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GAINING GROUND

Achieving Excellence in High Poverty Schools

CCSSO Resource Center for Educational Equity

Closing the Achievement Gap: A Look Ahead

Ayeola Fortune,
Guest Editor

It has been almost 50 years since the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that called for the desegregation of the nation's public schools. Today, however, schools remain largely segregated based on race, income, and ethnicity. Access to a quality education and educational resources continues to be closely correlated with the racial composition and socioeconomic makeup of schools. As such, the challenge remains to ensure that African Americans receive equal access to a quality education. The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act builds on the law's 1994 reauthorization by emphasizing the State's role in assessing students' progress and ensuring that all students meet established state standards. The legislation reaffirms the belief that all students should be expected to perform to high standards. This month we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King. The time is ripe to assess how African American students are faring in our nation's schools, and how we as a country have met the challenge to provide a quality education for all.

The achievement gap—a term often used to refer to the disparity in academic achievement, primarily measured in test scores, between students of color and their White peers—suggests that much work remains to be done in improving the educational attainment of African

American students in particular, and students of color in general. The gap has persisted for half a century, since *Brown v. Board of Education*. Walter Loban, a prominent researcher during the 1960s whose work focused on the language development of school-age children over time, first documented the gap in the 1950s and 1960s. The gap narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, but the trend in the last 12 years indicates that the gulf between African American and White students has increased

For example, just 12 percent of African American fourth graders scored at the proficiency level on the NAEP reading assessment compared to 40 percent of White fourth graders. On the NAEP math test, just 5 percent of African American fourth grade students scored at the proficiency level compared to 34 percent of White fourth graders. The NAEP science results exhibit the same pattern: 7 percent of African American fourth graders scored at proficiency level compared to 38 percent of White fourth graders. The achievement gap not only persists as students progress to higher grades, it increases. A gap also persists between African American students and other students of color, with African Americans lagging slightly behind Hispanic and Native-American students and dramatically behind Asian-American students in all three-subject areas. This pattern suggests that African American achievement must be compared to other racial and ethnic groups to ascertain a comprehensive measure of their progress or lack thereof.

African American students are more likely to be labeled mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed and given special education referrals. These disparate placements occur even in schools where both African and White students have high-income parents. African American students continue to be over represented in remedial courses, to be held back a grade, and to graduate in fewer numbers than their White peers. Finally, White students continue to outpace African American students in matriculation to four-year colleges. Between 1971 and 1999 White high school graduates who completed a bachelor's degree rose 13 percent, from 23.1 percent to 36.1 percent. In the same time period, the increase for African American high-school students was only 5 percent, from 11.5 percent to 16.9 percent.

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A Look Ahead

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The disparity in educational resources available to students of color compared to White students has also been well documented. Students of color attending high-poverty schools where they comprise the majority of the student population are more likely to be taught by uncertified teachers and to be assigned instructors without a major or minor degree in the subject they are teaching. In addition, funding gaps persist between low and high-poverty school districts in 42 of 49 states studied in a recent analysis. School districts with the greatest concentration of poor students typically have less money to spend per student than districts with the fewest number of poor children. These gaps translate into real consequences for minority students who attend schools in high-poverty districts. For example, a recent survey found that African American eighth graders are four times as likely as their White counterparts to take science in a classroom with little or no access to a laboratory or running water.

Most of what has been hereto discussed is well known by state education agencies, researchers, principals, teachers, and, on some level, by the students who are most affected by these inequities. Instead of restating the case, the next Gaining Ground will also be devoted to sharing the strategies, initiatives, and approaches that have shown results or exhibit promise in raising the educational attainment of African American students and narrowing the achievement gap. Cynthia Reeves writes about efforts to eliminate the achievement gap in North Carolina. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins' article focuses on the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education and the role that disaggregating achievement data can play in improving targeted services and preventing misclassification. Nora Howley reviews Robert Moses

work on the Algebra Project based on his recent book, *Radical Equations*. Finally, I synthesize recent research of the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) and discuss the role of research in improving the educational outcomes of African American students.

