

We care, therefore they learn

*Project about the achievement gap demonstrates
that encouragement can lead to achievement*

BY DENNIS SPARKS

JSD: During the 2000-01 school year, you did a survey of middle and high school students in high-performing suburban school districts to better understand racial and ethnic achievement disparities in those districts. Before we get into the results of this survey, I'd like to learn about the Minority Student Achievement Network for whom you did the study.

Ferguson: The network was convened a few years back by Allan Alson, who is the superintendent of

the high school district in Evanston, Ill. The district had been working to address the gap between black and Latino students, on the one hand, and white and Asian students on the other hand. It occurred to him that other districts must be facing the same challenges. He identified 15 potential partners, all but one of whom accepted an invitation to join in searching for ways to help black and Latino students do better academically.

My affiliation with the network came through two different routes. One affiliation came about because I

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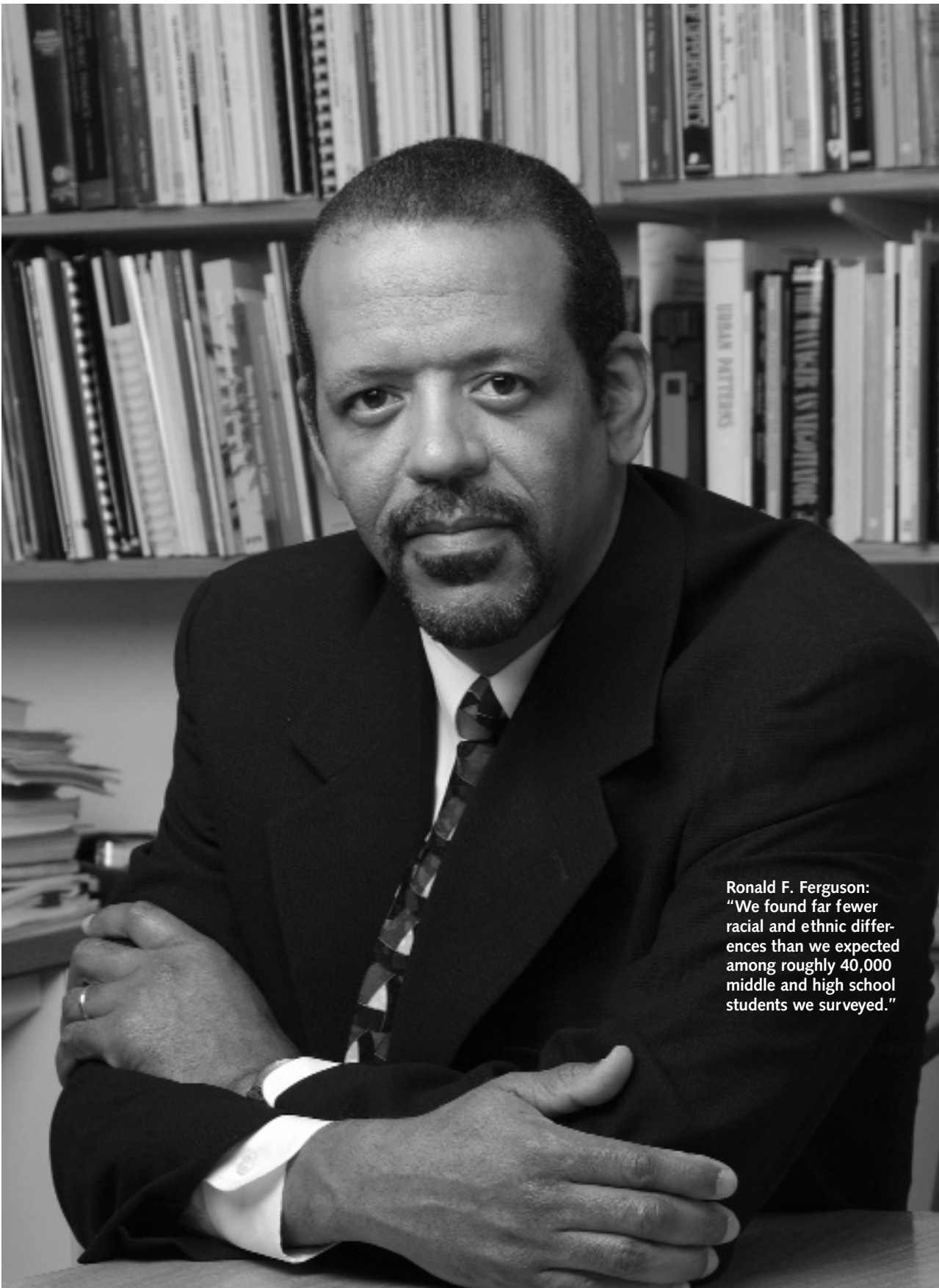
was working already with Shaker Heights, Ohio, and Shaker was one of the schools in the network. The other connection was through Edmund Gordon, who convened a group of researchers to support the work of the network. I was invited to be part of that group.

