

## **CSJ Position Statement on the Academic Achievement Gap and Equity on Educational Services**

### **CSJ Position**

Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ) recognize the urgent need to close academic achievement gaps between middle class White children and children of color and low income, and to assure equity of educational services for all children. Education is a basic human right guaranteed by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). It is CSJ's position that the counseling profession, individual school and mental health counselors, and counselor educators must work to eradicate the achievement gap through individual, community and societal level interventions.

### **Rationale**

Inequities in education are evidenced in elevated drop-out rates of Latino and Native American children (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003; Sue & Sue, 2003), disproportionate representation of African American, Latino, and Native American children in special education classrooms, unequal distribution of disciplinary measures leading to long-term suspensions and private day and residential treatment placements (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003) and the failure to provide services mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

The term *achievement gap* describes disparities in achievement between White children and children of Color, and between children of middle-/high-income levels and low-income children. CSJ forwards the role of counselors as leaders and advocates in an effort to address systemic barriers that obstruct the academic success of minority and low-income students.

Wide gaps in academic achievement are evidenced in national standardized testing scores. African American, Latino, and Native American children score significantly lower on national aptitude tests for math, reading, writing and science. Gaps in academic achievement are also evidenced in the low representation of children from these groups in courses designed to prepare students for college (NCES, 2007).

Funding practices at the federal, state, and local levels create obstacles to minority and low-income student achievement. Federal funding formulas that are based on average per-pupil spending reward richer states and penalize poorer ones. For example, states that generate higher per student education funding but low numbers of poor students receive as much as twice the federal dollars as do states with higher numbers of poor students and lower per student education funding. Funding disparities at the state level where funding is based on income and property taxes have much a greater influence on achievement gaps than do federal funds, however. In 2002-2003 states spent an average of \$825 more per pupil enrolled in low-poverty districts than students enrolled in high-poverty districts, and an average of \$908 less per pupil enrolled in high-minority school districts than in schools with low-minority enrollments. Further, an examination of 20 states and their districts showed that teachers in low-income districts are frequently paid less than teachers in high-income

districts, virtually assuring that higher quality teachers are diverted to higher-income school districts (Education Trust, 2006). Counselors for Social Justice strongly advocate for equitable federal, state and local funding practices at the federal, state, and local levels.

Educational inequities are also evident in special education services. African American children are more than twice as likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded as White children, while Latino children are significantly under-identified in these two categories (Parrish, 2002). Counselors for Social Justice recognize the central importance of an appropriate education on physical and mental health as well as the ability to achieve financial independence, satisfaction in one's work and the ability to contribute to the political process (Cox & Lee, 2007). CSJ strongly advocates that all children be afforded the services guaranteed under IDEA. Included among the mandated services endorsed by members of CSJ is the use of an appropriate functional behavioral analysis (FBA) and behavioral intervention plan (BIP) for children with identified disabilities that include behavioral difficulties that interfere with learning (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1997).

Further, CSJ recognizes the importance of educating all children in their neighborhood schools within mainstream classrooms to the greatest extent possible. Data suggests that as many as 30,000 *provisionally licensed teachers*, teachers with little to no formal teacher training, are responsible for educating children with emotional disturbances and other disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2000, in House & Hayes, 2002). CSJ further recognizes the urgency of placing children with special education needs in classrooms led by fully licensed teachers who are endorsed in the disability categories they will teach. Further, students with special needs should have access to evidenced-based curriculum designed to meet the challenges of their disabilities.

### **Relevance to Counseling**

The educational needs of America's children are of central importance to the mental health field, and in particular to school counselors due to their unique position within the school system. An appropriate education raises the quality of life by reducing the likelihood that a person will live in poverty. Consequently education supports an individual's ability to receive quality physical and mental health care. Education is correlated with higher employment rates and higher wages (NCES, 2004). Education is correlated with better mental health at all income levels; those with more education report better physical and mental health than do those with less education (NCHS, 2007). Education also increases the likelihood that a person will participate in the political process by voting or will contribute to the community through volunteerism (NCES, 2004).

### **Recommended Actions**

1. Counselors for Social Justice should work to forward efforts to close academic achievement gaps by forming a taskforce that works in conjunction with other organizations such as ASCA, the Education Trust, the Civil Rights Project and the American Counseling Association's Political Action Committee, to identify and address avenues for political and legal education reform.

2. CSJ should form a taskforce to develop materials aimed at educating counselors about the individual and systemic costs of the achievement gaps that are fed by federal, state and local policies. Projects this taskforce might undertake include:
  - a) Development of a bibliography on the topic of Equity of Educational Services and The Achievement Gap and make these materials readily available on the internet.
  - b) Development of a book that outlines specific and actionable efforts for use in the community and schools, such as models for educating and empowering parents in their efforts to gain mandated services for their children.
  - c) Development a curriculum for teaching counselors that includes the causes and effects of academic achievement gaps, relevant education law, and intervention and advocacy strategies appropriate to mental health counselors.

*Approved by the CSJ Board on 6/08.*