Social Inequities and School Rankings: A Critical Analysis of the ARIZONA LEARNS Achievement Profiles

Eric Johnson
Arizona State University
ejjohnson@asu.edu

Abstract:

Recognizing the vast disparities in academic achievement throughout Arizona's public schools, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) has recently started pushing for tougher standards and demanding for more school accountability. This study analyzes the ranking system implemented by the ADE that categorizes all public schools according to ridged educational characteristics. While standardized test scores and dropout statistics are touted by many as solid examples of aspects by which schools should be judged, this work presents multiple alternative social trends that are overlooked in the ranking process. Publicly accessible data is used to demonstrate commonalities between all Arizona high schools that reported test scores for language-minority students during the 2003-2004 school year. Instead of ranking schools according to a single monolithic system, environmental factors such as school size, teacher turn over ratio, and the socioeconomic level of the surrounding community need to be seen as significantly contributing to the overall level of student achievement. This paper contains various tables based on data taken from the ADE website. Furthermore, the bibliography includes eleven academic sources.

I. *Introduction*

> The No Child Left Behind Act, which will increase significantly the federal government's role in failing local school districts, is unlikely to provide the help that is needed. The measure does nothing to address the horrid conditions present in many failing schools, and it does not even begin to attempt to ameliorate the social inequities that affect schooling (Noguera 2003: 102).

The implementation of ARIZONA LEARNS is an attempt by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to reconcile the disparities in achievement levels that exist in the educational system. Following in the footsteps of No Child Left Behind, AZ LEARNS is a system that classifies schools according to various "educational" factors (listed below). While this ranking system is based on elements that ostensibly provide an accurate portrait of the achievement level of individual schools, it fails to highlight other possible issues that contribute to academic underachievement. The objective of this discussion is to outline some alternative characteristics

of schools as they are ranked according to the AZ LEARNS Achievement Profiles. Elucidating these alternative attributes will show that there are multiple social concerns that need to be addressed in addition to the curricular efforts that are currently the focus of attention.

The complex rubric of educational and social factors that ultimately determine a student's achievement level is exacerbated when applied to the context of a language minority education (Cummins 1986, 1996). Not only must language minority students negotiate a school system that already limits their language education to single monolithic approach (i.e., Structured English Immersion), they are also exposed to the same underlying elements that constitute the school/educational environment that surrounds all students. This idea evokes some interesting questions:

- Do language minority students in "excelling" schools inherently do better than those in "performing" or "underperforming" schools?
- Do lower ranking schools inherently have a higher population of language minority students than higher ranking schools?
- Why do schools with higher proportions of minority students achieve lower levels of success?

In order answer these (and multiple other) questions concerning the nature of language minority education, it is imperative to characterize the schools in which language minority students are educated. Stemming from these types of concerns, this project will critically analyze the contributing factors of (under)achievement in traditional district high schools (grades 9-12) in Arizona. The schools have been analyzed according to their AZ LEARNS Achievement Profile. Since this investigation's primary focus is on language minority students, only schools that reported AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards) scores for "Limited English Proficient" students as part of their Arizona Department of Education 2003-04 Arizona School Report Card were included in the study (individual report cards are available at www.ade.az.gov).

Outlining a portrayal of schools according to their profile rank enables us to understand the general environment in which language minority students are being educated.

II. *Background*

Before continuing, it is necessary to take a closer look at the criteria that determine the Achievement Profile (see www.ade.az.gov for an expanded description). Basically, schools in Arizona are assigned a profile ranking according to two general categories: 1) the ARIZONA LEARNS model, and 2) an assessment of Adequate Yearly Progress (as determined by No Child Left Behind). AZ LEARNS (A.R.S. § 15-241) identifies two primary indicators for measuring school success: 1) the AIMS, and 2) the Arizona Measure of Academic Progress (MAP). MAP is determined by using results from the Stanford 9 Achievement Test (SAT 9). Based on the SAT 9, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) computes the percentage of students enrolled in a particular school for at least one academic year who had achieved one year of academic progress. Additionally, as mandated by A.R.S. § 15-241, graduation and dropout rates are considered as secondary indicators for the Achievement Profile.

