Smith went far beyond NCLB’s focus on reading and math scores in Grades 3–8 and in high school. He insisted on measuring each major ethnic group, plus low-income students, students with disabilities, and students learning English, on the percentage:

- passing first-year algebra with a C or better by the end of 8th grade;
- enrolled and passing advanced courses in Grades 6–12;
- completing the third year of a foreign language by the end of Grade 11;
- of 6th–through 8th-graders taking electives in art, music and theater;
- meeting or exceeding criterion levels on Virginia’s Wellness-Related Fitness Tests and several other measures.

African-American, Latino, and other students of color have much poorer odds of succeeding in public schools than do their White counterparts. But those odds can be improved.

The school district of Arlington, Virginia collected and used research data to target solutions for reducing the achievement gaps that exist for students of color.

More than 20,000 students attend schools in Arlington, an inner-ring, and suburban school district outside Washington, D.C. The student body is 48 percent White, 27 percent Hispanic/Latino, 13 percent African American, and 11 percent Asian. 32 percent of their students qualify for federally subsidized meals.

Since 1998, the highly diverse district has made gains in the passing rates on the Virginia Standards of Learning assessments of 79% for Hispanic/Latino students (from 47% to 84%) and more than 100% for African American students (passing rates rising from 37% to 77%). About three–quarters of the district’s 2009 graduates completed one or more Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses during their high school careers.

In the recent book *Gaining on the Gap: Changing hearts, minds, and practice in the Arlington Public Schools*, former Arlington superintendent Rob Smith and colleagues describe how they increased academic achievement and narrowed gaps. The book discusses the challenges (educational, social, and political) Arlington faced and the steps the district took to meet those challenges. For example, Smith asked his staff to exceed what’s required by the federal No Child Left Behind law (see text box).
This issue offers two stories about students who must bridge languages and cultures, at school and at home.

In their role as “cultural broker,” children in immigrant families help their parents adapt to, and survive in, their adopted communities and cultures. Curtis Jones studied the ‘culture broker’ phenomenon in the context of the resources immigrants from the former Soviet Union bring with them, and the resources available to them in the communities where they settle. Jones discusses how social and economic contexts shape children’s roles and how they affect family relationships.

Federal accountability provisions require states to do several things for English Learner students. But these requirements exceed the technical capacity of many states and districts. Most lack the empirical data and the standards-based-English assessments they need to set standards and measure student progress. Gary Cook and colleagues have published a document that illustrates several ways state policymakers, standard-setting panels, and technical advisory panels can approach this important work.

You’ll also read about narrowing the achievement gap. Over the past several years the highly diverse Arlington Virginia school district has made significant in achievement gains among Latino and African American students. Arlington is one of 25 districts participating in the Minority Student Achievement Network, based at WCER. You’ll read about how Arlington’s leaders use research to shape successful policies.

You’ll also read about how faculty decision-making reflects stated and implied organizational structures and norms. Matthew Hora studied decision-making processes of STEM faculty at a Midwestern research university and accounts for the organizational elements that shape individual decisions.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Adam Gamoran

One of Arlington’s most important district-based supports that assisted them in “gaining on the gap” included participation in MSAN — the Minority Student Achievement Network. Based at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, MSAN is a coalition of 25 multiracial, urban-suburban school districts from across the United States who seek to achieve the parallel goals of closing achievement gaps while ensuring all students achieve to high levels. To this end, districts work collaboratively to conduct and publish research, analyze policies, and examine practices that support the Network’s mission: to understand and change school practices and structures that keep racial achievement gaps in place.

MSAN was formed in 1999 as district superintendents realized they could address the challenges presented by racial achievement gaps more effectively by working together. As was the case with Arlington Public Schools, MSAN districts were already recognized for overall academic excellence, connections to major research universities, a historical commitment to racial integration, and strong parent and community support.

Research shaped the development of MSAN and is at the heart of its operation at WCER. Executive Director Madeline Hafner says educators in MSAN districts value research and realize that closing the research-to-practice gap is essential in narrowing student achievement gaps. Hafner says MSAN has worked to build a community of learners who engage in common practices across school districts, which include:

- Engaging in collaborative research in which practitioners and researchers are equal partners in designing, conducting, and publishing research.
- Sharing procedures for gathering and reporting disaggregated data.
- Conducting evaluations of programs intended to raise the academic achievement of students of color.
- Conducting training and professional development activities for district teachers and administrators relative to the MSAN mission.
- Creating opportunities for students to guide the work of the organization.
- Disseminating results of Network activities among MSAN districts and the larger educational community.

