

Closing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing Public Schools

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North Central Region

Abstract

The “Closing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing Public Schools” initiative focuses on identifying factors that contribute to student underperformance and implementing academic and cultural interventions for student success. There is an understanding that implementing interventions that meet the needs of the district’s most challenged students will inevitably enhance the academic success of all students. The initiative involves significant collaboration between school district leaders, teachers, parent groups, East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS) students, and Michigan State University (MSU) faculty and students. This extensive collaboration has led to notable personal, institutional, educational, and research contributions to the school district and larger community. Consequently, as former superintendent David Chapin stated, “The conversation around race and student outcomes has been elevated in this district, and the action needs to continue!”

Using longitudinal mixed methods research, the partnership has yielded new insights into how to increase student achievement through improved teacher pedagogy and practice and student academic engagement. Specifically, the initiative has focused on: (1) increasing educator awareness of and sensitivity to the role of race and culture in teaching and learning; (2) helping educators make instructional decisions based on academic *and* cultural data; (3) building leadership capacity around educational equity and cultural competency; (4) empowering parents to make better informed decisions about their children’s school experiences and success; and (5) integrating youth voices in affecting positive change in learning spaces. Scholarship produced from this partnership has been shared at state- and national-level higher education and practitioner conferences and has been published in academic journals.

Relationship and Reciprocity Between the University and Community

Shortly after arriving at Michigan State University in 2005 as an assistant professor of teacher education, I was invited to attend a dinner for Michigan school superintendents in Detroit, where I met then Superintendent of East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS) Dr. David Chapin for the first time. After having read my research on race and equity in education in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *Journal of Negro Education*, *Journal of Educational Foundations*), Dr. Chapin suggested that Donna Kaplowitz, a current school board member, meet with me regarding the troubling performance of the district's African American students on the American College Testing (ACT) standardized test. The 2007 ELPS Superintendent's Report revealed that none of the district's African American students were considered "college ready" on the ACT in all four areas assessed—math, English, science, and social studies. My conversation with Dr. Kaplowitz led to subsequent follow-up by Dr. Chapin nearly a year later, when he invited me to serve on the district's Strategic Planning Committee in fall 2007. My service in this role was the start of a new university-community partnership with ELPS focused on educational equity.

This partnership began and continued as a solid embodiment of MSU's vision for university-community collaboration, because it was birthed in the community partner's needs and not in my desire to conduct research in a school district. The partnership produced scholarship that enhanced my teaching, research, and service to the university and broader community. My work with a variety of stakeholders in the East Lansing school community (e.g., school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and students) embodies the true meaning of community empowerment and transformation; the work is participatory and anchored in scholarship. I approached the partnership with the mindset that the community partner was an expert in a similar way in which they viewed me as an expert; they held a deep

knowledge about the everyday experiences of adults and students in K-12 schools, and I held a deep knowledge of the academic theory to help them understand best practices for and challenges to maximizing teacher practice and student success.

The partnership was modeled a “win-win” for all stakeholders. Anticipated benefits for the school district included an increased focus on race and culture in teaching and learning and a keener eye toward inequity in students’ and educators’ access to opportunities to learn how to interact and work across cultural differences. The school district also wanted to identify the factors contributing to differences in academic performance in the district as well as interventions for addressing those factors. I wanted to be able to advance the field of teacher education and the discourse on race and equity in education by producing scholarship *with* the district for academic, practitioner, and community audiences.

Shared decision-making has been central to the entire partnership. The school district provided feedback on all interview protocols that I developed for student and parent focus group interviews. They also provided feedback on the surveys I developed for staff and students. Additionally, the Black Parent Union developed a parent survey for use in the district and solicited my help in the data analysis process. The process of deciding what information was important for them to report to the general public was led by the parent group. After my initial 18 months of data collection in the district, I gave recommendations to the school board on next steps and waited to be asked for my input on how to prioritize action steps. As a scholar-practitioner (former high school math teacher turned college professor), I deeply value the expertise that K-12 educators bring to identify the solutions for the problems of schools.