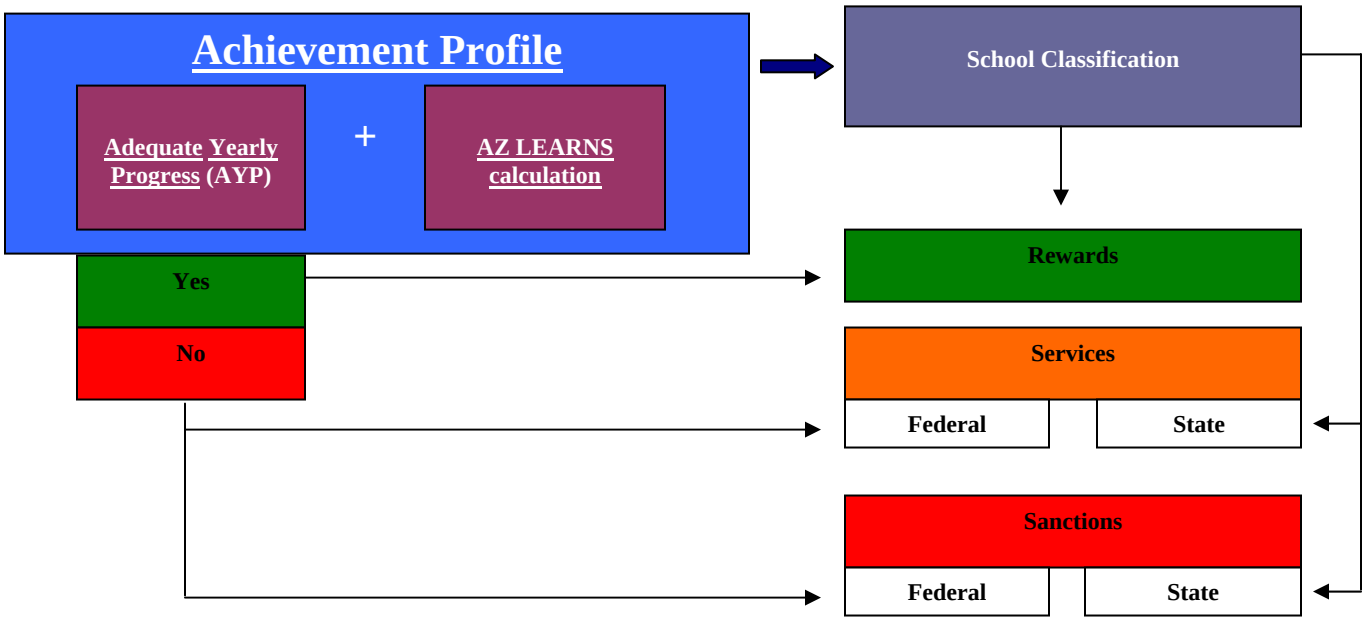
The ADE will determine whether a school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or failed to make AYP based on the criteria established under NCLB [Title I, Part A, Section 1111 (2) (B-I)] provided the subgroup meets the minimum analysis size of thirty (30) pupils. Essentially, the federally stipulated AYP is determined according to four factors:

- The school must assess 95 percent of the total enrolled student population as well as 95 percent of each disaggregated student group (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) using the state mandated assessment (i.e., AIMS);
- The school must meet the state's annual target percentage of students demonstrating proficiency in Arizona's Academic Standards on the state mandated assessment in the subject areas of reading and mathematics;
- The school must meet the target attendance rate or demonstrate improvement;
- The school must target graduation rate or demonstrate improvement.

Taking these factors into consideration, the ADE assigns each school a profile ranking. Schools are categorized as either: 1) *Excelling*, 2) *Highly Performing*, 3) *Performing*, 4) *Underperforming*, or 5) *Failing to Meet Academic Standards*. Schools that are designated as *Underperforming* for three consecutive years are labeled as *Failing to Meet Academic Standards* and are subject to a school improvement plan. In accordance to Section 1116 (Title I, No Child Left Behind Act), any school receiving Title I funds will be placed in federal school improvement after failing to make AYP for a second consecutive year.

The determination of all school site designations/classifications (through the Achievement Profile) will be made on the analysis of the measures in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Arizona's Single Statewide Accountability System
(source: www.ade.az.gov/azlearns/2004_AZ_Consolidated_Workbook.doc)



As stated by the ADE (see State of Arizona Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook: www.ade.az.gov/azlearns/2004_AZ_Consolidated_Workbook.doc), this model fully integrates NCLB stipulations for AYP and state accountability requirements. Depending on the

classification, schools will be included in the rewards system or will face sanctions, which may require them to deliver services to eligible students. Regardless of a school classification, Title I schools that do not make AYP will be required undergo the necessary sanctions detailed by NCLB. The ADE claims that the integration of AYP into the Achievement Profile ensures that schools, districts, and the state will maintain focus on the federal requirements outlined in NCLB.