**Convening helps educators and students**

This spring, MSAN offered one in a series of intensive research-based professional development opportunities (continued on page 7...
Cultural Brokering Stresses Students, Families

When moving to a new country, families often need help navigating the culture and language. Through their experiences in school and making new friends, children usually learn the language and adjust to the culture more quickly than their parents. As a result, in immigrant families, children often act as translators and interpreters during phone calls and daily conversations.

Parents often ask their children to translate newspapers, bills, rental agreements, notes from school, movies, and TV shows. Children are often used to help parents find information about potential jobs or manage family finances. In their role as “cultural broker,” children help immigrant families adapt and survive in the new culture.

Research on culture brokering has suggested that the acts of translating and interpreting may actually help students academically. However, the responsibilities of translating and interpreting for adults can create stress for children and also lead to tension among family members which can, under certain conditions, lower children’s performance in school. Previous studies focused on the individual child and interpersonal family dynamics. They determined that culture brokering interferes with children’s efforts to gain autonomy from their parents, which results in child emotional distress and family disagreements.

WCER researcher Curtis Jones applied a contextualist perspective to the culture broker phenomenon. That means he related the culture broker role to the resources that immigrants from the former Soviet Union bring with them and the resources available to them in the communities where they settle.

Jones and colleagues surveyed 328 former Soviet families settled in and around Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. They asked about their use of their children as culture brokers, their acculturation to the U.S., their employment situation, their emotional health, and their family functioning. Further, they explored characteristics of settlement neighborhoods by analyzing economic and cultural census data. The study established that the family and community economic and cultural contexts (1) acted as a determinant of culture brokering, and (2) helped explain how brokering related to family disagreements and child distress.

Jones found that families were more likely to use their children as cultural brokers when the parents had less English proficiency, lower status jobs, and lived in neighborhoods with more Russian speaking families. A parent’s low job status was likely to be associated with increased family stress. It also usually meant the family had fewer resources, which led to “patchworking,” where children were required to do more of the work needed to run a family, including culture brokering. Conversely, families had less need for cultural brokering if they had lived longer in the U.S., held higher status jobs, were more fluent in English, and lived in more advantaged communities.

(continued on next page...)
As Jones had hypothesized, the findings showed a direct relationship between children acting as culture brokers and a higher amount of family disagreements. Family disagreements also were related to children's emotional distress (see Figure above).

These findings add complexity to the understanding of cultural brokering found in the research literature. Jones' study points to the need for using an ecological framework to understand the role of the cultural broker in the lives of immigrant and refugee families.

The findings support theory and research that suggest that children step into the broker role more often when their parents' English language skills don't meet the family's needs. If the parents' English proficiency was poor, this influenced parents’ job status, both of which resulted in more likelihood of children acting as brokers.

Also, since economic conditions influence job status, children in less economically advantaged communities could be expected to perform the role of culture brokers more frequently. Although community economic factors were found to be important, they are rarely included in studies of immigrant youth in general and culture brokering in particular.

Jones cautions that it would be inappropriate to generalize the specific results of this study to other cultural groups and immigrants in other contexts. But it's important to keep in mind social and economic contexts when studying immigrant families more generally, and the culture broker role more specifically, with other cultural groups.

Adapted from the article, “Determinants and Consequences of Child Culture Brokering in Families from the Former Soviet Union,” by Curtis J. Jones, Edison J. Trickett, and Dina Birman. American Journal of Community Psychology, Online First™, 13 January 2012, http://www.springerlink.com/content/q968883x75450700/fulltext.html
Learning to Speak the Language

A student’s English language proficiency affects his or her school experience in fundamental ways. This holds especially true for English Learner (EL) students, whose life trajectories are shaped by how effectively teachers evaluate their proficiency in academic English and content knowledge.

EL students need time to develop language proficiency before they can fully benefit from instruction in English and perform well in the classroom and on content assessments. EL students are often seen as a homogenous group requiring the same type of support and intervention. This could not be further from the truth. These students come with a variety of capacities and needs. It is important to remember that EL students speak more than one language, they are multicultural, and have rich educational and life experiences that can greatly add to classrooms. They also have a variety of educational needs based on many factors, e.g., initial level of English proficiency, age and grade of entry into US schools, educational experiences in their home country, and family background.

