Introduction

“The education system in the United States is broken.” When that phrase is entered into a Google search, it yields nearly forty-five million results. Websites on the first two pages alone embrace arguments on all sides of the statement. It’s true—large numbers of students are denied access to meaningful education. Yet we believe that this declaration is a gross generalization, drawn from specific cases of egregious failures in school districts and schools. The main problem with the “system is broken” argument is that it creates a sense that all public schools are hopelessly flawed—that they merely warehouse students and provide paychecks for teachers and administrators who go through the motions with minimal effort each school day. Those who claim our schools are broken call for the nation to clear away traditional K–12 schools and rebuild the system from the ground up.

In particular, critics point to achievement gaps based on race or ethnicity, income, dominant language, and disabilities. Eliminating them has been a major national educational priority for over a decade, enshrined in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and in subsequent initiatives such as Race to the Top. Despite this national legislative and executive priority and the testing regimens, sanctions, and incentives directed at the problem of achievement gaps, national progress overall has been at best halting, with the degree of gap closing slight and distributed unevenly across individual schools and school districts.¹

In most of the 13,500 school districts and more than 132,000 schools in the United States, the system is not broken.² While there is much that is indefensible in public education, there are education leaders who are striving and succeeding in their efforts to improve educational equity in
the face of enormous challenges. In this book, we present one group of thirteen superintendents who have cut across the grain of disappointing results to make progress in closing opportunity and achievement gaps under the institutionalized constraints of traditional public school systems. Our mission is to tease out what can be learned from the practice and experiences of district superintendents who have devoted their careers to closing those gaps.

**WHO WE ARE**

Both of us were school practitioners before we became university professors. Smith spent forty-four years working in three school districts (Frederick County, Maryland; Spring Independent School District, Houston, Texas; and Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia). He taught high school social studies, led an adult and a junior high school, served in a variety of central office roles in Frederick, ranging from adult education to director of curriculum and staff development, worked for sixteen years as the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instructional services in the Spring Independent School District, and retired from preK–12 education after twelve years as the superintendent of the Arlington Public Schools. He joined Brazer on the faculty of the Education Leadership Program at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, in the 2009–2010 school year. He was one of the fourteen original members of the governing board of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) and with five colleagues authored the book *Gaining on the Gap: Changing Hearts, Minds and Practice*, a reflection on the Arlington Public School’s experiences with narrowing achievement gaps.3

Brazer spent fifteen years as a middle and high school teacher and administrator, serving the last six years of his K–12 career as principal of Los Altos High School in Los Altos, California. He joined the faculty of George Mason University in 1999. In June 2013, Brazer accepted a position as an associate professor and faculty director of Leadership Degree Programs at Stanford University.
OUR STUDY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS

Shrinking the achievement gaps between minority and majority populations in school districts is critical to achieving equitable outcomes in education. A great deal has been published about the nature, depth, and duration of achievement gaps, but superintendents’ efforts and perspectives have been little explored. It is with this in mind that we designed the study on which this book is based. Our intent was to learn more about apparently successful school districts and their leaders who seemed to buck the disappointing national trend of slow or no progress when it came to closing gaps. We wanted to learn what made them different, and we believed that the best way to learn how they approached the issue of closing gaps would be to talk to them directly and use their words as the basis for our analysis.

The study was planned during the 2009–2010 school year. It centered largely on interviews of thirteen school district superintendents, all of whom were members of the governing board of MSAN, an organization of inner-ring suburban school districts devoted to the purpose of eliminating achievement gaps (we discuss MSAN in detail in chapter 1). All of the superintendents of MSAN districts constitute the governing board, but we sought to interview those who had been in their current positions and had been members of the governing board for at least two years. We decided two years was probably a good minimum yardstick to apply to ensure that we were talking with leaders with enough experience to shed light on the questions we wished to pose. We wanted to talk with those who had a long-time commitment to closing achievement gaps, and some of these superintendents’ efforts had started well before the term achievement gap was coined and before NCLB was even on the horizon. As it turned out, all but one of the fourteen superintendents who met these criteria agreed to be interviewed.

