REGION IX EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER AT WestEd

The Racial School-Climate Gap

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A research summary produced by the Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.

Education inequity is a persistent reality of American culture. Almost 50 years ago, the *Coleman Report* put race- and ethnicity-based achievement gaps on the national radar.[1] Since that time, achievement gaps have remained largely unchanged. *[2] As early as kindergarten, there are marked differences in academic performance between racial minority students and their peers.[3] These differences are sustained as students progress through school.[4,5]

Various reasons have been proposed to explain the racial achievement gap. One of the simplest explanations is that race is inextricably connected to socioeconomic status in the United States. Poor students have fewer resources for learning and must overcome greater barriers, and a disproportionate number of poor families are racial minorities.[5] However, even when socioeconomic status is taken into consideration, an achievement gap among racial groups remains.[4] Social psychologists note "stereotype threat" as a possible contributor to the gap, wherein test takers of stigmatized racial groups worry that they may confirm stereotypes about intelligence, and thus perform worse due to this stress.[6] Other explanations are socio-cultural, suggesting that minority peer groups reward disengagement or that certain racial identities are not conducive to valuing academic success.[7] Finally, some scholars point to the disproportionate rate at which African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students are disciplined and suspended, distracting from learning time and undermining school connectedness. This disparity is presumed to be a function of either objective differences in student behavior or discrimination on the part of school staff in their subjective interpretation of student behavior.[8] A common thread to these explanations is that the divergent social experiences of racial groups contribute to the achievement gap.

One aspect of students' social experience that may help to explain the gap is school climate.[9] School climate is a broad term used to describe the school environment, and while it has no consensus definition,

* Throughout this document, "race" is used in lieu of "race and ethnicity" for the sake of simplicity. Further, the data used in the majority of the studies described herein treat African American, Asian, American Indian, Hispanic, and White as categories of the same variable.

there are several recurring themes: (a) order, safety, and discipline; (b) teaching and learning supports; (c) social relationships; and (d) school connectedness.[10,11] A positive school climate has been associated with higher levels of student achievement.[12,13] Thus, differences in how students of different races experience various aspects of school climate may help explain group differences in achievement.

This document, *The Racial School-Climate Gap*, summarizes several recent research studies conducted by WestEd's Health and Human Development Program staff that examined connections between student race, achievement, and school climate. The collective findings of these studies support the notion that, just as there is a racial achievement gap, there is a racial school-climate gap in California schools.

What recent WestEd research tells us about the racial school-climate gap

Between 2007 and 2012, WestEd researchers conducted six empirical studies on race, achievement, and school climate, using student and staff data from the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (Cal-SCHLS) System.† These data were collected biennially in nearly two thirds of California public schools from 2004 to 2010 from an average of about 500,000 students and 50,000 staff annually. Survey items gauged respondents' perceptions of their school environment (e.g., supportiveness, safety), as well as students' grades, truancy, and risk behaviors. The studies' findings are organized into three categories below: (1) examination of racial achievement gaps; (2) examination of racial school-climate gaps; and (3) examination of the degree to which these gaps are attributable to happenings within a school campus versus differences among schools.

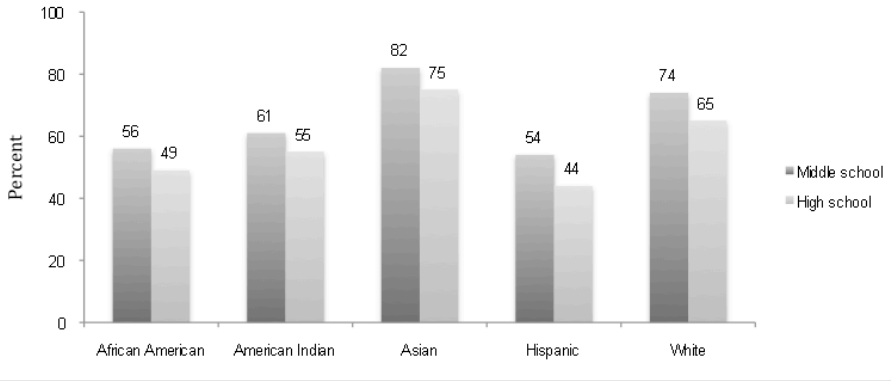
Finding #1: There continues to be a racial achievement gap.

