The Important Role of Data in Closing the Achievement Gap

Challenge
The “achievement gap” in education refers to the difference in performance between groups of students on a variety of measures such as grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates. The term is most often used to describe the gap in performance between minority students such as African-American and Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic White peers, or between students of lower and higher socioeconomic status.

As Education Week states
In principle, the public has been behind closing the achievement gap, and schools have employed a variety of tactics to address it. Common reform recommendations have included reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, expanding early-childhood programs, raising academic standards, improving the quality of teachers provided to poor and minority students, and encouraging more minority students to take high-level courses. Still, progress in reducing academic divides has been slow or nonexistent.¹

Solution
A vital supplement to any of the reform recommendations listed above is the proper use of data to help close the achievement gap. First, it is important to look at data in terms of examining studies from the educational literature of what works to close the achievement gap. This kind of grounding is vital in suggesting solutions that are based on research as opposed to anecdotal evidence.

Second, the use of data helps schools to recognize the extent of the gaps in their educational communities. This should be done within schools by teachers and administrators in order to benchmark where the school is currently and should include measures of both the achievement of students as well as the educational context. You can’t know where you are going if you don’t know where you are at. It is important to identify gaps that are statistically meaningful so that interventions can be identified. Strong statistical procedures for identifying gaps using state test scores have been developed by Ho and Reardon.²

Finally, data can be used to track student progress with respect to the achievement gap and to checking if that progress is meaningful. A proper view of the data goes beyond seeing if an intervention is statistically significant in closing the achievement gap but practically significant as well.

These approaches to using data to close the achievement gap are more fully explicated in the works by John Hattie³ and Ruth S. Johnson.⁴