Each year, schools compile the requisite information and submit it to the ADE. The state then produces a report card for each individual school (available at www.ade.az.gov). The majority of the data listed in the current discussion were taken directly from the report cards. As discussed above, the AIMS plays a large role in the outcome of school rankings (and individual student achievement), and a large portion of the report cards is dedicated to the scores. Since schools are required to report test scores in disaggregated student subgroups, the achievement of these groups is highly visible and open to the public. As listed in the report cards, the ADE has defined four levels of student achievement in reading, writing, and math according to the results on the AIMS test:

1) Exceeds the Standard: This level denotes demonstration of superior academic performance evidenced by achievement substantially beyond the goal for all students;

2) Meets the Standard: This level denotes demonstration of solid academic performance on challenging subject matter reflected by the content standards. This includes subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and content-relevant analytical skills. Students who perform at this level are well prepared to begin work on even more challenging material that is required for the next grade level. Attainment of at least this level is the goal for all students**;**

3) Approaches the Standard: This level denotes partial understanding of the knowledge and application of the skills that are fundamental for proficient work. Students who approach the standard demonstrate competency in the prerequisites necessary to begin working on the challenging content required of the student who meets the standards, but do not demonstrate full understanding of that challenging content;

4) Falls Far Below the Standards: This level denotes insufficient evidence of the prerequisite skills to approach meeting the standards. Students who perform at this level have serious gaps in knowledge and skills. They, in all likelihood, require a considerable amount of additional work and remediation in the basic skills that are prerequisite to the challenging work expected at the current grade level (www.ade.az.gov/standards/aims/PerformanceStandards/performancelevels.asp).

These definitions become extremely important when a student that *Meets the Standard* is viewed as possessing intellectual competency that "includes subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and content-relevant analytical skills" and a student that *Falls Far Below the Standards* is seen as having "serious gaps in knowledge and skills." It is a main objective of this work to demonstrate that definitions like these perpetuate the negative view that educators and the public have toward language minority students.

III. *Methodology*

The first step in this analysis was the selection of the schools. In order to establish continuity between the different factors of achievement, the schools selected had to be traditional district high schools that registered AIMS test scores for "Limited English Proficient" students. The schools were then grouped according to their AZ LEARNS Achievement Profile classification/ranking. It is important to note that the state did not list any high schools under the *Failing to Meet Academic Standards*. Furthermore, none of the high schools that were designated as *Underperforming* provided any test results for language minority students. Regardless, all of the high schools listed by the state as *Underperforming* have been included in this discussion as a means of establishing a baseline for comparison. The following is a list of all five high schools designated by the state as *Underperforming*:

AZ LEARNS Level	School	District
Underperforming	Baboquivar	Indian Oasis-Baboquivari Unified District
	Ft. Thomas	Ft. Thomas Unified District
	Music Mt.	Peach Springs Unified District
	Red Mesa	Red Mesa Unified District
	Superior	Superior Unified District

Finally, charter schools, alternative schools, and small schools (less than 100 students) were excluded due to various other contributing factors. A complete list of all Arizona high schools that recorded test scores for language minority students has been assembled below:

AZ LEARNS Level	School	District
Performing	Agua Fria	Agua Fria Union High School District
	Alhambra	Phoenix Union High School District
	Alchesay	Whiteriver Unified District
	Apollo	Glendale Union High School District
	Amphitheater	Amphitheater Unified District
	Barry Goldwater	Deer Valley Unified District
	Bradshaw Mt.	Humboldt Unified District
	Buckeye	Buckeye Union High School District
	Carl Hayden	Phoenix Union High School District
	Casa Grande Union	Casa Grande Union High School District
	Central	Phoenix Union High School District
	Cesar Chavez	Phoenix Union High School District
	Chinle	Chinle Unified District
	Cibola	Yuma Union High School District
	Coconino	Flagstaff Unified District
	Coronado	Scottsdale Unified District
	Deer Valley	Deer Valley Unified District
	Desert View	Sunnyside Unified District
	Douglas	Douglas Unified District
	Dysart	Dysart Unified District
	Flagstaff	Flagstaff Unified District
	Flowing Wells	Flowing Wells Unified District
	Ganado	Ganado Unified District
	Gila Bend	Gila Bend Unified District
	Glendale	Glendale Union High School District
	Grand Canyon	Grand Canyon Unified District
	Holbrook	Holbrook Unified District
	Howenstine	Tucson Unified District
	Independence	Glendale Union High School District
	Kofa	Yuma Union High School District
	Maricopa	Maricopa Unified School District
	Maryvale	Phoenix Union High School District
	Metro Tech	Phoenix Union High School District
	Mingus	Mingus Union High School District
	Monument Valley	Kayenta Unified District
	Moon Valley	Glendale Union High School District
	Nogales	Nogales Unified District
	North	Phoenix Union High School District
	Paradise Valley	Paradise Valley Unified District
	Peoria	Peoria Unified School District
	Pinon	Pinon Unified District
	Rincon	Tucson Unified District
	Rio Rico	Santa Cruz Valley Unified District
	Sahuarita	Sahuarita Unified District
	San Carlos	San Carlos Unified District
	Santa Rita	Tucson Unified District
	Sinagua	Flagstaff Unified District

