

Bridging the “Literacy Gap” Will Close the “Achievement Gap”

By John Corcoran

When it comes to addressing the “achievement gap” among California students, we must get our words right. We cannot view “English as a second language” (ESL) learners or those from poor or minority backgrounds as if they are somehow the cause of the achievement gap. This deficit has nothing to do with ethnicity or income level. In fact, demographics take the focus off the real issue, which is the “literacy gap.”

There is only one way to bridge the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in academic achievement and that is with strong literacy skills. To do that, we must train our teachers in the latest, research-based tools and methodologies to teach all learners.

As part of a comprehensive literacy initiative, we must reach out to minority, low-income, and ESL learners. ESL students often face challenges becoming fluent in written English when they are not taught in a total immersion environment. Further, students whose families are stressed by poverty, crime, or other trauma may have difficulty in school. However, we cannot overlook the literacy thread here too. Adults who lack adequate literacy skills are likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or earning only a subsistent wage. These adults are also unable to help their children prepare for school and to support their learning at home.

Poverty does not cause illiteracy. Illiteracy causes poverty. By bridging the literacy gap, we will provide equal opportunity in education to all children—and empower them with the skills they will need in today's increasingly technologically advanced workplace.

If we fail to see the entire picture, we will confine our view that the achievement gap only affects children of color or those from low-income backgrounds. Illiteracy crosses all backgrounds—racial, ethnic, and socio-economic. All any doubters have to do is look at the high-profile individuals, including several celebrities, who have publicly admitted to being dyslexic and struggling with reading.

Researchers and other experts also agree that approximately one-third of all students have some degree of difficulty learning to read. Some will need more attention in the classroom, and others will require intensive one-on-one instruction. This one-third of students, however, does not encompass one particular group; rather it is a significant part of the whole student body.

As a former illiterate adult turned national literacy advocate, I know the personal and the political sides of this issue. When I was a young child, some sixty years ago, I did not learn to read, write, and spell, nor did I master these literacy skills in high school or college. In fact, I did not become literate until I was 48 years old and finally received proper instruction. Now, twenty years later, I consider myself a lifelong learner and a lifetime advocate for those who lack literacy skills. Serving on the board of the National Institute for Literacy (as well as the San Diego Council on Literacy and currently as a member of the

Executive Board of The Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles) I have enjoyed a platform for advocacy and a vantage point to see what works—research-based methodologies.

The National Reading Panel has concluded that teaching reading requires five elements. They are: phonemic awareness (an understanding of the sounds made by letters and combinations of letters), phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Reading instruction that encompasses these elements will close the achievement gap by giving all students the literacy skills they need.

California's drive to address the achievement gap is commendable and serves as a national model as Congress takes up the renewal of the federal "No Child Left Behind" education reform. In taking comprehensive action, we must look beyond the demographics to the specific needs of individual students, delivering what they need to achieve the level of literacy that will close the gap for all.