

Closing the Achievement Gap, One Student at a Time



NUA partnership with Eden Prairie schools has improved instruction, raised expectations and produced dramatic academic gains

When Melissa Krull took over in 2002 as superintendent of the Eden Prairie Schools, she knew as a longtime special education teacher with the Minnesota system that dramatic change was needed to bolster academic excellence for all students.

Similar to countless suburban communities across the country, Eden Prairie was on the cusp of a seismic shift in its demographics as more children of color and more low-income students filled its classrooms. With this, Krull says, the school system's leaders recognized a pressing need to address each child based on his or her individual academic and cultural backgrounds. As the system saw the influx of more children with limited resources and experiences, it was imperative that Eden Prairie's education leaders do more to create a level playing field in the classroom.

"Gradually, we started noticing the achievement gaps as the population shift began to occur, and we knew we wouldn't be able to meet our students' needs unless we made systemic changes," said Krull, who served as Eden Prairie's superintendent until October 2011. "We needed to change our approach to teaching and change our programming."

Eden Prairie administrators knew that by improving instruction and raising expectations, they could produce educational opportunities, raise achievement levels and inspire teachers and students alike to reach for the highest academic heights.

Since the 2003-04 school year, Eden Prairie has partnered with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education to:

- Give principals and teachers professional development to help break down barriers to high expectations and help them better understand the strengths of incoming students from different racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

- Develop curriculum and instruction that acknowledge students' culture rather than ignore it and its relevance to how students learn.
- Engage cognitive research in all classrooms through strategies that are typically used in gifted and talented programs.
- Conduct community outreach and advocacy to build support for new instructional strategies and embrace an increasingly diverse student population.

NUA's rich curriculum broadened the perspective of teachers and principals, Krull said. "Ten years ago, we used certain strategies for all kids because they were from similar backgrounds," Krull added. "We weren't culturally competent as a system, and we needed to change that."

For instance, students often are asked to write about topics or experiences that are new to them. To help bridge gaps between students, teachers can expand the assignment to first have students write words and thoughts that come to mind about those subjects and build on those to share and learn from each other.

Working directly with schools staff, NUA has been training teachers and principals in how to differentiate instruction. Within five years, Eden Prairie students

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Melissa Krull
Former Superintendent
Eden Prairie Schools

experienced phenomenal academic progress as measured in their performances on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. Results of the 2008 testing showed remarkable gains across multiple subgroups, including increases of:

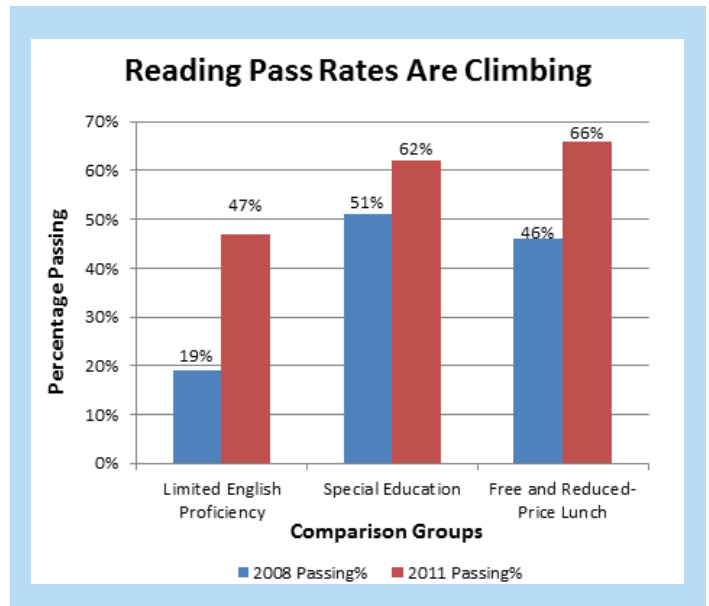
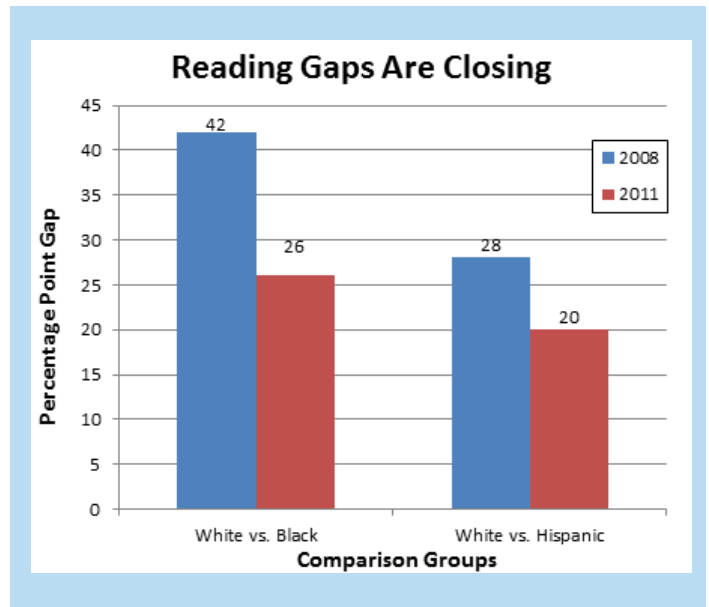
- 28 percentage points among students with Limited English Proficiency
- 21 percentage points among Black students
- 21 percentage points among students receiving Free and Reduced-priced lunch
- 14 percentage points among special education students
- 12 percentage points among Latino students
- 10 percentage points among Asian students
- 5 percentage points among White students

NUA and Eden Prairie have continued to experience remarkable strides in closing achievement gaps, according to data gleaned from the 2011 results of the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments in reading and math.

Last year, the gap between White students and Black students on the reading assessments stood at 26 percentage points – a narrowing of 16 percentage points from 2008, when the gap was 42 percentage points. Students who qualified for free and reduced-price (FRP) lunch – a indication of poverty – also posted sizable improvement, likewise closing the achievement gap by 16 percentage points when compared to White students (in 2008, there was a 40 percentage point gap between FRP students and White students; by 2011, the gap stood at 24 percentage points.)

With a vision to sustain such dramatic progress, and with help from NUA, Krull and her school board recently created a new student assignment system that aims to keep schools from becoming too heavily populated with mostly low-income children or students of color, by limiting the percentage of various subgroups among a student population to no more than approximately 20 percentage points. In other words, a school that once had 50 percent low-income students now has about 20 percent of its students who are low income, and a school that had 9 percent low-income students now also has about 20 percent.

“Two years ago, we knew we needed to disallow for segregation,” Krull said. “The boundaries around our schools were allowing for segregation. When segregation persists, we know that learning is slowed down. We wanted to eliminate any low-income isolation, so we redrew the boundaries.”



Krull said with the boundary changes and NUA practices being followed in all of Eden Prairie’s schools, she feels confident about maintaining the district’s academic strides.

“To eliminate achievement gaps, you have to use strategies that teach to the kids, that reach the kids in your classroom in diverse ways. One approach does not work for everyone,” Krull said. “We discovered that one of the best ways to differentiate instruction was to develop a deeper understanding of racial and economic differences among our students, and then teach with that knowledge. We needed to make all teaching as relevant as possible for each child.”