

No Child Left Behind and the Education Achievement Gap

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A gap in standardized achievement-test scores among different groups of students has existed since the inception of standardized testing. The gap between white and African-American schoolchildren was the primary impetus behind much of the social policy devoted to desegregating schools in the second half of the past century. Through a combination of policy-oriented research, media attention, and legislation, the minority achievement gap, including gaps among myriad ethnic and disability groups, has recently come to the forefront of concerns for the educational policy community and beyond. The gap that has received the most attention is that between African-American and Latino students, on the one hand, and white and Asian students on the other. In this brief, I will discuss the relationship of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to the achievement gap, as well as present some research findings on the gap, trends in the gap, and why it exists. I will close with a discussion of the policy questions that lie ahead.

NCLB on the Achievement Gap

NCLB addresses the achievement gap in its "Statement of Purpose" for Title I. That statement notes that Title 1's purpose "is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to gain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on state academic achievement standards and . . . assessments." It goes on to state that "this purpose can be accomplished by [among other strategies] . . . closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers."¹ The act further asserts that states must make "adequate yearly progress" toward having all children perform at a proficient level, with "separate, measurable, annual objectives for continuous and substantial improvement" of elementary and secondary students-and that the states must break out scores for "students from major racial and ethnic groups." The act forces schools to look beyond questions about differences between whites students and students of color to look at how a number of groups are performing in school.

In practice, NCLB translates into state testing of students at the end of every school year in order to ensure that schools are teaching necessary skills to all children. States will be held accountable for the achievement levels and progress of all of their students on average, as well as for the achievement levels and progress of racial and ethnic minorities. Thus, information on the relative performance of ethnic minorities in all states will be readily available and will be part of the federal government's determination of funding.

Research Findings

In recent years, some progress has been made in reducing the size of achievement gaps, as shown in data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a standardized test conducted every year since 1969 on a sample of students and schools by the National Center for Education Statistics.² Historically, most of the nation's attention has focused on the African American-white achievement gap, and there is thus more data available for this particular gap. It declined considerably during the years 1971 to 1990, but further progress in reducing the gap tends to diminish thereafter.³

Results from North Carolina are a bit more encouraging. Under the state's school accountability programs, all public school children have been taking end-of-grade reading and math tests in grades 3 through 8 since 1994. In the first year of testing, 33 percent of African-American students performed at grade level, while 47 percent of Latino students and 66 percent of white students did so.

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All ethnic groups have since shown progress on these tests. At the end of the 2001 school year, 82 percent of whites were performing at or above grade level, while 52 percent of African Americans and 59 percent of Latino students were doing so. The gap between whites and African Americans performing at or above grade level thus stands at 30 percent, a gap that, while a bit smaller than it was in 1994, is still substantial.⁴ One should keep in mind, however, that African-American students have improved their scores proportionately more than white students and have improved at a faster rate than have white students.

Explanations for the existence of the achievement gap abound, and many are ideologically motivated. Traditionally, the more conservative explanations of the gap center on the notion of a culture of poverty as the underlying reason for a number of social pathologies among inner-city families, particularly poor families, among whom racial minorities are disproportionately represented. Some observers claim that the culture of poverty devalues academic achievement. Others argue that a disproportionate decline of two-parent families explains why African Americans consistently score below whites on standardized achievement tests. The culture of poverty argument, however, does not account for why African Americans from middle- and upper-class and suburban backgrounds would score lower than whites do.⁵ Other research indicates that the mother's marital status has little effect on African-American children's scores independent of the mother's own schooling and test scores.

Pundits with more liberal politics tend to argue that the achievement gap is the result of a difference in socioeconomic status (SES) between white and minority families or differences in resources between schools attended by white and minority students. Research indicates, however, that income inequality between the two populations explains a bit of the gap, but not all of it. African-American children from high-SES households score lower on standardized tests than do white children from high-SES households. Furthermore, the average African-American child lives in a school district that spends the same per pupil as the average white child.⁶ However, having equal per-pupil spending rates in school districts does not necessarily guarantee that funds are efficiently directed toward effective programs that meet the targeted needs of specific student populations in well-organized institutions, or even that the schools that minority or white students attend are equally well funded.

Recently, more promising research has focused on interactions between various aspects of schooling, such as the school environment and the characteristics of the student. For example, Steele and Aronson find that African-American students at an elite university perform worse on a standardized test when they (1) think that it is an intelligence test and (2) when they have been prompted to note their ethnicity before the test begins.⁷ Such subtle means of producing achievement gaps are not easily found, but they can have significant leveling effects on the performance of African-American students, even at the top of the achievement distribution.

