
2001 Better Government Competition

CO-WINNER

Project Outreach

Closing the Achievement Gap through Community Empowerment

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At 3:00 in the afternoon, the church hall is quiet. Typically, the church hall is used for religious education, church homecoming celebrations, wedding receptions, and funerals. On weekdays, the church hall is transformed into an after-school learning center. Volunteers have begun to arrive to begin the process. While some set up study materials and laptop computers, others prepare a snack. In a short time, a school bus will drop 30 children off in front of this church and two additional churches in this rural community.

Before the after-school program was established, the children were transported home to empty apartments or houses to be watched by older siblings or neighbors. Now adult volunteers from the faith community who attended elementary school in the 1940s and 50s work as tutors, coaches, surrogate parents, and mentors to help this next generation excel. As the children enter the church hall, the noise level increases dramatically, and the eyes of wisdom gained through experience meet the sparkling eyes of youth. Hugs, greetings, and questions are exchanged: "How was your day?" "Did we have that homework math problem correct?" "Are you feeling better?" It is another day at the Project Outreach learning center—a day of bringing caring volunteers from the faith community together with a well-trained professional staff to reach and lift up 90 struggling children.

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THE PROBLEM

Maryland's Worcester County, on the Delmarva Peninsula stretching along the mid-Atlantic coast, is one of the state's most economically distressed rural jurisdictions, entrenched in "the solid grip of economic and social decline."¹ The county's economy is largely based on agriculture, from the fishing and poultry industries to farming and forestry. The seasonal nature of the economy in Worcester County, which also includes a summer family resort, has detrimental effects on both opportunities for year-round employment and on the types of employment available to county residents in general. Worcester County has Maryland's highest unemployment rate, with a yearly cyclical range of 4 percent to 15.7 percent.² In addition, both the mean and median household incomes in Worcester County fall approximately \$20,000 below the state mean and median income levels.³

¹ *One Maryland: The Plight of Distressed Jurisdictions*, State of Maryland, Department of Economic Development, 2000.

² *Monthly Labor Review*, State of Maryland, Department of Economic Development 2000 Report.

³ *State of Maryland, Department of Economic Development 2000 Report.*

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Scarce public resources are not always able to provide the family support services that are needed for the education, health, and safety of children in small rural communities. Thirty-six percent of all students enrolled in the Worcester County Public Schools are eligible for free and reduced-price meals (FARMS).⁴ In many risk factors that confront families in rural and depressed communities across the nation, including proportionately high rates of births to teenagers, child abuse and neglect, infant and child mortality, and children living in poverty, Worcester County ranks fourth among the 24 counties in Maryland.⁵

Despite the economic and social hardships that face many of its residents, Worcester County is dedicated to the education of its children. Nearly 7,000 pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students from four distinct communities attend 14 schools. It is the mission of the Worcester County Public Schools to empower all students to “Grow physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially with enthusiasm for life-long learning; Achieve high academic and performance standards; and Function responsibly as productive citizens.”

The population of Worcester County is 28 percent African American, 1 percent Hispanic, and 71 percent white.⁶ The school system population is 29 percent African American, 1 percent Hispanic, and 70 percent white (see figure 1). The source of school system funding is 88 percent local and 12 percent state and federal.

Worcester County Public Schools seeks to provide a balance of academic enrichment and remediation as needed for improving the achievement of all students. Maryland is one of the few states that provide standardized test data disaggregated by race and gender. In Maryland, as a group, white students achieve at higher levels as measured by standardized tests than minority students; girls achieve at higher levels than boys.⁷ These discrepancies are often referred to as the achievement gap.

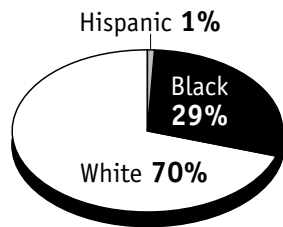
In 1997 in Worcester County, the gap in student achievement between African American female and white female students as measured by standardized tests using a 100-point scale was between 18 and 48 points. The gap in student achievement between African American male and white male students as measured by standardized tests using a 100-point scale was between 17 and 41 points.⁸

Despite various efforts to modify teaching strategies and change curriculum, the gap persisted and even began to widen. African American children were not meeting with success, and children from lower socioeconomic households were not excelling. The probability of success for an African American child from a household of poverty was extremely low. This pattern of low achievement led to a destiny of remedial classes, increased probability of dropping out of school, and a lifetime of low-wage jobs. It was obvious that the downward cycle of sustained low achievement had to be transformed into a pattern of success. The status quo was not acceptable. A change was needed and demanded.