Our study addressed how these superintendents became involved in tackling achievement gaps, their understanding of what causes these gaps, how they chose to respond to the equity challenges they faced, and their assessment of their progress and success. Although we focused on the
superintendents, we recognized that they operated in specific contexts and worked with critical allies in long-term efforts to close achievement gaps. Our analyses of superintendents and the organizational environments of their school districts helped us to conceptualize how the improvement of minority student achievement occurs.

In addition to the superintendents’ experiences in working to diminish achievement gaps, we believed the school districts they served would provide prime examples of how these gaps might be attacked. Most of the districts served small to mid-sized diverse student populations, were well resourced, and were situated in inner-ring suburban communities. Their size suggested they might be more nimble in responding to gap-closing needs than larger organizations, but large enough to staff gap-closing initiatives. Their resources, moreover, suggested they would be better positioned than cash-strapped organizations to finance their efforts. Finally, their diversity suggested they might represent more realistic tests of gap-closing strategies than districts that served either largely white students or students of color.

Most of the superintendents whose experiences provide the core of this book were interviewed in the spring of 2011. Each was interviewed for a minimum of one hour. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with ten of them. Of these interviews, four were conducted by both of us and six by only one of us. All but two interviews were conducted during a MSAN governing board meeting that was held in Arlington, Virginia, over a three-day period. The interviews occurred in a hotel or in a high school. Three telephone interviews were conducted by one author during the same period. The two remaining in-person interviews were conducted later in the fall of 2011 and in late summer of 2012 in the offices of the superintendents of Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia, respectively. We recorded all interviews.

Before we began the interviewing process, we developed a protocol based on concepts articulated in *Gaining on the Gap*.5 We were flexible about the order in which we asked particular questions based on the flow of the discussion, finding often that interviewees would answer some of our questions before they were posed. We attempted to create a comfort-
able discussion rather than a formal interview. Across all of the superintendent interviews, we managed to ask or discover:

- How they worked on achievement gaps became a priority in their district
- How they personally became involved in working on achievement gaps and what in their personal history might have animated them to do so
- The role played by the school board, the community, or other actors in making closing gaps a priority and in maintaining that priority
- How they defined the achievement gap and explained it to faculty, staff, parents, and the general community
- Their goals in relation to the gaps
- The ways in which progress was achieved, measured, and communicated
- Programmatic and organizational initiatives they directed toward narrowing gaps
- Barriers, challenges, or threats they faced; the sources of these barriers or challenges; and how and the degree to which the obstacles were overcome
- The initiatives and accomplishments of which they were proud and the mistakes, if any, they made along the way

After transcribing the interviews, we sent the transcripts back to the interviewees and asked them to correct any errors and to add any clarifying comments they thought appropriate and helpful. Only three provided corrections or additions. We then read the transcripts multiple times to discern basic themes and develop the conceptual framework with assistance from concepts articulated in *Gaining on the Gap* and the literature of organizational learning. In addition to generating the conceptual framework, the process of repeated reading and discussion of the transcripts yielded themes for each chapter of this book and provided the basis for data coding. In summary, we used a constant comparative method to identify unique characteristics of each superintendent’s leadership on
the achievement gap issue and searched for commonalities that emerged across the group’s experiences.7

The method we employed is intended to consolidate and organize the knowledge these superintendents derived from their leadership experiences. We do not propose to generalize to all school districts and leaders, but we believe there is much to be gained from understanding how these superintendents in comparatively well-resourced inner-ring suburban school districts were able to make progress in mitigating or eliminating a variety of achievement gaps that militate against educational equity. It is our intent that educators generalize from their own contexts to these cases, finding alignment with their own experiences and learning from others.8