Student Differences

The studies confirmed the racial achievement gap in California public schools. Based on Cal-SCHLS data from 2006–08, a higher proportion of Asian and White middle and high school students reported good academic achievement compared with reports from African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students.[14] Figure 1 shows the percentage of students, by school level and by racial group, who reported receiving grades of mostly Bs or above.

† WestEd developed the Cal-SCHLS system with funding from the California Department of Education. Cal-SCHLS consists of three comparable surveys: the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) for students; California School Climate Survey (CSCS) for staff; and the California School Parent Survey. The student and staff data used in these analyses were derived from the CHKS and CSCS. During the years that data used in these analyses were collected, the CHKS was administered in approximately 840 school districts to an average of 500,000 students per year in grades 7, 9, and 11. For more information, see http://cal-schls.wested.org.

Figure 1. Students with Grades of Mostly Bs and Above, by Race and School Level (%)



Adapted from Austin et al., 2010; see endnote #14

Similar disparities were found in results from the California Standards Tests of English language arts and mathematics in 2009.[15]

School Differences

At the school level, there is also a demonstrated association between achievement and race. Using data from 2004–06, it was determined that, even after taking student socioeconomic factors into account, predominantly Hispanic schools at all levels had lower average standardized test scores than predominantly White schools.[16] Schools serving large numbers of African American and Hispanic students exhibited even larger deficits. For example, after taking socioeconomic factors into account, 49 percent of ninth graders in predominantly White schools were predicted to score at proficient levels in English language arts compared to only 37 percent of ninth graders in schools serving large numbers of African American and Hispanic students. This evidence suggests that the racial achievement gap is still a conspicuous feature of education in California and is not attributable solely to socioeconomic status.

Finding #2: There is also a racial school-climate gap.

Student Differences

A more original discovery from this work is the existence of significant racial differences in students' experiences of school climate. As summarized in table 1, compared with African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students, White and Asian students generally reported higher levels of safety, support, and connectedness at school. Two reports using data from different years confirmed that there were significant disparities in students' sense of connectedness to school, with White students having the highest levels of connectedness, followed by Asian students, American Indian and Hispanic students, and, lastly, African American students.[14,15] Also, White students were the most likely to report having had a caring relationship with an adult at school and that their school had high expectations for students. Hispanic students were least likely to make these observations. In terms of safety, African American and Hispanic students, along with American Indian students, were the least likely to report high levels of safety at school.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of School Climate, by Race and School Level (% Reporting "High" Levels)

High Levels of:	African American		American Indian		Asian		Hispanic		White	
	M.S. (%)	H.S. (%)	M.S. (%)	H.S. (%)	M.S. (%)	H.S. (%)	M.S. (%)	H.S. (%)	M.S. (%)	H.S. (%)
School connectedness	34	31	43	36	51	42	42	37	53	47
Caring adult relationships	35	35	36	36	33	30	31	30	40	39
High expectations	55	47	54	46	55	44	51	43	59	50
Safety	52	49	57	63	64	60	54	53	65	63
Respect for all students	49	37	n/a	n/a	53	50	47	42	50	40

Adapted from Austin et al., 2010, and Austin & Hanson, 2012; see endnotes #14 and #17
M.S. = Middle school (7th grade), H.S. = High school (9th & 11th grades)

A 2012 study—using a supplement to the Cal-SCHLS that was developed specifically to examine factors associated with the racial achievement gap—found that Asian students were the most likely group to believe that all students were treated with respect.[17] African American and Hispanic students felt less respected by staff than Asian and White students. In high school, African American and Hispanic students were more likely to report feeling that students were not disciplined fairly.