(**Performing** continued)	South Mt.	Phoenix Union High School District
	Sunnyside	Sunnyside Unified District
	Tempe	Tempe Union High School District
	Tolleson	Tolleson Union High School District
	Trevor Browne	Phoenix Union High School District
	Tuba City	Tuba City Unified District
	Valley	Sanders Unified District
	Washington	Glendale Union High School District
	Westwood	Mesa Unified District
	Wickenburg	Wickenburg Unified District
	Willcox	Willcox Unified District
	Window Rock	Window Rock Unified District
	Winslow	Winslow Unified District
	Yuma	Yuma Union High School District
Highly Performing	Chandler	Chandler Unified District
	Hamilton	Chandler Unified District
	Marcos de Niza	Tempe Union High School District
	McClintock	Tempe Union High School District
	Mt. View (Tucson)	Marana Unified District
	North Canyon	Paradise Valley Unified District
	Sahuaro	Tucson Unified District
	Shadow Mt.	Paradise Valley Unified District
	Sunrise Mt.	Peoria Unified School District
Excelling	Arcadia	Scottsdale Unified District
	Dobson	Mesa Unified District
	Gilbert	Gilbert Unified District

Not counting the schools listed as *Underperforming*, 73 total (traditional-district) high schools reported scores for their language minority students. Of these schools, only 42 were select for analysis. Due to manageable numbers, all of the high schools in the *Underperforming*, *Highly Performing*, and *Excelling* categories were used in the study. Since there are a total of 61 schools in the *Performing* group, only 25 were randomly chosen to serve as a representative sample.

All of the schools have been arranged and analyzed in a matrix according to four general categories of (under)achievement. Each category comprises multiple specific factors and/or characteristics that contribute (directly or indirectly) to student success. The four general categories and their constituent factors have been listed below:

1) AIMS Scores for Language Minority Students by AZ LEARNS Level

**Scores are reported as discussed above: FB= Falls Far Below the Standards, A= Approaches the Standard, Met= Meets the Standard, and Ex= Exceeds the Standard.*

- math
- reading
- writing

2) Environmental Factors of Achievement

- total enrollment for 2003-2004
- % of language minority students in reading
- school dropout rate
- % of students participating in Free and/or Reduced lunch
- total number of incidents that occurred on the school grounds that required the intervention of local, state or federal law enforcement

3) Social Factors of Achievement

- % of total students tested that were listed as a minority (i.e., not white)
- % of total students tested that were listed as economically disadvantaged
- % of total students tested that were listed as being a migrant student
- school graduation rate
- school attendance rate

4) Characteristics of Teachers across Performance Levels

- % of teachers with 7+ years of experience
- % of teachers with a MA or higher
- 1st year salary with no experience
- 10th year salary with a MA or higher

For the majority of the factors, the information was readily accessible from the state produced report cards. For other factors (e.g., teacher salary and free and reduced lunch rates), district web sites and/or individual schools were contacted via telephone. For some factors, the scores of NA (no data) or NC (under 10 total students) are listed. In some cases, there will be an asterisks listed denoting that there is a description listed below for the given score. Once the individual schools were arranged within the given matrices, averages were calculated for the given factors. The averages allow schools to be compared according to their different

Achievement Profiles. While the following section delves deeper into theses results, it is important to note that, barring the AIMS scores, the analytical categories listed above are not mutually exclusive. The various elements of achievement discussed below should not be seen as isolated factors; rather, they should be understood as belonging to a single web of contextual influences that equally contribute to the students' overall educational experience.

