

# Barriers

# 6

*Relationships, rigor, and relevance may help to eliminate barriers to educational equity that are not easily overcome.*

**S**ome or all of the institutional biases discussed in Chapter 5 were manifested in 10 barriers to high levels of achievement by historically underserved students in a sample of low-performing schools where I served as an external evaluator. The vignette below provides the reader with a preview of how some of the biases and barriers converge in a specific educational setting.

## **KWL EXERCISE**

1. Describe how institutional biases in your school district or school setting become actual barriers to achievement at high levels by your historically underserved students.
2. What do you want to know about how to respond to what teachers think are the barriers to achievement at high levels by the most underachieving students?
3. What have you learned from this guide so far about what is needed to begin removing barriers to achievement at high levels?

### **VIGNETTE 6-1: JIMMY'S AND HIS MOTHER'S ATTITUDES ABOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL HE SHOULD ATTEND**

*Jimmy will soon be entering the ninth grade at Thurgood Marshall High School (see vignette 1-5 in Chapter 1 for an earlier description of Marshall), even though his mother would like him to apply for acceptance at a high school across town for a variety of reasons. These reasons include her desires for a safer and more academic environment, her concern about the negative influence of his homeboys, and wanting her son*

*to have more supportive teachers. However, even though Jimmy's eighth-grade achievement would likely keep him from being accepted, he has resisted applying to the district's school choice program because all of his friends will be going to Marshall. Like most adolescents, Jimmy wants to attend the same school where his friends will be going, even though he has heard the teachers at Marshall don't seem concerned about their Black and Brown students and have negative stereotypes about most of them. His priorities, unlike his mothers, are not whether the school has a strong academic program. Even though he is confident he can do well in school when he applies himself, Jimmy is more interested in the athletic program and is convinced the track-and-field program at Marshall is one of the best in the school district. He is afraid he would have to work harder to become academically eligible for the track team if he went anywhere else and would also experience even more racial bias. Even though Jimmy isn't in a gang, he doesn't seem worried about whether he will be pressured to join one when he goes to Marshall or about staying out of trouble when fights occur between a few of the Black and Brown males. Bottom line, Jimmy is not focused on the relationship between how he does in his classes and his future after high school. He has never had a male role model he looked up to who stressed the importance of doing your best in school or motivated him to adopt such goals.*

### MAKE IT PERSONAL

1. Describe how a school's response to students with Jimmy's perspective could be a barrier to improved student achievement.
2. Describe how educators you know have responded to students like Jimmy, and reflect on whether their response helped create or reduce barriers to improved achievement.

Thurgood Marshall High School has many characteristics found in low-performing schools that are populated primarily by students of color from low- to moderate-income working-class families. Schools like Marshall usually have a group of teachers relatively new to the teaching profession. They may or may not have volunteered to work in such schools and may have little if any preparation for doing so. Many teachers have students with cultural backgrounds and life experiences different than their own and have not worked in any school where equitable student outcomes for all subgroups were achieved. They are learning how to do the job while teaching, and the metaphor “flying the plane while building it” is appropriate.

My work in low-performing schools included assisting the principal and school staff in each setting to identify barriers to achievement at high levels and then develop/implement/revise multiyear action plans for comprehensive improvement.

The barriers identified in these state-designated “low-performing schools” are echoed in the research literature review on the features of ineffective schools (Sammons, 2007).

In chart 6a, there are 10 barriers in five categories found in all of the 12 schools. The barriers were determined by collecting data in each school community in six ways:

- Individual and small group interviews
- Total staff meetings
- Focus group meetings
- Classroom observations, campuswide monitoring, and shadowing the principal
- Examination of school improvement plans and student achievement data at each school
- Data from training, providing technical assistance, or coaching site administrators and teachers in some of the schools

The following words introduce in a nutshell the major areas requiring improvement in these low-performing schools:

- Leadership
- Support
- Planning
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- Data utilization
- Attitudes
- Conflicts
- School climate
- Accountability



### MAKE IT PERSONAL

#### FN6-1 (SEE FACILITATOR NOTES IN APPENDIX 1)

1. When no meaningful support is forthcoming from the district office, what initiatives should principals take to increase the support they and their staff need in order to effectively address challenging conditions at the school site?
2. Given the limited resources available to school sites in the area of staff support, what in your opinion are some strategies site staff should consider to increase support within the building?

