THE GAP!

Closing Opportunity Gaps - Every school in America claims to be closing opportunity gaps. But are they really?

Stedman Elementary

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ABSTRACT

Closing Opportunity Gaps - Every school in America claims to be closing opportunity gaps. But are they really? This adaptive problem is often met with technical solutions, and we wonder why the gap still exists. The answer isn't to teach faster, plan harder, evaluate more, or continue to use old systems to analyze student data. In order to close the opportunity gap, we have to think innovatively and realize that students are more than test scores.

Throughout the course of our project, we have dismantled the top-down structures of Data-Driven Instruction and allowed teachers to collect authentic, meaningful data about how children engage in learning through the use of Learning Labs. What happens when we utilize video to hone in on specific learners and study their engagement in learning? What happens when we place agency within teachers to critique and offer suggestions on their peer's instruction? How might a focused weekly qualitative analysis of 5 focus children offer insight into the impact of teacher instruction?

INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn Fellowship project focused on our student population's academic achievement and racial disparities. The academic achievement gap GAP is often addressed with increased technical structures that don't result in student achievement. Too often, the outcome is more systems that seem only to increase teacher workloads. Meanwhile, the gap continues to exist.

Not this time. This time, we focused on evaluating the teacher's experience through empathy interviews within systems of evaluation, Data-Driven Instruction (DDI), and coaching to guide our leadership moves while removing oppressive approaches that hinder teacher's growth. In contrast, focusing on creating supportive systems and opportunities for teachers to give one another feedback as it

relates to culturally responsive teaching practices.

Stedman Elementary School is a historic neighborhood school with deep roots in the Park Hill community. Our school has served generations of neighborhood families with a history of strong parent involvement. We are a Dual Language school in grades K-5 which means we offer two programs: English or Spanish Immersion. The mission and vision are; "As life-long learners, we strive for excellence in everything we do while respecting our diverse Park Hill community. We care about each other and make a difference. We, the Stedman community, embrace our diversity and are committed to excellence in our instruction and our quest for wisdom, so all students will achieve academic growth and personal success."   Stedman is a neighborhood school serving approximately 425 students in Early Childhood Education (ECE) through 5th grades. Forty-seven percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 9% are multilingual learners, 66% are students of color and 14% of students have an IEP. Stedman serves students in an area of Denver that is changing in terms of demographics, with the cost of housing causing an increase in middle class families and a decrease in families qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Historically, our enrollment was on a decline but since the 16-17 school year we have seen a steady increase. Our enrollment has increased by 71% over the past six years, indicating that we have gained the trust of our community. The leadership team consists of a Principal, an Assistant Principal, a Learn to Lead Resident, a Dean of Culture, and five Senior Team Leads. Everyone on the leadership team provides teachers with coaching, facilitates data teams and supports school-wide professional learning opportunities. Stedman CMAS data has incrementally improved over the past six years. Since 2017, Stedman has increased CMAS literacy proficiency scores 25 percentage points. In math, Stedman students have increased their proficiency scores by 21 percentage points. Overall Stedman's evolution over the past several years has solidified its position in the Park Hill neighborhood

as a thriving, rigorous learning community.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The student academic gap at Stemdan is no different than the gap that exists within the United States. There are many causes of the Achievement Gap – from racism, lack of acculturation, and socioeconomic status, to sexism and policy. To make things even more complex, these factors all interact with one another, and often it's impossible to differentiate between their effects. However, socioeconomic differences are the major cause of achievement gaps, which is to say that Achievement Gaps are largest in places with large economic disparities. Typically, where minority groups have low incomes and low employment rates, children coming from these groups simply don't have the same opportunities as those who come from wealthier families.

With the achievement gap in mind, our Stedman team engaged in a thorough data analysis to identify three key problems of practice. We noted the need for a change in practice related to the following problems: 1) Academic data for black students is not improving at an appropriate rate. 2) Current teacher supports are not effectively impacting student data. 3)The data being collected is not informing appropriate next teaching steps. <u>Problem 1:</u> Academic data for black students is not improving at an appropriate rate: Stedman's disaggregated data illuminated a gap in student achievement between our black and white students. On the 2022 CMAS Math Assessment which assesses third through fifth graders, 13% of black students met standards while 58% of white students met standards. On the 2022 CMAS Literacy Assessment, 19% of black students met standards while 73% of white students met standards. Similarly, on the IStation early reading assessment which assesses Kindergarten through third graders, 33% of black students met standards while 84% of white students met standards. Furthermore, we noted a slower rate of growth from our black students in comparison to our white students. This