SURVEY FINDS KEY DIFFERENCES

JSD: Let's talk about the survey of secondary students you did for the network.

Ferguson: The "Ed-Excel Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture," also known in the network as the Cornell Survey, was developed by John Bishop at Cornell University with a little help from me and Robert Strauss at Carnegie Mellon. The Minority Student Achievement Network was interested in how students were experiencing school in their districts, what their achievement orientations were, what types of peer support or lack thereof students were experiencing, and how that might vary by race and ethnicity.

We found far fewer racial and ethnic differences than we had expected among roughly 40,000 middle and high school students we surveyed. Students' self-reports about their interest in their studies and the value of high achievement were very similar.



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Photo by Martha Stewart.Martha at marthapix.com.

It wasn't that students reported terribly high levels of interest, but rather that the various groups had pretty uniform, moderate levels of interest. There were no systematic differences in the amount of time students said they spent on their homework when we controlled for course levels, except for Asians, who spent somewhat more time on homework. In fact, among blacks, Latinos, and whites in the same classes, the similarity in reported time on homework was remarkable. In addition, there were virtually no differences among any of the groups, including Asians, in how interesting they reported their studies to be.

Given that, though, we did find some important differences. The first category was in family background support. Even in these upper-middle income, somewhat elite school dis-

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tricts, half of the black students and roughly a third of the Latino students said that they lived with one parent or neither compared to a percentage in the mid-teens for white students. Although parents are more highly educated in these communities than the general population, there were still racial and ethnic gaps in the number of years of schooling parents had. There were also gaps in the number of books and computers students said were in their homes. So when we try to understand disparities in student achievement, differences in supports outside of school are an important part of the story.

The second major category of difference was in the percentage of their studies that students reported they understood well. Roughly half of blacks and Latinos reported that they completely understood half or less of what they were reading for school, and roughly the same percentage (in other words, half or less) of their

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EDUCATION: Ferguson earned his bachelor's degree in economics from Cornell University and a doctorate in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

PUBLICATIONS: Ferguson's publications cover issues in education policy, youth development programming, community development, economic consequences of skill disparities, and state and local economic development. His research for the past few years has focused on racial achievement gaps, appearing in publications of the National Research Council, the Brookings Institution, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Educational Research Service.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: In addition to teaching and research, Ferguson participates in a variety of consulting and policy advisory activities. Recently, these have included the National Research Council Committee on Community-Level Youth Programming, the National Research Council Board on Testing and Assessment, the National Urban League's Campaign for African-American Achievement, the Research Advisory Group on Closing the Achievement Gap of the Council of Great City Schools, the Advisory Committee for the National Job Corps Evaluation, consulting to school districts on efforts to narrow achievement gaps, and expert testimony in school finance cases.

PERSONAL: He has been married to Helen Mont-Ferguson for 25 years and lives with two sons, ages 10 and 15, and a 16-year-old nephew.

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teachers' lessons. For white and Asian students, 25% to 30% understood half or less. These group disparities are consistent with various measures we have of achievement, such as test scores and grade point averages. They highlight the importance of attending seriously to basic pedagogy and of finding ways to help students learn the things they initially find difficult to understand.

