

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE ETHNIC MINORITY TEACHER CANDIDATES ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENTS?

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While it was acknowledged as an issue approximately three decades ago, the discussions around shortages in the educator workforce have increased in recent years, causing a great deal of alarm about the nation's capacity to provide quality educators for its students. A related concern is the lack of teachers of color, relative to an increasingly diverse student population. The body of research focusing on this issue has identified two major factors—the pipeline of teacher candidates of color, and higher rates of attrition among teachers of color.¹

According to the Center for American Progress, disparities in the pipeline of teachers of color begin prior to college enrollment, as approximately 18 percent of Education majors are of color. The enrollment rate of education majors is well below the overall enrollment rate for undergraduate students of color, which was approximately 43 percent in 2014. The dearth of eventual teacher candidates of color is further exacerbated by several factors, including lower completion rates in higher education programs. While teacher candidates of color are more likely to encounter barriers to college graduation, an additional contributor to the gap in number of teachers of color may be disparities in pass rates for licensure examinations. Specifically, teacher candidates of color, on average, have lower scale scores on most national and state-level assessments used as gateways to the classroom.²

BACKGROUND

In addition to the completion of either a traditional or alternative teacher preparation program, most states require the successful completion of a standardized assessment as part of licensure and/or certification requirements. This Research Brief provides a review of findings regarding the longstanding disparities in performance on these assessments, and some promising examples of interventions used to alleviate differences in success. The assessments featured here include the Praxis®, the SAT, and the ACT.

TEACHER CANDIDATE PERFORMANCE ON PRAXIS® ASSESSMENTS

The Praxis is a widely used suite of assessments designed to test the academic skills of teacher candidates, both in terms of general skills (e.g., reading, writing and mathematics) and subject-area content. The Praxis Core (also known as Praxis I) assesses general skills and is frequently used for entry into schools of education and the student teaching phase of degree programs for education majors. Praxis Subject and Content Knowledge for Teaching Assessments (also known as Praxis II) measure the extent to which early educators and experienced educators possess the subject-area and pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach in typical K-12 settings.

Findings from a 2011 Educational Testing Service report, published in partnership with the NEA, suggest that African-American educators' performance on the Praxis I was lower than that of White candidates, regardless of the candidate's grade point average. The largest gap in performance was observed in the assessment's mathematics portion. Also, gaps in performance increased with educational attainment (used as a proxy for socioeconomic status). Therefore, as socioeconomic status increased, so too did the performance gap on the mathematics Praxis I. Further, enrollment in a teacher preparation program and selectivity of institution appeared to have little to no effect on Praxis I performance. Many of the report's findings have been replicated by subsequent studies, reinforcing similar performance patterns across widely used standardized assessments.³

Education majors, on average, performed worse on the Praxis assessments. African-American teacher candidates tend to take the Praxis later in their academic careers. While more than half of White candidates take the assessment within the first two years of their undergraduate tenure, less than one-third of African-American teacher candidates do so in the same time span.

A subsequent ETS study found that there was a difference in assessment performance, such that most candidates who elected to take the Praxis I in Reading via computer fared better, on average, than their counterparts who chose the paper-and-pencil version. This relationship existed for every teacher candidate group except Hispanic. It is important to note that while the gaps in performance among candidates of color and White candidates who took the computer-based Praxis I assessment persisted, the gaps were smaller.⁴

Another ETS study, also published in partnership with the NEA, found similar patterns of performance by race and ethnicity. Researchers examined the 12 Praxis II exams taken most frequently at the time of study. The findings suggest that all test takers of color lagged behind non-minority educators, with the largest gaps in performance existing between White and African-American test-takers.⁵

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON THE SAT AND ACT

While some states require teacher candidates to take an assessment like the Praxis for licensure, others use college-readiness assessments, such as the SAT and the ACT. Both the SAT and ACT are used by higher education institutions for admissions and some financial aid decisions. Both assessments test students' achievement in reading and mathematics, with an optional essay section. However, the SAT also covers writing and language as an additional content area, while the ACT includes science.

There are long-standing gaps in performance on both the SAT and ACT by race and ethnicity: African-American and Latino students lag behind their White counterparts.⁶ For example, as Figure 1 (below) indicates, African American and Hispanic/Latino students in the graduating class of 2016 performed below the national average and had lower average scores than both White and Asian-American students. Additionally, students who

identified themselves as either American Indian/Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander earned scores below the national average.

Students taking the SAT in 2017 performed in a similar manner: the scale scores of students of color (with the exception of Asian-American students) were lower than the scale scores of White students (see Figure 2, below).

TEACHER PERFORMANCE ON edTPA

edTPA is a standards-based assessment used to determine if new educators possess the skills necessary to be successful in the classroom. It differs from the aforementioned assessments because it is portfolio-based. That is, it requires the collection of multiple sources of evidence to determine the candidate's level of preparation for the classroom—while standardized assessments provide a moment-in-time snapshot of content knowledge. Currently, 18 states allow the use of edTPA for program completion, state licensure, or accreditation review.⁷

Results from the 2015 edTPA assessments suggest that there are no significant differences between Latino and White teacher candidates. Although African-American teachers scored lower than all other groups on average, the gap between their performance and White teachers was minimal—one half of a standard deviation (approximately three points). This difference was significantly smaller than the race/ethnicity gaps in other assessments.

