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Phillip Oliff worked for the Education Collaborative for Greater Boston (EDCO), an organization representing 21 Boston-area public school districts. He assisted EDCO initiating a major research project investigating the racial achievement gaps within its member districts. The bulk of his work involved conducting interviews with an array of school personnel, including superintendents, principals, teachers and METCO directors. The purpose of the interviews was twofold. First they were designed to elicit a general sense of approaches to, and ways of thinking about the racial achievement gap within EDCO's member districts. Second they were intended to gather information about best practices in educational interventions that might help to narrow the racial achievement gap. At the end of the summer Mr. Oliff wrote a major report detailing his findings and making recommendations as to how EDCO should proceed with its research initiative. The project aims to develop a better understanding of the racial achievement gap within EDCO member districts, to identify promising practices, to test them to see if they are effective and replicable, and to foster a spirit of cooperation.

MEMORANDUM

To: Mark McQuillan, Executive Director, EDCO Collaborative
From: Phillip Oliff
Re: EDCO's Achievement Gap Initiative

The EDCO Collaborative is a particularly promising venue for confronting the racial achievement gap. Its member districts vary demographically to a degree. But they are geographically contiguous, bound by the same system of state academic standards, and have an established working relationship. These characteristics position the Collaborative to foster a culture of innovation and information sharing among its member districts: an approach that, at present, appears to be the most effective means of addressing this persistent problem.

Information sharing and experimentation among educators is crucial because so little is understood about the racial achievement gap. For years the link between race and achievement was a taboo topic largely neglected by academic researchers. Policymakers approached disparities in educational outcomes as a reflection of unequal access to resources, and thus sought to level educational funding. The failure of this policy approach to bridge the racial achievement gap forced educators, researchers and policymakers to develop new ways of thinking about the problem.

In recent years a range of people concerned with educational equity have devoted increased attention to understanding and narrowing the racial divide in educational outcomes. As part of this effort a few networks of similar school districts, such as the Minority Student Achievement Network, have established collective initiatives to forge new approaches to the problem. The similarities among cooperating school districts allow them to share ideas with one another down to the level of implementation. EDCO's districts have sufficient similarities to undertake and benefit from such an initiative.

To maximize the possibility of success for such an initiative the board of the EDCO Collaborative should undertake the following measures:

1. Agree upon a limited number of key indicators of academic success, and consistently collect and share disaggregated data corresponding to those indicators
2. Pool resources to fund professional development opportunities
3. Establish a shared mission and a collective enthusiasm surrounding the initiative
4. Refine the grant writing process to attract outside funding
5. Establish a sustained inter-district research program

Obstacles to successful implementation are likely to stem from three main sources:

1. Philosophical divisions among educators about how to approach the problem
2. Community members wary of an academic focus on race
3. Funding sources hesitant to provide grants to suburban, rather than inner-city districts

Elaborating an Implementation Strategy

I. Identifying and Tracking Key Indicators

To identify areas of overlap and begin a meaningful dialogue EDCO districts must first take a closer look at the phenomenon they hope to address. Do EDCO districts have racial achievement gaps? If they do how severe are the gaps and how do they manifest themselves? It would also be useful to look at achievement patterns across the districts to see whether various practices and district characteristics impact student performance.

Identifying such patterns would require looking at a range of data, not only MCAS scores, but also indicators such as grade distribution, leveling practices, SAT scores and college acceptance rates. Gathering data across a range of measures would paint a more accurate picture of student performance, highlight trends and commonalities across districts and perhaps point to potentially effective interventions. Thus the first step the Collaborative should take is to generate a list of useful performance indicators. The member districts must subsequently commit to gathering data on these key indicators and sharing it with the Collaborative.

Such an exploratory effort will give the Collaborative a baseline to define its goals, measure progress, and test the effectiveness of interventions. As part of this process METCO districts should take a close look at the relative performance and experience of resident and Boston students of color. Such a study would help the Collaborative to identify the extent to which it can focus on the racial achievement gap as a unitary problem, independent of the specific situation of urban students.

II. Strengthening Professional Development

Once EDCO districts gather baseline data and better understand the problem that they face (assuming that such a problem manifests itself in the data), the Collaborative should develop a comprehensive program of professional development. A major advantage of the collaborative approach to the issue is the ability to pool resources across districts. EDCO should take advantage of this situation to hire leading experts on the achievement gap to serve as consultants. These experts will foster ideas, which the Collaborative can discuss and adapt to the specific situation of EDCO districts. Moreover, EDCO should sponsor presentations and workshops run by educators within EDCO districts, who can share their expertise and describe district specific initiatives.

III. Evolving a Unified Sense of Purpose

To get the most out of this initiative EDCO must attempt to foster enthusiasm and unity of purpose across the districts. It should try to forge, to the extent possible, a set of shared beliefs and goals that will guide the initiative. EDCO should establish an achievement gap subcommittee to draft a set of guidelines for the initiative outlining its purpose and importance and detailing an initial plan for implementation in consultation with all of EDCO's member districts. Given the size of the Collaborative this subcommittee must play an active leadership role in designing and implementing the initiative, but it cannot act in isolation. The full board of directors should meet to review, amend and ultimately approve the initial set of guidelines. If the subcommittee does not foster transparency and consult with all of the member districts in the planning stages, it risks alienating significant segments of the EDCO population, and attaining lackluster or uneven participation.