**Chart 6a** Some Barriers to Equitable Outcomes

<b>Ten Barriers In Five Categories</b>	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Weak Instructional Leadership</b>
Barriers	Principal doesn't successfully engage staff in developing consensus on school vision, mission, goals, objectives, culturally responsive standards, plans with benchmark indicators, or efforts to improve sense of efficacy regarding the achievement of equity
	Insufficient time spent on classroom observation, and few efforts to address instructional areas needing improvement, except when it is time for annual evaluations
<b>Category</b>	<b>Insufficient Support for Instructional Staff</b>
Barriers	District staff provide little training or assistance to school site administrators or designated teacher leaders on strategies for improving instructional performance with underachieving students of color
	Districts provide limited training or guidance for school site staff who teach special needs students (not special education) significantly below grade level, and no help to site administrators on how to improve school climate/work environment
<b>Category</b>	<b>Teaching Problems</b>
Barrier	Many new and veteran teachers demonstrate low expectations, their students have low time on task and student engagement; students' life experiences not tapped; even when on task, many students do not understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, or what successful efforts would look like
<b>Category</b>	<b>Toxic School and School Community Climate</b>
Barriers	Teacher conflicts among staff at same grade level, within same department or schoolwide, negatively impact cohesion and morale; there is a lot of within- and across-group distrust and/or fear among certificated, classified, and parent stakeholders
	Stakeholder strengths not adequately utilized and staff input not sought on major decisions affecting them; communication, collaboration, problem solving, and conflict management not facilitated within/across stakeholder groups
	Administrators and staff do not proactively reach out to parents on a regular basis unless their children are in trouble; parents are generally not viewed as partners, and their leadership is not nurtured
<b>Category</b>	<b>Limited Accountability</b>
Barriers	Few efforts by administration to increase staff's sense of urgency and commitment; many teachers have a low sense of efficacy (i.e., belief in their ability to teach all students to high levels); some teachers do not follow through on district/site initiatives or directives related to improving instruction, and experience no consequences
	Students' socioeconomic status, parent values, the district administration, board of education, or state politicians are frequently blamed for low student achievement, with no personal responsibility taken

## SOME BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

### Weak Instructional Leadership

Most principals in this small sample of low-performing schools did not attempt structural and cultural changes contributing to equity as part of their instructional leadership role, and some did not have the discretion to undertake such initiatives because of district-level micromanagement. Teacher leadership was very unevenly nurtured and utilized to help achieve school goals. Most administrators were preoccupied with just maintaining the semblance of an orderly environment. Some of the principals, because of other demands such as district meetings or directives, felt the need to delegate many instructional leadership functions, or to perform the tasks they associated with instructional leadership from their office. A few were new to the job and others were seasoned veterans. In these schools, there were some institutional biases, such as curricula, scheduling, professional development, personnel, and supervision practices. As instructional leaders, school site administrators, particularly principals, set the moral tone for their school site, in terms of what are nonnegotiable priorities, essential tasks, and no-excuse attitudes. When principals of schools with a large majority of historically underserved students don't regularly inspect what they expect, don't monitor the follow-through of those to whom they delegate some leadership tasks, don't provide support for those who need help to perform at an acceptable level, and don't constantly keep considerations of race and culture on the table in all conversations related to school improvement, then some of their staff may act in counterproductive ways. The school leaders in the sample of schools did not engage in any of these behaviors on a consistent basis. Loyalty to the principal was perceived by staff as more important than staff effectiveness in some cases. In a few cases, the same was true when it came to the relationship between principals and their district supervisors.

### Insufficient Support for Instructional Staff

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

##### FN6-2 (SEE FACILITATOR NOTES IN APPENDIX 1)

1. What additional support is needed in your school(s) in order to effectively address student, parent, and staff needs?
2. What are the common explanations given in your school(s) for why it is not possible to improve staff support?

Low-performing schools are often paralyzed and unable to make substantive progress in improving achievement because of very little if any “thinking outside the box.”

Many staff in such schools are afraid to acknowledge their own areas where growth is needed and may want school transformation to occur without their having to engage in any personal transformation. In the sample of schools, those feeling differently were hesitant to express their ideas about the changes needed, due to fear of retaliation, ridicule, or being ostracized by other staff. The concept of leadership in the schools within this sample was very narrow, and the school leadership didn't attempt to reach out and more fully engage the broader community in addressing the problems.

