

Prepared Statement

Richard Coleman
Director, An Achievable Dream Academy
Newport News, VA

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Roundtable: "NCLB Reauthorization: Strategies that Promote School Improvement"

February 8, 2007

An Achievable Dream

Newport News, Virginia

"Breaking the cycle of poverty through social, academic and moral education"

An Achievable Dream (AAD) is a collaboration of public and private organizations that runs a comprehensive K-12 public school program. Newport News Public Schools provides the instructional and support elements common to all schools in the city, including curriculum, student services, basic staffing, transportation, food service, and maintenance. The private arm, through the mechanism of the non-profit An Achievable Dream, Inc., raises funds for and operates all the additional components that contribute significantly to the program's effectiveness: the extended school day, longer school year, uniforms, tennis equipment and instruction, curriculum enrichments, technology, parent involvement activities, and program evaluation. At present, AAD operates a K-8 Academy with students in grades 9-12 continuing in the program while attending a comprehensive high school in the district. Beginning with the 2007-2008 school year, AAD will operate its own Middle and High School Academy so that students have full access to the array of AAD services through their primary and secondary school years.

AN ACHIEVABLE DREAM SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

An Achievable Dream's selection and integration of specific design elements is based on available evidence of strategies that are effective at promoting the educational success of minority and low income students. (Note: Among 1,000+ An Achievable Dream students, 100% qualify for free or reduced lunch and 98% are African American.) Among those that have the most influence on program design are:

- Evidence that in urban schools, minority and low-income student are more likely to achieve at lower levels, need remedial services, be retained, and drop out and less likely to take advanced courses or apply to college. They are less likely to receive health care and more likely to become involved in the justice system, bear children during adolescence, and, as adults, be unemployed or underemployed and depend on public assistance. Equally compelling is evidence that with appropriate supports and high expectations, they can achieve and succeed at levels consistent with those of white and affluent students. At An Achievable Dream, expectations are uniformly high, clearly articulated, and consistently reinforced by teachers, staff and volunteers.
- Evidence that students lose academic ground in the summer. An Achievable Dream is a year-round school, with its extra 30 days organized into three mandatory intercessions between regular quarters.
- Evidence that extended instructional time can yield results in student achievement. An Achievable Dream's day is 2¼ hours longer than the city norm and the year 30 days longer. This schedule makes time available for more intensive instruction in basics, as well as for curriculum enrichments (foreign language, technology education, the arts) and special offerings like the positive conflict resolution program, etiquette and Speaking Green (proper business English).

PROGRAM EVALUATION

An Achievable Dream believes that evaluation is essential both to identify areas in which modifications are needed to strengthen the program and to demonstrate its effectiveness to other communities seeking evidence-based strategies for serving inner-city youth.

Outcome evaluation focuses on two areas: educational achievement, as measured largely by standardized testing and college acceptance, and behavioral performance, as measured by the incidence of infractions of school policies (ranging from cheating, lying, and insubordination to those involving weapons, alcohol, and drugs).

The program has contracted with the School of Education at the College of William and Mary for continuing, objective, and systematic evaluation. In assessing outcomes, Achievable Dream students are compared to a control group of students matched by age, gender, socioeconomic level, and academic status. William and Mary also assesses parent satisfaction through focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys.

The key findings from a two-year study by William and Mary, issued July 2006:

- *Compared with the match group, An Achievable Dream students in grades 3 and 5 scored higher on every portion of the Standards of Learning academic tests and on a standardized reading test.*
- *The number of disciplinary referrals for Achievable Dream students was less than half that for the match group. Dreamers miss less school.*
- *Parents involved in the program are extremely satisfied with their children's learning, the performance of teachers, communication and relations with the school, and the school environment.*
- **The most significant finding is that An Achievable Dream is effective at closing the gap between white and black students. On statewide tests, Dreamers – 98% of whom are African-American and all of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunches – outperform other minority students in the city. They pass the Virginia tests at rates approaching or identical to the rates for white students. On some tests and grades, they closed the racial gap typical in most schools and on other tests narrowed it to only a few percentage points, compared to the 15 – 30 percentage point gap between black and white students in the city, the state and the nation as a whole.**

Advancing the principles of positive youth development

An Achievable Dream does this through:

