

Achievement Gaps in Our Schools

The goal of “closing the achievement gap” in education is often proclaimed and is emphasized in the *No Child Left Behind Act*. What is meant by the achievement gap and how much progress has been made?

What is the “achievement gap?”

One of the most serious problems in the U.S. educational system is the gap in student achievement between African-American, Latino, Native American, and low-income students when compared with many of their white, Asian, or economically-advantaged peers. This gap is called the achievement gap. The idea of “closing the achievement gap” is emphasized in the *No Child Left Behind Act* and many other documents. The slogan may be popular, but achieving this important goal remains elusive. Although progress has been made in some respects, there is still a long way to go.

A large body of literature examines the causes, conditions, and explanations for the achievement gap. Many educational organizations have focused on strategies to reduce the gap and encouraged the nation to learn from schools and districts that are succeeding. Researchers have worked to improve standardized tests and to lessen social and cultural bias, yet some commentators insist that many tests do not adequately measure the capabilities of all students, such as those for whom English is a second language. The goal is for all students to have the opportunity to experience high-quality instruction. In the words of a Northwest Central Region Educational Laboratory (NCREL) position statement:

Students of every race, ethnicity, language, and income need the skills and tools to compute, critique, and create at high levels. We must agree to identify and employ initiatives that hold the greatest promise for moving all students—including students of color, poor students, rural and urban students, and second-language learners—to high levels of achievement.

Parent Involvement Is Pivotal

The achievement gap exists because the economic, social, and cultural obstacles that many students face are real and difficult. Research shows that there is a strong association between a parent’s educational and economic status and their child’s performance in school. Poverty and other economic or social disadvantages impose severe hardships, and research indicates that poverty is the most consistent

Resources

Helpful Web Sites

CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>



indicator of academic failure. On the positive side, **a parent's involvement in their child's education is the single most important predictor of student academic success.** This is true for students from all backgrounds, including and perhaps especially those in less advantaged situations.

Research shows that strong parent involvement in high quality school and family partnerships can lead to substantial student achievement gains, regardless of family social and economic background. Research also shows that all students at a school benefit from parent involvement, not only those students whose parents volunteer at the school. Studies have found that parent participation appears pivotal: it is positively related to *both* parent satisfaction and student achievement. Substantial evidence exists to show that children whose parents are involved in their schooling have significantly increased academic achievement and cognitive development.

In their review of existing research, the San Diego County Office of Education concluded that the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

- Create a home environment that encourages learning.
- Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers.
- Become involved in their children's education at school and in the community.

How can schools and parents help reduce achievement gaps? What should I look for in a school as an indicator that it is committed to narrowing the achievement gap?

Research indicates that schools, especially in disadvantaged communities, can help bridge achievement gaps by setting and maintaining high academic and social standards, then providing children opportunities to reach them. Here are some characteristics of high quality schools where achievement of all students is a major goal.

- The district has a plan that supports achievement of all students and specific programs to help narrow the achievement gaps.
- The school principal sets an effective vision for the school that includes commitment to high standards; and recruiting, retaining, and supporting high quality teachers.
- Principal and teacher turnover is low. Frequent turnover makes it difficult for school-wide connections to occur. New principals often have a new vision and new plan that can mean the old vision and old plan are lost in the shuffle. Of course, sometimes a new principal can be instrumental in positive change.
- There is frequent, supportive communication and connection between the principal, teachers, and staff that supports student achievement.



- All students have the tools they need to succeed, including textbooks, school supplies, and counseling services.
- The school has a differentiated learning program so children are appropriately challenged and provided instruction that allows them to reach their maximum potential.
- The school has an effective student data collection and analysis system that gives teachers individual student information when and where it is needed. At the beginning of each year, teachers have information on hand for incoming students and use it to focus their instruction to students' knowledge, learning styles, and abilities.
- The school has specific programs for students with special needs including special education, reading intervention, gifted opportunities, and English as a Second Language.
- School programs and curricula are based on evidence-based research. Programs are regularly evaluated for their effectiveness and action taken to make improvements.
- The school has an effective after-school program that provides a quiet time and place for students to do homework or study.

What You Can Do

- Visiting a school beforehand is the best way to know if it's committed to narrowing achievement gaps. Meet with the principal, visit classrooms, walk the halls, and talk to other parents to see if it meets many of the above criteria. High standards for all students should be the school mantra. Strong and positive community values can have a very positive effect.
- If your child is already enrolled in a school, volunteer in the classroom, with the PTA, the site council, or take part in other activities that show your commitment to making your school a better place for all children to achieve. Remember your involvement will benefit all the school's children, as well as your own.
- Review your school's report card and ask your principal about racial, cultural, and other differences in student attendance, discipline, or students enrolled in special education. If your school has a gifted program, it ideally will have a representative percentage of students from all backgrounds. Are teachers from diverse backgrounds? Does the school curriculum include activities that celebrate diversity and promote racial and cultural exchange and harmony? Be careful not to over-emphasize any single indicator because—by itself—it may not be a dependable measure of a school's commitment to narrowing achievement gaps.

- Test scores are helpful but have limitations. A school with a growing number of English language learning students, for example, may have a growing gap in language arts that does not necessarily reflect school quality—or on the capabilities of English language learners.
- When looking at test scores from your child’s school or a prospective school, look to see if achievement gaps are occurring at all grades and in all subjects. Are gaps increasing, decreasing, or staying the same over time? Look not just at gaps between racial and ethnic groups, but between students overall and students with social disadvantages, special education students, and English language learners. Don’t expect the gaps to disappear, but look for progress.
- Become better informed through reading some of the resources listed below.

Useful Resources

Closing the Achievement Gap: Lessons from California (2003). (R&D Alert) San Francisco: WestEd, http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/RD-03-01.pdf

Provides an overview of the challenges in closing achievement gaps with thoughtful insights on the investments that we should be making in our schools.

NCREL's Position Statement on Closing the Achievement Gaps by Gina Burkhardt, NCREL Executive Director, <http://www.ncrel.org/gap/position.htm>

Haycock, Kati (2001) *Closing the Achievement Gap: Helping All Students Achieve*, Educational Leadership, Volume 58, Number 6. On the web at:

<http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0103/haycock.html>

Joyce Epstein (2003). *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork*. Johns Hopkins University: Center for the Social Organization of Schools.

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmain.htm>

Provides a framework of six major types of involvement and activities to develop a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships.

Mel Levine (2002). *A Mind at a Time*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Describes and supports the concept of differential learning abilities in students.

What Makes a Good School. Los Angeles: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing <http://cresst.org/files/goodschool.pdf>

Provides an extensive list of criteria for evaluating the quality of your school.



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Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!

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