Also promising is strong evidence that such factors as small class size and improved opportunities for preschool education disproportionately benefit the performance of poor and minority youngsters in public schools and can significantly narrow the achievement gap between African-American and white and low- and high-income students.⁸ With these and other findings in mind, recent analysis of long-term educational trends paint a much more optimistic picture of the degree to which school policy can improve the relative performance of disadvantaged groups.⁹

Future Policy Questions

The most pressing policy questions that lie ahead on the minority achievement gap have to do with educators' knowledge base, with implementation of practices, and with political will. Educators have identified a number of promising programs that they believe can reduce the achievement gap, and under the NCLB legislation they will have to begin implementing them or lose access to federal funds. While there are many proposals, however, not all have been rigorously tested to see if they are indeed effective. These ideas include lowering class size in early grades, conducting early intervention with language development and expanding other preschool oppor-

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tunities, creating new ways to encourage parental involvement, providing additional supports in school settings, using flexible teaching methods, and making greater use of cooperative group learning. Some are supported by rigorous research, while others remain promising but have not been rigorously tested. Each of these reforms poses different financial and organizational challenges. Each involves major changes to large complex organizations that are often resistant to change.

Whether the gaps between different groups can be erased entirely, given the impact of socioeconomic standings and other out-of-school factors, and whether schools, without the help of other social institutions, actually have either the power or the means to remove those gaps remains to be seen. To illustrate—there are studies showing that the gap between rich and poor students and African-American and white students actually decreases significantly during the school year, meaning that African-American and disadvantaged students make greater relative gains than white and economically advantaged students during the school year.¹⁰ These studies show that what happens in schools can and does reduce these gaps. However, the same studies show that by the beginning of the next school year, after a summer away from school, the gaps are often wider than they were the year before. Schools, themselves, may be reducing the achievement gap at the same time that disadvantaged students are falling further behind their more advantaged peers for various socioeconomic and other reasons. It is well known that health, attendance, neighborhood disorganization, and tardiness explain a large part of the differences in academic achievement between ethnic groups independent of what happens in the classroom. For these reasons, the solution to achievement gaps may be found only partially within school walls and may require extensive support from the entire community.

Many of the strategies designed to reduce the achievement gap are also quite costly and, as with any social policy change, there is always the danger of unintended consequences. While the No Child Left Behind Act promises federal aid to schools that have difficulty meeting their achievement goals, it is unclear whether it would be enough to implement many of the most effective and also most costly reforms, such as reducing class size.

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1. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, PL 107-110, sec. 1001, available at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/>.
 2. Larry Hedges and Amy Nowell, "Black-White Test Score Convergence since 1965," in Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 149-81.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Sheria Reid, "The Achievement Gap 2002: An Update," North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center and the North Carolina Education and Law Project, Raleigh, N.C., 2002, available at <http://www.ncjustice.org>.
 5. Jencks and Phillips.
 6. William N. Evans, Sheila Murray, and Robert Schwab, 1997. "School Houses, Court Houses, and State Houses after Serrano," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 16 (1997): 10-31.
 7. Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Test Performance of Academically Successful African Americans," in Jencks and Phillips, 401-430.
 8. Alan B. Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, "Would Smaller Classes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?" Working Paper no. 451, March 2001, Industrial Relations Section, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.; Frederick Mosteller, "The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades," *Future of Children* 5 (1995): 113-27.
 9. Jencks and Phillips.

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10. Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda S. Olson, 2001. "Schools, Achievement, and Inequality: A Seasonal Perspective," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23 (2001): 171-91; Doris R. Entwisle and Karl L. Alexander, "Summer Setback: Race, Poverty, School Composition and Mathematics Achievement in the First Two Years of School," *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992): 72-84. For more on this subject, see Karl L. Alexander, "Public Schools and the Public Good," *Social Forces* 76 (1997): 1-30; Doris R. Entwisle, Kyle L. Alexander, and Linda S. Olson, "Keeping the Faucet Flowing: Summer Learning and Home Environment," *American Educator* (fall 2001): 10-5, 47; Kyle L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda S. Olson, "Schools, Achievement and Inequality: A Seasonal Perspective," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23 (2001): 171-91; and Kyle L. Alexander and Doris R. Entwisle, "Schools and Children at Risk," in A. Booth and J. F. Dunn, eds., *Family-School Links: How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1996), 67-88.

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