There’s an old saying: “If we keep doing things the way we have always done them, then we will keep getting the same results we have always had.”

And that is fine, if the results we have always had are the ones we want them to be. But – if they are not what we want them to be, then we have to be willing to change our way of doing business; in the words of educator Victor Cary, we need to interrupt business as usual, to create change and to achieve a different kind of result.

The issue of racial equity and achievement is simply too important for us to push aside, even if we have talked about it before; even if it makes others uncomfortable.

So what are we to do about it in Brookline School District and at Runkle School?

In the three years since Brookline began its equity project, with a goal of eliminating the racial achievement gap, we have looked at clear and compelling data that tells us that not all of our students are making a successful academic journey through our schools. Black and Latino children are disproportionately underrepresented in the upper tiers of our classes whether it is on measures like MCAS, DRA’s, or classroom-based teacher-developed assessments. And, these same groups of students are over-represented in special education programs, our failures disproportionately hurt poor and minority students.

Doug Reeves at Harvard has put this to us directly: if a student needs help in math or reading when the experience does it make what the student’s race is? Is there not “African-American math” or “Hispanic geometry” – let’s just give all students GOOD math and GOOD writing. Therefore, when the issue is planning curriculum, assessment, and effective teaching strategies, the only “subgroup” that matters is who has met the standard and who needs additional help. This is the first part of a two-part conversation.

But the second part of this conversation is one that goes to the heart of our dilemma. We acknowledge that there are differences based on gender, race, economic status, and language, then we will never admit that there is a problem.

Call it “Educational 12-step” – the first step is admitting, “I’m Doug, and even though I’m not a bigot, I’ve got to admit that poor and minority kids in my classroom are performing at a level well below their Anglo and economically advantaged counterparts. I’m not saying that this is my fault, but I am admitting that it’s a problem, and that I’ve got to be part of the solution.”

The result of this two-part conversation will not, I hope, be to create separate math programs for minority kids. Rather, we should create specific interventions for ANY student who needs help. But by conducting the gender, economic, and ethnic analysis, we should admit that if we fail to intervene, our failures disproportionately hurt poor and minority students.

As we enter the fourth year of
Courageous conversations about race and the shares we need to make will reach the classrooms.

That is what we need to help us close the gap:
1) What do students need to know and be able to do? That will guide our instruction.
2) How do we know when they have learned it? That will guide our assessment.
3) What will we do when they have not learned it? That will determine whether we interrupt business as usual to help us close the gap or whether we continue to accept the results we have now.
4) What will we do when they already know it? That is our call for appropriate differentiation that is so crucial to sustaining support for this effort.

If this were an easy task, teachers in schools like ours would have solved it long ago. Only if we are willing to face down a deeply entrenched problem and go at it with the resources and the persistence it requires will we get different results than we have been able to get in the past.

The challenges that face us today as educators do not lend themselves to quick fixes or isolated workshops. They require us to deepen our understanding as we develop new ways to build upon and expand the successes of the past. Whether we are working on closing the achievement gap, reaching out to include children who are on the autism spectrum, ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment for all of our students, or using the tools of technology to improve instruction and learning, we need to be willing to learn from each other in order to grow and to improve our practice.

We will continue to open our doors to all students, and we will continue to support the staff in acquiring the skills needed to teach all children effectively. We will work hard to ensure that we all have the training and resources necessary to do our jobs well.

What does it mean that teachers feel they cannot relax around parents?

Bumper Sticker Activity

In the best tradition of political campaigns, I invite you to take a few minutes now to develop a slogan for a bumper sticker to represent your commitment to this effort.

- How can we expect equity when we don’t live in an equitable world?
- Keep Pace, Respect Race.
- Understanding Individuals.
- I’m the Solution.
- Equity = Commitment + Discomfort =>
- Keep Pace, Respect Race.
- How can we expect equity when we don’t lend ourselves to quick fixes or isolated efforts?
- Equity = Commitment + Discomfort =>
- Every child can succeed. Every child deserves the chance!
- Go the distance… Equity for ALL!
- Success for all… not for most.
- Equity Equals Excellence.
- Fairness means you get what you need.
- Equity in the Classroom.
- Equal Educational Access
- Change is good
- Coexist
- Affirm identity - Build community - Create leaders
- What do students need to know and be able to do? That will guide our instruction.
- How do we know when they have learned it? That will guide our assessment.
- What will we do when they have not learned it? That will determine whether we interrupt business as usual to help us close the gap or whether we continue to accept the results we have now.
- What will we do when they already know it? That is our call for appropriate differentiation that is so crucial to sustaining support for this effort.

Interrupting Business as Usual...

(continued from page 6)