Educational Leadership Challenges in the 21st Century: Closing the Achievement Gap for At-Risk Students

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Randall S. Vesely, Guest Editor

The purpose of this special issue is twofold: To explore the challenges educational leaders face in addressing the achievement gap for at-risk students; and to seek solutions. Included in this issue are five articles which explore various aspects of this challenge, ranging from the role of superintendents to funding concerns. In the first article, "The Incidence of At-Risk Students in Indiana: A Longitudinal Study," Vesely sets the stage with an exploration of historical definitions of student "risk" and proposal of a definition based upon a current synthesis of research. He then analyzes the change in the incidence of at-risk students in Indiana over a ten year span using that framework. Although some readers may think of Indiana as a rural, low poverty state with a homogenous population—and therefore one with a low incidence of risk factors—the author's data analysis reveals a startling and concerning level of student risk, that in increased between 1999 and 2009 for almost all potential risk factors.

In the second article, "The Role of Superintendents in Improving Instruction and Student Achievement," Mac Ivers posits that because increasing high school graduation rates is a systemic issue for school district leaders, not just a school level issue, the district office plays a key role in narrowing the graduation gap and ensuring that all students are well-equipped for college and career. This article articulates a systematic, integrated approach to addressing this issue where both district and school leaders: (1) Analyze data to identify and address early warning indicators of dropout, including policies and practices related to student attendance, behavior, and course failure; (2) build consensus among school leaders and faculties on the need to implement research-based practices to reduce absences, suspensions, and course failures; and (3) create integrated whole school reforms and school level student support structures, including early warning systems that will ensure appropriate, timely interventions to keep all students on track to on-time graduation.

In the third article, "Native American Educational Leader Preparation: The Design and Delivery of an Online Interdisciplinary Licensure Program," Vogel and Rude describe an innovative online interdisciplinary Master's degree program in educational leadership and special education that was developed to prepare Native American school leaders for schools with substantial Native American student populations. This article not only describes the context, design, and evaluation of the program for the first two student cohorts, but also candidly presents the challenges and lessons learned related to start-up and implementation. Although the focus of the study is a single program, others interested in leadership preparations programs for historically under-represented groups will find the authors' findings insightful and thought-provoking.

Knoeppel and Rinehart authored the fourth article, "Student Achievement and Principal Quality: Explaining the Relationship,"

in which they argue that educational accountability requires a fundamental change in the way that schools are led. The authors assert that the adoption of content standards and corresponding state assessments offer school leaders a wealth of data. As a result, data-driven decision making techniques enable them to use data in a reflective process to drive school improvement. Knoeppel and Rinehart propose the use of canonical analysis, a multivariate statistical analytic approach, as a means by which educational leaders can examine multiple measures of student achievement in order to prioritize school improvement initiatives. Specifically, their study examined which factors distinguish successful schools from unsuccessful schools, and they conclude that successful schools are characterized by a focus on content, especially mathematics, and preparation for life after high school. Their emphasis on the need for educational leaders to effectively use data echoes the recommendations of Mac Ivers.

The last article focuses on the funding of schools and districts with at-risk students. In "The Economics and Financing of Urban Schools: Toward a Productive, Solution-Oriented Discourse," Crampton proposes a common framework and language for discussing urban school finance and its role in improving children's lives. This article also provides a straightforward, non-technical description of the mechanics of school funding. Together, these provide stakeholders, from community members to policymakers, with the tools to incorporate the results of relevant research-based and evidence-based analyses into solution-oriented conversations. The article ends with eight recommendations for those who seek to improve the education of urban children on how they can become more engaged in this discourse.

Together, these articles continue an important line of inquiry on the complex educational challenge of closing the achievement gap for at-risk students. Because our students will face an increasingly competitive global economy, the United States cannot afford academic achievement and high school graduation rates that trail those of our developed nation peers--and even those of some developing countries. Educational leaders must embrace "the fierce urgency of now"[1] and address head on the needs of at-risk students so that may be academically successful.

[1] E. Ethelbert Miller, "Remembering King and the 'Fierce Urgency of Now'," National Public Radio, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122610865.

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