



D.C.'s Achievement Gap: Why Place Matters

Every child deserves educational opportunity and the chance to achieve, no matter his or her school, neighborhood or background. Unfortunately, large and persistent disparities in achievement among public school students in the District of Columbia indicate that all children here may not have the same opportunities.

Achievement gaps are often attributed to socioeconomic differences — with children from higher-income families doing better than children from lower-income families. We believe that the story in D.C. may be more nuanced than income differences among individual children's families. Data suggest a role for concentrated poverty (and its converse, concentrated privilege) and a confluence of inequities conferred by place, race and income (including race and income segregation).

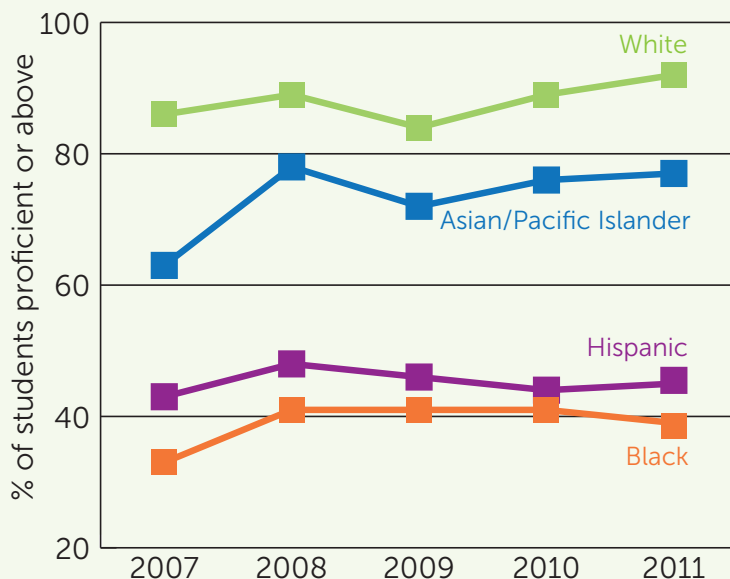
This Data Snapshot examines citywide achievement on the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC CAS) and the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),¹ looking in greater depth at achievement in the fourth and eighth grades. (More information is available at our D.C. KIDS COUNT Data Center (<http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/kids-count>) for all grade levels on both tests.) This Data Snapshot also suggests the need for deeper analysis of the role that place and neighborhood — both where children live and where they attend school — may play in the achievement gap.

Achievement gap by race

D.C. has one of the widest racial achievement gaps of all large urban school systems in the country. The gap is so wide, in fact, that it might

Figure 1: Fourth Grade Reading Proficiency, DC CAS

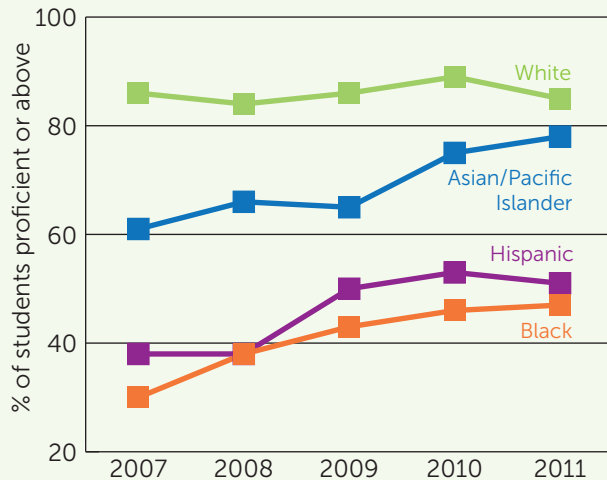


Source: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Data also available on the D.C. KIDS COUNT Data Center (<http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/kids-count>).

We would like to thank our partners at Higher Achievement and For Love of Children for their guidance in shaping this Data Snapshot. This Snapshot is based on DC Action for Children analysis of NAEP and OSSE data conducted by Kate Kairys, policy analyst. For additional information, please contact Gwen Rubinstein, deputy director at DC Action for Children, at grubinstein@dckids.org.

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Figure 2: Eighth Grade Reading Proficiency, DC CAS



Source: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

Data also available on the D.C. KIDS COUNT Data Center (<http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/kids-count>).

be better called an achievement gulf. Black and Hispanic students perform far behind their white peers, a divide that appears on both state and national tests.

For example, 91 percent of white fourth graders were proficient in reading on the DC CAS in 2011, while only 38 percent of their black classmates and 45 percent of their Hispanic classmates reached proficiency. The gulf was even wider on the 2011 NAEP, with 74 percent of white fourth graders proficient in reading compared to 12 and 19 percent of their black and Hispanic peers. Math results on both tests were similar. Even more striking is that this gulf has remained fairly steady over time.

For the past five years, at least 45 and up to 55 percentage points have separated the shares of black and white fourth graders who were proficient in reading and math. The gap is only slightly narrower between Hispanic and white students.