IV. Attracting Sufficient Resources

EDCO will need outside funding to move forward with a truly ambitious achievement gap initiative. The research component of the initiative will be especially resource intensive and will likely require the hiring of additional staff.

Developing partnerships with local universities interested in the topic could help EDCO to develop its research expertise, and give EDCO access to experts in the field. But EDCO would still need to develop the internal capacity to guide the implementation of the initiative. Unfortunately, the budgets of all EDCO member districts are stretched thin, with little money available to help fund discretionary projects.

Thus EDCO must devote considerable time and energy to grant writing early in the initiative. It should take the enhanced understanding of the importance and purpose of the initiative devised by the subcommittee, and use it to make a persuasive case as to why outside organizations should support EDCO's work. To make a sufficiently persuasive case EDCO must devote more focused effort and more specific expertise to the grant writing process. EDCO should assign the task to someone with a well-developed understanding of the achievement gap, and make procuring funds for this project a priority.

V. Establishing a Sustained Research Program

Finally, the Collaborative should expand and continue the limited exploratory research effort initiated this summer. EDCO districts should continue to share best practices and serve as a laboratory for educational innovation. When a district has a good idea it should implement that idea, test the effectiveness of the idea against the available indicators and baseline data, and share its findings with other members of the Collaborative. EDCO could serve as a catalyst for such efforts by encouraging and providing support for innovative experiments. It should also do far more comprehensive research to get a better sense of the nature of the problem, the effect of particular interventions, and to foster ideas for new interventions. This research should include interviews, focus groups, and surveys soliciting the input of a wide range of district personnel, parents, and students.

Obstacles to Implementation and Possible Responses

I. Divisions Among Educators

Educators are divided philosophically about how to address the achievement gap. This philosophical divide is a serious stumbling block to attaining widespread buy-in and participation.

Some educators view the achievement gap as a product of American educational culture, a phenomenon that can only be addressed through the wholesale transformation of that culture. Others believe that a steady focus upon improving basic skills and reforming student behavior is the only means of bridging the achievement gap. Some feel that numerical assessments of student performance are misleading, while others believe they are the lynchpin of education reform. Moreover there is a widely varying degree of awareness of and interest in the issue.

While these divisions hinder a unity of purpose, they underscore the importance of attaining consensus before proceeding with the initiative. There is a significant risk that the initiative will reflect the views of a limited segment of the educational community, limiting the participation of those who do not agree with its philosophical underpinnings. The EDCO achievement gap subcommittee must provide strong leadership, working to find areas of common ground that will facilitate cooperation. It should emphasize the lack of understanding surrounding the issue and the need to test a range of possible interventions to find ones that work. The subcommittee should work to educate those who are unaware of the issue, and engage those who doubt its importance. Finally, attaining widespread agreement on a range of performance indicators will help to quell the doubts of those who distrust simplistic numerical assessments of student performance.

II. Community Concerns

Another likely obstacle to effective implementation is resistance within the communities of EDCO's member districts to an academic initiative focused upon race. The population of EDCO member communities is overwhelmingly white. While these communities are on the whole, likely to be supportive of programs designed to boost the achievement of minority students, this is not universally the case. Most communities would probably manifest significant pockets of resistance to such programs. Moreover, parents within these communities tend to be quite demanding. They want their local school to focus attention upon the needs of their children.

Superintendents and principals are acutely aware of this dynamic. Truly making the closing of the achievement gap a priority risks alienating the majority of their constituency. Even if these school leaders are personally committed to boosting minority achievement, converting this commitment into effective action is quite difficult. This state of affairs could be a serious impediment to innovation. Implementing system-wide reform designed to address a problem as weighty and entrenched as the achievement gap will require strong leadership. Teachers taking on the challenge of bridging the achievement gap must feel supported and connected to a larger cause.

Thus EDCO districts should be careful to place the achievement gap initiative within a wider context. Closing the racial achievement gap is part of the overarching goal of helping all students to attain high standards. Schools have especially struggled to reach their black and Hispanic students, and thus addressing the needs of this population must be a central focus of the broader effort. As much as possible initiatives should be designed to improve the performance of all struggling students, with special care taken to assure that they improve the performance of struggling black and Hispanic students. This approach will help EDCO districts to address the achievement gap within the context of the political concerns listed above.

III. Reluctance of Outside Funding Sources

Securing the necessary resources to sustain the initiative is likely to pose a considerable challenge. Funding sources will be hesitant to provide grants to an organization representing suburban school districts. To lure money EDCO will have to prove that its initiative is a worthy investment, even though inner city schools have a greater immediate need for outside funding.

EDCO can make that case. The initiative that EDCO is considering is a rare approach to a pressing problem that is gaining increased attention but is relatively unexplored. Because it has been a taboo topic for so long existing research on the achievement gap is limited, and only begins to scratch the surface of the problem. Experts on the achievement gap are highlighting the need for further experimentation within districts, calling upon educators to reflect upon practice to generate new ideas. Few districts, or networks of districts are addressing the problem in a systematic way. If EDCO can emphasize these points it may be able to overcome its suburban stigma, and convince outside sources of funding to support this important initiative, both for the sake of the students within the Collaborative, and for the innovative ideas that the initiative has the potential to generate.