

Bridging the Gap

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When I walk in to Marie Reed Elementary School in Ward 1 every Tuesday, a herd of middle school students greet me with hellos and high fives. We separate into study rooms and begin reviewing academic topics in which scholars may need assistance. The entire program regroups in the cafeteria, where we dine on pre-packaged sandwiches provided by the school district. Upon finishing dinner, I unite with the two scholars with whom I have been paired, and we begin our one-hour mentoring session. Roberto and Christian, my seventh-grade students, are two intelligent, hard-working students. My scholars and I reflect on the high points and low points since we last met and discuss what we look forward to in the days to come. We then continue on to the lesson plan that typically includes an article highlighting a particular social injustice. The scholars reflect on one of the four social justice pillars: voice, freedom, justice, and solidarity and how they may be impacted by them. At the end of the one-hour mentoring session, everyone reconvenes to discuss what was learned that day.

“Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not” (Higher Achievement). That is the Higher Achievement Program (HAP) slogan. HAP is a 501(c)(3), a nonprofit organization that is approved as a tax-exempt, charitable organization. It was founded in 1975 by a teacher at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, DC. The program originally aimed to address the opportunity gap between Gonzaga students and youth in the nearby housing projects by creating learning opportunities. In 1999, HAP became an outcomes-based model for high-level academic achievement for after school and summer school programs. In the last 40 years, HAP has worked with more than 10,000 youth in the Washington, DC, Pittsburgh, PA, Richmond, VA, and Baltimore, MD metropolitan areas (Higher Achievement).

During the transition from elementary to middle school, students from all socioeconomic groups typically show a decline in academic achievement (National Conference of State Legislatures). However, research by the National Institute for Early Education Research has revealed that African-American and Hispanic/Latino children are generally 7-12 months behind in reading skills and 9-10 months behind in math skills when they enter kindergarten. These gaps hold several economic, societal, and public health implications. Referred to as the “achievement gap,” where one group of students performs better or worse than another group in terms of academic achievement. The achievement gap is often the result of the opportunity gap, which is the disparity in access to resources needed for all children to be academically successful. Thus, opportunity and achievement gaps are inextricably connected.

The mission of HAP is to close the opportunity gap and achievement gap during middle school. HAP provides a rigorous year-round learning environment which includes caring role models and high standards. At HAP, we call the middle school students “scholars.” A “scholar” is an empowerment term that reassures the student that their education is an accomplishment and something of which they should be proud. Their passion for learning in and outside of school can

help bridge the opportunity gap in their communities. The after-school program provides scholars with homework help, mentoring, and high school placement advisors.

The scholar population has a demographic makeup of 80% African-American and 10% Latino adolescents. According to the HAP website, students in communities served by HAP are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school than are their peers in more affluent communities. In contrast, 95% of HAP scholars who complete the program go on to top high schools in the area (Higher Achievement). This program is especially important in the District of Columbia because the school system is unique from the rest of the country. Within DC Public Schools (DCPS), schools are classified as either a "neighborhood school" or a "destination school." Neighborhood schools are elementary or secondary schools assigned to students based on his/ her address. Destination schools are feeder-schools for elementary or secondary institutions from a school a student is already attending. Since the fall of 2009, students may apply to a destination school, regardless of their neighborhood location. In 2019, the graduation rate of DCPS was 69%. Consequently, students are also encouraged to apply to charter, private, and parochial schools. In total, there are 13 top tier public and charter high schools in DC.

For the past two years, I have mentored the same group of scholars. Although my mentee group behaves most of the time, at times they have challenged my patience. Once a month, the organization hosts a "mentor lounge," where mentors can voice concerns and learn new teaching techniques and behavior mitigation strategies. During study hall, the scholars typically have trouble paying attention and staying focused. This might be due to fatigue at the end of a long school day and often it is evident they are tired. In the mentor lounge, it was suggested to frequently mix up techniques to help scholars stay engaged and motivated. Before every mentoring session, I always take time to talk with my scholars about any issues they may be having inside or outside of school. Behavioral issues may sometimes overshadow their many strengths, but HAP believes each scholar has the potential to succeed given the resources and opportunities being provided to them.

I have been able to make many connections between my volunteer work and my Multicultural Health class. Through our coursework, I learned about the impact education has on health. We learned about Healthy People 2020, which is a collaborative initiative of the United States Department of Health and Human Services that guides the national prevention agenda. Leading Health Indicators (LHIs) were selected by the initiative to communicate high-priority health issues and actions that can be taken to address them. Education was selected as one of the key LHIs of the social determinants of health. Those with more education tend to experience better health compared to those with less education. Therefore, efforts to address health should include making quality education widely accessible to all populations. The target for 2020 is to increase the percentage of students in public schools graduating with a high school diploma to 87%, which would be an 8% increase from 2010-2011 (Healthy People). By preparing the scholars for high school and aiding with the admissions process, HAP is simultaneously preparing them for eventual admission into college.

In my class, we discussed how individual responsibility for health in the context of social determinants is related to and can be applied to education. Although we have a choice to take responsibility of our education, some communities do not necessarily have the resources to do so. Achieving optimal educational attainment is not always possible in certain situations because

social determinants interfere with individual responsibility. Social determinants of health are “conditions in the environments in which people interact that affect a wide range of health outcomes and risks” (Healthy People). Resources that enhance quality of life can have a significant influence on educational attainment and, subsequently, health outcomes. Healthy People 2020 proposed a “place-based” organizing framework, reflecting five key social determinants of health that include: economic stability, education, social and community context, health and health care, and neighborhood and built environment (Healthy People). It is imperative to understand the limitations of focusing on individual responsibility within the context of social determinants, because focusing exclusively on individual responsibility will affect possibilities for change. Health is largely determined by the complexities of people’s interactions with the world around them, including where they are born, live, work, and learn. Additionally, these complexities are shaped by the distribution of resources, power, and opportunity at global, national, and local levels.

As a result of my work with HAP, I have witnessed the severe educational inequalities in Washington, DC. This has helped me understand the need for programs like these in the communities it serves. More importantly, it helped me understand the systemic and institutional issues our society faces that prevent certain people from reaching their maximum potential. Although more work has to be done, especially on a larger scale, these programs are helpful in closing the achievement gap that is perpetuated by the society in which we live. This program sparked my interest to continue to fight for social justice by continuing mentorship with the program and advocating for policy changes on the larger scale.

References

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