As many educators already know, closing the achievement gap and raising the educational attainment of African American students are not synonymous goals. Many gains have been made by African American students in recent years, including higher scores on tests, higher graduation rates from high school, and increased matriculation to four-year colleges. Yet the achievement gap persists as White students have generally increased their educational attainment as well. As a recent study conducted by AYPF asserts, a policy which solely focuses on reducing the achievement gap without addressing the overall quality or emphasizing that all students perform to the same high standards is inadequate. Ideally and under the best circumstances, educators would do well to advocate all students performing to high standards with little or no gap.

Recent research indicates that in the long-term only a comprehensive approach will result in a better system of education for our nation's youth, which includes

- Implementing content and performance standards and a challenging school-based curriculum;
- Aligning student assessments with standards; improving teacher quality;
- Providing additional supports including extended learning time for those students deemed at-risk of failure;
- Increasing parental involvement; and
- Focusing on improving access to early childhood education.

The next two issues of *Gaining Ground* are dedicated to discussion of ways

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Closing the Achievement Gap in North Carolina

Cynthia Reeves

The standards-based reform movement has focused attention on the need to improve achievement levels of all students. As a result, States have established standards describing what students should know and be able to do, developed assessments to measure students' progress toward those standards, and adopted accountability systems to hold schools responsible for student performance. However, it has become increasingly clear that testing and accountability alone will not close the achievement gaps among minority and White students, and economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. States must adopt strategies that are comprehensive and sustained over the long term. North Carolina has recently embarked on such an effort.

In the past two years, North Carolina has stepped up efforts to close the achievement gap between the State's Black, Latino, and American Indian students and their White counterparts. Since establishing a new accountability system in 1995, statewide test scores for all students have been improving; nonetheless, the achievement gap remains unchanged. In 2000-2001, in the elementary and middle grades, 82 percent of White students scored at grade level or better in reading and mathematics; in contrast, 52 percent of Black students scored at or above grade level.

The persistent achievement gap between White and minority students led North Carolina superintendent Michael Ward, in spring 2000, to propose a ten-point plan aimed at closing the gap. The plan included the formation of a permanent advisory commission, and a section of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) focused on this issue. The North Carolina Commission on Raising Achievement and Closing

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Disproportionate Representation and the Achievement Gap in Special Education

Elaine Bonner-Tompkins

Like general education, the major problem in special education is differential quality. Some students have access to rich, high-quality special education services that lead to positive futures while others do not. The have and have-nots in special education follow familiar patterns: students from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds tend to be over-represented among students classified as disabled and receive lower quality services; students from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have more positive experiences with respect to special education. A critical indicator of educational progress among African American students is access to high quality instructional programs in both general and special education.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, approximately 10 percent of students eligible for special education and related services have moderate to severe disabilities. These include physical or sensory impairments, autism, brain injury, or severe cognitive delays. A little more than half of all students eligible for special education services are classified as learning disabled, approximately 20 percent are classified as speech impaired, 10 percent as mentally retarded (with the vast majority of these students considered mildly retarded), and a little less than 10 percent as emotionally disturbed. Thus, most students served by special education have what are considered mild to moderate disabilities that are amenable to interventions in the general education classroom. As policymakers and educators consider strategies for bolstering the achievement of all students, and African American students in particular, they should consider two critical themes: disproportionate representation and the achievement gap in special education.

Disproportionate representation refers primarily to the over-representation of African American, Native American, and limited English proficient students eligible for special education services. In particular, Black students are about three times as likely as Caucasian students to be classified as mentally retarded and about two times as likely to be classified as emotionally disturbed, according to the Office of Civil Rights. Disproportionate representation can also refer to the over/under-representation of Latino and Asian American students, depending on disability category.