clear gap illuminates a lack of understanding in best instructional practices particularly for our black students. Problem 2: Current teacher supports are not effectively impacting student data. In the original model, Stedman teachers engaged in several forms of coaching and professional development. In place was a weekly one-on-one coaching meeting with a Senior Team Lead, a weekly grade level data analysis meeting, and monthly whole staff professional development. While teachers engaged in all of these platforms, the summative student data confirmed that students were not growing at the required rate as a result of this work. In this DDI protocol, every student's data was analyzed each week leaving very little time to engage deeply with identifying key teaching opportunities to close gaps. Problem 3: The data being collected is not informing appropriate next teaching steps. At this stage, teachers collected weekly formative academic data such as exit tickets and written responses to analyze student performance. However, we noticed this approach did not encompass the whole child and created a very narrow view on student achievement. Next steps all focused on academic standards and did not take into account a student's mental health, engagement or learning style.

As we analyzed the following problems we realized that the throughline clearly illuminated was the lack of culturally responsive practices within our teaching community as well as ineffective systems to support teacher growth in order to impact student achievement. Therefore, our inquiry question became: "How do we create systems that support teachers in shifting their focus from oppressive evaluative structures to developing culturally responsive practices that will enhance their intercultural development and ultimately lead to increased student achievement?"

This inquiry question provided us with the opportunity to grow as leaders in a variety of ways. First, we had to step out of the role of knowledge holder and trust our teachers to collaborate to uncover next steps for students while considering the whole child, not just academic data. In that same vein, we

needed to believe that trying a new process that incorporated a variety of data would yield innovative approaches to support students. Finally, we had to trust in the concept that focusing on our black students specifically would not only positively impact them but would also ultimately grow teacher practice and support all students in the end.

The measures we planned to utilize to monitor growth were the Interim Assessments which measures student growth and status within literacy and math as well as the BESS Screener which measures a student's social emotional regulation and self-efficacy. Both assessments are administered three times a year in order to incrementally monitor growth.

<div align="center">METHODS</div>

We utilized the Design Improvement Process (DI) to guide our inquiry throughout. This process includes five phases; discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation and evolution. It is a non-linear process that allows participants to utilize the most recent information and thinking to ideate, experiment and establish new functioning systems to address the problem of practice.

First, we leaned into the discovery phase in order to understand the problem and the system that produced it. We utilized three key components to support our discovery process; empathy interviews, expert interviews and research. Each of these pieces provided unique data to help us truly understand the problem and to guide our next steps.

We began by engaging in empathy interviews with all of our teaching staff by eliciting support from an outside consultant from the University of Denver, Dr. Ellen Miller-Brown. Due to previous professional learning opportunities, the Stedman staff had a high level of trust with Dr. Miller-Brown. We knew that this trust would create appropriate conditions for the staff to share their true feelings about their experiences with leadership at Stedman. The Instructional Leadership Team generated a

list of key questions for Dr. Miller-Brown to ask each staff member during a one-on-one empathy interview. The questions we asked are as follows: 1. What qualities do you look for in a good coach/coachee relationship that leads to improved student outcomes? 2. Think back to a relationship or experience in your life that helped you be an impactful teacher. a. What qualities in that relationship/experience enhanced your ability to provide standards-based, rigorous tasks? b. What qualities were barriers to your ability to provide standards-based, rigorous tasks? 3. We know that coaches provide feedback to teachers based on what they observe in the classroom and what they see in student work. What's the best way for your coach to provide feedback to you about how to raise expectations of students and provide culturally sensitive instruction?

While the empathy interviews were being conducted we also engaged in an expert interview with a local principal, Sheldon Reynolds who has consistently demonstrated successful results with a similar student population. The key takeaway from our interview with Principal Reynolds was the importance of consistently assessing how teachers are receiving leadership messaging. He illuminated the importance of aligning the instructional vision across the school and to recognize when there is confusion. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of the Instructional Leadership Team's responsibility to ensure that messaging is communicated in a way that staff can comprehend it.