Impacts

On community partners. My five-year partnership with ELPS has had a positive impact at the district, school building, and student levels. At the district level, I designed and

implemented a nine-month professional development course, *Teaching Across Cultural Differences*, for volunteering teachers. About 25 teachers participated in this course, which helped them gain a deeper understanding of how issues of race, culture and power impact teaching and learning. They, in turn, implemented new practices in their classrooms and also were able to disseminate information throughout their buildings in staff meetings. This knowledge-sharing underscored the need to continually center race and culture in discussions about teaching and learning. Some findings from this professional development experience have been published in *Science Today Bulletin*. The district established an Achievement Gap Task Force in 2010, composed of teachers and administrators, parents, and MSU community members. This group was responsible for developing a short term action plan to build cultural competency in the district and identifying academic and cultural interventions to address student achievement gaps. Several of the action items have been addressed over the past five years, leading to positive change in programming and instruction.

ELPS also established an equity coordinator position in the district so that a district-level administrator could focus specifically on issues of educational equity. As a result of my research and our collaboration, the district has also joined a national consortium of demographically similar school districts across the nation focused on closing academic achievement gaps. Membership in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) allows adults *and* EL students to participate in regularly held conferences/institutes focused on building cultural competency and increasing student achievement.

At the building level a student-run Diversity Conference has been held at East Lansing High School for two consecutive years. MSU undergraduates partner with EL students to design a half-day conference focused on building EL students' ability to learn and work across cultural differences. Additionally I partnered with Dr. Kaplowitz, after she retired from the school board

to initiate Leadership and Diversity Clubs in four buildings in the district. These yearlong clubs allowed MSU undergraduate students to work weekly with EL students in grades 6-12 to learn how to be leaders for social justice in their school and community. EL students designed and implemented two social action projects—one in the school and one in the community—and held community events to showcase their learning. I also initiated a mentoring program for African American students in the district that allowed pre-service African American teachers in the MSU teacher education program to mentor an underperforming Black student in the school district. Grant funds to run these additional programs totaled \$49,000 from the University on top of the \$40,000 that ELPS dedicated to the first four years of the partnership. The school district has also held several community forums on race and cultural diversity as a way to encourage courageous dialogue about these issues and their impact in the schools and larger community. Lastly, the ELHS Parent Council has established a subcommittee to focus on cultural inclusion and educational equity at ELHS.

On university partners. My partnership with ELPS has embodied part of MSU's mission in university-community collaboration by fostering relationships that are collaborative, participatory, systemic, transformative, and anchored in scholarship. The partnership is also demonstrative of how outreach scholarship—research, teaching, and service—can be integrated to produce and further academic excellence. Former superintendent Chapin asked me to co-present with him at the 2012 fall conference of the Michigan Association of School Administrators on the academic and cultural interventions that had been initiated in the district since our partnership began. This was a wonderful opportunity for district leaders across the state to glean a better understanding of one district's effort to tackle a national problem that plagues many schools. The presentation led to partnerships with DeWitt Public Schools and Holland Public Schools to aid in addressing cultural inclusion and educational equity issues in their

districts. Additionally two of my doctoral students and one of the EL middle school teachers presented with me at the American Educational Research Association international conference in 2010 regarding the politics of voice and implementation in closing the achievement gap in ELPS. This type of creative activity has led to a book chapter on the educational needs of African American males in predominantly white schools, a manuscript on variations in secondary students' perceived sources of and reasons for discrimination, and a manuscript on multiracial students' perceptions of schooling. These manuscripts have been shared at prior annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association; scholarly presentations were also shared throughout the district.

In the area of service my partnership with ELPS has reinforced one of the goals of the Department of Teacher Education, bridging theory and practice by knowledge-building and knowledge-sharing between university professors and K-12 educators. As a result of this partnership I have been able to expand the reach of my scholarship through writing about race and equity in education in various venues (e.g., online national blogs, state-level toolkits for “failing schools,” a TED talk on equity in education, etc.), and I serve on district-level committees. At the national level I was selected as a 2013-2014 Phi Delta Kappa Emerging Leader based on my work with ELPS. Because MSU is neighbor to several school districts in the area, this partnership has created a heightened visibility for MSU and the College of Education more specifically, as a willing partner to aid K-12 school districts in social justice work in education.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

There were several challenges faced in engaging a partnership where conversations and action on “difficult topics” in education were central to the success of the collaboration. Over the five-year period the school board membership changed. As new members came on board, there

was a declining interest in focusing on achievement gap issues by targeting increased cultural competency of individuals as an end goal. But parents and teachers who were invested in the initiative rallied to keep the work on the table. Additionally resistance arose from some teachers who did not want to talk about race but were more comfortable classifying inequities as solely class-based. And there were parents who worried that their “gifted” children would be overlooked by such a strong focus on the underperforming students in the district. Dr. Chapin and Mr. Seybert held fast to their commitments to the work, and this helped validate my continued presence in the school district as an “outsider.”