A number of theories have been advanced regarding why disproportion representation exists. Most center on differential access to resources and a cultural mismatch between students of color and White middle class norms. Some researchers argue that poverty and a lack of resources among high-poverty schools offers the primary rationale for disproportionate representation, at least among Black students. However, more convincing research challenges the poverty rationale by demonstrating that over-representation increases as the affluence of a school and its proportion of Caucasian students increases. Conversely, classification rates among White students remain almost constant regardless of community income or ethnic diversity.

Disproportionate representation is problematic for a number of reasons. Students who could be better served in higher quality general education programs unnecessarily suffer the stigma of being classified disabled when they are not. The quality of special education services offered to minority and/or low-income students assigned to special education is often poor as well. Low expectations and lower levels of teaching expertise too often characterize such programs. In turn, identified students are rarely

given an opportunity to transit back into the general education. The misidentification of students as disabled represents a waste of scarce resources that could be better spent on improving the capacity of general education classrooms to deliver instruction to diverse learners.

Closely linked to disproportionate representation is the achievement gap in special education. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports a 18 to 36 point gap in scores between White and minority students with disabilities on 1996 Math Assessment, and a 28 to 32 point gap in scores on the 1996 Science Assessment. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study, students from minority and lower-income backgrounds tend to receive poorer quality services under special education: less experienced teachers and limited access to vocational education and the general education curriculum. In turn, they also experience higher rates of school dropout, under employment, welfare dependency, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Office of Special Education Programs mandates that states collect data on the ethnic backgrounds of students eligible for special education services. Title I demands that states report achievement data disaggregated by ethnic group, income, and disability status. However, no federal requirements exist to require that school systems report the achievement of students with disabilities disaggregated by ethnicity, language proficiency, or income. This may seem an obscure point, but without this data, how will states and local districts know where to target gaps in achievement in special education?

Educators and advocates readily acknowledge that the push for standards-based reform created incentives for schools to classify more students as disabled in order to avoid testing. In response, federal guidelines were established to ensure that students receiving special education services were included in

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Recent Research on Raising Minority Academic Achievement

Ayeola Fortune

Recent research efforts have attempted to discern what strategies and best practices have proven effective in raising minority academic achievement and eliminating persistent racial disparities. In late 2001, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) released its latest volume in a series that highlights promising practices at the program level. The survey was the result of a 22-month effort to document programs that have demonstrated results in terms of raising the academic achievement of students of color. Only programs with measurable achievement data, in most cases disaggregated by race, were included in the volume.

A total of 38 diverse programs were selected for final inclusion, which included after-school programs, district and state level initiatives, high school transition programs, early childhood programs, K-8 programs, and post-secondary school programs. While the programs differed significantly in terms of their focus (i.e., the student populations served and program goals), they all exhibited common strategies the practitioners deemed essential in improving the academic success of at-risk students. Program practitioners cited the following best practices as key in their success:

- Emphasizing program quality;
- Providing professional development to staff, teachers, and program providers;
- Implementing a demanding curriculum that challenges all students to high levels;
- Lowering student-teacher ratios;
- Providing individualized support to students at risk of academic failure; and
- Providing extended learning opportunities for youth.

In short, these programs did not employ a singular tactic to achieve re-

sults for students, but rather they implemented a comprehensive approach utilizing multiple strategies. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and Sacramento Students Today Achieving Results for Tomorrow (Start), two after-school programs profiled in the study, provide extended learning opportunities for students and incorporate several of the strategies listed above.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America implemented Project Learn as a pilot after-school program in 1996 in order to enhance the educational attainment of youth residing in public housing. Its programs feature “high-yield” activities (leisure activities that provide students with the opportunity to cultivate skills such as reading, writing, problem solving, etc.) and emphasize parental involvement as well as continuous training for volunteers, parents, and staff. A recent evaluation found that students who participated in the program increased their grade averages in core subject areas, compared to peers not enrolled in the program, whose grade averages declined within the same time period.

