

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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What is the Achievement Gap?

Disturbing numbers of African-American and Latino students continue to lag far behind their white peers on many measures of educational performance. This disparity in performance tied to race and ethnicity is known as the *achievement gap*. The gap appears before children enter kindergarten and it persists into adulthood. It surfaces in grades, test scores, course selection, high school graduation rates, and college completion. And it exists at all socioeconomic levels, being most pronounced at the highest. To be sure, minority students have made striking gains in academic performance over the past several decades, but their achievement levels have never reached parity with those of white students.

Historical Perspective

The achievement gap is not a new phenomenon; it has been documented for at least a half of century. During the 1970s through mid-'80s, a great deal of progress was made in closing the gap, largely due to the proliferation of school desegregation efforts, federal anti-poverty programs, and other school reform activities. Between 1971 and 1988, for example, the achievement gap on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math tests was cut in half. The improvements in achievement, moreover, began to translate to real gains in college-going rates. But around 1992 all of the progress seemed to come to a halt as test scores of African-American and Latino students started to decline. Today the typical minority student scores below three-quarters of white students on most standardized tests.

And on the NAEP tests, minority high school seniors trail their white counterparts by as much as four grade levels.

Although theories abound as to what stalled the narrowing of the achievement gap, a number of researchers now believe that reasons have to do with the focus of the earlier solutions. According to this reasoning, the earlier interventions were directed toward a limited understanding about the causes of the problem; hence, they lacked the necessary elements for making a real difference beyond improving very rudimentary skills of minority students.

What, then, are the causes of the achievement gap, and what can be done about it? This issue of the *Balanced View* examines answers to these questions. In preparing our work, we have drawn on the latest research and reports about this topic including an October 1999 report and subsequent publications from the College Board's *National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. We begin our review by discussing why the achievement gap is an important educational issue.

Why is the Achievement Gap Important?

Though acknowledged for years, the achievement gap has been a difficult and under-researched area for educators. Many feared the subject would fuel suggestions that African-Americans are genetically less intelligent, as the fiercely debated book, *The Bell Curve*, asserted. But a number of converging factors have changed that, including the following:

■ The nationwide move toward high standards and “high-stakes” testing, which has accentuated performance disparities among racial and ethnic groups.

■ The growth of charter schools and voucher programs, which has led some minority parents to leave traditional public schools in favor of other alternatives.

■ The erosion of affirmative action policies in college admissions, which has increased the need for raising minorities’ achievement levels earlier so that racial preferences are not needed when they apply to college.

■ Rapid changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the nation, which have the potential for widening the achievement gap and leading to further inequality and social conflict.

These factors, combined with the recognition that both individuals and society lose when entire groups of people are ill-equipped for educational success, have raised the achievement gap to the forefront of the national debate about schools. What was once a verboten subject is now a top priority for educators, researchers, and policymakers, alike. It is prompting them to look at the problem in new ways and to seek workable solutions that produce lasting results.

What Explains the Achievement Gap?

To date, there is no clear consensus among researchers on the causes of the achievement gap. The most commonly cited (and more widely accepted) explanations cluster in five areas:

❶ **Poverty** – Research shows that poverty is strongly related to low academic achievement. Growing up poor often means getting inadequate health care and nutrition, having fewer resources in the home, and moving frequently—all factors known to depress school performance. Researchers have also found that in schools with poverty rates of 25 percent or higher, both poor and non-poor students do less well academically. Minority students are much more likely than whites to be poor or to attend high-poverty-concentration schools; thus poverty takes a higher educational toll for both poor and non-poor students from these groups. But poverty cannot explain all of the achievement differences, because performance disparities exist even in middle-class communities and well-to-do suburbs. Affluent African-Americans, in fact, tend to score just below the level of the least well-off whites.