A third category of differences reveals a disconnect between what teachers see in terms of homework completion rates and behavior compared to what students report about the amount of time they spend on their homework and their actual interest in their studies. The students' self-reports in the survey indicate that blacks and Latinos have lower homework completion rates. In addition, between 15% and 20% of blacks and Latinos, but only 5% to 10% of whites or Asians, agree with the statement, "My behavior in this class sometimes annoys the teacher." Such differences in homework completion and behavior are among the reasons some teachers and other observers believe black and Latino students do not work as hard or care as much about their studies as whites and Asians do. But such beliefs may be wrong. As I said a moment ago, students of all groups report similar levels of interest in their studies and only Asians stand out as reporting more time on homework than classmates. My current reading of the evidence is that group differences in homework completion appear most related to gaps in skills and resources at home, not effort or time on task.

The fourth major category of differences was in the importance that students attributed to encouragement from their teachers compared to demands. When we asked students about the most important reasons they worked hard in school, there was usually little or no racial or ethnic dif-

ference in the percentage of students identifying any particular reason. There was a difference, however, for teacher encouragement contrasted with demands. Roughly 30% of white students said they worked hard because their teachers encouraged them and roughly 30% said they did so because their teachers demanded it. However, for black students, 46% said they worked hard because their teachers encouraged them and only 16% indicated they did so because their teachers demanded it. That constitutes a 3-to-1 emphasis on encouragement compared to demand for black students, compared to a roughly 1-to-1 ratio for whites. Latinos were in the middle with about a 2-to-1 ratio. For Asians, it was a ratio of about 1.5-to-1. These data call attention to the importance of teacher-student relationships and the quality of communication in affecting student effort and intellectual engagement in the classroom. That finding has been a primary influence in my work with schools.

JSD: Would you expect black and Latino students to report similar views regarding encouragement and demand in non-elite schools?

Ferguson: At the moment, I don't know. John Bishop has data from a number of different kinds of places that will provide at least first-cut answers to your question, but they have not yet been analyzed to answer your specific question.

TEACHER ENCOURAGEMENT

JSD: I'd like to learn more about your views on teacher-student relationships and teacher encouragement, factors that you regard as key in the academic success of black and Latino students.

Ferguson: From the student perspective, teachers who encourage students combine emotional support and instrumental assistance. For instance, students say they find it encouraging

when a teacher really spends time helping them understand instead of giving quick, incomplete answers that leave them still confused. The teacher may meet with the student after school and not seem in a big hurry to leave. It shows that the teacher really wants them to understand, and it gives them hope. There seem to be three themes. First, "You can do this!" Second, "I'm here to help." And third, "I'm going to take great pleasure in your success!"

Students don't really have much to say about the demand side of teachers' behavior. However, I see demands, especially in the absence of encouragement, as power plays. They're assertions by teachers that students should do particular things because teachers say so, and if students don't, there will be consequences. There is a threat in the demand, not an offer of assistance. Encouragement is about caring and assistance, not power.

The work we are doing this year indicates that a teacher's demand may be understood as either friendly or hostile, depending upon whether the teacher is perceived as caring or not. I did a study of community-based programs in the early 1990s. A teacher at one of the sites said, "Once these kids know you care, they'll walk through walls for you." When we visit a school or program where kids really feel supported, they sometimes will tell us, "Here it's different. They really care about you; it's almost like a family." Students say that adults in these schools go above and beyond the call of duty, and that they don't give up on them. Neither do they allow students to give up on themselves.

Teachers often believe that they have to lay down the law with students — that they have to threaten students to get them to do the work. This view can lead to too many demands and not enough encouragement. The goal is to find the right

combination of the two.

Consequently, we try to help teachers see that it's not an either/or proposition and that these qualities can complement one another.

TIME AND KNOWLEDGE

JSD: You've been talking about teachers' beliefs about the relative importance of demands and encouragement. Another critical part of this, it seems to me, is teachers' beliefs regarding the capacity of students to learn.