Similarly Sacramento Start, a city-wide after-school academic enrichment program that provides extended learning opportunities to youth from low-income families, used multiple strategies. They emphasize collaboration with school-day faculty and involve the community by hiring staff primarily from the surrounding neighborhood. Despite a dropout rate of 32 percent, students who remained in the program increased their scores on standardized tests.

The results from the AYPF study reflect a shift in the past decade in the public discourse, from diagnosing the problem (i.e., the disparity in educational attainment that persists between students of color and their White peers) to addressing the prob-

lem by documenting proven programs and strategies that positively impact youth academic achievement. Research-based best practices are invaluable as they can inform the creation of new programs and initiatives, and improve existing ones. Yet, as the reviewers at AYPF themselves note, obstacles remain which impede the data collection process.

One such impediment is that many programs still do not disaggregate their data. Even those programs that do disaggregate often do not incorporate racial, ethnic, linguistic or gender subgroups in their analyses. Programs and school-based initiatives that appear to be successful in the aggregate can potentially mask disparities across student populations. Despite this reality, a growing number of states, local education agencies, and program providers are beginning to disaggregate the data in compliance with federal law.

Over-reliance on one type of indicator, such as test scores and/or GPAs also hindered research collection efforts. Of the 38 programs surveyed, few evaluations reported more than two measures of achievement. This was most evident in the K-8 programs and initiatives, which tended to rely almost exclusively on student test scores as the measure of improvement. This tendency is problematic. Many crucial indicators, such as dropout rates, expulsions, attendance, student retention and teacher evaluation, were not included. These indicators could provide a more detailed and accurate assessment of the impact of a particular program or school-based reform. Solely relying on the results of high-stakes tests as a measure of success may also mask changes in student population (exempting special education and/or limited English proficient students from the tests), and school-day curriculum (teaching to the test), in order to score better overall. Using multiple indicators to

measure African American and other minority students' academic achievement is the only way to measure true progress and ensure that programs

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Book Review *Radical Equations:*

Math Literacy and Civil Rights

by Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., 2001, Beacon Press

Nora L. Howley

"The main goal of the Algebra Project is to impact the struggle for citizenship and equality by assisting students in inner city and rural areas to achieve mathematics literacy. Higher order thinking and problem solving skills are necessary for entry into the economic mainstream. Without these skills children will be tracked into an economic underclass." These words, from Algebra Project founder, Robert Moses, describe the project's underlying philosophy.

The project grew out of Mr. Moses' concern as a parent that children in Cambridge's minority community were not receiving the preparation needed to allow them to succeed in higher math and, therefore, in post-secondary education. From one concerned parent grew a movement, a movement rooted in the belief that mathematical literacy is the new civil rights issue.

Radical Equations vividly describes the efforts of Robert Moses and his colleagues to create a mathematics program that prepares poor and minority children to take the higher-level math courses necessary for higher education. Using the lessons of the civil rights organizers in the south, he describes the efforts to create a demand, among parents and young people, for access to algebra and other higher mathematics courses.

The book is readable, even for those of us still scared of math. The authors use the stories of the real children and families of the Algebra Project sites around the country to demonstrate how raised expectations can support raised achievement. When Moses' daughter reached middle school, children at her school were

not expected to take algebra. By the end of the time he spent working with students and teachers in her class, they were the first group of students from her school to pass the citywide algebra examination and qualify for ninth grade honors geometry.

As an organizer, Moses realized that the issue was larger than a few students and teachers. It was one of diminished expectation, by parents, teachers, and students. By creating an understanding of why algebra was necessary and demonstrating that even "ordinary" students could learn it, the Algebra Project created new opportunities for many children.

In *Radical Equations*, the authors provide an analysis of why algebra and how the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement can be applied to educational change. They also compellingly describe the real children and families of the program, and their struggles and accomplishments. Finally, Moses and Cobb describe the "Mathematics of Trips," an example of how real world experiences are used to make algebra comprehensible.