In order to round out our discovery phase we pulled key research we learned throughout our Cahn Fellowship sessions. There were three key sessions that informed our thinking; Dr. Brian Perkin's session on culture and climate, the Exec Comm Team's, motivating and mentoring and Dr. Carolyn Reihl's session on systems thinking. Each of these sessions informed how we understood our own problem of practice and prompted our team to utilize research based best practices to generate ideas for change.

The next step in our process was to interpret the information we learned from the discovery phrase and to begin to ideate. First, we utilized a fishbone diagram to unpack and align new information. Throughout our conversations we realized that there were six key systems that were impacting how our teachers engaged with improving their practice. Teachers shared that each of these systems either hindered or supported their growth. When we aligned this information with both the research and expert interviews we realized that it was important for our school to move away from compliance based practices for our staff in order to positively impact engagement for our students of color. Furthermore, we determined that improving the effectiveness of our ILT to support our teachers would place more agency within our teaching staff to implement new learning they uncovered throughout their engagement. At this point in the process our problem of practice evolved to, "How do we create culturally responsive systems that will lead to academic achievement for students of color?"

During the Ideation phase we identified four key technical shifts that we anticipated would impact adaptive change. The first shift was to modify our Mid Year/End Year conversations with teachers. Instead of this conversation focusing on professionalism indicators we supported teachers in identifying five key students of color to strategically support. Teachers analyzed both social emotional and academic data for each student and established a theory of action that would support student growth. During our conversations with teachers we were able to shift the conversation to focus on students as opposed to compliance based indicators.

The second shift we made was to streamline our professional development learning with staff to Zaretta Hammond's text Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain. Each week our staff would work to unpack a different concept in the text by conversing in vertical teams. They shared their own

experiences in the classroom and aligned the learning to their five focus students. This component provided research-based strategies that could be applied immediately in the classroom.

The third shift we made was to revamp our data analysis meetings. Our desire was to put the learning in the hands of the teachers and to move our leadership team from experts to facilitators. In order to accomplish this goal we established a Learning Lab protocol. During each meeting teachers viewed a video of one of their colleagues teaching. During the video the teachers focused on at least one of the focus students. They observed the student's behaviors and analyzed the academic output. Then, together as a team the teachers created next steps. They supported the teacher whose video was observed in identifying what small next step needed to be taken to move that child to the next level. Throughout this process the leadership facilitated the process but did not step into consultancy and offer suggestions. By making this shift we put the ownership back into the hands of the teachers.

The final shift we made was to align our one to one coaching with teachers to all the new systems in place. During these meetings, our coaches supported teachers in putting the learning together and to apply it to their five focus students. Coaches continued to lead as facilitators asking key questions and providing time for teachers to process and to come to their own conclusions. Again, this provided another opportunity for teachers to lead their own learning.

By putting into practice these four core shifts simultaneously we were able to completely shift our support of teachers from compliance to adaptive. Teachers felt a sense of agency and ownership. They acted as experts sharing their observations and experiences. Finally, we encompassed data that took into account the whole child. Each component of this shift built upon one another creating a cohesive plan to support teachers and grow student academic achievement.

RESULTS

Managing complex change in adults takes time and patience. Studies show that organizational success is manifested through managing complex change in adults. Throughout our process, we consistently engaged with the intricacies of managing change at such a large scale.

Several educators initially resisted the instructional shifts school leaders and coaches attempted to make. Even though everyone agreed there was an achievement gap and that our current practices were not serving all of our students, teachers were unclear about their role and the punitive consequences they would receive if they failed to close achievement gaps.

"One of the most critical failures to change is an employees' attitudes toward change. Unaware of the potential benefits associated with organizational change, employees often develop a sense of fear, and perceive the introduction of change as an unfair act" (Rehman, Nabeel, et al. 2021). Therefore, we had to regroup and refocus on the roll-out of our change ideas and system changes. Hence, we focused on the empathy interviews as the essential driver for change. This intentionality really eased the fear, allowing educators to embrace vulnerability and authentically ask questions, seeking their role as change agents within the new initiatives.

Even through this process, we had to encourage educators to think outside the box. Once educators were willing to embrace these changes, Stedman's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) received feedback from teachers that was more aligned to old practices and lacked innovation. For example, one of the change ideas was to put students in ability groups during Tier I instruction.

According to Furstenthal, Laua, the second-biggest human barrier to innovation is difficulty dealing with *uncertainty and losing control*. Such fears trigger the ambiguity effect, a cognitive bias that leads us to avoid options with uncertain outcomes. Management executives seeking more control over

outcomes often prioritize incremental innovations they perceive as less risky or push teams for assurances that their projects will pay off, producing the counterproductive result of less experimentation, less ambitious ideas, and less creativity. (Furstenthal, Laura, et al. 2022).