Ferguson: I did a survey in 1993 at a summer training institute with teachers in schools that were at risk of being taken over by the state of Oklahoma because of the low performance of their students. The survey asked teachers how likely it was that students at their schools could perform at the level of an upper-middle income suburb if the conditions were right. To a surprising degree, teachers thought it was likely that their students could reach that level. Another set of questions asked teachers for their explanations regarding the reasons they didn't do as well as they might.

We asked about time, knowledge, effort, supervisory support, and freedom in the classroom. Time and knowledge were their top two responses. If you combine the answers to these two sets of questions, teachers were saying that while someone may be able to get their students to a higher level, a lack of knowledge on their part was a primary reason for their limited success. So teachers' expectations for students are conditional — based upon their beliefs about their own capacities to successfully teach their students.

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THE TRIPOD PROJECT

JSD: I'd like to know more about

the kinds of professional development that you believe increase teachers' use of encouragement for minority students and that improve teacher/student relationships.

Ferguson: The 2002-03 school year was the first full implementation year for something we call the Tripod Project, which was developed during the preceding two years in collaboration with teachers and administrators in Shaker Heights. The program is now in place in a number of school districts in several states. The tripod's three legs are content, pedagogy, and relationships. As with a tripod, if any one leg is too weak, the whole thing topples.

The project is built around five challenges that people face whenever

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they work together to accomplish something. I've found these challenges listed in the same sequence in several different literatures. The challenges are to have a successful beginning in which people feel optimistic about working together; to cope effectively with early power struggles, balancing leadership control and the freedom of participants; to clarify goals and develop a shared, ambitious commitment to achieve them; to work industriously toward achieving goals, overcoming

any setbacks; and to end with a shared sense of accomplishment and an optimism about the future.

The Tripod Project applies this framework to teachers and students in classrooms. Each of the five challenges is the subject of a kickoff meeting. The kickoff meeting is the opening of a module during which teachers share strategies and try new ideas related to the challenge.

The first kickoff meeting is an all-

school faculty meeting a day or two before the school year begins. The meeting addresses ways of helping students to feel trusting and interested during the first days and weeks of the school year. During the first 10 minutes, teachers view a videotape in which teachers and students talk about what they want to have happen on the first day of class and what they're concerned or worried about. Teachers then spend 10 minutes responding in writing to several prompts about how to have a good start to the school year. Our web site includes examples of the kinds of things teachers have written. During the next 10 minutes, a panel of five students from the school talk about the first day and week of class — what they worry about and what they like teachers to do. Students then answer questions for about five minutes. The last 25 minutes is a whole-group conversation among the teachers about what they've just seen and heard.

At this first meeting, students tell teachers things that most have never heard before, things such as really wanting to know a bit about their teachers as people. Many teachers are surprised to hear that. They've wanted to share more about themselves and connect on a personal level but had never felt authorized to do that. Among other things students say is that they like icebreakers at the beginning of the school year to get to know their classmates and teachers so that they can feel comfortable asking questions and not fear looking stupid in front of others if they make mistakes.

A second task we address is striking a balance between teacher control and student autonomy. This meeting has the same format as the first — videotape, prompts, a panel of students, and open discussion. But it's a bit more contentious and uncomfortable than the first one. Some teachers don't like it because they believe the

issues raised concerning student autonomy are solely in their domain of authority. In addition, the kinds of things the students say on the panel can be uncomfortable for some teachers. Some students report that some teachers yell too much or are too controlling. They also describe teaching styles that aren't controlling enough. Of course, students are cautioned in advance not to mention any teacher by name, pro or con. The discussion eventually focuses on the balance between teacher control and student autonomy and what a good balance looks like in the classroom.

The third meeting focuses on cultivating ambition rather than ambivalence in students regarding their goals for achievement. Instruction needs to engender in students a sense of possibility regarding their success because it's hard for students to be ambitious about goals they believe they can't achieve. It also helps if the classroom experience is enjoyable and students see the relevance of what they're learning. In addition, it's about students feeling supported by adults and peers, which is a continuation of the relationship issues raised in earlier sessions. During the session teachers share their ideas about how to create these conditions in their classrooms.

