



To: Mayor and City Council Members
From: Brian Phillips, Assistant City Manager
Date: November 6, 2020
Subject: School Achievement Gap

At its 2020/21 Goal-Setting Session, the City Council adopted a goal to: “Identify, by the end of 2020, the ways the City can assist the Ames Community School District in its efforts to close the achievement gap.” Task 2 related to that goal is for City staff to provide an analysis of best practices in peer cities to cooperate with school districts to close the achievement gap.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP DEFINED:

The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics reports that the achievement gap is a statistically significant difference in the scores of white students and black students. These results are measured through standardized tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is administered nationwide, allowing for comparisons of students from state-to-state. In Iowa, the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) has been administered since spring 2019. Scores on this assessment are cataloged at iaschoolperformance.gov, and can be viewed at the individual district and school levels.

ACSD SPECIFICS:

In 2017, the Ames Community School District (ACSD) outlined initial plans for addressing racial disparities in achievement (<https://www.ames.k12.ia.us/2017/09/tackling-racial-disparity-gap-step-one/>). This article also highlights the gaps in reading, science, and mathematics at that time.

BEST PRACTICES:

A leader in the field of achievement gap best practices for communities is the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This lab conducted research with cities across the U.S. beginning in 2016, to explore how cities

could best support students in closing the achievement gap and providing for the comprehensive needs of children. A report was issued in 2018 outlining city-wide systems that advance these goals. This report indicates 10 keys to success:

1. **Lead with the mayors.** The cities studied had strong leadership from mayors to drive a community discussion related to children's success. Traditionally, children are the focus area of school systems. Leadership from the city shifts the responsibility for children's success and wellbeing from solely the schools' responsibility to a community-wide effort.
2. **Define the need locally.** The stakeholders involved in community support of students need to identify clear goals, action-oriented agendas, and processes for capturing and sharing updates and action items from their discussions. Examples of topics addressed by these stakeholder groups include data sharing, out-of-school time initiatives, preschool access, and communications.
3. **Build a city-wide movement.** Engage the whole community to make the case for a new, comprehensive approach to serve children. Stakeholders should be identified who have an impact on children's well-being, who can participate in discussions and take action to address issues raised.
4. **Form a children's cabinet to coordinate across sectors.** A children's cabinet is a high-level mechanism to coordinate children's services across local government, schools, health services, social services, and other government and community organizations. In the examples identified, these cabinets are co-chaired by the mayor and school superintendent, and members are those who have the authority to enact change.
5. **Develop a shared vision for the whole system, but also create tangible interim successes.** Adopt a community vision for children, then identify strategies and work to implement them.
6. **Create a backbone and internal capacity to start and sustain the work.** The children's cabinet must have commitment from leaders and support from the staff in the member organizations. For example, staff from the school district, city, and non-profits must be committed to carry on the work of the children's cabinet. If there is a transition in any one of the staff members, others can continue without losing momentum. Staff support is needed to prepare for meetings and execute the actions identified by stakeholders.

7. **Use data strategically and share data across different parts of the system.** Shared data regarding access and outcomes provide important evidence of the success of collaborative efforts.
8. **Build true partnerships between the city and schools, across city organizations, and with funders.** Strong partnership between the mayor and superintendent is essential. Partnerships with funders and other organizations that provide a variety of programs and services are also key to success.
9. **Anticipate turnover.** Develop formal structure and codified practices to ensure the children's initiative will be sustained even if key staff or stakeholders change.
10. **Create time and space for deep collaboration. Build relationships.** In addition to cabinet meetings, hold retreats or other functions to build relationships, common understanding, and commitment to goals and strategies among the key stakeholders.

The full report contains more detailed case studies and information as to why these ten keys to success were identified. The report can be found here:

<https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/edredesign/files/building-city-wide-systems-of-opportunity-for-children-full-report.pdf>