Several conclusions and best practices can be drawn from the partnership. First, a strong university-community partnership is built upon mutual respect and trust. There must be respect for diverse viewpoints and trust that everyone is working toward the same goal. Secondly, always stay true to the needs of the community partner. This helps sustain mutual respect and trust in the partnership. Thirdly, anticipate conflict and resistance and have a plan for how to deal with it. Lastly, remember that academic *and* cultural interventions are necessary and sufficient for closing academic achievement gaps.

Future

If this project is selected for the regional and/or national award, the monies would help advance professional development offerings for administrators in the district so that they can be more culturally responsive school leaders. Funding would also support the continuation of efforts to build student cultural competency and initiate and sustain similar outreach efforts with other local school districts in the state of Michigan that are also looking to close achievement gaps.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

March 28, 2014

Selection Committee
C. Peter Magrath/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Selection Committee:

Michigan State University faculty, staff, students, and alumni work to advance the common good in uncommon ways. For more than 150 years we have demonstrated a pioneering blend of imagination, innovation, risk, persistence, and hard work that contributes to cutting-edge discovery. We have high standards, and foremost among our values are quality, inclusiveness, and connectivity. Community-engaged scholarship is at the heart of our land-grant tradition, and it remains firmly embedded in the culture of Michigan State University.



Office of the President

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Recognizing the spirit and tradition of the C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement and the Outreach Scholarship-W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Awards, it is an honor to endorse **Closing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing Public Schools**, a project led by Dorinda Carter Andrews, associate professor in the College of Education, to represent Michigan State University in the 2014 awards process.

The genesis of the project evolved because performance indicators of college readiness for Black youth at East Lansing High School (ELHS), including ACT scores, were strikingly low in recent years. While relatively new to MSU, Dr. Carter Andrews began an active agenda as a faculty member in the College of Education that included meeting and interacting with a variety of community members. An event with Michigan school superintendents led to an invitation from the former superintendent and a former school board member to address the academic underperformance of Black students at ELHS.

Dr. Carter Andrews has constructed a partnership that includes almost every aspect of working with a public school system to create change. She interacts with administrators, including the latest superintendent of ELHS, teachers, students, parents, and other community members to increase student academic engagement and strengthen teacher pedagogy and practice.

During the past five years she has focused on longitudinal mixed methods research that addresses educator awareness of, and sensitivity to, the role of race and culture in teaching and learning; helped educators make instructional decisions based on academic and cultural data; built leadership capacity around educational equity and cultural competency; and, integrated youth voices in creating positive cultural changes at East Lansing High School.

At MSU we welcome a full spectrum of experiences, viewpoints, and intellectual approaches. It challenges us to grow and think differently. We embrace access to success for all, and encourage asking questions and encouraging conversations that may, at times, make us uncomfortable.

We are proud of this exceptional partnership, because it exemplifies how we at Michigan State University foster university-community relationships that are collaborative, participatory, systemic, transformative, and anchored in scholarship.

Those involved in this project have demonstrated scientific excellence, creativity, flexibility, and the ability to listen. The commitment to build a mutually respectful relationship, working together to determine how best to achieve goals and measurable results, is what makes this project an award winner.

At MSU, engagement is defined as a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research, and service. It involves generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences. Dr. Carter Andrews and her team continue to apply the rigors of the field to develop new ideas for the partnership, as well as share their discoveries with academic colleagues through scholarly publications.

Closing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing Public Schools is an outstanding example of partnering scholarship and community expertise through university-community collaboration. I invite you to consider the scope and the impact of Dr. Carter Andrews' engaged scholarship. Thank you for considering our Michigan State University nomination for the 2014 Outreach Scholarship-W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award for the North Central Region and the national 2014 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award.

Sincerely,



Lou Anna K. Simon, Ph.D.
President

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

March 31, 2014

Selection Committee
C. Peter Magrath/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Members of the Selection Committee:

Please consider this as a letter of support for the nomination of **Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews** for the C. Peter Magrath University/Community Engagement Award. Dr. Carter and I began our work together in East Lansing in 2007. At the time, I was Superintendent of the East Lansing Public Schools, and we invited her to participate in our strategic planning process. She was a great asset to our long-term planning but, more importantly, became a key partner with the District in addressing gaps in achievement within certain subgroups of our student population. As a result, Dr. Carter and I have worked very closely professionally for approximately five years. I have great respect for her intellect and her commitment to our students in East Lansing. She is an exemplary professional.