There was no professional development support to help staff improve their cross-cultural communication skills among themselves or with parents and students. In addition, there were very few adults, either employees or community volunteers, providing extra help to underachieving students. When teachers of color, however few, were hired, they were the first to go when budget problems arose.

Excuses were often used to explain the low degree of parent/community involvement at each site, especially among historically underserved student groups, and there were no parent liaisons/volunteers who could try to increase parent involvement.

### Teaching Problems

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

1. To what extent are the items mentioned under teaching problems in chart 6a the same as those you have witnessed or personally experienced in low-performing schools?
2. What are the top three priorities regarding teaching problems that need to be addressed in your work setting?
3. What strategies do you utilize to build on students' life experiences and interests during the instructional process?

The characterization of some teacher behaviors as inadequate is idiosyncratic, to some extent, based in part on the particular context of the classroom, school, and school community where the teacher is working. Black and Latino/a students were a large percentage of the population in most of the low-performing schools within this sample, and the teachers were very diverse in their instructional and classroom-management skills. Some were much more competent in specific areas than other teachers. The labeling of some teacher behaviors as inadequate was not based on how they compared with other teachers or based solely on the teacher effectiveness research. The primary criteria utilized was whether what the teacher was doing in their classroom with particular students demonstrated progress toward students' development of grade-level competencies.

Some teachers spent an inordinate amount of time on classroom management, and successful time on task was universally low in almost all classrooms. For example, students might be highly engaged on teacher assigned tasks, but in some cases, they didn't know why they were doing the task or what success would look like. Such engagement was not leading to progress toward developing grade-level competencies in specific cluster skill areas within English/language arts or mathematics.

A few teachers in this sample of schools did not know the language arts or math curriculum they were teaching, staying at best only 2 days ahead of their students. This was true for veteran teachers as well if newly adopted textbooks or other new instructional materials were being used. In addition, teachers with the least experience were assigned to work with the most needy students. No professional development was tailored to the needs of these teachers. Also, these same students were usually not scheduled into small group tutoring or given access to afterschool academic support programs that provided targeted assistance in their areas of greatest need. When they were so scheduled, there was little if any articulation with what was happening in the regular classroom.

### Toxic School and School Community Climate

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

##### FN6-3 (SEE FACILITATOR NOTES IN APPENDIX 1)

1. What are some of the work conditions that most affect some of the indicators of toxic school climate mentioned in chart 6a?
2. Prioritize the three work conditions that you think have the greatest negative impact on school climate in your work setting.

Just as successful time on task was universally low in almost all classrooms, poor school climate was universally the case in all schools within the sample. Nevertheless, there were some teachers in each school who were very positive and industrious, trying hard to do a good job, but not always succeeding. Likewise, there were some students who were very positive about school, liked school, and were trying to do their best most of the time.

However, despite these beacons of light, the overall school climate was problematic in all schools within the sample. This was the case in secondary schools more than in elementary schools, and more in large schools at any grade level than in small schools. In several schools, there was considerable fear or resentment

of the administration by some teachers. The lack of civility between the administration and some teachers was apparent in some schools. Where there was a lack of civility, a lack of professionalism was usually observed. In those cases, a few staff were derelict in carrying out their responsibilities, such as meaningfully engaging all students throughout the allotted time for instruction, and demonstrating “stand-up teaching” with detailed standards-based culturally responsive lesson plans. Unfortunately, in many instances, what I observed was the teaching and learning process being peripheral and held hostage to adult/adult animosities, dramas, a lack of professionalism, and personal idiosyncrasies. Some teachers were also overwhelmed with the range of student academic levels and needs in their classes.

### Limited Accountability

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

1. What have you found to be the major constraints to improving accountability of all stakeholders in low-performing schools, including the accountability of faculty in higher education teacher/administrator preparation programs?
2. Describe the strategies you have used or know others have used that helped improve teachers' sense of efficacy, that is, their believing they have the ability to help students of all subgroups to achieve at high levels?

Accountability of all stakeholder groups was observed to be much better in schools where the school climate was perceived as better by staff, students, and parents, or where most staff perceived the administration making serious efforts to improve school climate. Likewise, students made stronger and consistent efforts to improve their academic performance when they perceived teachers caring about them and respecting them.