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the achievement gap.**

❷ **Parenting/Education of Parents** – Research indicates that at least half of the achievement gap between minority and white students is attributable to learning differences already present when they begin school. That has suggested to some researchers that parenting practices could be a major cause of the achievement gap. “Good” parenting is strongly related to formal education. Parents with college degrees, more so than those with less formal education, are able to draw on their skills to provide an informal “preschool” for their youngsters that offers valuable preparation for the elementary grades. Moreover, they continue to provide strong support to help their children succeed at all grade levels, K-12 and beyond. For example, they hire tutors when

their children are having learning problems; they press high school officials to let their children take Advanced Placement classes; and they pay for SAT preparation lessons to help their children get into college. Parents with little formal education and low incomes, generally, are not in a position to provide these extensive supports. Currently, most students with less well-educated parents are minorities, while those with well-educated parents are white. Thus, parent education and, by extension, parenting practices are areas where white students enjoy a large academic advantage over many minority students.

❸ **Racial Bias** – While racial attitudes in this country have become more positive over the years, an ample number of people still believe that minorities are less able to succeed in school for either innate or cultural reasons. Researchers have identified at least two ways in which these beliefs can contribute to the achievement gap. First, they can lead educators to have *low academic expectations* for minority students, which in turn could result in them asking less of these students. Teachers, for example, might not hold minority students to high standards or encourage them to take more advanced classes. Second, prejudicial beliefs about intellectual ability can lead some minority students to perform less well than they are capable of doing. On this front, research has shown that anxiety about fulfilling a stereotype of inferiority—i.e., the “*stereotype threat*”—not only depresses the test performance of minority students, but also could explain why these students are sometimes reluctant to take advanced academic courses or otherwise compete in the academic arena. While researchers have yet to quantify the overall impact of the “stereotype

threat” or of low teacher expectations on the achievement gap, many believe that it may be significant.

4 **Cultural Differences** – Increasingly, the research community is taking a serious look at how cultural differences might contribute to the achievement gap. There is evidence that some minority students view academic success as a betrayal of their cultural identity because it involves conforming to the norms of white behavior, or “*acting white*.” As a result, they lower their academic effort so as not to break ranks with their peers. There is also evidence that the link between *effort and reward*—the basis of the white work ethic—is not at all obvious to minorities. Historically, minorities,

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particularly African-Americans, were denied higher educational opportunities and employment on the basis of their ethnicity; it did not matter how much they valued education or strove to master it. While this scenario has changed, it may take several generations for African-Americans to experience and therefore believe that academic effort leads to success and be committed to it.

5 **School Resources** – Although there has been considerable debate among researchers as to the impact of school resources on achievement, new statistical methods and data suggest that additional resources may have sizable effects. Studies show that crucial resources such as qualified teachers, technology, and challenging curriculum are unequally distributed among high- and low-minority-concentration schools. Studies also indicate vital differences in the way high- and low-minority-concentration

schools spend the resources available to them. On this matter, some researchers have theorized that the differences derive from the disproportionate number of minority students with severe academic, emotional, or disciplinary problems. Such children consume many times more resources than the average child—more reading specialists, more related services staff, and more of their teachers’ time. The net result is that while predominantly minority schools spend about as much per pupil as predominantly white schools, the average minority child without special problems is likely getting less.

Taken as a whole, the research evidence suggests that the achievement gap is a deep-rooted, complex problem stemming from a variety of economic,

social, and cultural causes. That, researchers say, is why solving the

problem requires a combination of strategies—no single “magic bullet” will take care of it.

What Can Close the Achievement Gap?

Coming to terms with the achievement gap will not be easy, but researchers increasingly are convinced that it can be done. This conviction is based on growing evidence about innovative practices that have improved the academic outcomes of minority students, helping to narrow the gap.

1 **Preschool and Parent Education Programs** – A large body of research suggests that quality early childhood education (ECE) programs can improve the achievement of minority children both immediately and for the long-term. The most effective ECE programs are those that combine child-focused services with significant par-

enting components (see **Early Childhood Education** issues of the *Balanced View*). But several cautionary points need to be made about ECE programs. First, although the academic gains produced by the best programs have been substantial, they generally have not been large enough to close the achievement gap. Second, most preschool and parent education programs are designed for disadvantaged children and parents; little is known about the educational benefits for middle and high socioeconomic-level minority families. Third, many minority families do not have access to preschool or parent education programs. And finally, not all preschool/parent programs have the resources available to provide the quality of service needed to achieve significant benefits. This evidence suggests that issues of access, evaluation, resources, and program quality/standards must be considered in the design and expansion of preschool delivery systems. Moreover, if these systems are to make a genuine impact on the achievement gap, stronger linkages and instructional alignment must occur with receiving K-12 schools.