The lack of innovative, creative thinking is why the Racial Achievement Gap continues to exist. We must create simple yet innovative technical structures that lead to adaptive change for students of color (SOC). Instilled in that belief, we engaged vertical teams of teachers in brainstorming sessions to support creative thinking aligned with the problem of practice. Through collaborative efforts we were able to re-create our academic systems to support Stedman's SOC's better.

One of the most surprising challenges of this work was the mindsets of Stedman's coaches and ILT members. Months into the Design Improvement (DI) process, we realized the need for capacity building on the team to manage the innovative systems they were responsible for effectively. For example, one of the change ideas was to create a Learning Lab process where vertical teams watched their peers teach a small group of students and provided feedback, identifying the most robust, culturally responsive next step. After observing these Learning Labs, we quickly realized that there was a knowledge gap aligned to culturally responsive teaching best practices. Therefore, we used Zaretta Hammonds' work to identify and align best practices, such as tapping into student schema (background knowledge) for every lesson, authentic relationships, and appropriate scaffolds. This allowed us to realign what we were looking for during Learning Labs and focus alignment on school-wide feedback and next steps for teachers.

One of the main goals of the Learning Lab experience was to collaborate as a group of educators and provide feedback to a group of your peers based on a 30-minute snapshot of that educator's teaching. It is meant to empower teachers to share their teaching practices while embracing vulnerability and acknowledging that we are all working to get better for students. According to Bair et al., Learning

Labs create a shared concern for student learning, which will help faculty see each other not as threats but as intellectual partners committed to student growth and help promote a sense of self-efficacy. It also creates a sense of trust among members who, instead of posturing before their peers, expose their vulnerabilities and seek opportunities to inquire into ways to become more effective instructors (Bair et al. 2019).

This process revealed that many Stedman educators made assumptions about students without using the student as a tool for gathering information. For example, educators would note a misconception as the student needing to be more engaged, which is not a misconception. As the Learning Lab group pressed this educator to investigate the situation more, the teacher learned that the student needed glasses and could not see the teacher's slides during Tier I instruction and, therefore, could not engage. Utilizing the learning lab process to encourage small shifts in teacher behaviors has increased relational capacity.

All of these challenges led to growth for not only students but the adult community. These technical shifts have forced educators to rethink the way they teach and who their Tier I instruction is impacting. Data-driven instruction (DDI) has been altered, forcing people to think critically about their teaching moves while providing their peers with celebrations and next steps.

While creating new technical systems has allowed adults to embrace the challenge of change, innovation, and new technical systems, removing barriers, such as using the LEAP evaluation tool as the main driver for coaching and teaching conversations, providing autonomy within the focus of Mid-Year Conversations (MYC), has allowed teachers to focus more on growing their capacity and less about the systems used to evaluate their effectiveness in the classroom. Leading to students' academic and social-emotional success.

Students of Color (SOC) are not where we want them to be YET, but our new systems are cultivating the mindsets of our educators creating a hardened foundation students can stand on. SOC demonstrated consistent growth from Interim I to Interim III (Summative Assessment used within DPS to measure students' Mastery of State Standards) in grades 3-5. For Example, in Math 5th grade, SOC proficiency grew from 20% -36%. According to Stedman's Interim data, SOC also grew in Literacy - 100% of SOC in 4th grade moved into the Partially Proficient proficiency band or higher.

We used the BESS as a gauge to understand students' experiences within the classroom and their relational capacity with their teachers. The BESS is used to monitor changes in children's behavior or emotional status. The BESS categorizes students into three categories (Normal, At Risk, and Elevated) based on how a student responds to the questionnaire. Although we would like every child to report in the normal range, we have a district goal of 85% (Normal), 10% (At-Risk), and 5% (Elevated).

In the Fall before Stedman's change initiative, Stedman students scored below the district average and goal. Students reported 72% (Normal), 19%(At-Risk), and 9% (Elevated). Well below the District's goal of 85%/10%/5% and below the Fall district average of 78%/14%/8%.

In the Spring after the implementation of Stedman's change initiative, Stedman students scored above the district average and goal. Students reported 86% (Normal), 10%(At-Risk), and 4% (Elevated) above the District's goal of 85%/10%/5% and above the district average of 73%/19%/8%.