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

While the thirteen interviews are the foundation of this book, it goes beyond reporting what we found by integrating the superintendents’ words with relevant literature and our own experiences. We seek a larger audience because we became convinced that these superintendents were doing important work and, in the main, were doing it very well. Their examples, we believed, could be digested and adapted by many other school districts across the country whose student bodies are growing increasingly diverse and that are concerned about implementing strategies that will create conditions of equity. We imagine superintendents, school boards, communities, teachers, and other leaders borrowing the ideas contained here and adapting them to their own educational contexts to accelerate progress in closing achievement gaps. We have two purposes in mind for this book beyond describing and explaining the superintendents’ work: (1) to illuminate what equity-focused superintendents have been able to achieve in their school districts, and (2) to synthesize their experiences, along with previously published organizational theory and research, into a model or conceptual framework that informs the work of narrowing achievement gaps going forward. Collecting superintendents’ experiences into a reasonably coherent system helps others to generalize to these specific cases. Thus, we aspire to go beyond exemplary cases from which readers can
easily turn away by claiming their situations are different to suggest a lens that can be used to look at any situation and find promising means for narrowing achievement gaps.

Investigating superintendents’ perceptions in particular, as we do here with a relatively large number of participants, brings to light conditions conducive to addressing achievement gaps, specific strategies and tactics applied to serve underperforming minority students, and reflections on many years of work in this area. As we wrote the book, moreover, we wanted to maintain these superintendents’ voices because we believed their experiences, behaviors, and motivations are best described by them and because they had important stories to tell. For this reason, we employ a large number of direct and sometimes extended quotations. We anticipate these quotations, as opposed to our characterizations, will more likely enable readers to capture the flavor of the superintendents’ perspectives and appreciate the work in which they engaged.

In the academic realm, we move beyond declaring the existence and extent of achievement gaps to explain how the leaders we interviewed address them and why they have made some of their critical choices. Our empirical findings and theoretical development can serve as a guide to future research aimed at articulating influences on successful and struggling attempts to give all students socially just educational opportunities. In practical terms, this book adds to our knowledge of what superintendents, schools, and school districts should consider doing to make progress on this important national priority.

THE LARGER MEANING

Learning and publishing the thought processes of social justice–minded superintendents is important to understanding and, ultimately, being able to implement means of improving the life chances of this nation’s most challenged students. Instead of trying to determine if we should tear down the country’s school systems, we are more interested in figuring out how to make what we have work better. Doing so is vital because even the most desperately needy schools, no matter how low performing, are
anchors in their communities. When they close, trauma and dislocation follow. Charter schools and independent schools of various types show some promise of narrowing achievement gaps, but the charter model is not universally successful. The worst charter examples perform less well than traditional public schools; charters at best display the kind of variation that exists within the traditional K–12 system. With the vast majority of the nation’s school-age children attending traditional public schools, the various manifestations of achievement gaps represent an educational problem in urgent need of attention.

The thirteen superintendents represented in this book are frank about the struggles they have experienced, but they are also a source of hope and optimism. Their strenuous, practical efforts point the way for others, not in terms of “best practices,” but as examples of where to focus energy and attention and how to think about the root causes of the persistence of achievement gaps. We in no way intend to convey the notion that these superintendents, individually or collectively, have “fixed” the achievement gap problem, but they have made progress. Understanding the nature of that progress from personal recollections and through an analytical lens is of great importance to learning how to improve educational equity within public schools.

SEEKING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Taking school systems as they are, with both their failures and successes, the primary question in front of superintendents who participated in this study is: What can we do to change the educational experiences of previously underserved students such that they learn and perform at a level close or equal to those who have traditionally thrived in the US education system? From a more academic perspective, we ask: What will it take to get to a point where student achievement is no longer reliably predicted by characteristics such as race, poverty, second language, and disability?

