

EDUCATION WEEK

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Achievement Gap

The "achievement gap" in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. It is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between many African-American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white peers, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income and well-off families. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates. It has become a focal point of education reform efforts.

While National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results have shown that, over time, black and Hispanic students have made great strides in narrowing the breach that separates them from their white peers, that progress seems to have come to a halt since the mid-1980s. For example, in 2003, while 39 percent of white students scored at the proficient level or higher on the 4th grade reading exam portion NAEP, only 12 percent of black students and 14 percent of Hispanic students did so. Forty-two percent of white fourth graders scored at the proficient level or above on the mathematics exam compared with just 10 percent of black students and 15 percent of Hispanic students (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Disparities exist in students' course-taking patterns as well. Data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that approximately 62 percent of white, black, and Hispanic high school graduates each were enrolled in an Algebra 1 course

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in high school in 1998. But that pattern did not hold for higher-level math courses. While 64 percent of white students took Algebra 2, only 55 percent of black and 48 percent of Hispanic students were also enrolled. Even larger gaps appear in honors-course enrollments: 7.5 percent of white students,

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3.4 percent of black students, and 3.7 percent of Hispanic students took Advanced Placement calculus (U.S. Department of Education, 2000a).

Such disparities are also evident in graduation rate and college success statistics. While 72 percent of white students enrolled in 9th grade graduated from high school on schedule in 2001, this was true for only just over half of the same group of black and Hispanic students (Greene, 2003). According to the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (2001), while 30 of every 100 white kindergartners go on to graduate from college, only 16 of every 100 black kindergartners later earn bachelor's degrees. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education released data showing that black and Hispanic kindergartners already trailed their white and Asian-American counterparts on tests of general knowledge and early-reading and math skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2000b).

The disparities in achievement are often attributed to socioeconomic factors. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, of all children younger than 18 living in families, 27 percent of Hispanic children and 30 percent of black children live in poverty, compared with about 13 percent of white children (Proctor & Dalaker, 2002). According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, the average cognitive score of pre-kindergarten children in the highest socioeconomic bracket was significantly higher than the average score of students in the lowest socioeconomic bracket. The composition of these socioeconomic brackets was closely tied to race; 34 percent of black children and 29 percent of Hispanic children were in the lowest socioeconomic bracket, compared with just nine percent of white students (Lee and Burkam, 2002). Research has also shown that dropout rates tend to be higher for children who live in poverty. In 2000, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were six times more likely than their peers from families in the top 20 percent of income distribution to drop out of high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2000c).

Researchers have tried to pinpoint why race and class are such strong predictors of students' educational attainment. In the 1990s, the controversial *The Bell Curve* claimed that gaps in student achievement were the natural result of variation in students' genetic makeup and natural ability. The book drew severe criticism from various research fields. Many experts highly contested the findings and asserted that achievement gaps were the result of more subtle environmental factors. Being raised in a low-income family, for example, often means having fewer educational resources at home, in addition to poor health care and nutrition-factors that can contribute to lower academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2000a; Viadero, 2000). Others point directly to factors within school such as peer pressure, student tracking, negative stereotyping, and test bias (U.S. Department of Education, 2000a; Viadero, 2000).

More recently, scholars have analyzed the effect that certain in-school factors have on student achievement. While it is difficult to isolate the variables that directly impact student achievement, research has shown that good teaching matters (The Teaching Commission, 2004; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998). The Education Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, found that many minority students attend inner-city schools, which are often under funded. As a result, those students tend to receive poorer-quality instruction, have fewer high-caliber teachers, and have access to fewer resources (The Education Trust, 2002).

An analysis of the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey by University of Pennsylvania's Richard Ingersoll for *Quality Counts 2003*, for example, revealed that students in high-poverty, high-minority schools have less access to highly qualified teachers than do students in low-poverty, low-minority schools. Secondary students in high-poverty schools are twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to have a teacher who is not certified in the subject he or she teaches. Students in high-poverty, high-minority schools are also more likely to be taught by an inexperienced teacher. Furthermore, teachers in high-poverty schools reported less favorable working conditions than teachers in wealthier schools. Teachers from high-poverty schools were more likely to report that student disrespect and lack of parent involvement were problems (*Quality Counts*, 2003).

In principle, the public is behind closing the achievement gap. In a 2003 national opinion poll on Americans' attitudes toward public education conducted by Phi Delta Kappan and Gallup, ninety percent of those polled believed closing the achievement gap between white and black and Hispanic students was somewhat or very important. Although most think the gap is a result of factors unrelated to the quality of schooling, a 2001 poll revealed that more than half thought it was the responsibility of public schools and educators to close the gap (Rose & Gallup, 2001, 2003).

Schools are employing a variety of tactics to address the gap. Common reform recommendations include reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, expanding early-childhood programs, raising academic standards, improving the quality of teachers provided poor and minority students, and encouraging more minority students to take high-level courses (Viadero & Johnston, 2000).

The federal No Child Left Behind Act also takes aim at the achievement gap. It requires states to disaggregate student achievement data by racial subgroups of students, including black and Hispanic students, so that performance gains for all children can be tracked. The law also contains a host of accountability measures that penalize schools that are unable to show achievement gains by all subgroups of students. The hope is that these strict accountability measures will spur across-the-board gains in achievement.

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