This is further proof that the shifts we are making in alignment with international relationships through accountability, high expectations, and learning labs are resulting in stronger relationships between students and teachers.

REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS - Michael Atkins, Fellow

As I reflect on the impact of my Cahn adventure on my leadership, I am grateful for the experience. Over the 23 years I have served in public education, I continue to develop within my ability to empower those I lead and lead with. The Cahn Fellowship has allowed me to navigate as a learner with multiple entry points to analyze my leadership.

When I examined my leadership style, I noticed it has traits similar to the Union Leaders: calm and collected. Knowing the areas under my control, I can empower my team to reach their maximum potential and learn to respect and learn from the entire school community.

As a leader, I aspire to make those around me more vital educators. I can only do that through building relational capacity, being an authentic listener, and thinking critically about the systems created that impact children. George Washington Carver said, "Where there is no vision, there is no hope." Strategy matters!

My greatest joy has been the growth of these educators because of the transformative work we have done in the school because of my participation in this program. We have been able to create systems that are directly aligned to our students, which has created a seamless throughline for teachers. Many teachers have expressed a lighter workload as they work to change the world. This is also true as I reflect on the growth of my Ally, Adrienne Lopez.

Adrienne Lopez and I have had the pleasure of working together since 2019. We have been able to learn and grow together as leaders. Strategically, we push one another into spaces of deep reflection and personal growth goals.

This journey has involved coaching her through her transition from Assistant Principal to Principal. During

our Cahn experiences, Adrienne Lopez was also an active participant of Denver Public Schools, Learn to Lead Program. The Learn to Lead (L2L) Program supports the district priority of great Leaders in Every School to ensure every student succeeds. L2L is designed for educators who possess leadership qualities and want to continue building knowledge, skills, and abilities toward principalship.

Adrienne has developed her vision as a leader through these strategic learning opportunities. As a result, she secured a principalship for the 23-24 SY and beyond.

The evolution of my leadership has been immense over the past academic year. My learning and experiences through the Gettysburg experience and workshops have transformed my leadership. I am a better listener, a more profound instructional leader and I am more confident in my operational leadership. It's a reminder that we must get off the dance floor and view leadership from the balcony. As a result, I have been offered a future opportunity with my current school district, Denver Public Schools, as Director of Black Student Success (BSS). The position is a new position within the district focused on supporting schools with the densest population of black students. The goal is to target school wide systems to better serve black students and close the achievement gap. I am grateful for the Cahn experience, which has propelled me into positioning myself to impact a larger population of students and educators.

<div align="center">REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS - Adrienne, Ally</div>

Throughout this process I have had the opportunity to reflect on the impact this work has had on me as a leader. Globally it reminded me of the importance of engaging in the design improvement process regularly. As leaders in education we are often caught in daily operations and it is very important that the problem of practice we addressed throughout the year illuminated a few key learnings that have informed my work as a leader moving forward. First, I was reminded of the importance of utilizing

multiple data to have a true understanding of a student's gaps and next steps. By not only looking at academic performance but also social emotional data and student behaviors during instruction I was reminded that students can not be summed up by a number and there is more to their story than assessments. Second, I learned that holding our educators up as experts and moving our leadership focus from consultant to facilitator helped to create agency in our teachers. Because they were identifying students' next steps independently they were very invested in achieving positive outcomes. Finally, I learned that a problem of practice often evolves as you dig into research and collect perception data. This is important because it highlights the importance of truly understanding the problem of practice and being willing to adjust it as necessary.

When reflecting on student impact I can specifically name a few students that grew due to our implementation of these changes. One student in particular was so proud to share his improvement in his small math group. He highlighted for me how his teacher was able to make changes that helped him to engage more fully and to understand concepts in a more holistic way. It is these small changes that eventually will help this student to grow and be successful.

As of June 2023 I have transitioned to a new school in Denver as Principal. I am grateful for the opportunity to have engaged in this process throughout the past year. It has helped me think through new systems I want to bring to my new school. I have specifically helped highlight for my new staff the use of SEL data within our DDI process. Teachers have been excited to share their observations of student behavior as part of the data analysis process. In addition, I plan to lead our own design improvement process beginning this spring. Overall it is amazing to see how the work I have done at

Stedman is transferring to my new role and is positively impacting a new set of students.

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