IV. *Analysis*

Even though none of the schools deemed by the state as *Underperforming* reported scores for language minority students, the results for other contributing factors discussed below illustrate definite patterns of underachievement that need to be addressed. Even more ominous is the number of schools that are one step away from being listed as *Underperforming*. By far, the *Performing* classification is the most prominent for both high schools and language minority students. Of the 73 schools that listed scores for language minority students, 61 (83.6%) are ranked as *Performing*. Though being designated as *Performing* might sound sufficient to some, when the main characteristics of these schools are brought to the surface, it is evident that there are vast inequities between the educational environments of *Performing* schools and those classified as *Highly Performing* (and/or *Excelling*).

The following analyses seek to answer the question of why 83.6% of the high schools that educate language minority students only ranked as *Performing*. While the statistics discussed below represent averages for their indicated profile level, a complete listing of schools and their individual scores can be found in Appendix I (p. 21). Due to the importance that the ADE places on test scores, the first category to be analyzed displays the average AIMS results attained by language minority students (grouped according to profile ranking). In the table

below, each profile category has been listed according to their initial letter (e.g., U = *Underperforming*).

Table2: ***AIMS Scores for Language Minority Students by AZ LEARNS Level***

AZ LRNS LEVEL	Math				Reading				Writing			
	%FB	%A	%Met	%Ex	%FB	%A	%Met	%Ex	%FB	%A	%Met	%Ex
U	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**
P	**86.6**	**4.9**	**7.8**	**.8**	**52**	**36.2**	**9.6**	**2.3**	**65**	**14.6**	**20.4**	**0**
H	**71.2**	**17.8**	**6.8**	**4.3**	**27**	**48.9**	**24.3**	**0**	**53.8**	**11.2**	**35**	**0**
E	**79.3**	**21**	**0**	**0**	**50**	**44.3**	**5.7**	**0**	**70**	**20**	**10**	**0**

At first glance, the scores do not seem to be disproportionate. Starting with the math scores, it could be stated that both the *Performing* and *Highly Performing* schools attained a higher overall level of achievement since 8.6% and 11.1% (respectively) of language minority students in these schools achieved at or above a level that "Meets the Standard," compared to 0% of *Excelling* schools. Language minority students in the *Performing* schools 'met the standard' more frequently than the students in the *Excelling* schools. In fact, there was a higher percentage of students from *Excelling* schools that scored at a "Falls Far Below the Standard" level in writing than from the other levels. Overall, though, the *Highly Performing* schools consistently realized higher scores than the other two levels.

Even though these types of micro-observations give the impression that students from lower ranking schools are doing better in some areas than those higher ranking schools, it must be noted that in schools from all four levels, more than 75% of language minority students are not achieving a score that "Meets the Standard" in all three testing groups (except for the *Highly Performing* schools on the writing section where "only" 65% did not 'meet the standard'). Looking at these trends from a broader viewpoint, it can be posited that the AIMS is an insurmountable task for language minority students, regardless of the level.

In addition to the pressure that students feel by having to pass the AIMS in order to graduate, there are also many other social factors contribute to the overall educational equation. Taking into consideration the overall educational environment of exclusion that language minority students must feel in the *Excelling* schools (described below), it is no surprise that their scores do not parallel the scores of their fellow classmates. Apart from the *Excelling* schools, there is definitely a considerable rift between the scores of language minority students in *Performing* schools and those attending *Highly Performing* schools. This becomes a significant point when one considers the nature of the overall environments of these schools. The rest of this discussion attempts to explain why (language minority) students in *Performing* (and *Underperforming*) schools generally score at a lower scholastic level than those in the *Highly Performing* and *Excelling* schools.

Building on this foundation of (state assigned) achievement levels, the next group of factors involves the general school environment in which the students are situated. The following table labels some important features of school demographics.