In eighth grade reading (and math) the situation is slightly better, as gains among black and Hispanic students decreased the gap over time. Even with this improvement, however, a large achievement difference remains. In 2011, about 40 percentage points separated the share of black and white students who were proficient on the DC CAS. Measured by the NAEP, the gap was more than 50 percentage points.

There's more to the race gap than family income

In D.C., the achievement disparity among races is likely related to income, but the family income gap does not explain the entire test score divide. Across grade levels, subjects and years, the achievement difference by race consistently outpaces the achievement gap by family income, a finding from both DC CAS and NAEP data. The gap between black and white students is about double the achievement difference between disadvantaged² and non-disadvantaged students.³

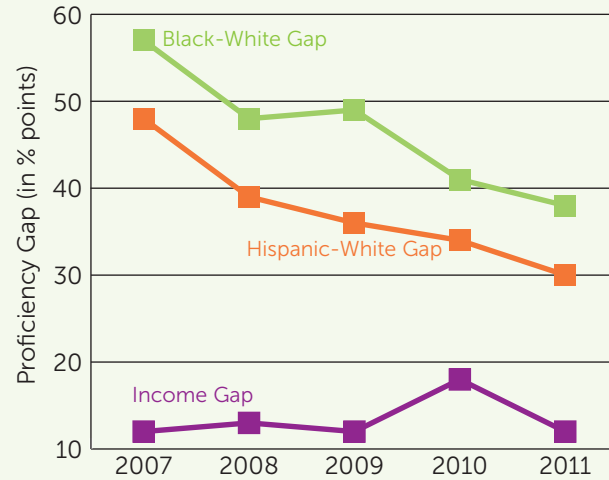
But if the source of the race gap were primarily a family income divide, race and income trend lines would look more similar. As Figure 3 illustrates, they do not. In eighth grade math (and reading, which is not pictured here), the race gap narrows over time, but the income gap does not. For fourth graders (also not pictured), the race gap does not change much over time, but the family income gap grows even wider.

How the confluence of race, place and income may affect achievement

All of this data analysis leads us to believe other factors — related to the confluence of place, race and income — are at work here, including:

- **The economic status of neighborhoods where students attend school.** When DC CAS proficiency is stratified by ward, students attending schools in Wards 2

Figure 3: Race Gap vs. Income Gap, Eighth Grade Math, DC CAS



Note: The proficiency gap by race is the share of white students with a proficient score minus the share of black students with a proficient score. The income gap is the share of students who are not disadvantaged and had a proficient score minus the share who are disadvantaged and had a proficient score.
 Source: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education.
 Data also available on the D.C. KIDS COUNT Data Center (<http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/kids-count>).

and 3 have much higher scores than peers in Wards 7 and 8.⁴ Research suggests that student mobility is high⁵ and that D.C. students who attend out-of-boundary public schools outperform similar students who attend in-boundary public schools in both reading and math.⁶ Students from lower income families seem more likely to attend out-of-boundary schools: only 33 percent of students residing in census tracts with median household income lower than \$40,000 attend their assigned traditional public school while that number is 73 percent for those with census tract median income higher than \$60,000.⁷

- **The economic status of the neighborhoods where students live, and whether they are neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or neighborhoods of concentrated**

privilege. National research shows that low-income working black families are significantly more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods than low-income working white families.⁸ High-poverty neighborhoods are more likely to have under-resourced and under-performing schools.

- **Differences in school quality by neighborhood.** Research shows that school quality is uneven in D.C. — with disparities in school quality combining with housing patterns to limit both diversity and equity.⁹

More information about and insight into these factors should help District leaders adopt and implement more effective strategies — including neighborhood-focused strategies — for narrowing educational achievement gaps in the city.

1. The DC CAS is an annual, statewide assessment administered to public school students in math and reading in grades 3–8 and 10. The main NAEP test is administered every two years to representative samples of students in grades 4, 8 and 12 and allows comparisons among states and urban districts.

2. Measured by free/reduced price lunch eligibility, which is based on the federal poverty level. For a family of three in the 2010–11 school year, a child was eligible for a free lunch if family income was at or below \$23,803 and a reduced-price lunch if income was at or below \$33,874.

3. Because of the high cost of living in D.C., a child's family may be economically insecure without meeting this criterion.

4. Turque, B. (2011, August 6). Deep Divide in DC CAS Scores. *The Washington Post*.

5. Schneider, M. & DeVeaux, N.R. (2010). *Choice without Options: Why School Choice Is Less Than It Seems in Washington, D.C.* American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

6. Nichols, A. & Ozek, U. (2010). *Public School Choice and Student Achievement in the District of Columbia.* Working Paper 53. Calder and the Urban Institute.

7. Ibid.

8. Turner, M.A. & Fortuny, K. (2009). *Residential Segregation and Low-Income Working Families.* The Urban Institute.

9. District of Columbia. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (2008). *Quality Schools, Healthy Neighborhoods, and the Future of DC.*