Who should read this book? Any one who cares about the issue of lowered expectations for poor and minority children. Any one who wants to see how real children and families become advocates for their own success. Anyone who believes that educational success for all is a matter of families, schools, and communities working together.

More information on the Algebra Project can be found at www.algebra.org and at the website of the Civic Practices Network, http://www.cpn.org/cpn/sections/topics/youth/stories-studies/algebra_project.html

Disproportionate Representation

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statewide assessments and that their scores were counted in accountability systems and reported separately. As more states pay explicit attention to reducing the achievement gap between students groups in general education, the incentive for classifying at-risk students of color into special education increases as well. Without a parallel commitment to reduce the achievement gap in special education, the achievement of students of color and African Americans in particular, remains at-risk.

States, districts, and schools need greater technical assistance, resources, and funds targeted to ameliorating these dilemmas. A greater investment to identify, disseminate, and put into practice research-based strategies for effectively addressing disproportionate representation is sorely needed. As a start, educational agencies can collect and report to schools disaggregated data on the achievement of students with disabilities by ethnic sub-group. Bolstering the quality of general education programs to prevent disability misclassification and provide services to diverse learners is also needed. A focus on early literacy and positive behavior supports seems to offer the most impact for school systems to address both disproportion and the achievement gap.

In sum, monitoring the achievement of students with disabilities by sub-group, increasing the capacity of general education programs to offer instruction to diverse learners, and improving the quality of services offered to students with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds offers the most promise for reducing disproportionate representation, reducing the achievement gap in special education, and improving the life chances of Black children with and at-risk of developing disabilities.

State School Support Team Network

Burton Taylor

As reported in last month's issue of *Gaining Ground*, the Council is creating a network to help increase states' capacity to improve academic performance in low-performing, Title I schools. The network, known as the *State Support Team Initiative*, presents states that are committed to strengthening their systems of school support with an important opportunity to access high quality technical assistance. The network will consist of a limited number of teams composed of state and local education officials and possibly others who will work together over a period of several months to develop or strengthen state systems of school support.

The network will meet three times, for two-and-one-half days each meeting. The first meeting is planned for May 8 to 10, 2002, in Albuquerque, NM. The meetings will focus on the creation and operation of school support systems, the use of data to examine root instructional issues influencing student achievement, and how instruction can be changed to improve achievement. With respect to instruction, the emphasis will be on reading in the elementary grades.

Applications for membership in the network are requested by February 15, 2002. Detailed information about the network and the application process was sent to chief state school officers via a letter dated December 21, 2001. Questions may be directed to Julia Lara, Deputy Executive Director for State Services and Technical Assistance (202/336-7043 or juliala@ccsso.org), or Burton Taylor (202/336-7043 or burtont@ccsso.org).

Please note that this network is distinct from the High Poverty Schools Initiative, which is holding its next meeting in Albuquerque, N.M. from May 5-7, 2002. (Please see related item on page 8 of this issue of *Gaining Ground*.)

Recent Research

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and school and/or district based initiatives are in fact effective.

Finally, researchers in the AYPF study found that few programs used control or comparison groups as a baseline to compare the progress of the test group. Moreover, few studies utilized performance indicators to assess the achievement of students. Without such comparison groups and/or standards, student achievement is assessed in a vacuum and lacks context. Particularly as the goal remains to reduce the achievement gap and improve the educational attainment of African-American students in particular, there must be reasonable attempts to compare success across groups and against widely accepted performance standards. Programs and initiatives whose evaluations neglect to disaggregate data, include multiple measures of student achievement, or utilize baseline indicators cannot reasonably claim unqualified success in improving minority achievement.

The use of research to inform best practices in the education field is a growing. Access to data is critical in order to determine which strategies work best in fostering the academic success of African-American students deemed at risk for educational failure. Equally, if not more important, is that educators are passionate and dedicated to the premise that all students can perform to high standards as "commitment to all students, more than specific strategies, appears to prevail as the main contributing factor of success" (James, Jurich & Estes, 2001).