However, when teachers bribed students with food, time off, class parties, or field trips based on their good citizenship, there were often short-term benefits. Student bribing was common.

In a few schools within the sample, a very small number of teachers consistently engaged in insubordination and a lack of professionalism, without suffering any negative consequences because of contract language that protected them from being held accountable. In addition, district/school site administrators or teachers who were derelict in their responsibilities were sometimes protected by their political alliances.

## MAKE IT PERSONAL

### FN6-4 (SEE FACILITATOR NOTES IN APPENDIX 1)

1. Of the ten barriers to high achievement in chart 6a, which three do you think most apply to schools with which you are familiar, especially low-performing schools?
2. In your opinion, which of the institutional biases discussed in Chapter 5 most contribute to the identified barriers to equitable outcomes?
3. Select any *two* of the five *barrier categories* in chart 6a and describe what administrators and/or teachers can do to lessen or eliminate these barriers.
4. Select any *one* of the *barrier categories* and describe what support staff, students, and/or community persons can do to lessen this barrier category.
5. What actions are being taken by the school board and/or higher education faculty to eliminate any of the stated barriers?
6. What are *you* personally interested in doing, or are currently trying to do, related to any of the barriers you experience that are mentioned in chart 6a?



## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONAL IDENTITIES AND BARRIERS

*You cannot change how people see or define themselves, or how they perceive others defining them, especially the older they get; they are who they are and we just have to live with the situation.*

This statement may be believed by many, but others will have an inclination to challenge it and make constant efforts to influence the thinking and identities of those with whom they work or live. Teachers have varying degrees of comfort with helping students of color to develop healthy, well-informed self-identities based to some extent on their cultural/ethnic heritage(s), strengths, interests, life experiences, value of mutual respect, and respect for “different” others. A teacher’s personal identity, including their level of racial identity development, may have an enormous impact on how they relate to and work with historically underserved students.

How people derive or change their self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem is very complex, but the results of self-image are often simple to explain. Personal identities may have a major bearing on perceptions, beliefs, intentions, and actions in every sphere of one’s life (Weitzenkorn, 2010).

The personal identities of those in school communities are not just influenced by their roles and the expectations of others based on their role, but also on how they see themselves beyond their role as principal, parent, teacher, community activist, university faculty member, and so on. Most persons' sense of self-worth affects what they do or avoid, and also affects their intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. For example, when persons are struggling with obvious discrepancies between some of their self-proclaimed values, or between some of their beliefs and actions, these may be intrapersonal conflicts that are not observable.

Conversely, interpersonal conflicts, between two persons, are explicit and observable. One aspect of a person's personal identity is how they see themselves in the work setting. For example, if principals have a very traditional concept of leadership that includes the belief that they alone should make all of the decisions, and arbitrarily decide if, when, and from whom they will seek input, it may be a barrier to staff taking initiatives on their own to improve achievement and reduce achievement disparities.

Likewise, when university faculty in teacher preparation programs see their role as separate and not part of the schools receiving new teachers that university faculty have taught, then they may not take any responsibility for the degree of competence or incompetence demonstrated by their graduates.

In a few cases, when the principal is a person of color, of a different cultural background, or is a female in a high school or district office setting, there are some staff who will have difficulty receiving direction. They may have prejudices they aren't even aware of until being in the situation. Experiencing resistance to one's leadership may be more or less true for those who are the first from their race/ethnicity/gender occupying a position of leadership in their school community.

I have personally experienced such resistance. This dynamic can also be triggered by other human differences between the new leader and all followers. How people manifest their personal identities can ultimately contribute to or help eliminate barriers to high achievement.

The barriers in chart 6a all refer primarily to the attitudes or behaviors of various stakeholders. Barriers to high achievement are to some extent based on the personal identities of all stakeholders and how they use and further enhance their personal and position power.



## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIAL/CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND BARRIERS**

*Conflicts between people are natural because we are all human beings with different beliefs, ideas, and ways we respond to life experiences.*

There is a self-assessment diagnostic tool called the DiSC profile, available from Inspiring Solutions (<http://inspiringsolutions.com/disc>) that has been used for decades by more than 40 million people worldwide to improve organizational development and performance improvement. It helps people to explore behavior across four primary dimensions: dominance, interpersonal, steadiness, and conscientiousness. In addition, individuals completing the assessment can discover the extent to which they are uncomfortable with conflict. Others may discover they thrive on conflict or are not bothered by it at all. Most barriers to high achievement in low-performing schools are pregnant with multiple conflicts between students, students and adults, and adults with adults.

