

Harvard prof: Cambridge achievement gap can be closed with more dialogue

By Gila Babich
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“It is a city of haves and have-nots, so are we coming together as a community of learners and educators and asking about whether our very diverse community is successful for everybody?” she said. “Do our kids, regardless of race, ethnicity, language and social class have access to the same opportunities? If not, how could we change that?”

Nathan, a professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the founding headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, Boston’s only public high school that focuses on performing and visual arts, published a book last month entitled “The Hardest Questions Aren’t on the Test.” The book’s main theme? How posing essential questions may lead to fundamental improvements in any school system.

“It’s the depth of our questions, it’s the rigor of our questions, that really determines how successful we’re going to be,” Nathan said in an interview. “It’s not that asking questions gives you solutions, but it gets you better questions, and that can get you better answers.”

In her book, Nathan argued that each school should develop and apply a unifying framework — a unique set of principles that embody the school’s educational goals.

Parallel to the framework, which is designed to establish the students' learning habits, Nathan also argued the importance of teaching students behavioral standards, which she calls shared values. At BAA these values are defined as "Passion with Balance," "Vision with Integrity", "Community with Social Responsibility" and "Diversity with Respect." A school that puts emphasis on such behavioral principles regards students as a part of the community rather than praising the individual.

“In Cambridge, I know the high school has very clear shared values,” Nathan said in an interview. “Do all the kids know them? I don’t think so. You ask kids here, they know them.”

Nathan, a mother of a Cambridge Rindge Latin School junior and two CRLS graduates, suggested that repeated communication of the shared values at Cambridge might help students internalize the values better – at Boston Arts Academy, one of the four values is announced over the intercom every morning. She also stressed that positive reinforcement encourages students to live by these principles, which might lead them to succeed in school.

“Schools often set up rules to prevent bad behavior, but neglect to reward good behavior,” she said. “Kids who are affirmed for positive things might strive to be better people, and better people are happier, and people who are happier do better academically.”

As part of the shared value "Diversity with Respect," Nathan wrote in her book, discussion of racial differences is a daily occurrence at BAA. According to Nathan, talking about this topic is critical to both dealing with racism and narrowing the achievement gap.

Boston Arts Academy faculty is more diverse than CRLS faculty (during the 2007-2008 school year, 54 percent of teachers at BAA were white, compared to CRLS’s 78 percent.) Nathan said, however, that regardless of which race, class or culture is in the majority, or how sensitive the topic is, it is the educators’ responsibility to learn and teach about the different groups, bringing in outside experts if necessary.

"If I’m in a faculty where everyone is white, let’s say, that doesn’t mean that we can’t have the same kinds of conversations," Nathan said. "It just means that we have to dig a little harder."

At BAA, teachers study the backgrounds and behavior of African American male students in particular, in order to improve the teaching system for them. During honor roll assemblies at BAA, it is always mentioned how many African American male students are on the honor roll.

“That sounds like you’re dissing all of the non-African Americans, but it isn’t,” she said. “It’s about making that part of the conversation. To close the achievement gap, first of all you have to talk about it.”

Another approach to bettering the school system for students with individual needs that Nathan brought up is continual professional development. Instead of assuming that all students come with the same set of skills, like basic math and reading, schools should educate their teachers to teach elementary skills, no matter what subject they specialize in.

“The achievement gap is not just about my psychological preparedness, my emotional preparedness, my cultural preparedness, it’s about whether I’ve had the opportunity to learn preparedness,” she said. “It’s an orientation to learning that the adults need to have.”

Nathan did not whitewash the fact that BAA has an achievement gap as well, but rather pointed out that every school, no matter how well it does, has to actively work at improving.

“We have to be willing to critically self-reflect,” she said. “Cambridge has got just fabulous teachers. So they’re ahead of the eight ball in that sense. The question is, are we willing to slow down and look at our practices? The question isn’t ‘are we good or bad?’ It’s ‘how do we be better?’”