

# Working Together to Erase the Achievement Gap

New partnership addressing nation's worst achievement gap

**SESSION** *Working in Partnership to Improve Educational Outcomes Among Black Students*

**Presenters** Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest: Kyle Fagan, researcher; Jameela Conway Turner, researcher; Racine Unified: Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton, Office of Family & Community Engagement manager; DPI Policy and Budget Team: Carl Frederick, research analyst

It's a dismal statistic that points to a persistent and challenging problem: Wisconsin has the largest achievement gap between African-American and white students in the country.

But a new partnership between state and local partners and the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest should bring new information and strategies designed to address the complex issues creating that gap.

"It's a glaring problem. It's been a real problem," said Carl Frederick, a research analyst at the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI), during a breakout session on the new partnership.

DPI has been working on the issue for years and hopes to use existing research to collaborate with the new partnership among REL Midwest and its partners. The initiative is called the Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance or MAGRA.

"This way we have multiple people having the conversations," said Frederick. "There's a lot of opportunities for cross pollination."

Jameela Conway Turner, a REL researcher, explained that the group works in partnership with 10 different regions in the country and is based at the American Institute for Research. The states within REL Midwest choose the issues they wish to work on and Wisconsin selected

the achievement gap.

Conway Turner noted that the partnerships are long-term. Local partners identify the issues and provide data, which the researchers use to develop strategies for addressing the issue. The overall goal is to support and increase the local partners' ability to put strategies in place.

"It's about increasing Wisconsin's capacity for doing this work," Conway Turner said.

The Racine Unified School District is one of the local partners working with REL. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton, manager of family and community engagement at Racine, came to the district from DPI last year. At DPI, she had worked on other initiatives designed to address the achievement gap issue.

"This is a race-specific issue," she said. "It's not just equality. It's equity."

In other words, the solution is not just providing the same type of resources to all students. It's a matter of recognizing that students have very different needs and addressing those needs. She acknowledged that there are "bright spots" in the state although there is a lot of work still to be done.

"It all comes down to the belief that all children can learn," Sutton said.

In Racine, the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch continues to increase. Black



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— Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton, Racine Unified School District

students are suspended at a higher rate than white students, Sutton said, noting that research shows that just one suspension increases a student's chances of being imprisoned.

"We should be thinking about what we can do differently about how we help all children learn," she said.

Understanding the reasons behind a student's behavior is important. She related a recent incident where police came to a student's home at 4 am to arrest the mother. The children were left alone. When the student came to school the next day, he refused to talk to counselors but confided in a youth advocate.

She also believes schools should change the way language is used. Instead of calling a student "struggling," Warthen-Sutton prefers the term "striving to succeed."

All attempts to address the issue must be fluid enough that it gets into every classroom and to teachers, "the people on the front line," she added. ■