For example, I have found conflicts in schools may be manifested as different interpretations of the thoughts or actions of others, different beliefs, values, and priorities, and different interests, strengths, or expectations. People may resist and resent others expecting them to think or act in ways contrary to their preferred ways of being. In most of the above barriers, school community participants are upset with what they think some others are doing or not doing; they may feel slighted, not valued, and mistreated. Sometimes they will totally withdraw or react with explicit or camouflaged anger. When most conflicts are not openly addressed and managed, they may fester and get worse.

When human differences, that is, conflicts, are not addressed in positive ways, with interventions tailored to the situational context and characteristics of the persons involved, there may be negative consequences. Some people may withdraw even further, get more entrenched in their point of view, and the conflicts can get worse, resulting in more rather than less dysfunctional behavior.

A complex variable impacting accountability is whether one cultural group in the school community is able to exercise disproportionate dominance over other groups. Some schools overtly and proactively take measures to minimize or camouflage any negative fallout from human difference conflicts. They may have administrative, teacher, parent, and community leaders who work at creating the impression of win-win solutions among stakeholders who have differing perceptions, identities, and priorities. Diverse school community members all have their want lists and unique needs. I find most stakeholders in all groups need help to strengthen their culturally responsive management of conflict, which includes how they deal with conflict of any kind, especially with culturally different others.



## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LACK OF CULTURAL DEMOCRACY AND BARRIERS**

*The job of schools is to teach about American culture, not about all of the cultures students bring to school from their home; that is unrealistic, and teachers already have more than enough to do.*

Cultural democracy is a very emotionally laden issue with many school stakeholders and the public at large. Many persons in diverse stakeholder groups, perhaps based on their own narrow self-interest, are very opposed to a greater democratization of the curriculum (from its current Eurocentric emphasis) or the decision-making process in schools. Many, if polled, would not support the notion that schools have a responsibility to teach all students not only about the common culture but also about how U.S. citizens and persons worldwide from all cultures and ethnicities have contributed to global humanity and to the development of the United States. Even more controversial is whether schools should include in United States history/social studies curricula any attention to the many kinds of oppression and discrimination experienced by U.S. citizens of many ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, past and present.

There is some consternation over whether students should learn about how oppression has been fought, reduced, and eliminated for many in the United States, but not for all. Such teaching may be characterized as a social justice agenda, as if that is anti-American, even though the country is based on historical documents proclaiming the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness by all.

For those school communities and school community leaders in all stakeholder groups who are committed to improving cultural democracy as well as achieving equitable inputs and equitable student outcomes, it should be noteworthy that in schools having eliminated achievement disparities (see Chapter 11), cultural democracy has been one of the schooling conditions significantly improved. Culturally democratic schools conscientiously avoid exclusive implementation of a Eurocentric curriculum, and each teacher avoids being overly influenced by their own cultural lens when diagnosing student needs, capacities, and potential. In the sample of schools discussed in this chapter, there was evidence that several of the barriers to equitable achievement in chart 6a were in part the result of a low priority given to cultural democracy, which includes meaningful involvement of all school stakeholder groups—especially teachers, culturally diverse community persons, and parents—in critical school decisions.



## **RELATIONSHIP OF PERSONAL BIASES AND NORMS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS TO BARRIERS**

Integral to all of the biases and barriers discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 is the resistance of many school community stakeholders to making personal changes in some of their thoughts and actions. Despite such resistance, they usually blame others for inequitable student outcomes of historically underserved students of color.