- Surrounding children with high, clearly articulated, and consistently reinforced expectations. It is blatantly clear: these children are preparing for college, for careers, and to become contributing members of their families and communities. These expectations are reinforced in daily morning character development exercises, classroom discussions and proclaimed from banners in the hallways.
- A strong and pervasive character education program that helps children develop critical values – honesty, respect, responsibility, loyalty, courage, self-discipline, integrity, and patriotism.
- Equipping children for the world of success through programs like etiquette classes and the "Speaking Green" program, which fosters poise, public speaking skills, and fluency in standard English. The "Peaceful Conflict Resolution" program teaches non-violent ways to resolve disputes.
- Fostering a sense of identity with a positive group that is an antidote to the lure of street gangs. From the earliest years, students identify themselves as Dreamers, an identity that is bolstered by uniforms, and the distinction of attending a school that has a high profile in the community.
- Requiring and supporting the involvement of parents, one of the strongest weapons in the quest to develop strong children. All parents must sign a pledge to volunteer in the school and make education a priority at home. They review children's binders daily and can take a variety of classes in the parents' night school.
- The program incorporates services to prevent and treat health needs and promote students' wellbeing. An on-site health clinic serves students and their families, and the "Healthy Living" curriculum emphasizes healthy habits and living, including nutrition, exercise, hygiene, and healthy daily schedules.

DISTRICT STRATEGIES

Newport News Public Schools, like many urban districts, is working to assist a number of schools that have been identified for improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act, specifically schools that did not meet Annual Yearly Progress Determinations (AYP) for two or more consecutive years. One school improvement strategy the district has pursued is the closure of Briarfield Elementary School, whereby Briarfield's students (with similar demographics to AAD students) were absorbed into AAD's elementary and middle school programs, while Briarfield's campus is to be converted to the new An Achievable Dream Middle and High School.

While no district likes to think about closing schools, this public/private partnership has demonstrated how a bad situation can be turned into a win-win for the district, students, parents and the community.

CHALLENGE #1

With Newport News Public Schools, An Achievable Dream operates a K-8 Academy. Historically, when they graduate from the eighth grade, AAD students attend a comprehensive public high school (Heritage High School), a school in year 2 of improvement, where the current high school "culture" does not share the academic expectations and the disciplined structure to which AAD students have grown accustomed. The social pressure at this 1,800+ student high school to not achieve is a grave concern, and has had a negative impact on AAD students in terms of academic achievement.

Research shows that in the mid-1990s, high schools began receiving better-prepared students, after numerous reform efforts focused on elementary and middle schools, but achievement remained flat at the high school level. One of the problems is size: Many of today's high schools have enrollments of 2,000, 3,000, even 4,000 students which make it difficult, if not impossible to govern and emphasize the academic part of the curriculum. Further research shows that students drop out of school because they are bored or do not think material learned in high school applied to real life. Specific research on An Achievable Dream high school students supports the findings that achieving academic success in a large high school is a challenge.

SOLUTION

This year, alongside Heritage High School, An Achievable Dream is building its own dedicated 500-student middle and high school. Where it has closed the achievement gap, An Achievable Dream will now be able to close the ambition gap by giving students future goals to work toward. An Achievable Dream, working as a laboratory school, is developing and will test new ways to excite students to keep them in school, and to motivate them to graduate and pursue college, further career training, or the military. The campus is an innovative partnership of An Achievable Dream, Newport News Public Schools, the City of Newport News, regional corporations and regional universities.

The enriched academic program will prepare students for successful careers by allowing them to explore and plan for intended vocations. Students will be exposed to twelve primary career paths, including: college, the military, police and fire, medical technology and nursing, shipbuilding, computer technology and other 21st century careers. Enrichment classes in math, science and technology will be offered in partnership with Virginia Modeling Analysis Simulation Center and Northrop Grumman Newport News. Medical careers will be directed by Riverside Health System, homeland security (police and fire) through the City of Newport News, and entrepreneurship through Ferguson Enterprises.

CHALLENGE # 2

One of the national education community's and An Achievable Dream's greatest challenges is teacher recruitment and retention, specifically in urban schools. The national average tenure of urban teachers is 2-3 years. While An Achievable Dream has been fortunate to find and hire many committed, long term teachers, it is increasingly more difficult to fill teaching positions when they do come open.

SOLUTION

Old Dominion University (ODU), in nearby Norfolk, Virginia, will establish the Center for Urban Teacher Training, Education and Research (CUTTER) on An Achievable Dream's new middle and high school campus. The Center will initially focus on preparing AAD teachers to staff the new 6-12 campus. Later, the Center will open its doors to teachers from districts within the region and beyond. The Center will become a national model for urban teacher professional development, education and research.

The Center will invite K-12 teachers and administrators and higher education faculty from communities across the globe to join ODU in improving teaching and learning. In order to improve teaching and learning at scale, universities and schools must join forces with the community to strengthen its instructional core by increasing teachers' skills and knowledge in combining instruction and assessment; enable students to be active agents for their own learning; enable teachers and higher education faculty to serve as "coresearchers;" and ensure that the curriculum challenges the students academically.

Getting assessment "right" is more important than ever for African American children as we near 2014 when all children must meet NCLB requirements. With a growing knowledge of how people learn, it is critical to develop assessments that help teachers diagnose students' comprehension more precisely and accurately.

In essence, the Center moves school improvement to the university and teacher development to the urban classroom.