

Opportunity and Time

Tackling the achievement gap through early childhood education, teacher training and collaboration, character education

SESSION: *Closing the Achievement Gap: "The Brown Deer Way"* | **Presenters:** Deb Kerr, district administrator; Dennis Griffin, school board member; Kortney Smith, K4-6th grade principal; Tosha Womack, 7-12th grade principal; Ted Knoll, director of pupil services; Greg Schaffer, director of teaching & learning; Brown Deer School District



It's an ugly truth — when most black students begin their education, they are already academically behind most white students. On average, outside of the classroom, black children read less and are generally given less opportunities for learning. This is a reality every school district in the state is facing.

"Every one of us has an achievement gap in our district," Deb Kerr, superintendent of the Brown Deer School District, said to school leaders. "We can't be afraid to talk about this."

As is the case with many school districts in the state, the Brown Deer School District saw its percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch increase. The number of special education students went up as well. Like many school districts, the achievement gap was a major issue. The district has undertaken several specific efforts to try and lower its achievement gap.

One of the most successful efforts has been bringing early childhood back into the school district and working collaboratively with day care providers in the community.

"We went to early childhood providers in the community and asked them, 'What are you doing to

prepare kids for school,'" said Kortney Smith, K4-6th grade principal. "It's been very enlightening learning where we have holes."

The district works with participating day care providers in the community to better prepare young children for school. This collaboration has been going on for several years and the district knows students are benefiting from the work. "Students who participated are soaring [academically]," Smith said.

After-school support has also helped students. The support is available two hours after school, two to five days a week depending on the individual student. "For some kids, it is their homework time," Smith said. "In many cases, we have students place their homework in their teacher's box before they leave."

The efforts seem to be making a difference. Data from the 2010-11 school year showed an improvement in reading scores, especially in lower grades. Specifically, among fourth-graders, 85 percent of black students and 89.3 percent of white students were at least proficient in reading (a gap of only 4.3 percent). Students in the upper grades are achieving as well. In 2012, 84.2 percent of Brown

Deer's black sophomores rated proficient or advanced in reading, compared to the state average of 47.7 percent for black Wisconsin students in 10th grade.

Character education has also helped play a role in addressing the achievement gap by creating a school culture where students feel more connected to teachers. The school district initially had such a high number of discipline referrals, that it was asked by the DPI to improve. The district put together a team to address student behavior and that team found that 40 percent of Brown Deer students said they didn't feel connected to the school.

In an effort to create a school community, the team suggested the school district make character education a priority. The district educated its community, trained its teachers, and began dedicating one lesson a week in homeroom to character education. The district has had the most success with character education by empowering the students and letting them take the lead. Students now create the character education lessons and the community outreach efforts continue.



The effort is known as the “Brown Deer Way.”

“If we do this collectively as a community, we’re much more likely to help turn things around for our students,” said Tasha Womack, 7-12th grade principal. The school district used to get as many as 10,000 discipline referrals a school year, now they district only deals with about 2,000.

Teacher training and staff development have also been key to addressing the achievement gap. The district’s staff development committee, made up of teachers, helps identify what teachers need to know and learn to be effective. The teachers that make up this committee then go into their respective schools and lead staff development, covering student/teacher interactions, classroom management, and strate-



gies shown effective in helping low-achieving students.

Finally, the school board has been behind the efforts to lower the district’s achievement gap. The

school board helped get professional development time onto the school calendar, and it specifically focused on narrowing the achievement gap as one of the district goals. ■

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