THE SOLUTION

Project Outreach was the community’s response to the ever-increasing gap in student achievement between African American and white children and between children who live in poverty and those who do not. Project Outreach has been the journey of a rural community from haphazard initiatives to community empowerment.

Figure 1. Worcester County School System Demographics



⁴ National School Lunch Program Enrollment Data, Worcester County Public Schools.

⁵ Advocates for Children and Youth, Inc., 2000 Maryland Kids Count Book.

⁶ U. S. Census Bureau, 2000 data.

⁷ Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland School Performance Report 2000.

⁸ Maryland State Department of Education, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills McGraw Hill, Maryland School Performance Report 2000, p. 87.

In reviewing the challenges and exploring potential long-term approaches to closing the achievement gap, it was essential for the school system to secure parental “buy-in” and mobilize community support. It was evident to school system staff that the process chosen to create a local strategy for closing the gap would to a great extent determine its success. Buckingham Elementary School was selected as the target school. The school serves 480 children in pre-kindergarten through fourth grade from the community of Berlin, Maryland. Student enrollment by race for Buckingham Elementary School is 49 percent white, 46 percent African American, and 5 percent Hispanic. Two-thirds of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

School system staff created a seven-pronged approach to mobilize and empower the community:

- 1) Information was shared with the Worcester County Board of Education to solicit the Board’s endorsement.
- 2) Data were shared with administrators, teachers, and support staff to explain the need to implement change.
- 3) Through public forums held to engage parents and other stakeholders, the community began to understand the extent of the problem and the strong commitment needed to close the gap.
- 4) Student learning style surveys were used to provide additional data to help focus resources.
- 5) The local print and television media were briefed on the problem of the achievement gap and the challenge to close it.
- 6) Support and technical assistance were sought from the Maryland State Department of Education.
- 7) Through this process, school system staff were able to identify both potential challenges to closing the gap and the unique strengths of rural communities.

Among the challenges they identified were recruiting and training volunteers, transportation of children, space, and funding. During public forums, the need for after-school care that could be provided by a learning assistance center was very evident. Even more importantly, the comments clearly showed that the learning centers needed to be located in the neighborhoods. The community came to believe that the achievement gap could be closed by addressing the parental need for after-school care with an academic program staffed by trained volunteers and educators and emphasizing reading and mathematics linked to daily schoolwork.

Public discussions demonstrated that the faith community could supply the caring and dedicated volunteers needed for a long-term commitment to close the gap. The church is the spiritual and social fabric that binds these rural areas together. The faith community would be a wonderful source for the volunteers needed to staff the learning centers. In addition, churches would provide space and neighborhood locations for the after-school learning centers.

School system staff used research findings as well as information gathered through the community forums to create Project Outreach. The goals of Project Outreach include increasing the achievement of all children; reducing the disparity of achievement levels

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The faith community provided volunteer staff and neighborhood locations for the after-school learning centers.

During the regular school day, Project Outreach resource teachers work with classroom teachers to monitor the progress of children in the program and strengthen the link between school and the after-school program.

among African American and white children in mathematics, reading, writing, and language usage; increasing parental support and community involvement; and initiating the innovative use of technology in the home and the community to increase achievement. In seeking funding, school system staff wrote and submitted a Goals 2000 grant proposal in the amount of \$249,656, which was funded by the Maryland State Department of Education.

Project Outreach after-school learning centers have been established in three churches in Berlin, Maryland. Four school staff members, specifically two resource teachers and two community facilitators, and a cadre of dedicated volunteers from the faith community provide services at the centers. Each day a total of 90 children, 28 percent of first- through fourth-graders at Buckingham Elementary School, are transported to the centers. Children were recommended by classroom teachers for participation in the program. The after-school center schedule includes snack, help with homework, small group instruction in the areas of reading and mathematics, and computer time. The program concludes at 5:30 p.m. with parents visiting the center to pick up their children and interact with staff.

In addition, during the regular school day the Project Outreach resource teachers work with classroom teachers to monitor the progress of children in the program and strengthen the link between the regular school day and the after-school program. Also, each school day, the resource teachers team teach with classroom teachers and provide support to Project Outreach children while the children are in the regular day program. The community facilitators make regular home visits to build and maintain the connection with the home.

Participants' Perspectives

In the words of one volunteer, "Some of these kids come from situations where they have a lot of obstacles that are keeping them from doing well academically." We can give these kids the love and attention they may not be getting. Some of these kids are starved for attention."

Another volunteer added, "I worked with one boy and he just didn't believe he could do the work. He had an older sister who always got As, and his parents were always saying, 'Why can't you get good grades?' They had convinced that child that he was not smart. Well, it took two years working with this boy to build up his confidence. I worked with him and encouraged him, told him he was smart. He worked with the computer, and he found out he could do the work. I know this program will make him a success in middle school."