Federal accountability provisions require states to establish accountability systems for English language programs in school districts that support EL students. (See Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.) If school districts do not meet accountability requirements, they must provide action plans on how they will improve their English language instructional programs. Federal law outlines three EL accountability requirements:

1. EL students are making adequate progress in learning English,
2. EL students are attaining English proficiency at adequate rates, and
3. EL students are meeting state content performance targets.

Unfortunately, current federal requirements exceed the technical resources of many states and districts. Most lack the capacity to analyze their data to determine criteria for student progress and performance targets. Also, there is little federal guidance on acceptable procedures for doing this.

Gary Cook is an associate research scientist at WCER working with WIDA, or World Class Instructional Design and Assessment http://www.wida.us/. He and his colleagues* support educators, schools, districts, and states in setting and monitoring rigorous, yet reasonable accountability provisions for EL students.

Over the past several years, Cook and his colleagues have called for more coherence in state Title III accountability systems. One of Cook’s goals has been to examine states’ EL accountability systems and create statistical models that can support states’ compliance with federal guidance. Federal officials recognized the dearth in research in this area and have subsequently funded a study to examine these issues.

To that end, Cook and colleagues wrote a federal report that illustrates several methods state policymakers, standard-setting panels, and technical advisory panels can use to do this kind of work. The document addresses three questions.

1. What analytical methods can be used to determine a meaningful and empirically based English language performance standard?
2. What analytical methods can be used to establish a realistic, empirically anchored time frame for attaining a given an English language performance standard?
3. How can an EL student’s English proficiency level be taken into account when setting academic progress and proficiency expectations?

Several statistical approaches are provided for each of the above questions. The goal of this report is to support the development and regular use of empirical methods to inform ambitious, realistic, and meaningful performance standards and accountability policies that will foster EL students’ linguistic and academic progress and attainment.

*Robert Linquanti, WestEd; Marjorie Chinen, American Institutes for Research; and Hyekyung Jung, American Institutes for Research.

For the report see http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/implementation-supplemental-report.html
When Teaching Decisions Collide with Organizational Norms

Professionals in social marketing, public health, and applied anthropology frequently base behavior-change initiatives in a solid understanding of local practice.

This approach can be used by school administrators, policymakers, and faculty developers so that teaching improvement efforts are well aligned with the existing constraints and practices of teacher in specific situations.

WCER researcher Matthew Hora studies instructional policies and practices at institutions of higher education. He is especially interested in those who teach in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). He recently studied how faculty make decisions about course curriculum, time allocation, and classroom instruction at a midwestern research university.

Hora’s model of faculty decision-making draws on research from teacher cognition theory and naturalistic decision-making theory. Many factors influence course planning and instruction, yet Hora focused on how faculty perceptions of their organizational and socio-cultural environments shape instructional decision-making.

In academic environments some particularly influential factors include students, instructional tasks, role expectations, and organizational characteristics. Over time, teachers repeatedly encounter certain features of their environment and become attuned to which behaviors are feasible and desirable within their departments and institutions.

Hora carefully traced individual faculty members’ decision-making processes to fully capture the situated nature of instructional decision-making. He interviewed staff participating in a National Science Foundation (NSF) math and science education project that attempted to revise how mathematics and science courses were designed and taught for pre-service K–12 teachers. Faculty from math, life sciences, and education collaborated in interdisciplinary planning teams to redesign these courses.

To trace pathways of educators’ instructional thinking, Hora interviewed them about what organizational factors they noticed, how they interpreted these factors as constraints or benefits to their teaching, and how these interpretations influenced their decision-making.

Hora determined that both organizational and individual factors shaped faculty decision-making.

Respondents interpreted organizational factors in a variety of ways. They felt that the type of institution and its personnel policies created normative standards for desirable professional behavior. Their particular university's governance system encouraged individual decisions and freedom regarding instructional practices.