School Differences

In addition to individual student differences, schools that serve mostly African American and Hispanic students had lower overall school-climate ratings than schools that serve mostly White and Asian students, even when adjusting for student socioeconomic status. In the former schools, ninth grade students were less likely, on average, to report feeling safe, supported, and connected or to report having opportunities for meaningful participation.[16] These differences were also reflected in staff survey results. Teachers and other staff in predominantly White and Asian schools reported more positive school climates than their counterparts in predominantly African American and Hispanic schools.[18]

There is also evidence that staff experience differences in school climate based on *their own* race. Irrespective of the racial demographics of their school's student body, White and Asian staff were more likely than African American and Hispanic staff to report that their school provided a positive, supportive, and safe learning environment for students and that the students they serve come to school ready to learn.[19] One possible explanation for this finding is that staff of different races may work in different types of schools and in different roles within schools, thus affecting their perceptions. Nonetheless, these findings, taken together, imply that there is a meaningful racial gap in school climate for California students and staff.

Finding #3: Racial gaps exist within individual schools.

One reaction to the findings described above could be, "Of course there are racial gaps in achievement and school climate—that's because African American and Hispanic students attend lower performing schools

that are located in worse neighborhoods than the schools attended by their White and Asian peers." Schools that have higher levels of achievement and are perceived by their students to have higher levels of supportiveness, engagement, and safety are attended mostly by White and Asian students.[16] African American and Hispanic students tend to go to schools that have lower rates of achievement and, as reported on student surveys, are less supportive, engaging, and safe. But does this reality alone explain the gap?

The answer appears to be "no." Racial gaps in achievement and perceptions of school climate exist *within individual schools* as well as between schools.[15] Indeed, these gaps within schools contribute *more* to the overall racial gap in California than the fact that White and Asian students attend different schools than African American and Hispanic students. This finding is both important and novel. Consider the following illustration: Two students attend the same middle school. One student is African American, and one is White. Based on this finding, one would expect that the African American student would have lower test scores and grades and would report lower levels of perceived safety, support, and connectedness, despite access to the same facilities, resources, administration, teachers, and staff.

This general finding occurs across all California schools. Thus, if a school had equal shares of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and White students—each group accounting for 25 percent of the student population—one would expect the African American and Hispanic students in that school to have lower test scores and grades, and would perceive their school to have lower levels of safety, support, and connectedness. In the same vein, if a school's student population was 90 percent Hispanic and 10 percent White, according to this finding, the Hispanic students would have lower test scores and grades and would report lower levels of safety, support, and connectedness than their White peers. If a school were 75 percent Asian and 25 percent African American, the finding suggests that the African American students would have lower test scores and grades and their perceptions of safety, support, and connectedness would be less positive compared to the Asian students.

Regardless of a school's racial composition, this study suggests that the school's African American and Hispanic students will have less positive outcomes and a less positive school experience than their White and Asian counterparts. Either something is happening within the school to foster this disparity or students of different races at the school have consistently different out-of-school experiences (e.g., in their neighborhoods or families) that affect their in-school experiences. For example, if the school catchment area is racially segregated, and the neighborhoods where African American and Hispanic students live have more crime than neighborhoods where White and Asian students live, then African American and Hispanic students may be exposed to stressors that spill over into their relationships, participation, and feelings of safety at school.

Differences between schools are still important, however. There is evidence that, compared to their White and Asian peers, African American and Hispanic students more likely attend schools that are lower performing and that are perceived by their students to be less safe and less supportive, with less connection felt by students.[2,15] The fact that students of different races generally attend schools of different quality may be one contributing factor in the academic-achievement and school-climate gaps, but this research suggests that students' divergent experiences within the same school may be a bigger factor.

What are the implications of these findings for educators?

First and foremost, WestEd's recent findings show that, despite decades of efforts to eliminate student achievement gaps, the racial achievement gap continues to be a pressing public policy issue. By almost any measure of academic achievement, African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students perform significantly worse than their Asian and White peers. But these recent studies also suggest that, in their efforts to reduce achievement gaps, educators might do well to include a focus on school climate. The underlying logic of this assertion is that

1) School climate is associated with academic achievement.

2) Students' experiences of school climate vary by race, creating a racial climate gap.