The community facilitator added, "Families really grow together through this program. We had a little girl who had no computer at home, so one day she asked if her mom could come in and use the computer. So, this little girl and her mom, who was a single parent, worked on the computer together. The child was so proud to be able to show her mom how to use a computer."

A community volunteer captured the sentiment of many senior citizens: "Older people want to be wanted and used. It's good for them, too. If we didn't have this contact with the children, well then we'd be even older!"

One of the children said, "I didn't like school. I couldn't do the work. The people at the center like me and now I can do the work and I feel good about myself."

A volunteer added, "It's the love that makes it go!"



During the visits, the community facilitators respond to questions, give parents learning packets to use at home with their children, and provide feedback to the parents on the progress of their children. The home, church, and school connection is a major component of Project Outreach.

The Project Outreach staff recruits and conducts training for community volunteers. Most volunteers are members of the participating churches; they range in age from 16 to 78. The education level of the volunteers ranges from high school student to college graduate. Most of the volunteers are retired senior citizens. Training is provided at the church sites using a modified version of the induction training program used by the school system for new paraprofessionals. The training includes such areas as improving reading comprehension through prediction and questioning techniques, assisting with homework, helping improve skills in mathematics, and using the computer as a learning tool.

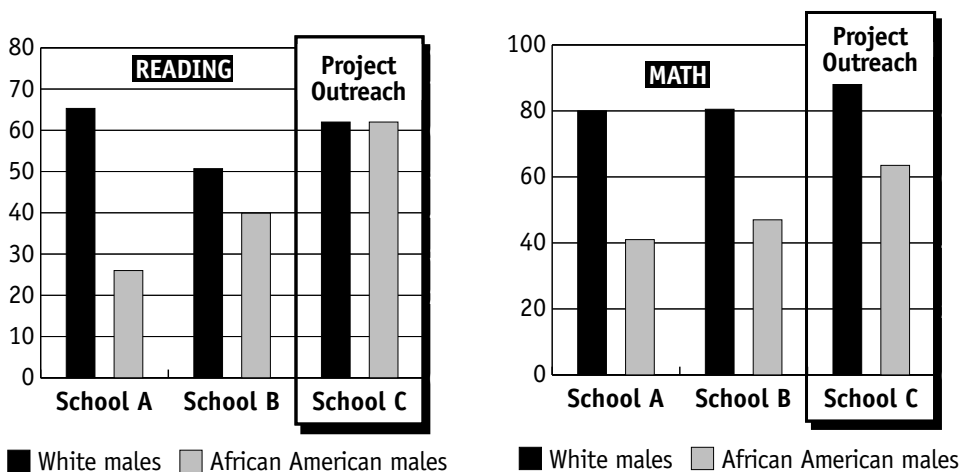
COSTS AND BENEFITS

Project Outreach effectively demonstrates that a public school system, faith community, and home can work together to close the achievement gap. Now beginning its fourth year, Project Outreach has significantly improved the academic achievement of the children and enriched the lives of everyone who participates in the program. Using dedicated volunteers from the faith community and the expertise of school system staff, Project Outreach has identified a challenge and empowered a rural community to meet that challenge.

Project Outreach is an excellent example of advancing student learning and achievement through responsible school governance. Partnerships established by instructional leaders with the faith community are producing dramatic results. For example, comparison of scores from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS/5) between the Project Outreach school and other demographically similar schools in Worcester County indicates that Project Outreach is closing the achievement gap, while scores in reading and mathematics are consistently increasing for all students (see figure 2). African American males

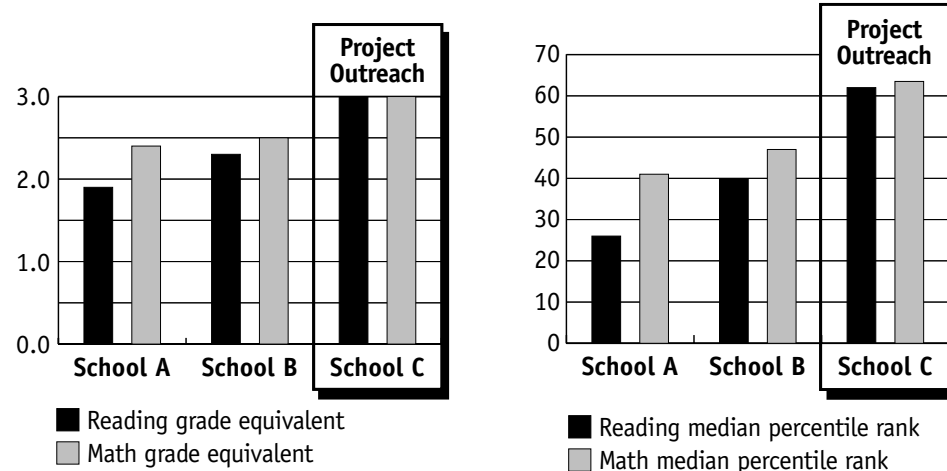
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Figure 2. Performance, White Males and African American Males, Median Percentile Ranks, 2000



attending the Project Outreach school are exceeding anticipated grade-level achievement in reading and mathematics (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Performance Level, African American Males, CTBS/5, 2000
(Administered 6th month of grade 2 = 2.6)



