

Submit your letters  
by fax at (734) 994-6879  
or by e-mail to letters@  
annarbornews.com

# THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

FOUNDED IN 1835

Laurel R. Champion  
Publisher

Ed Petykiewicz  
Editor

Victor Schaffner  
Editorial Page Editor

## Students' involvement encouraging for the gap

### Teens can help educators find solutions

OPINION

Policymakers from Lansing to Ann Arbor for years have talked about closing the staggering achievement gap between white and black and white and Hispanic students. Gov. Jennifer Granholm has championed Project Great Start, an effort to get all the state's school districts to reach out to parents to help them read to kids under the age of 5 for at least 30 minutes a day. The Ann Arbor Public Schools district under Superintendent George Fornero has targeted a 25-percent reduction in the gap between underperforming high school groups including minorities, and the district averages in areas that include graduation rates, dropout rates, suspensions and expulsions. Fornero also wants to lessen disparities in test scores, grade point averages and participation in remedial and advanced classes.

The gaps officials are trying to close are astoundingly and achingly large, however. A report last year by the Urban Institute and Harvard University examining the class of 2001 showed 74 percent of students overall in Michigan were getting diplomas, but little more than one-third of Hispanic students were. In Ann Arbor schools, an overall graduation rate of about 80 percent markedly contrasted with a 53 percent graduation rate among black students. Considerable gaps in standardized testing also are separating groups.

Nevertheless, so conspicuous are these gaps that several students here now want to see what they can do to narrow them. A commendable effort is under way by the Ann Arbor Youth Senate and the Youth Empowerment Project, who have formed Youth Powered Solutions to the Achievement Gap. The group this year will look to recruit 400 teenage students who ordinarily don't participate in extracurricular projects to discuss the gap in a series of half-day focus groups.

The information gleaned from those sessions will then be used to write survey questions, which will be made available to at least 2,500 students. The group steering the project will then work with professors and students from the University of Michigan to analyze the findings and make recommendations to the district.

The group says it will be examining barriers at the personal, school and community level. The school district and some local businesses are financially supporting their project.

More youths participating in finding solutions to a problem that continues to stymie or frustrate policymakers and academicians is a good thing. That the district is encouraging their efforts also is admirable. More buy-in from stakeholders is needed.

But the students mustn't get discouraged if their recommendations don't effectively take a giant eraser to the gap. Many of the problems creating it are systemic or societal. As we and educators who have devoted themselves to the problem have noted, gaps in earning levels among whites and various minority groups result in minority children having less access to after-school activities or computers. That there is a higher percentage of single-parent households among some minority groups also places some kids at a learning disadvantage in comparison to the attention some households with two parents can afford to give their children.

"What we want out of this project is results," said one involved student. Even slight upticks would be important for a problem that has been so resistant to significant progress. The students' participation also marks an excellent opportunity for the district and community to become better focused on narrowing the gap, including how to spend resources in that area and in others.