

John Muir Elementary is making progress against the achievement gap

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By Stevon Cook

Look all over the country and the story of urban education is consistent. There is an achievement

gap that is as predictable as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. Schools with a majority African-American and Latino student population have higher teacher turnover rates, students facing adverse family conditions which affect the learning process, higher rates of chronic absenteeism, and lower proficiency rates on English Language Arts and Math scores.

That seems to be the case everywhere except John Muir Elementary school in San Francisco's Western Addition.

Muir has a long tradition in the fabric of San Francisco. My dad attended the school back in the 1960s, but it wasn't until I became a mentor at the school during my term on the Board of Education that I really got to know what life was like for Muir kids and educators. The majority of the students live in public housing, the school population is 25% African American and 51% Latino, as compared to the District-wide average of 4% and 25% respectively.

Spending time weekly at the school, I've seen educators addressing behavior issues, family trauma, and a host of other barriers that are common at schools that serve the school's population. That hasn't become an excuse for achieving exceptional outcomes. This year, the school's Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) scores were higher than the district's average, which is promising. But they were truly exceptional when it came to African-American students at 68% proficient in English Language Arts compared to the district's 21% and 59% proficient in Math compared to the district average for students at 14%.



How is it that a small elementary faced with so many challenges is doing three times as well with its African American students compared to the entire SFUSD average? It's not rocket science — it's based on instructional practices that are culturally relevant for the students. Three years ago, educators at the site decided to break away from the district math curriculum to introduce a different approach to teaching Math, Teaching Through Problem Solving. In Teaching Through Problem Solving, students develop mathematical concepts by solving problems that illuminate or make the concept relevant. Students grapple with

problems, present and discuss their strategies, and build conceptual understanding together through teacher facilitated, student lead discussions.

Unlike traditional math classrooms, in Teaching Through Problem Solving, students solve problems before a solution or procedural method is taught. One could say, unlike traditional math classrooms, at Muir student ideas and solution methods are more highly valued than the teachers solution methods. Muir teachers are deeply committed to the ideas and knowledge students bring with them to the classroom, and seeing these as their greatest asset. The teachers believe that their ability to facilitate student learning is deeply rooted in the value they give to their students ideas, backgrounds, and experiences.

In order to change the way the teachers were teaching Math at Muir, they knew they needed to grow and develop professionally- meaning they had a lot of their own learning to do in order to change their teaching habits and instructional methodologies. The school decided to change the way it engaged teachers in professional development and adopted a lesson study approach to professional learning at the site. Muir teachers have worked closely with Mills College over the past three years to engage in the lesson study process. Mills College defines lesson study as a simple idea- in order to improve instruction teacher must collaborate with fellow teachers to plan instruction and examine its impact on students. Muir teachers began to collaborate on teams with one goal in mind: to improve instructional outcomes for it's students. Over the past three years Muir teachers have deepened their knowledge of

content, knowledge of their students thinking, and maybe most importantly- their commitment to improving instructional outcomes for all of their students.

The John Muir teachers built a consensus within the school to change teaching practices. They built out a professional development strategy that showcased students engaging with the material differently as a way to support their vision. And they kept at it. Over the course of three years, the school went from being one of the lowest performing in the city to having the highest achieving African American and Latino elementary school students in San Francisco.

This does not have to be an isolated incident of success. This can be common. However, being that these outcomes remain to be uncommon, it's our responsibility to elevate, celebrate, and learn from educators at John Muir Elementary to scale the impact they've achieved.

Stevon Cook is president of the San Francisco Unified School District board.

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