College of Education

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Dr. Carter's work in East Lansing has been and will continue to be impactful and significant. She led an 18-month study in our classrooms and schools in 2008-2010, which truly led to changes in the way that we do our teaching and learning in the East Lansing Public Schools. She has designed professional development, influenced the level of cultural competency in our schools and has enhanced learning opportunities for all students. Of significance, too, is her personal and very positive involvement in our schools. She has been an active participant in a group she helped found, our Achievement Gap Task Force (AGTF); she led teachers through a year-long professional learning community designed to increase cultural competency; she co-organized an after-school leadership club for middle and high school students, among many other things. Her work in East Lansing fully embodies the letter and spirit of meaningful community outreach.

In September of 2012, Dr. Carter and I co-presented at the Michigan Association of School Administrators Conference detailing the nuances and impact of our partnership over a four-year period. Our presentation, "Addressing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing: Our Story, 2008-2012 and Beyond" was well received by participants spawning inquiries and site

visits from school districts across the state. I believe her very relevant and timely work in East Lansing will have a far-reaching impact in schools in the months and years ahead.

I completely endorse this nomination, both on a personal level and on behalf of the East Lansing Public Schools' students and faculty, and I hope you will strongly consider Dr. Carter as the recipient for this award. If you have any questions, I can be reached at 517-884-7894.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "DB. ds", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

David B. Chapin, Ph.D.
Superintendent, East Lansing Public Schools (2004-2013)

March 28, 2014

C. Peter Magrath/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

To Whom It May Concern:

It is with great pleasure and honor that I recommend Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews for the C. Peter Magrath University/Community Engagement Award. During my five-year tenure as a principal in East Lansing Schools, Dr. Carter collaborated with stakeholders at all levels to implement an Achievement Gap Initiative. This initiative included several components such as a mentoring program for African American students, Project LEAD, professional development for all stakeholders, several keynote speakers such as Drs. Pedro Noguera and Lisa Delpit, data collection and analyses, problem-solving, and open dialogue to name a few. Dr. Carter served on East Lansing's Strategic Planning Committee, District Response to Intervention (RtI) Leadership Team, and as an Ex-Officio Member of the Achievement Gap Task Force (ATGF) to support our understanding and action planning aimed at closing our achievement gap. Most importantly, Dr. Carter worked with students to include their voice and representation at all levels of our efforts. Dr. Carter made herself available to all principals. She spent time in each of the eight schools providing administrators and staff members with opportunities to problem solve using data and the latest research aimed at understanding characteristics of high achieving students. She also grounded our work in the literature that highlights some of the cultural nuances between students of color and schools affecting student achievement.

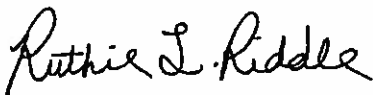
Dr. Carter is an exceptionally talented contributor to narrowing the achievement and discipline gap in East Lansing. As part of her work, she provided stakeholders with a depth of knowledge about issues associated with achievement gaps and connected her work with our efforts to implement RtI at the district level. These efforts directly increased teachers' and administrators' knowledge in culturally relevant practices in the delivery of instruction, student discipline, policy, and at the higher levels of decision-making. Dr. Carter's work allowed educators to examine more critically their dispositions and beliefs about diverse students in productive ways that created a safe space to engage in critical conversations. These conversations were needed to break barriers contributing to our achievement gap. Her work also involved collecting and analyzing survey data from students, families and staff along with discipline and achievement data. Dr. Carter used this data to problem-solve and support student academic growth by working with the district to create a task force and action plan aimed at addressing the findings from the data.

Dr. Carter also worked closely with our school board, superintendent, director of instruction, teacher leaders and principals to organize district wide professional development that focused on achievement gap issues, cultural competency and instructional practices for increasing student academic growth. During this professional development, Dr. Carter brought in scholars from Michigan State University and several other universities across the country to provide us with a breadth and depth of understanding surrounding our work. The faculty members who presented in our district are experts in their field. Dr. Carter's collaboration and contributions allowed stakeholders such as principals to engage in meaningful and much need conversations with their staffs regarding ways to increase cultural understanding and sensitivity. I personally experienced feeling more knowledgeable and open to have discussions and read related literature with my staff. Furthermore, Dr. Carter's work led to the infusion of cultural competency goals, objectives, strategies and activities in our district's improvement plan, in all eight of our schools' improvement plans and most importantly in our district's strategic plan. Dr. Carter's work has permeated the culture of East Lansing Public Schools. Additionally, it has informed my work as the new Executive Director of Curriculum and Staff Development in Holt Public Schools. Dr. Carter's collaboration meshed perfectly with our district's initiative to intervene early for all students.