**Chart 6b**

Relationship Between Biases and Barriers

<p><b>Institutional Biases</b></p>	<p><b>Barrier: Weak Instructional Leadership</b></p> <p>Lack of attention to cultural responsiveness and curriculum inclusion during instructional supervision</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Insufficient Staff Support</b></p> <p>Few staff, volunteers to provide needed help for marginal students</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Teaching Problems</b></p> <p>No adaptation of curricula to build on students' prior knowledge, strengths, and interests</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Toxic School and School Community Climate</b></p> <p>No teacher collaboration on lesson planning and problem solving that gives explicit attention to racial and cultural issues</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Limited Accountability</b></p> <p>Board of education approval of Eurocentric instructional materials; teachers not helped to adapt curricula as needed</p>
<p><b>Personnel and professional development practices</b></p>	<p>No consistent use of student data to determine staffing needs and limited efforts to expand/develop instructional leadership team</p>	<p>No ongoing assistance for marginal teachers</p>	<p>No focused assistance for teachers on how to improve successful time on task with their diverse students</p>	<p>No site or district help to improve teacher collaboration</p>	<p>Staff selection and evaluation protocols do not include cultural proficiency, cultural responsiveness, or other equity performance criteria</p>
<p><b>Supervision/evaluation practices</b></p>	<p>No positive modeling and follow-through on stated expectations for staff performance</p>	<p>Poor allocation, utilization of existing resources</p>	<p>Classroom instruction and classroom management not tied together</p>	<p>Little help to resolve staff-staff or parent-teacher conflicts</p>	<p>Little effort to change "pass the buck" mentality or assess teachers' cultural proficiency as well as their students' performance</p>

(Continued)

<p><b>Institutional Biases</b></p>	<p><b>Barrier: Weak Instructional Leadership</b></p> <p>Few systems put in place to help most needy students, and inability to get many low socioeconomic status (SES) parents and students to participate in afterschool extra support provided</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Insufficient Staff Support</b></p> <p>Teachers who fear or are unable to relate to students, and don't believe historically underserved students can achieve at high levels</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Teaching Problems</b></p> <p>Teachers have no knowledge of students' cultural heritage and perspectives of scholars with same cultural background as their students of color</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Toxic School and School Community Climate</b></p> <p>Teacher-teacher conflicts over low expectations and grade inflation practices; conflicts between ELL teachers and other teachers</p>	<p><b>Barrier: Limited Accountability</b></p> <p>Differential standards for tea. performance and professionalism in low SES schools compared with primarily middle class schools with smaller numbers of low SES students</p>
<p><b>Practices influenced by student socioeconomic status</b></p>	<p>Little adult peer pressure and no leadership taken to confront prejudices against students and parents based on their primary discourse</p>	<p>No staffing for in-class assistance with nonspecial-education ELL students</p>	<p>Teacher academic expectations and degree of instructional rigor based on culturally biased criteria</p>	<p>Philosophical, personality, and pedagogical differences make teacher collaboration difficult</p>	<p>No accountability assumed for implementing delivery, opportunity to learn, and professional development standards</p>
<p><b>Practices related to involvement of parents and guardians</b></p>	<p>No leadership to increasing involvement of and respect for Black and Brown parents, or to more broadly defining parent involvement</p>	<p>No use of parents to improve communication and school-home partnerships</p>	<p>Very little teacher home visitation or ongoing communication with student families</p>	<p>Conflicting perspectives by parents of color and teachers on each others commitment to do what is best for their students</p>	<p>No specific objectives, activities, or who is accountable for improvements in parent involvement</p>

Barriers to high achievement include very complex conditions, with multiple causes from different sources, but they all have some common characteristics. Central to all barriers are biased beliefs (i.e., thoughts) and norms (i.e., routine actions) in school settings:

1. **BIASED BELIEFS** (i.e., thoughts and attitudes) include negative stereotypes of different others and a proclivity to accept unfounded hearsay and prevalent attitudes in the larger society. Biased beliefs may also be personal self-assessments of one's inability (i.e., efficacy) to improve the achievement of some students based on their demographic characteristics. Finally, biased collective beliefs can be reflected in school site plan language about subgroup academic gains to be accomplished, reflecting conservative goals and low expectations based on federal NCLB annual yearly progress targets.
2. **BIASED NORMS** (i.e., routines in school settings) include patterns of behavior in schools, between districts and schools, in school communities, classrooms, and on playgrounds. These norms may reflect cross-cultural, ideological, and jurisdictional conflicts and struggles over who controls what happens and who controls the reaction to what happens in schools. For example, a powerful norm in schools is whether input in the decision-making process is solicited and used from historically underserved parents and students as well as from support staff. Another norm in schools is how students in particular ethnic/cultural groups think about and treat each other on playgrounds as well as when away from school. For example, student bullying is a major national problem, but teacher bullying is given much less attention, if any.

