

HISPANIC SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: CATCHING UP REQUIRES RUNNING FASTER THAN WHITE YOUTH

Hispanic students are notably behind their white counterparts in the core academic skills. Although the precise size of the gap depends on the subject area, age or grade, and the assessment, by all measures, a significant gap in mathematics, reading skills and science exists between Hispanic and white students.

Educational achievement, or knowledge learned in school, matters. Persons with the same academic diploma often have vastly different levels of math knowledge, reading abilities or problem-solving skills. These differences in school achievement have important effects on social and economic success. Children with greater early cognitive skills are likely to attain higher levels of schooling. High achieving high school students go on to more selective colleges. And teens with higher test scores are paid significantly more in midcareer, even after controlling for other factors. Finally, some evidence suggests that the economic rewards for achievement are increasing over time.

Trends in the national educational achievement of students are conventionally assessed using the “Nation’s Report Card,” as the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP is widely known. Although the gap in mathematics achievement between white and Hispanic children has significantly narrowed for 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds since 1973, it has remained statistically unchanged for 9-year-olds. Even so, the gap remains large for all age groups, appearing in early childhood.

Average Math Test Scores of 1st and 2nd Generation Kindergartners	
Parental Birthplace	
Mexico	38.6
Dominican Republic	35.7
Puerto Rico	37.3
Cuba	46.1
El Salvador	39.7
other Central America	39.4
South America	42.4

Source: Jennifer Glick, using the ECLS-K

The Early Childhood Achievement Gap The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the U.S. Department of Education examines the schooling experiences of 1998-1999 kindergartners nationwide. Differences in school-related skills have already become apparent. In spring 2000, the average math test score was 45.5 for whites, in comparison to 40.0 for Hispanic and 38.4 for African American children. Youth with parents born in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico scored much lower than their white peers. Youth with parents born in Cuba outperformed their white counterparts.

Learning During the School Years Although gaps in knowledge among students may appear early, there is no reason to consider them immutable. Hispanic children can catch up, or narrow the gaps, by learning more than white children. NAEP does not track the achievement levels of the same students over time. Instead, NAEP provides nationally

representative snapshots of the achievement of 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds. So it is possible to approximate the change in the achievement gap between 9-year-olds in one year and the

	Age 9 White - Hispanic Math Score Gap	Age 13 White - Hispanic Math Score Gap 4 Years Later
1978	21	22
1982	20	19
1986	21	22
1990	21	25

Source: NCES, *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress*

gap four years later, when the 9-year-olds had aged to be 13-year-olds. In mathematics, both Hispanic and white 9-year-olds improve their math knowledge over four years. NAEP, however, suggests that the Hispanic children do not learn any more than the white children, so that the achievement gap does not narrow between age 9 and age 13.

No Apparent Achievement Differences Across Generations

Eighth Grade Math Test Scores	
White	
Third generation and up	52.5
Mexican origin	
First generation	45.4
Second generation	45.6
Third generation and up	46.4
Other Hispanic origin	
First generation	47.0
Second generation	48.5
Third generation and up	46.7

Source: Grace Kao, using NELS 1988

There appear to be no achievement differences among Latinos by generation. Eighth grade average math test scores and middle school grade point averages are very similar, regardless of whether the student is foreign- or U.S.-born. The measured Hispanic achievement levels are all uniformly below white third-generation and higher eighth graders. Based on typical background characteristics, one would not expect immigrant Mexican eighth graders to perform as well as native-born Mexican-origin eighth graders. On average, family income and educational profiles are lower. For some, schooling was interrupted by migration. These and other factors would be expected to diminish the academic achievement of immigrant Mexican youth.

Preparation for College

Among students that graduate from high school on time, Hispanics are much less qualified for college. Although this reflects high school coursework as well as academic achievement, only 53 percent of Hispanic high school graduates are at least “minimally qualified” for admission to a four-year college. In comparison, nearly 70 percent of white high school graduates are at least minimally prepared to pursue four-year

	Preparation for 4-year College of High School Graduates (in %)				
	Not college qualified	Minimally qualified	Somewhat qualified	Highly qualified	Very highly qualified
Hispanic	47	21	14	11	8
Black non-Hispanic	53	17	14	10	6
White non-Hispanic	32	16	17	20	15

Source: NCES, *Access to Postsecondary Education for the 1992 High School Graduates*

college studies. At the upper end of achievement, 19 percent of Hispanic high school graduates are at least “highly qualified” for a four-year college, in comparison to 35 percent of whites.

Resources

- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance*, NCES 2000-469, Washington, D.C., August 2000.
- Glick, Jennifer. “Young Children in Immigrant Families: Still ‘Divided Fates’?,” mimeo, Arizona State University, 2003.
- Kao, Grace. “Psychological Well-Being and Educational Achievement Among Immigrant Youth,” in *Children of Immigrants: Health, Adjustment, and Public Assistance*, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1999.

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