student achievement by creating incentives for students to be successful. Tukeva described many types of incentives that CHEC uses, including dress-down days, trips, etc. in order to move students to an advanced achievement level. She also said that the schools provided \$100 to every student that scored as 100% proficient on the last DC CAS. There is a definite financial investment required for some of these incentives, and schools must consider and plan accordingly during budgeting in order to pursue this technique. Other non-monetary based incentives include ones that TMA uses, such as allowing AP students to wear an AP t-shirt on test days (rather than a uniform shirt), or creating hype about AP tests by telling students they are taking the same test as students nationally.

In addition to incentives, support services are also often critical for students in Title I schools. Several presenters described offering additional student services, such as enriching after-school programs, messaging to engage the local community and family to support students (i.e. by helping with homework, volunteering at extracurriculars, etc.), mentoring, tutoring, summer preparatory courses, and alumni services. These services may be offered either by the school itself, or through partnership of the school and an outside organization. One particular example of a supportive service is the senior seminar that TMA offers. This optional class helps students to complete the college application process in school, as many students will be first-generation college students, meaning their parents often lack the experience with or knowledge about the college process to help the students at home.

Beyond formalized programs and financial investments, the dedication of individual teachers and staff members can also make the difference in supporting and motivating students. At TMA, students and staff spoke highly of Mr. Rohal, who goes the extra mile to make sure his students learn the material and are successful in his class. TMA senior Taylor said that Mr. Rohal was "really supportive throughout the AP process" and that he stays after class and even came in during the weekends before the AP exam in order to make sure that his students were prepared and confident to take the exam.

### **Conclusion and Lesson Learned**

This roundtable was a significant event for the DC education community because it demonstrated that local Title I schools are making headway in using data to close the achievement gap in DC, and that they are eager to make even more progress in the years to come. In many ways, the success of the event was in its creation of a collaborative venue for local education leaders. As Patrick Pope, Principal of Savoy Elementary School, noted, "It was a terrific forum. It really provided an array of perspectives." He said the chance to mingle with representatives of the variety of schools, both public and public charter, at the event was an opportunity he does not frequently have. Likewise, Janice Talley, Principal of DCPS' Visiting Instruction Services, commented that the session provided "information that principals don't often have the chance to hear" and that it was nice "to hear how other schools are implementing change and reform because we all have the same issues; we're just dealing with them differently." Michelle Pierre-Farid, who works for the non-profit organization New Leaders for New Schools, said she thought the structure and momentum of the day, as well as the variety of presenters really "provided diverse perspectives" so that "participants were always learning something new."

Through the knowledge sharing at the event, a number of attendees discovered approaches, tips, or ideas to take back to their own schools and communities. Jubria Lewis, the Principal at Mary McLeod Bethune Day Academy, said that the event was an occasion to reflect on what had worked in his first year as principal and what had not, and reminded him to stay focused on the role that leadership plays in using data to inform instruction. Rasheki Kuykemdall, a teacher at Roots Public Charter School, said, "I'm looking forward to sharing with other teachers how important it is to get behind our principal on data-driven instruction." Roots PCS's Principal, Bernita Thompson, said that she really latched onto the idea of expecting and appreciating small, measurable progress, and of working with teachers week by week to make change. Even panelists themselves had takeaways from the session. Lucretia Murphy said, "I appreciated the presentation on AP courses [made by Pardo and Rohal]. It's helpful to learn about the logistics of that kind of program – them being so open about the process really makes it more implementable."

This roundtable demonstrated that closing the achievement gap is possible through thoughtful, thorough instruction and support that is guided by data analysis. While some schools, such as Stanton ES, are only beginning their journey to becoming a data-driven institution, the successes of other schools, like Thurgood Marshall Academy, serve as a beacon of what is possible and a source of best practices for those schools still working to achieve such progress. The knowledge sharing, idea generation and reflection that took place through the interaction of so many school leaders underscored the power of collaboration to fuel change in DC's schools. Attendees buzzed with enthusiasm and eagerness to implement new practices at their own institutions. If this energy is directed through this process of achieving data-driven instruction – the best practices of experienced schools – then good things are to come for District students who may otherwise be lost to the achievement gap.

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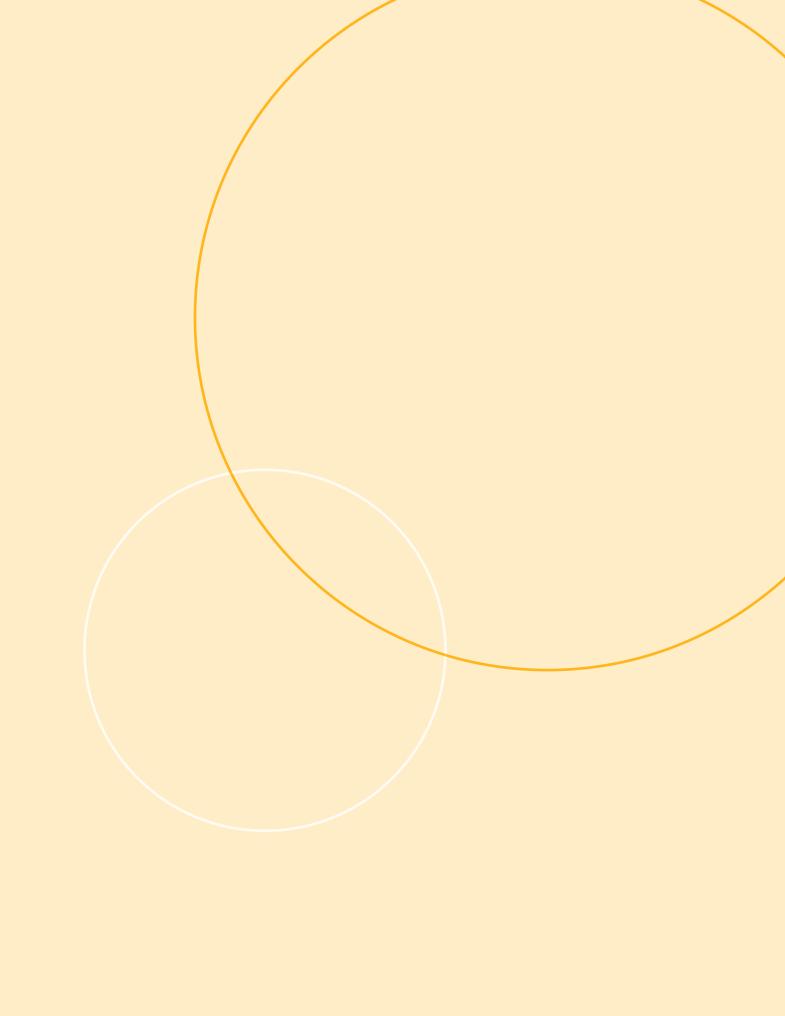
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