### **Personal Beliefs**

*How people think and feel influence how they act.*

Beliefs are central to all achievement barriers. Whether the barriers are weak instructional leadership, insufficient support for instructional staff, toxic school and school community climate, or teaching problems, personal beliefs play a major role in determining what is or is not done. When engaging stakeholders in identification and critical investigation of school barriers, they often reveal as much about their own way of thinking and belief systems as they do about the institutional dilemmas experienced. Many do not perceive their complicit role in the barriers identified or how their beliefs influence their actions.

For example, site administrators, especially principals, will sometimes describe the multiple and conflicting demands on their time as a major constraint to spending more time on instructional supervision. From their perspective, they don't have control of the demands on their time. However, I have found those who perceive themselves having expertise in instructional supervision/classroom observation are

much less likely to find it impossible to give priority to this task. Some persons tend to spend more time doing what they perceive themselves doing well, have more experience doing, or are most comfortable doing. Others allow instructional supervision to take second priority because they don't *push back against* district office directives or meetings that are blamed for taking time away from such duties.

Likewise, teachers have shared with me a litany of reasons for why their students don't achieve proficiency of grade-level standards, from the students' academic readiness level to the students' failure to complete class assignments or pay attention in class. Teachers seem unaware of the extent to which their reasons for students' poor performance are also their beliefs about student potential, based on certain student characteristics.

### Norms in School Settings

*Habits, unconsciously formed, are very difficult to change.*

The norms, or patterns of behavior, in school settings or in school community settings are usually very strong and help to shape personal relationships of all kinds between particular adults, particular students, and between adults and particular students. The historical politics are influenced by race, ethnic, and cultural relations within the nation as a whole, as well as within specific communities. The politics influence the communication, problem-solving, decision-making, conflict management, and collaboration norms that persist in schools.

To some extent, norms that don't contribute to sustaining high-level student outcomes for the historically underserved may be a function of no one asking the hard questions or providing the critical friend support for all stakeholders, including superintendents and boards of education. Anti-democratic norms in the schooling process may have a better chance of being changed when there is a transformation of the personal identities developed by various stakeholders, including policymakers. For example, the norm in many schools is to not explicitly discuss the thorny issues associated with shared accountability for the educational outcomes of underachieving students.

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

1. Based on your experience, *prioritize* the following topics addressed in Chapters 1 through 6, regarding how much these issues contribute to perpetuation of inequitable educational outcomes:
  - Cultural hegemony
  - The personal identities, including level of racial identity development, of all school community stakeholders
  - Students' personal identities
  - Cultural conflict/cultural politics
  - Deficiencies in teacher/administrator preparation programs
  - Human fears

- Institutional biases negatively impacting equitable educational outcomes (see chart 6b)
  - The five categories of barriers to achievement at high levels by historically underserved students
2. What beliefs or personal patterns of behavior in school settings do you have or persons you know have that could be construed as barriers to achievement at high levels by historically underserved students of color?



## THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY COURAGEOUS LEADERS IN ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

1. Culturally courageous leaders would critically examine the factors influencing their own personal identities, including level of racial identity development and educational philosophy, followed by writing their own racial autobiography, as discussed in *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006). They would do this to jump-start their foray into personal ways of being that might stimulate insights into how they unwittingly help perpetuate barriers to high achievement by historically underserved students.

2. Culturally courageous leaders would continue such critical self-reflection by self-assessing their attitudes and practices related to each of the five barrier categories. They would then choose one barrier to develop a personal growth plan on what they can do to strengthen their awareness and ability to lessen that barrier to achievement at high levels in their work environment.

### REVIEW OF CHAPTER 6

- In a small sample of schools, five categories of barriers to high achievement were weak instructional leadership, insufficient support for instructional staff, teaching problems, toxic school and school community climate, and limited accountability.
- There is a relationship between barriers to high achievement and personal identities, racial/cultural conflicts, and the absence of cultural democracy.
- There is a strong relationship between personal biases, school norms, and barriers to achievement at high levels.
- Culturally courageous leadership by all stakeholders includes confrontation of biases and explicit ongoing attempts by all school community stakeholders to eliminate identified barriers to all students achieving at high levels.

