



Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance

Research Update • June 2017



Message from the partnership facilitator and research liaison

Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest is partnering with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Wisconsin DPI) to form the Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance (MAGRA). Knowing Wisconsin has the largest Black-White achievement gap in the country, Wisconsin DPI identified this issue as the focus of the alliance. The alliance will develop and carry out a 3- to 5-year research agenda that will help identify effective practices for closing this achievement gap and build on work underway at the department. The alliance seeks to produce research and engage in activities that will impact this long-standing issue in the state of Wisconsin. Fortunately, we have individuals and organizations from various contexts working collaboratively on strategies.



The alliance has representation from all levels of the education system in Wisconsin, including Wisconsin DPI, cooperative educational service agencies, districts, and schools. The University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Great Lakes Equity Center also are engaged in the work. In addition, the Wisconsin National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has two members working on the alliance. We are excited and honored to be working with this group of people who bring so much

passion, commitment, and experience to the challenge of closing the Black-White achievement gap.

We hope you enjoy the following articles and resources, which provide insight into our current and upcoming work.—**Deb Gurke, partnership facilitator, and Kyle Fagan, research liaison**

How will MAGRA tackle the achievement gap?

MAGRA will launch two projects in 2017 that support Wisconsin DPI's continued efforts to close the Black-White achievement gap.

In partnership with the MAGRA membership, REL Midwest researchers will conduct a systematic review of research literature on strategies that effectively reduce the Black-White achievement gap. The review will examine what strategies improve educational outcomes for Black students, key characteristics of successful interventions, and which interventions can be applied across a variety of contexts. This literature review will be posted to the REL Midwest website in late 2017.

REL Midwest also will support the MAGRA membership with in-depth coaching and consultation. Although Wisconsin currently has a framework for closing the achievement gap between students of color and their peers, the complexity and number of approaches to closing the achievement gap make coordination and evaluation difficult. Wisconsin DPI and alliance members have asked REL Midwest to perform an environmental scan of current efforts to close the achievement gap in Wisconsin. The hope is that a shared understanding of the challenge will allow Wisconsin DPI and its partners to enhance how they work together to close the achievement gap in the state.

Task force asks successful educators to share insights about closing the achievement gap

The achievement gap, or the difference in academic performance among different groups of students, poses a significant problem to students and states alike. Faced with data from the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress showing Wisconsin had the widest race-based achievement gaps in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics, State Superintendent Dr. Tony Evers convened a task force to address this persistent and troubling issue. The outcomes of the task force's work have informed MAGRA's research agenda and planned efforts.

The [Promoting Excellence for All: State Superintendent's Task Force on Wisconsin's Achievement Gap](#) included 18 educators—superintendents, principals, teachers, curriculum coordinators, and instructional coaches—from traditional public, charter, and private schools with demonstrated success in closing the achievement gap. With research and facilitation support from the [Midwest Comprehensive Center](#) and Wisconsin DPI, this group shared and brainstormed strategies, resources, and policy changes to address the achievement gap. Specifically, the task force sought to:

- Examine and recommend proactive instructional strategies to close achievement gaps in Wisconsin.
- Develop resources for Wisconsin practitioners working to close achievement gaps in their schools and districts.
- Recommend local board policy changes that can support efforts to close achievement gaps in Wisconsin schools.

The task force's work culminated in two products: a report and an eCourse.

- The [report](#) (PDF) breaks down the task force's beliefs, support from the research, and recommended strategies into four categories: effective instruction, student-teacher relationships, family and community engagement, and school and instructional leadership.
- The [eCourse](#) is designed to help educators deepen their understanding and use of proven strategies to close the achievement gap. It comprises three learning modules: Understanding Race in Education, Exploring the Data, and Using the Strategies.

MAGRA member Allison DeGraaf, principal at Kennedy Elementary School in Janesville, Wisconsin, participated in the task force and sees Promoting Excellence for All as a foundation for the alliance's research on the achievement gap.