A fourth meeting addresses industriousness vs. disengagement. Ideally, it focuses more directly on the content and pedagogy legs of the tripod and teaching for student understanding. Students are most likely to become disengaged if they don't think they're smart enough or that the teacher can explain the material in ways that they can understand it. The opening videotape for this meeting concerns the need for teachers to stretch themselves and to search together for ways of helping students understand difficult material. The discussion concerns ways of working together to share ideas about pedagogy. It begins the process of identify-

ing skills and concepts that challenge students the most and ways that teachers can collaborate over time to broaden their instructional repertoires.

TRUST IS BASIC

JSD: While you were talking, I found myself thinking that many adults in schools don't experience such qualities in their own work lives. I'm curious what you've learned about the role of adult relationships and school culture in this work. I'm particularly interested in how trust among adults affects your work.

Ferguson: It's been fascinating. All the issues in this framework have appeared among adults as we've worked together, including between me and those in the schools. It's important, obviously, that people trust me. For example, some of the teachers who haven't been as central to the evolution of this work as others resist the notion that some guy from the outside has the power to frame their school's conversation. That becomes a conversation about their trust in me and about balancing my power to shape the conversation and their autonomy as teachers to do as they wish. Once it becomes clear that my goal is to build a professional community for sharing their ideas, not a program to force them to comply with my ideas, cooperation improves. Trust grows.

No matter who the actors are, trust has to do with assessing motives, competence, dependability, and collegiality. It's important that people find one another trustworthy on all four dimensions. One of the important roles of leadership is to help people regard one another as trustworthy and to help people who are not trustworthy on one of those dimensions become more trustworthy.

To track how trust and other perceptions evolve between teachers and students across the school year, we've

surveyed students and teachers in 2002-03 in October, December, and March. We track changes across the school year in a number of things related to student academic engagement, and we study the reasons for the changes. Findings are reported back to schools for use in school-improvement discussions.

It's still too early to pick up changes we can attribute to this work, but a number of teachers tell us anecdotally that they are trying things they would not otherwise have done and that they're relating to kids in new ways.

For example, in the videotape that kicks off the first meeting, a teacher says that at his school on the first day all the teachers are in front of the school greeting the students and their parents. A middle school that watched that tape decided to not only meet their students on the front lawn, but to march them into the auditorium for a pep rally. The principal encouraged teachers to spend the first few days developing rapport with students and to not be in a big rush to get deeply into the material. The principal reported in late October that she'd had only one fight in the first two months of school and that that fight was a carryover from something that happened during the summer.

To cultivate ambition in students, another school encouraged all the teachers to meet one-on-one with students during the third module to discuss goals for both the class and students' futures. Teachers reported very positive experiences with students, and some students said they had never gotten that much attention before and that they enjoyed it. Teachers tell us that students are more engaged than they would otherwise have been.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

JSD: The process you've devel-

oped invites teachers out of their classrooms and asks them to look at information they may never have previously considered — the perspective of their students.

Ferguson: Students' responses to the survey and the student panels have been the most special part of the project for teachers. Teachers also tell me that they welcome the opportunity to trade ideas. We've found that teachers not only talk about what they do well, they express what they want help with. So in front of the faculty someone will say, "A little bit into the semester I always wish that I could go back to start over. What do you do when you blow it, because I've blown it a few times." Other teachers empathize and the faculty talks about it. At a meeting I observed, one of the most respected teachers in the school stood up and said she didn't like having a bunch of adolescents judge her all day on the first day of school. She talked about things she did to have students interact more with each other rather than focus on her. Later, teachers talked about what it meant to have a well-respected teacher acknowledge some insecurity and share her strategies for coping with it. She empowered other people to acknowledge that they had some problems and to share them with others.

Reports regarding both challenges and positive outcomes from this work for 30 or so schools are posted on our web site (www.tripodproject.org). I don't want to exaggerate how well things are going. There have been tension and resistance at most places. We have invaded people's space enough that they have to react, but we provide a framework within which they can come together as a stronger community. ■

Information about the MSAN network and its work to reduce the achievement gap, including a list of participating districts, can be found at www.msanetwork.org.