

Do You Believe in Magic?—Closing the Achievement Gap

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Words 321

We hear a lot of talk these days about “closing the achievement gap.” The federal No Child Left Behind act requires that by the year 2012, all children, including poor children of color who historically have been educationally neglected, achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Unfortunately, only 40% of urban third graders currently read on grade level. Raising student achievement is a hard job, but it’s a job that can be done, and magicians need not apply.

Teachers in the Teachers Network Policy Institute have done extensive research on high-performing classrooms and schools that are located in high needs, high poverty areas. What they’ve found is this: when teachers engage in professional talk, kids get smarter.

Marika Paez teaches at the Future Leaders Institute, an elementary school in Central Harlem. She found that when teachers at the school spent two hours a week studying and reflecting together on student work, student achievement skyrocketed. The teachers discussed issues and posed questions about their students, and studied how to teach them better. They observed each other’s teaching and provided critical feedback on how to improve lessons. By the end of the school year, over 90% of Paez’s first graders read at or above grade level.

One would think teachers have opportunities for this type of conversation and collaboration throughout the day but, unfortunately, most do not. Can you imagine lawyers working on an important case or legislators drafting a bill or doctors planning surgery without consultation with one another?

Schools spend thousands of dollars each year on packaged literacy programs that have little or no effect on improving teacher quality. When schools choose instead to invest in giving teachers time to talk professionally with each other, the payoff is smarter teachers and higher student achievement.

If we professionalize the teachers’ work day by including time for teacher conversation and learning, we can help all of our students reach magical heights.