The challenges are relatively simple to state, but potential solutions are complex. After decades of striving for equity, perhaps beginning with the Brown decision in 1954, we have learned the hard way that pet solutions
alone—a little more money for economically disadvantaged, choosing English immersion over bilingual education, or response to intervention—have minimal impact on achievement gaps. The conceptual problem is that children are not outputs that respond to one or two or three specific inputs. They are human beings who exist in and are influenced by systems—schools, school districts, their families, their neighborhoods, and society. The superintendents whose wisdom we draw on for this study all recognized that schools and the social systems in which they are embedded interact, and therefore, as leaders in their districts, they must look not only at their schools and districts systemically, but also understand how the organizations for which they are responsible interact with systems over which they may exercise little or no influence.

A LOOK AHEAD

This book is organized to help the reader make sense of superintendents’ efforts to close achievement gaps across their experiences in different contexts. We begin chapter 1 by describing the development and a bit of the history of MSAN. A brief profile of each of the thirteen superintendents follows, as well as their reflections on the progress they believed occurred during the time of their leadership. This first chapter also establishes context by addressing the similarities and differences of the MSAN member school districts led by the superintendents we interviewed. In chapter 2, we introduce the conceptual framework to orient the reader to our analytical perspective and to lay out the general challenges and opportunities embedded in persistent achievement gaps. Chapters 3–7 use the conceptual framework to analyze and interpret specific strategies and tactics employed by long-serving superintendents to close achievement gaps. By organizing the chapters according to superintendents’ decisions and actions, we provide readers an inside perspective on the puzzles, dilemmas, and paradoxes of efforts to enhance social justice within public education.

To move their schools and districts into addressing long persistent achievement gaps, participating superintendents recognized the need to adopt a systemic perspective. Chapters 3 and 4 address two important
organizational conditions necessary for success in this enterprise. Chapter 3 explores the idea that closing achievement gaps is not a matter of quick fixes; rather, it requires a considered, thoughtful, persistent, and sustained approach over a number of years under conditions of organizational and political stability. Chapter 4 examines how the levels of agreement or disagreement among members of the community, the board, and the superintendent regarding the priority of closing gaps are critical in predicting the degree of success a school district will enjoy in achieving that end.

Chapters 5–7 move from organizational conditions to a discussion of three strategic considerations. Chapter 5 demonstrates the degree to which superintendents agreed with Elmore’s view that capacity for change must be created before improvement will occur and describes the ways in which different superintendents attended to the professional development of their faculties in the interest of building equity in their school systems. We explain how their perspectives differed in working toward that end. Chapter 6 focuses on differences between participating superintendents as they describe opportunities they created for youngsters to narrow achievement gaps. In this chapter, we also grapple with the relationship between opportunity and achievement gaps and the potential of schools to address both. Chapter 7 uses Bolman and Deal’s four frames model to analyze ways in which achievement gap work could be stalled or otherwise thwarted in the school districts these superintendents led and describes a variety of ways the superintendents countered such threats.

Chapter 8 revisits the conceptual framework to identify the most powerful strategies and tactics employed by participating superintendents and to explain strengths and weaknesses in the framework itself that were revealed as we applied it to superintendents’ experiences. We clarify lessons learned from the superintendents to suggest to both education professionals and education researchers fruitful paths ahead.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We believe that superintendents, school administrators, teachers, school board members, other community members, and students of education
leadership will find the portrayals of how various superintendents approached the goal of narrowing achievement and opportunity gaps to be deeply engaging. We hope that superintendents and other education leaders will find inspiration in the ideas and actions of those who have given their professional stories to this book.

Beyond aspiring to kindle resolve to create greater opportunities for students and narrow gaps in opportunity and achievement, we believe there is guidance in the conceptual framework, in the ways in which the superintendents approached their sets of issues in their organizations and communities, and in the lessons learned. At the same time, we recognize that specific initiatives must be determined by the context of individual school districts, schools, and communities. We expect that researchers will be able to make good use of the conceptual framework as they pick up the trail of discovering more widespread and nuanced results from teachers, site administrators, superintendents and their deputies, school boards, and community members striving to create more equitable, socially just outcomes in public education.