Table 3: *Environmental Factors of Achievement*

AZ LRNS Level	Total 2003 Enrollment	%LEP ` Tested in Reading	School Dropout Rate %	% F/R Lunch (School)	# criminal incidents
U	**221.8**	**NA**	**18.2**	**78.1**	**40.8**
P	**1538.6**	**24.5**	**4.9**	**50.2**	**29.3**
H	**2286.5**	**5.1**	**1.3**	**16.6**	**21.9**
E	**2254.3**	**4**	**1**	**15.5**	**10**

In this section, the *Underperforming* schools are included so as to show some general trends in (under)achievement. Even though *Underperforming* schools did not record any AIMS scores for language minority students (due to a lack of enrollment), characterizing their school environments is important to understand how they relate to *Performing* schools. Looking at the enrollments of the different schools, it is clear that small schools are more subject to

underachievement than larger schools. Additionally, there is an inverse relationship between the overall population of a school and the percentage of language minority students that were tested. Even though the percentages listed above only represent the number of sophomore language minority students that took the AIMS test, they are a good marker of the overall demographic proportion of students in the schools.

Another important indicator of school environment is the dropout rate. Though there is a momentous gap between the *Underperforming* schools and the rest, the 3.6% difference between *Performing* and *Highly Performing* schools is also quite telling. If the dropout rate is calculated against the overall enrollment, it is the *Performing* schools that actually see the largest number of students dropping out (i.e., 75 *Performing* vs. 40 *Underperforming*, 30 *Highly Performing*, and 23 *Excelling*). While the overall dropout percentage is definitely significant, the large number of individuals that quit *Performing* schools is a powerful social statistic, especially when one considers the sheer number of language minority students that attend those schools (based on the proportion of language minority students that were tested in each school).

The percentage of students participating in the Free and Reduced Lunch program is commonly used to indicate the socioeconomic status of the students/families in the school. Although the difference between *Underperforming* and *Performing* schools is somewhat large, the more poignant fact is that they are both over 50%, as compared to the *Highly Performing* and *Excelling* schools which are both under 17%. While it might seem tautological to point out that financially limited kids do worse than wealthy kids, the fact that the *Performing* schools both have a large low socioeconomic population *and* contain the majority of language minority students is very important. This aspect will be further addressed at the end of the discussion.

According to A.R.S. § 15-241, the number of criminal incidents is required to appear on the school report cards. Even though it is unclear as to what counts as the "total number of incidents that occurred on the school grounds that required the intervention of local, state or federal law enforcement," it is obvious that, independent of school population, there are more visible "incidents" that occur on lower ranking schools as compared to higher ranking schools. This number becomes even more stifling if calculated according to the total number of incidents compared to the total enrollment. Either way, it shows that in lower achieving schools, crime is more apparent (as compared to more prevalent). This could be dismissed by saying that some schools "cover up" incidents, or that others are more eager to include the authorities. In the public eye (i.e., the ADE report cards), lower achieving schools are more susceptible to criminal incidents.

The following section describes (additional) socio-environmental factors of achievement, many of which are directly related to the previous section. In the following table, though, there are not any direct statistical categories that exclusively depict language minority students (i.e., not all migrant students are classified as "Limited English Proficient").

Table 4: *Social Factors of Achievement*

AZ LEARNS LEVEL	% Minority (non-White) Tested (in Reading)	%Economically Disadvantaged Students Tested	%Migrant Students Tested	Graduation Rate	Attendance Rate
U	**90.6**	**21.4**	**0**	**60.8**	**90.6**
P	**67.9**	**36.2**	**4.6**	**78.8**	**95.1**
H	**32.8**	**2.8**	**.3**	**87.2**	**97.3**
E	**29.3**	**.3**	**0**	**92.3**	**97.3**

While the attendance rate statistic might not be overwhelmingly impressive, the most disheartening statistic is represented in the overall percentage of minority students that were tested. As sad as it might be, the trend displayed here shows that schools with more minorities

attain lower levels of achievement than those with larger proportions of white students. This figure alone demands a closer look at *how* and *by whom* these students are being educated.

The next statistic is a bit deceptive. It does not mesh well with the number of students involved in the Free and Reduced Lunch program described above. In reality, the Free and Reduced Lunch program might be a better overall benchmark to gauge the socioeconomic context of the school, but the fact that there is such a large difference between the *Underperforming-Performing* school percentages and the *Highly Performing-Excelling* percentages here reifies the correlation between socioeconomic status and achievement. Furthermore, the disproportionate number of migrant students tested at the *Performing* level corresponds with the high percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

The final group of factors speaks volumes to the importance of solid teachers in a school. In an attempt to understand why some schools seem to have better teachers than others, four basic characteristics of high school teachers have been isolated.