Parents benefit from Project Outreach through reading assistance that emphasizes family learning and provides opportunities to help their children grow academically.

The benefits of Project Outreach are extending beyond the walls of the schools. By engaging nontraditional partners in planning and implementing Project Outreach, Worcester County instructional leaders have actually unified the community. Stakeholder involvement has become a vehicle for change not only in the schools, but also throughout a community that has long suffered from divisive social issues. Underachieving minority students benefit from Project Outreach through daily rigorous, direct instruction beyond the regular school day and constant monitoring of progress. Parents benefit from Project Outreach through reading assistance that emphasizes family learning and provides opportunities to help their children grow academically. Volunteers benefit from Project Outreach by realizing a sense of accomplishment, belonging, and self-worth as they see their efforts result in tangible progress. The entire community benefits from knowing that involvement can lead to positive change and that the future of their children can be brighter.

The initial Goals 2000 grant to establish Project Outreach in 1997 was \$249,656. The funds included the salaries of the four staff members, consumable materials, books, laptop computers, training for volunteers, supplies, and transportation. The three churches provide sites at no charge to the school system. In addition, church members prepare snacks.

Since the Goals 2000 grant was a three-year renewable grant expiring June 30, 2001, in FY 02 it was necessary to seek local funds to continue Project Outreach. In Maryland, school systems are fiscally dependent on local government such as County Commissioners for funding. Through a successful lobbying campaign spearheaded by the Project Outreach volunteers and the faith community, the County Commissioners have provided the necessary funding for Project Outreach for the 2001-02 school year. The anticipated cost is \$168,000.

OBSTACLES

The essential components to the success of faith-based after-school learning centers are first, recruiting and hiring professional staff who can work with the community and parents, and second, finding church leaders and congregations who accept the successful education of the next generation of children as a primary mission of the church.

Some parents were reluctant to have their children participate in the program. In some instances, it took many telephone contacts and home visits to explain the program, build trust, and seek approval. Selecting community facilitators who lived in the community and knew the families was crucial to getting parent “buy-in.”

As each congregation and church leadership is different, establishing a working relationship with church organizations and recruiting a volunteer corps is a new challenge each time. Engaging the congregation in an open dialogue about the role of the church in the community is essential. In all cases, it was necessary for school system leaders to meet on several occasions with church leaders and entire congregations before approval was given. Although it was not difficult to convince church leaders of the need to close the achievement gap, it can be difficult to convince church congregations to take on this challenge as a mission of the church.

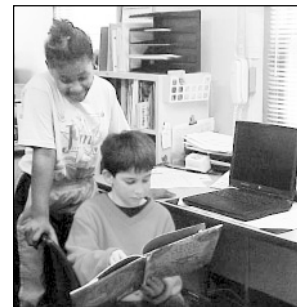
POTENTIAL FOR REPLICATION

Although Project Outreach was developed by stakeholders in a unique community, it can be a model for school systems, faith communities, and other governmental and non-governmental organizations to attack the achievement gap. Project leaders agree that the most important factor in successfully replicating the Project Outreach model is flexibility in establishing strong partnerships with community churches.

Based on the success of Project Outreach, the Worcester County Public Schools wrote and secured a second Goals 2000 grant to implement Project Intervene in another community in the county. As a replication of Project Outreach, Project Intervene uses faith community volunteers and churches as after-school learning centers. A key aspect of Project Intervene is the development of individual learning plans for each participant. Initial results indicate that Project Intervene is increasing student achievement and narrowing the gap. This initial success of Project Intervene indicates that replication of Project Outreach is achievable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon M. Andes was appointed Superintendent of the Worcester County Public School System in 1996. In 2000, Dr. Andes was selected as the Maryland Superintendent of the Year. He previously worked in the Harford County, Maryland, Public Schools, where he taught for nine years and served as a high school assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent for personnel and staff relations. While serving as the principal of Havre de Grace High School, he led the school to be recognized as a State and National Blue Ribbon School. Dr. Andes earned his bachelor’s degree from Bloomsburg State College, master’s from Loyola College in Baltimore, and doctorate from the University of Maryland.



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