“When the task force completed these resources, we knew the work couldn’t stop there. We hoped it would start further work,” said DeGraaf. “I think the alliance can dig deeper into the research and figure out resources, action steps, and strategies to continue to support schools in Wisconsin doing this work.”

Visit Wisconsin DPI’s [Promoting Excellence for All website](#) to access comprehensive information and resources. We also encourage you to stay up-to-date with REL Midwest’s related work on closing the achievement gap in Wisconsin and other Midwest states.



Meet the alliance member: Chrisarella Warthen-Sutton, Ph.D.

MAGRA member Chrisarella Warthen-Sutton, Ph.D., is the manager of the Office of Family and Community Engagement for the Racine Unified School District in southeastern Wisconsin. The state’s fifth-largest district, Racine includes 31 schools that serve a diverse population of 19,455 students. Working across this large district, Warthen-Sutton designs, directs, and evaluates programs and services to promote year-round strategic engagement of families and communities.

When asked why she joined MAGRA, Dr. Warthen-Sutton said she feels a sense of urgency to develop ideas for narrowing the Black-White gap in education access and opportunity in Wisconsin. She cites the severity of the gap and the many challenges facing the state’s Black students. “The soaring unemployment rate, marginal career and college readiness, health care disparities, and unprecedented incarceration rates continue to plague Wisconsin’s Black community,” she explains. “The progress is bleak statewide, given the national and state measures signifying that Wisconsin is the worst state in the nation for a Black child to be educated.”

Through her work with MAGRA, Dr. Warthen-Sutton hopes to broaden the discourse by examining the achievement gap through the lenses of equity, social justice, and cultural competency. “The identifiable challenge is that there are many teachers who are not culturally competent,” she notes. “Belief systems shape a person’s worldview of others who are culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse.... Cultural responsiveness has the potential to shift mindsets and influence practices that affirm and acknowledge the brilliance of Black children.”

In working with education-based community organizations, Dr. Warthen-Sutton has learned the power of personal stories, experiences, and perspectives to broaden people’s understanding of equity and race, as well as the value of courageous conversations. “Many efforts to address Black student achievement fail due to the lack of courage to isolate and name race as a primary contributing factor,” she explains.

On both a professional and personal level, Dr. Warthen-Sutton hopes her involvement with the alliance will advance her capacity to consider robust ways to address the access and opportunity gap for Black students in an intentional and deliberate manner. “In order to be a champion for children, we must be accountable for the detrimental consequences of allowing them to fall through the cracks.”

Resources and events

[Promoting Excellence for All: A Report from the State Superintendent’s Task Force on Wisconsin’s Achievement Gap \(PDF\)](#)

This Wisconsin DPI report identifies classroom-centered best practices intended to address Wisconsin’s achievement gaps. The task force was composed of representatives from schools with narrowing achievement gaps or quickly growing achievement rates for students of color.

Understanding Race in Education: Promoting Excellence for All E-Module

This module, developed by Wisconsin DPI and the Minority Student Achievement Network, explores perceptions of race and subsequent effects on the education system. Teachers can use this module to create positive and inclusive interactions with students, families, and community members.

Great Lakes Comprehensive Center Achievement Resource Center

The Great Lakes Comprehensive Center Achievement Resource Center offers resources to support educators in their efforts to help African-American young men reach their full potential. Content is organized by five topic areas: data trends and use, instructional support, models of success, thought leaders, and social-emotional support.

Tribal Consultation Under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Briefs

Research shows that when schools partner with tribal communities and incorporate culture into the curriculum, American Indian students have a greater chance of academic success. The Midwest Comprehensive Center created two briefs to support the meaningful tribal consultation required under ESSA: [*Tribal Consultation Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: A Guide for Tribal Leaders and Communities*](#) (PDF) and [*Tribal Consultation Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: A Guide for Affected Districts*](#) (PDF).

Culturally Responsive Resources for Native Students

This REL Southwest webinar examines two high-quality online repositories of culturally responsive education resources for Native students.

Contact Us

Please contact us for more information about any of the items in this newsletter or to speak to a member of our staff. We look forward to hearing from you.

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