Table 5: ***Characteristics of Teachers across Performance Levels***

AZ LRNS LEVEL	%Teacher Experience 7+ yrs	%Teachers w/ MA+	$ Salary 1st yr	$ Salary 10 yr w/ MA
U	53.9	37.7	26,332	37,939
P	56.6	52.6	29,239	39,355
H	63.4	61.3	31,384	43,073
E	65.1	70.9	31,293	40,285

The first statistic contains a double significance. First, it indicates that high achieving schools have experienced teachers. On the other hand, it also alludes to the fact that lower achieving schools (for whatever reason) have a higher turnover ratio of teachers. This not only equates to a lack of experience in the teaching realm, but also, it results in less collegiality among the staff. The other (un)believable statistic that surfaced is the education level of teachers across the different levels. Basically, the majority of language minority students in the state are

being educated in schools where approximately half of the teachers have M.A. degrees (compared to 70.9% of those in *Excelling* schools). It is troubling to ponder why the more experienced and educated teachers gravitate toward schools that are predominantly white.

The last two statistics might (ostensibly) offer an answer to the previous question. Apparently, if an educator in Arizona wants to earn a good living (working in a school where language minority students attend) then s/he has to work in a school that is *Highly Performing* or *Excellent* (i.e., predominantly white and affluent). Due to the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the actual salary schedule level attained by teachers (e.g., salary freezes, incentives, career latter, maximum 5th step starting point for new-experienced teachers, etc.), only the first year salary can be used as an appropriate metric. Even then, most schools offer a competitive first year salary in order to attract new teachers only to bog them down with salary freezes and low incentive rates.

V. *Discussion*

The objective of this project was to unearth some of the underlying factors behind school and student underachievement. It has been well document that minority and impoverished schools have less access to educational resources (Kozal 1991; MacLeod 1995; Noguera 2003; Gibson et. al. 2004). I have tried to show how Arizona's Achievement Profile ranking system reflects some of the main characteristics illustrated by previous studies on social inequities in education. To improve the educational system, we need to focus on the school environment and the cultural capital that the students possess. According to the Arizona Department of Education, the dropout rate for minorities (10.4% of African Americans, 11.8% of Hispanics, and 15.3% of Native Americans) considerably outweighs that of White students (5.6%) (Owin 2003). Considering that Arizona's dropout rates for minorities are so staggering, it is obvious that more

resources need to be focused on minority schools. Moreover, stepping back from the state level, there have been many revealing statistics produced on a national level that are appropriate to this discussion. Taking a look at how Arizona funds education sheds light on the why there are so many inequities in our schools.

As reported by the National Education Association (2004), teachers in Arizona maintain an average salary that is 28th in the nation ($45,532). Relating this fact to the statistic on teacher salaries above, $45,000 is a fairly lofty goal for teachers in an *Underachieving* and/or *Performing* school. More significantly, though, is the NEA's statistic concerning money spent on education per pupil; in this category, Arizona ranks 50th out of 51 (they include the District of Columbia in the rankings). Whereas Arizona allotted $5,091 per student during the 2003-04 school year, all of the top ten states reported spending over $10,000 per pupil (D.C. was first with $13,317). Furthermore, Education Week (2004) reports that Arizona's per pupil funding accounts for a mere 77% of the national average.

As for the overall educational results, Arizona has recently been dubbed by Morgan Quinto Press (2005) as the 48th "smartest state" (number 1 -Massachusetts- being the smartest). Each state was evaluated according to the following factors:

POSITIVE FACTORS:

1. Public elementary and secondary school revenue per $1,000 personal income;
2. Per pupil public elementary and secondary school current expenditures;
3. Percent of public elementary and secondary school current expenditures used for Instruction;
4. Percent of population graduated from high school;
5. Public high school graduation rate;
6. Percent of public school fourth graders proficient or better in reading;
7. Percent of public school eighth graders proficient or better in reading;
8. Percent of public school fourth graders proficient or better in writing;
9. Percent of public school eighth graders proficient or better in writing;
10. Percent of public school fourth graders proficient or better in mathematics;
11. Percent of public school eighth graders proficient or better in mathematics;
12. Percent of 4th graders whose parents have strict rules about getting homework done;

13. Average teacher salary as a percent of average annual pay of all workers;
14. Percent of school-age population in public schools.

NEGATIVE FACTORS:

1. High school dropout rate;
2. Percent of public school teachers who reported being physically attacked in the past 12 months;
3. Special education pupil-teacher ratio;
4. Percent of public elementary and secondary school staff who are school district administrators;
5. Estimated pupil-teacher ratio in public elementary and secondary schools;
6. Average class size in public elementary schools;
7. Average class size in public secondary schools.

