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Intensity grows as OPRF gap widens

Weninger to present achievement plan in October

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Those who 'meet' and 'exceed'

Prairie State Achievement Exam
results for OPRF:

READING RESULTS % meeting or exceeding standards

YEAR	ALL STUDENTS	WHITE	BLACK
2007	68.8	81.9	33.1
2006	77	86.7	48.4
2005	76.6	85.9	52.5
2004	71.4	85.8	44.8

MATH RESULTS % meeting or exceeding standards

YEAR	ALL STUDENTS	WHITE	BLACK
2007	70	84.4	32
2006	74.1	86.3	35.8
2005	65.8	80.4	27.8
2004	69	85.2	38.5

With new test scores reporting the achievement gap has again worsened at Oak Park and River Forest High School and a new superintendent charged with focusing on the issue, added voices are now being heard on how the school ought address the academic gap between black and white students which was first publicly identified more than a decade ago.

While school officials insist that standardized tests are not the best way to measure a school's academic success, they readily admit the existence of the gap and that recently released preliminary Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) scores showed the gap widening as measured by the state's standardized test

District 200 Supt. Attila Weninger was hired in part to figure out how to close the gap. Weninger said that next month he will present his plan to address improving overall academic achievement and closing the gap.

Weninger will certainly hear the views of school board members, two of whom said this week that the school needs to take substantive action to break the current dispiriting cycle. Ralph Lee, a retired OPRF teacher elected to the board in April, wants a much stronger emphasis placed on improving reading as the underpinning for all academic success. Sharon Patchak Layman, a former elementary school board member also elected this year, hopes OPRF will look outside its walls for examples of success in other schools facing a similar gap.

Weninger addressed the achievement gap most recently at a OPRF community town hall Aug. 29. He said the school has to find out where students are academically at the time they enroll, aside from relying only on transfer and eighth grade data. He said the school needs to find out where the students' deficiencies are and help them.

"To close this achievement gap," Weninger said, "we need to do a comprehensive review of our programs, some of which

people are wild about but we don't really know if they're working."

The year-long review process is currently underway, he said.

Weninger said the review will look at a specific initiative, find out who it targets, the number of kids and staff involved, and its cost. The review will also look at what the original goal was for the initiative and whether OPRF can measure its success rate. The difficulty for the school community, Weninger admitted, will be eliminating popular but unsuccessful initiatives.

His plan, though, is not the first attempt by OPRF to tackle the gap.

Improving skills

The most recent in-depth study, titled *The Learning Community Performance Gap: An Analysis of African American Achievement at Oak Park and River Forest High School*, was published in 2003. The study was put together by the African-American Achievement Study Team, a group composed primarily of OPRF educators.

One of that study's recommendations was for a full program review.

The recommendation called for "institutional investment in resources to implement evidenced-based research on all existing and future programs..."

School officials, however, admit that the school does not have a comprehensive review process for its programs.

But the recent ISAT scores inspired new board member Ralph Lee to restate one of his concerns: how much time is the school spending on improving the reading skills of some students?

Lee said that for a student, reading was more important than any other academic skill. Lee, a retired OPRF chemistry teacher, is a proponent of OPRF spending a greater part of the school day on improving reading skills for some students.

School curriculum officials at OPRF have said the school does not focus entirely on one subject at the expense of others. But for Lee, extra reading prep time is a key component in addressing - and closing - the gap.

"I believe we need to consider increasing the amount of time spent in improving reading skills with some students in some circumstances," he said.

The 'Two OPRF's'

There's another aspect of the achievement gap not often discussed publicly, though some are willing to speak without attribution. It has to do with what they say are "the two OPRF's."

A parent who spoke on condition of anonymity explained the meaning.

For OPRF students who "get it" as far as the academic program and the curriculum, and who are also self-motivated, they're able to achieve at a high level. For those students who are struggling, the school can be a challenging and even difficult place.

The parent added that the faculty at OPRF are, for the most part, responsive to students. But, some don't have the patience or available time to spend with those students needing extra attention.

School officials, though, have routinely pointed out that the school has implemented programs over the years to help a specific portion of struggling students.

Lee, who's lived in Oak Park for nearly 30 years and taught at OPRF for 16 years before retiring in 1999, agreed that the school has succeeded in educating some but not others. Neither Lee nor the parent, however, suggests lowering standards, each said.

"We haven't done as good a job as we should have to give better attention across the entire student population," Lee said. "We have given the lion's share of attention to the most attractive end of the spectrum."

Learning from other schools

Board member Sharon Patchak Layman has often brought up another point: whether OPRF can learn something from schools in Chicago that successfully educate low-income, and black students. Chicago's Whitney Young High School, she noted, routinely makes AYP - adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind.

Some OPRF officials, though, point out that Whitney Young is a selective admission school and takes a certain population of students.

Jim O'Connor, principal of KIPP Ascend Charter School, an elementary school on the West Side, said their school's success has come from an extended school day, and also an increased amount of time teachers spend with students outside of the classroom.

KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) began in 2003 and is part of a nationwide consortium that, interestingly, has OPRF roots.

KIPP is a collection of charter elementary and high schools. It was founded in 1994 by Mike Feinberg, an OPRF alum, and fellow teacher Dave Levin.

KIPP Ascend enrolls students as fifth graders, and currently has fifth through eighth grade students, more than 90 percent of whom are black, according to KIPP's 2006 national school report. KIPP schools nationwide serve predominantly low-income black and Hispanic students.

According to its 2006 state school report card, KIPP Ascend had nearly 74 percent of its students meet or exceed standards for overall performance in reading, math and science.

"I really feel like that's the way to go," he said of an extended school day. "Some kids just need more time. Not all kids in Oak Park need it. If it could be something where there's extra time for kids in the lowest percentile, that would help."

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