3) Reducing racial disparities in students' experience of school climate will result in reduced racial disparities in achievement.

The studies reviewed here provide empirical support for the first and second points. Proving the third point necessitates further research. Absent this empirical evidence, however, there is still a clear conceptual argument that improving school climate for African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students may help reduce the achievement gaps.

Where should school-climate interventions be targeted to reduce inequity? These findings suggest that much—if not most—of the work needs to happen in individual schools or in the communities they serve. Within the same building, disadvantaged minority students are not having the same school experience as their peers. The underlying reasons for this disparity are not clear, but one implication is that school administrators and staff can remedy this gap through building-level policies and practices.

Among the more commonly employed strategies for improving climate at the school level are schoolwide approaches that involve all staff in establishing a positive behavior management system and student social and emotional learning approaches that rely on classroom social-skills instruction.[20] For example, some schools have implemented restorative justice programs as an alternative to traditional punitive discipline codes that focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of misbehavior and members of the school community, including potential victims and their families. Another example is transformative classroom management that leverages students' motivation and engagement to increase adherence to classroom behavioral norms. Resilience research indicates that developmentally supportive schools that emphasize caring student-adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation can help mitigate the effects of the multiple risk factors experienced by low-socioeconomic-status students of color and can promote positive academic, social-emotional, and health outcomes.[12,16] Finally, to provide compensatory supports for students from low-income homes and communities, some researchers have recommended that schools establish after-school programs and health clinics and hire mental health counselors.[21] More privileged students often have access to a wide array of out-of-school supports that prepare them for learning. To the degree that schools can fill in these missing supports for other students, they may help moderate the effects of income inequality.

The California Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools program (Cal-S3), in collaboration with WestEd, recently published a series of "What Works Briefs" to assist schools in their development of initiatives related to school climate, including schoolwide programs, targeted supports, and low-cost strategies that staff can implement immediately.[22] The Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd

offers services to support schools that are interested in using school-climate improvement as a means of reducing inequity.

There is also work to be done to address the academic and environmental disparities between schools. This district-, state-, and federal-level issue requires special attention to schools that are most in need. The U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools program is an example of an initiative targeted specifically at low-performing schools with relatively poor school climates in an effort to get them on an equal level with their counterparts.

Addressing both within- and between-school inequality requires attention to the social and economic forces that cause students from traditionally marginalized neighborhoods to start off on an unequal playing field. Districts and schools can focus efforts on parent engagement, after-school programming, service learning, and partnerships with community-based organizations to help improve their students' out-of-school experiences. One example of this type of place-based, collaborative effort is The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative.[23] Schools in several neighborhoods around the state work with public agencies, nonprofits, and community members to identify local barriers to positive youth development and develop common action plans to address them.

Another implication of these findings is that it is important for schools to regularly assess and monitor school climate as perceived by different racial/ethnic student groups. Schools can use tools such as the Cal-SCHLS system (available nationally as the Healthy Kids School Climate Surveys).[9] Schools can use such data to identify climate-related needs and to guide efforts to address them. Otherwise, efforts to close the achievement gap will fall short.

The racial achievement gap continues to confound education researchers and practitioners. However, WestEd's recent research findings suggest that addressing school-climate issues, including the *gaps* in how different student groups experience school climate, may be an important and complementary strategy for reducing achievement gaps. African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students report school experiences that are very different from those reported by their Asian and White peers. Nurturing school environments that are safer and more supportive for all students, and that make all students feel part of a larger community, is an important step toward education equity and a promising step in the direction of closing the racial achievement gap.

Endnotes

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22 For more information, visit http://californias3.wested.org.

23 For more information, visit http://www.calendow.org/healthycommunities.

The Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd is one of 10 Equity Assistance Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance and training in civil rights, equity, and school reform. Our primary goal is to help ensure that all children have access to equitable education opportunities. The current network of Equity Assistance Centers will operate through 2014.

Suggested citation for this brief: Voight, A. (2013). *The Racial School-Climate Gap*. A report from the Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd. San Francisco: WestEd.

This work was supported by the Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, PR/Award Number S004D110011. It does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.