Many respondents considered structural factors as particularly influential. For example, the structural aspects of undergraduate courses posed logistical constraints on teaching practices. Furthermore, structural features of this particular university shaped faculty decision-making by constraining what was deemed possible or desirable behavior according to their peers, particularly in how they allocated their time. The organizational environment contained clear assumptions that faculty should devote the bulk of their time and intellectual resources to research. This assumption was particularly true for untenured faculty. Some departments actively protected junior scholars from teaching and service responsibilities, which were seen as distractions from establishing a research program.

Respondents observed that the expectations for research productivity are enshrined in departmental recruitment, tenure, and promotion policies, which set standards and criteria for what is admissible as evidence of productivity and what will be valued and rewarded when hiring and promoting.

Respondents also cited logistical constraints to their teaching. These constraints included large, introductory courses, prescribed teaching loads, and budgetary limits. All shaped teaching-related decisions and behaviors, particularly in the range of pedagogical techniques. Respondents noted the following:

- Different types of courses, such as graduate-level seminars, upper-division courses, and lower-division introductory courses, each requires its own approach to instruction.
Although teaching ranked low in tenure and promotion decisions, student end-of-semester evaluations were important to faculty advancement.

Each department dictates to its faculty how many courses they are required to teach in a given semester. Given the pressure to be a productive researcher at this university, those with high teaching loads are particularly pressed for time.

**Decision-making unfolds in local situations**

Importantly, decision-making is an idiosyncratic and localized phenomenon, where each instructor brings their own experiences and pre-existing belief systems to unique departmental contexts. Because his or her account of the organizational context is decidedly local, Hora says, it's important to understand how an individual's decision-making process unfolds in specific situations.

One biology instructor, for example, described her teaching as strongly influenced by a math and science education project at her institution and by her doctoral training, which emphasized teaching. Combined with her strong personal initiative to use innovative teaching practices, she wanted to “mix things up” by implementing specific teaching techniques, such as small-group work.

However, her course coordinator denied such efforts, reasoning in part that additional labor would be required to change desks and tables for small-group work. As a result the respondent was forced to use a primarily lecture-based approach. She managed to use some whole-class discussions and multi-media techniques to engage the students' interest. In this way, organizational factors constrained her range of possible teaching decisions, and yet left her the possibility of exerting a small degree of creativity and autonomy.

Hora recommends that future researchers dispense with the notion that a single, unitary mental representation guides faculty thinking and behavior, and instead take a more nuanced view. Future studies should focus on the constituent parts and processes that comprise decision-making in specific contexts, including the role of mental representations known to be related to educational practice, such as self-efficacy.

Hora hopes that this kind of analysis will be replicated at different types of institutions of higher education, including community colleges and teaching colleges, to determine the universality or idiosyncratic nature of faculty decision-making pathways.


For more information about the Network see http://msan.wceruw.org/

For more about Arlington Public Schools policies and results see http://www.apsva.us/domain/15

Current research initiatives being conducted in MSAN districts were presented by WCER researchers but the focus of the two day Institute was on the sharing of Promising Practices from across MSAN districts. MSAN has defined Promising Practices as school or district based initiatives which accelerate learning of students of color AND for which there is evidence the practice is effective over time and/or with multiple groups of students. Sharing these research-based programs, policies, and practices comprises the heart of MSAN. MSAN’s convening opportunities are intended to streamline and inform local district research and development and enhance networking among various district roles.

Students also have a role to play in shaping MSAN’s research and policy work as well. Each year teams of high achieving students from member districts gather to engage in discussions about the barriers students of color face in their schools and districts, and develop action plans that outline steps their schools and districts can take to eliminate those barriers and improve the effectiveness of their schools. Examples of student-developed initiatives that have been implemented in MSAN districts include an AP Buddy Program, a Student Leadership course on Diversity Dialogues, a Sociology of Achievement Gaps course, and the MAC Scholars mentoring program.

The first MSAN Student Conference was held in 2000 co-hosted by the Shaker Heights City School District and the Cleveland Heights–University Heights City School District in Ohio. Subsequent student conferences have been hosted by member districts in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Evanston and Oak Park, Illinois, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Princeton, New Jersey, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Green Bay and Madison, Wisconsin, Arlington, Virginia, Bedford, New York, and Columbia, Missouri. The 2012 MSAN Student Conference will be hosted by one of the newest MSAN districts: - Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, AZ.

For more about this year’s student conference see http://www.pvschools.net/msan2012/

For more information about the Network see http://msan.wceruw.org/