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A Look Ahead

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to mitigate the achievement gap by fulfilling the mandate for a comprehensive approach to education.

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Recent Research

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Recent Research

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Gaps is made up of teachers, school administrators, parents, school board members, business people, and community organization leaders. It is charged with advising the DPI and State Board of Education on ways to raise achievement for all students and close the gaps in student achievement and participation. Since its inception, the Commission has spent time learning about the existing gaps and examining research regarding the range of issues connected to closing the gap. The Commission reviewed research studies, spoke with experts, and visited classrooms. In December 2001, it released a list of recommendations that included reducing the disproportionate number of minority students assigned to special education programs, conducting a broad-based public awareness campaign, providing classroom training to teachers, and adding a closing the gap district-level component to the ABCs accountability system.

The Closing the Achievement Gap Section within the School Improvement Division of the DPI was established to assist districts and schools in identifying and developing programs and strategies aimed at closing the gap. The section provides awareness sessions on a variety of gap-related issues, technical assistance, information dissemination, current research findings, and an annual report highlighting the status of minority and at-risk students across the state.

Since 1997, the North Carolina Department of Education has held an annual Improving Minority and At-Risk Student Achievement Conference. The conference is aimed at district and school staff and representatives from business and communities around the state. The goals for 2001 conference included encouraging districts to use disaggregated data to make decisions about improving schools; increasing the capacity of schools, districts and communities to develop strategies to increase the achievement of all

students; sharing strategies for continuous improvement in implementing the state standards; increasing the capacity of schools and districts to develop personalized education plans for students performing below proficiency; and encouraging the establishment of networks of schools and/or districts to share best practices and resources. The 2001 conference was attended by nearly 3,000 participants and included over 200 presenters and 150 concurrent sessions.

Since fall 2001, five school districts in North Carolina have been participating in a pilot program to test a change in the state accountability system that would reward schools based on improved levels of achievement for every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic subgroup. If schools are successful in increasing student achievement, teachers, other certified personnel, and teacher assistants will receive monetary bonuses. These bonuses are on top of what they receive for meeting or exceeding state growth goals.

In addition, the Department has created a Web site to serve as a resource for everyone concerned with closing in the gap in North Carolina. The site includes information pertaining to the latest research findings, effective and promising strategies, Web resources, and an e-mail discussion group. Information about the upcoming conference as well as previous conferences is also available on the Web site.

While North Carolina's efforts to address the achievement gap are too new to determine their long-term impact, and other components of the plan are still being developed, these initiatives provide examples of strategies states could use to ensure that all students achieve to high levels.

For more information about North Carolina's initiatives, visit the Department of Public Instruction's website: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/closingthegap>

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**ESEA Implementation: States and Districts Share in Best Practices
High Poverty Schools Initiative Conference
Albuquerque, New Mexico
May 5-7, 2002**

The High Poverty Schools Initiative (HPSI) will convene its annual conference May 5 to 7, 2002, in Albuquerque New Mexico. The HPSI will focus on issues related to the implementation of the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). CCSSO staff will build an agenda for this meeting on topics related to ESEA implementation. Proposed topics include:

- State responsibilities for school improvement;
- State systems of school support and recognition;
- Teacher quality;
- Assessment and accountability; and
- Realignment of resources to serve students in low performing schools.

These topics will be further defined based on staff consultation with state team leaders, which will take place during the first two weeks of February.

For more information on this meeting, please contact Madeline Morrison (202) 336-7039 or madelinem@ccsso.org, or until February 28, 2002, Cynthia Reeves at (202) 336-7024 or cythniar@ccsso.org.

The HPSI conference will be followed by the State Support Team Initiative Network conference. Please see page 6 of this issue of *Gaining Ground* for details on this project.