Dr. Carter's work in our district was a high priority to her. She is held in very high esteem by stakeholders at all levels in the East Lansing School District including students at East Lansing High School. She has garnered so much respect from faculty, parents, and students for her problem solving ability, commitment, and honesty. Dr. Carter is a principled person who is an outstanding educator, a great mother, and professional. Her ability to organize, invigorate, innovate, and inspire serves as some of her professional and personal strengths. She is very passionate about her work as an educator and has a strong desire to see all students achieve their highest potential in schools.

Please feel free to contact me at 517.694.0404 if you or any panelist would like to discuss Dr. Carter's collaboration with East Lansing Schools. I highly recommend her selection for this award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruth L. Riddle". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Ruth L. Riddle
Executive Director of Curriculum & Staff Development
Holt Public Schools
5780 West Holt Road
Holt, MI 48842



East Lansing
Public Schools

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Donley Elementary School
East Lansing High School
Glencairn Elementary School
MacDonald Middle School
Marble Elementary School
Pinecrest Elementary School
Red Cedar Elementary School
Whitehills Elementary School

March 26, 2014

Selection Committee
C. Peter Magrath/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
1307 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

Selection Committee:

It is my distinct pleasure to write a letter on behalf of Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews in support of her candidacy for the C. Peter Magrath University/Community Engagement Award. Dr. Carter Andrews has distinguished herself through her work with East Lansing Public Schools over several years of intense research involving quantitative and qualitative measures to support the district's investigation into the academic performance of minority youth, and in discerning the readiness of its staff as culturally competent professionals.

Dr. Carter Andrews' research and engagement with East Lansing Public Schools directly benefited the district and as a result of significant school based research her work was reciprocal and mutually beneficial. The district's capacity to understand and address cultural difference, the academic engagement and performance of students of color, and planning to implement what are necessary and sufficient actionable strategies resulting in congruent deliverables were as a result of Dr. Carter Andrews' outreach and engagement with the district. From the inception of her research and subsequent service to the district Dr. Carter Andrews meticulously documented measurable differences in student academic performance and perceptions of students and adults regarding race. These findings lead to a concerted effort on the part of the district to welcome eleven recommendations from Dr. Carter Andrews' comprehensive research report entitled Closing the Achievement Gap in East Lansing Public Schools. Subsequently, the district formed the Achievement Gap Task Force and later with the support and guidance of Dr. Carter Andrews drew from the report a set of intentional short-term action goals.

The impact of her work has been documented through ongoing professional development for staff e.g. developed coursework on Teaching Across Cultural Differences, district outreach and budding relationship with the Minority Student Achievement Network, a group of like minded and demographically similar district working to raise the achievement of minority youth and the cultural competency of educators. Additionally, Dr. Carter Andrews through her engagement with district

personnel and parents urged district stakeholder attendance at national conferences, thus gleaned key contributors to the internal effort to educate staff. Engagement with the Michigan State University Transforming Theater Ensemble provided first hand dialogues and transparent performance pieces gleaned from the words of students and staff as scripted by theater ensemble personnel from Dr. Carter Andrews' interviews with focus groups of educators and students. Not only have these as well as other actions contributed to exposing a predominantly Caucasian teaching population to performance data, unfulfilled competencies and a need for race dialogues, they have also been an outward expression of the work to be done. Her work has raised a level of concern by our Board and our school community of the need to provide explicit support for students of color and for the engagement of staff on a much higher plane of understanding and behavior.

The scholarship of Dr. Carter Andrews' research and subsequent work within East Lansing Public Schools demonstrates the requisite insight and positive impact on a highly collaborative partnership between the district, the research and the researcher. Without this collaborative relationship, race would remain under the rug, in the closet, and in the darkness of the night never to see the light of day. Through this community-based research collaboration we have cracked the door open, letting in the light on one of the most consequential issues of our time and of the landscape of our work within East Lansing Public Schools. It is for these and many unstated reasons that I recommend Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews to you as a candidate for your consideration for C. Peter Magrath University/Community Engagement Award.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Clifford M. Seybert", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Clifford M. Seybert
Superintendent