Astoundingly, Arizona has slipped three places in this study from last year (where it ranked 45th). These factors are a nice supplement to the ideas that have been illustrated above. If the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tome Horne, were to examine these numbers he would probably say that they reinforce his efforts to implement the federal No Child Left Behind Act, AIMS, and the AZ LEARNS system of profiling schools. He might even tout improving test scores among minorities or point to the number of *Excelling* schools. Though, addressing the achievement gap between White students and minorities, the Education Trust (2005: 2) reports that Arizona has "narrowed achievement gaps in reading but only because the performance of White students declined- not because schools accelerated gains for lower performing groups." Isolating high school scores, the Latino-White and Native American-White achievement gaps have widened in both math and reading (Education Trust 2005: 13). As stated above, where gaps did narrow, it was due to lower achievement by White students.

This discussion has revolved around the differences between schools and the ways in which they are ranked. Identifying schools that are struggling to educate children is not an unworthy task. Yet, by focusing on certain aspects of their education, the state and federal education agencies are ignoring the bigger picture. It can be said that categorizing schools as

Underperforming and individual students as *Falling Far Below the Standard* are harsh ways of telling those communities that the knowledge base that they already possess is not valid in our society. There are certain fundamental skills that students need to contribute in our contemporary social system, but, imposing broad sweeping demands on how students should learn them is ethnocentric. It has been demonstrated that the majority of schools that are *Performing* and *Underperforming* contain large minority and language minority populations. In addition to concentrating on the resources that they receive, by focusing on the social and cultural capital that language minority students *bring* to school we can improve their overall educational experience on a basic level. Such improvements will ultimately result in a collective improvement and a higher profile level.

One positive way of helping schools and students is to focus on the teachers. While students are the ones who take the tests and/or ultimately decide to drop out, teachers are the individuals that help students negotiate the educational system and cultivate their knowledge. Not only do we need to help lower ranking schools to retain and reward their good teachers, developing the educational level of the less experienced staff members is equally as important. Neither new nor experienced teachers would want to work in an atmosphere that has been deemed *Underperforming* (or merely *Performing*) when they can work for a *Highly Performing* or *Excelling* school and make more money. Furthermore, the difference in teacher experience and education should be a point of contention for analyzing *Performing* (i.e., minority) schools. How many of those schools could be achieving at higher levels if they had the same teaching environment?

This project is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the state of Arizona's education system. Using publicly available information, I simply assembled some basic characteristics of

high schools that the state has classified as similar. While this information may not be surprising to the ADE, I think it establishes a basic understanding of why certain schools achieve and others underachieve. Basically, this report provides insight into the types of schools that need to be studied more closely using an extensive ethnographic approach. A more in-depth look at the school environment will help better our understanding of what it means to attend (or work at) *Performing* and *Underperforming* schools. The fact that these schools contain a disproportionate amount of Arizona's student minority population warrants further investigation into the nature of the AZ LEARNS Achievement Profile system as well as student ranking in general.

VI. *Resources*

Cummins, J. 1986. Empowering Minority Students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*. 56: 18-36.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*. Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education.

The Education Trust. (2005). Stalled in Secondary: A Look at Student Achievement Since the No Child Left Behind Act. January 2005 issue. Retrieved from: http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/77670E50-188F-4AA8-8729555115389E18/0/StalledInSecondary.pdf

Education Week. (2004). No Small Change: Targeting Money Toward Student Performance. *Quality Counts 2005*. Retrieved from: http://www.edweek.org/ew/index.html

Gibson, M.A., Gandara, P., and Peterson Koyama, J. (2004). *School Connections: U.S. Mexican Youth, Peers, and School Achievement*. New York: Teachers College Press.

MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't No Makin' it*. Boulder: CO: Westview Press.

Morgan Quinto Press. (2005). *Education State Rankings 2004-2005*. Retrieved from: http://www.morganquitno.com/edrank.htm

National Education Association. (2004). Rankings and Estimates: A Report of School Statistics. Retrieved from: http://www.nea.org/edstats/images/04rankings-update.pdf

Noguera, P. (2003). *City Schools and the American Dream*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Kozal, J. (1991). *Savage Inequalities*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Owin, B. (2003). *Dropout Rate Study: 2002-2003 Annual Dropout Rates- Arizona Public Schools Grades Seven Through Twelve*. Retrieved from: http://www.ade.az.gov/researchpolicy/DropoutInfo/