2 **K-12 School Reform Strategies**

– Extensive school reform efforts over the past 15 years have highlighted a number of effective K-12 strategies for improving the achievement level of minority students. These include the following:

■ Developing high academic expectations for all students, e.g., through explicit grade-by-grade content standards, more challenging curriculum, and more rigorous promotion and high school graduation requirements.

■ Encouraging more minority students to enroll in college preparatory classes (*Note: **Advancement Via Individual Determination** or AVID, is a research-based program noteworthy for its success in this area.*)

■ Selecting and retaining only the most qualified teachers, and systematically supporting existing staff through sustained professional development.

■ Making extensive use of data to identify root causes of the achievement gap, e.g., analyzing test results, course enrollment patterns, disciplinary actions, school climate survey results, etc. (*Note: the **Minority Student Achievement Network** is a collaborative research group that is conducting root cause analyses to identify explanations and solutions to the achievement gap*).

■ Redesigning schools to create closer relationships among teachers and students, e.g., through smaller schools/houses or smaller class size (see **Class Size** issue of the *Balanced View*).

■ Adopting and carefully monitoring “whole-school” reform models (*Note: two of the 24 well-known reform models have proven promising for disadvantaged minority students—**Success for All** and the **School Development Program**. Research on the vast majority of other comprehensive models is mixed or non-existent*).

■ Using instructional strategies that emphasize active, inquiry, or discovery learning so that intrinsic reward—the satisfaction students experience by their own efforts—is the primary motivator for learning.

■ Reducing school segregation, including segregation within schools, e.g., in challenging courses or remedial programs (*Note: Research in New York State has shown that well-implemented **magnet schools** can help to narrow achievement differences between minority and white students*).

■ Systematically involving minority parents in school activities and in the education of their children; and, with low-income minorities particularly, making a concerted effort to minimize barriers that may prevent them from attending school events, e.g., by providing babysitting, a meal, financial incentives, etc.

In assessing these strategies, school decision-makers will have to weigh a series of tradeoffs centering on cost, ease of implementation, and proven effectiveness. For example, reducing class size is effective, but it is also expensive and can result in a shortage of qualified teachers. Similarly, certain whole-school reform models are effective, but these models are seldom implemented with the fidelity needed to produce results. Decision-makers will also have to balance other issues in devising a workable gap reduction plan. For example, they will have to consider strategies that not only help the worst performing minority students, but also nurture the highest performing minorities, lifting them from “good” to “excellent” achievement. And they will have to attend to the political reality that any viable strategy must promise some benefits for white students as well as minorities. Reducing class size, requiring high levels of teacher competence, and developing high academic expectations all meet this test.

③ **Supplemental Education Strategies** – The educational reform movement has also spurred the growing use of supplemental programs such as after-school tutoring; Saturday schools; summer enrichment programs; and learning opportunities offered by community organizations, churches, and other groups. For the most part, these programs have been designed to help low-achieving minority students reach basic levels (*Note: the federal government’s new **21st Century Community Learning Centers** initiative, which provides funding*

for after-school enrichment, is an example). Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of supplemental programs. And few of the programs target high achieving minorities or those from middle to high socioeconomic levels. Despite these issues, researchers point out that many high performing white students are exposed to extensive supplementary opportunities provided directly or paid for by their parents. They, therefore, suggest that if minority students are to reach parity with high achieving white students, a more comprehensive array of supplemental education programs—designed for all socioeconomic and achievement levels—should be made available to them.



In summary, solving the achievement gap problem will not be easy. It will require a mobilization of resources at every step along the path to adulthood, and every location: homes, communities, college campuses, and pre-K-12 schools. And it will require sustained research. Experts acknowledge that it could take years, if not generations, to eliminate the gap. But they also say that too much is at stake to avoid the problem and hope that it will go away on its own.

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments. For further information about the programs cited in this issue, or the references used, please e-mail us.