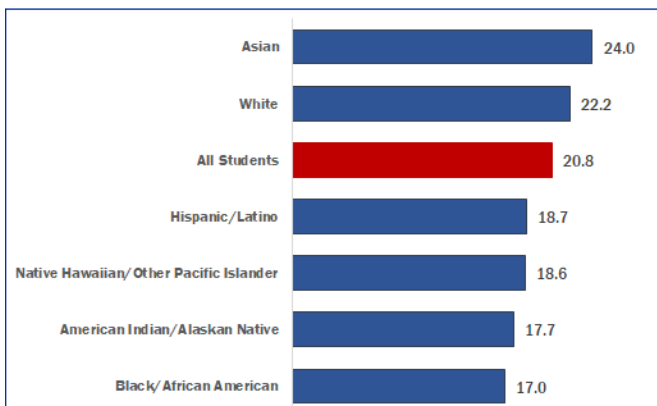


Figure 1. Average 2016 ACT scores by race/ethnicity

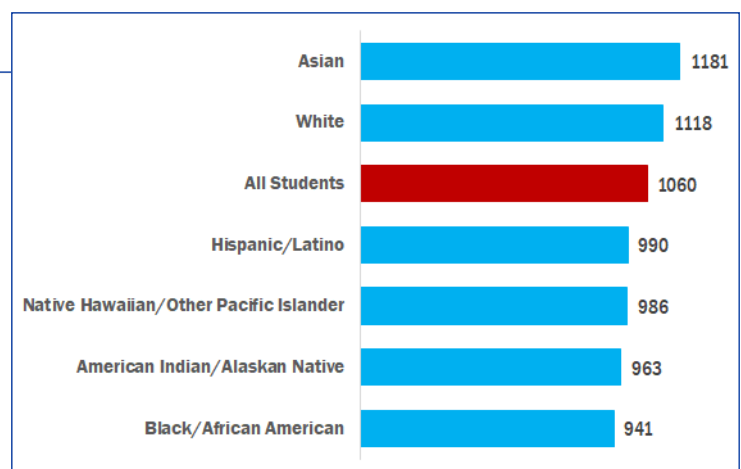


Figure 2. Average 2017 SAT scores by race/ethnicity

SUMMARY

Multiple factors contribute to the shortage of teachers of color in public schools. One barrier to increasing the number of teachers of color involves the pipeline of teacher candidates, and disproportionate pass rates for standardized assessments used for completing teacher preparation programs and for certification and licensure. In particular, there have been longstanding differences in performance on the Praxis, SAT, and ACT (and similar standardized state-level assessments) that, on average, place most teacher candidates of color at a disadvantage.

Given our understanding of disparities in standardized test performance at the elementary and secondary levels through assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it seems reasonable to assume that teacher candidates would have difficulties with standardized tests before, during, and after the post-secondary level. If most such assessments measure basic skills, then better preparation prior to college would do a great deal to alleviate the issues students of color encounter in undergraduate.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

The NEA demonstrated awareness of this issue through its partnership with ETS and offered multiple suggestions for areas of intervention, including:

- ★ **Focus on specific concepts and skills within subject and content areas.** According to work conducted by ETS and the NEA, there are race and ethnic differences in test performance within skill areas that present opportunities for additional support. For example, findings from this study suggest that the performance gaps by race and ethnicity on the Praxis I writing test are smaller for constructed response items compared to multiple-choice questions. Therefore, supports around this portion of the assessment should focus on strategies for multiple choice, versus constructed response.
- ★ **Provide supports for faculty responsible for teacher preparation.** Interviews with faculty in select teacher preparation programs suggested that there was variation in the extent to which they were aware of the state requirements. Therefore, it may be helpful to ensure that faculty in schools of education know what is necessary to successfully become a classroom teacher, and that content on which they are focusing lends itself to developing the skills needed to do well both in the classroom and on the assessments.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION INCLUDE

- ★ **Encourage students to take the Praxis as early as possible.** As multiple studies have suggested, students of color—particularly African-American teacher candidates—take the Praxis when they are further along in their college careers, when some of the knowledge and skills they learned in high school have eroded. Some experts suggest that if these students take the assessment earlier (e.g., during or immediately after high school), then they may be more successful.
- ★ **Improve articulation between high school and college.** Interviews from the aforementioned study also suggested that faculty are often concerned about the skill level with which students enter their programs presents issues for preparing them for the classroom. Improved communication between the high schools from which the teacher candidates graduate and their post-secondary institution may provide faculty with the opportunity to better plan for the students who enroll in their courses.

It is important to mention that there are NEA affiliates that have ongoing interventions to assist both students and faculty responsible for teacher preparation. For example, Bowie State University has provided supports for its students around Praxis preparation. Also, local affiliates in Alabama have provided similar preparation supports for their students, in an effort to improve pass rates on the Praxis.

CONCLUSIONS AND ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research findings suggest that increasing diversity in the teacher workforce provides benefits for all students. The findings also demonstrate that students of color consistently experience more positive outcomes in the presence of teachers of color.⁸ However, a number of studies also indicate that a contributor to the lack of teacher candidates is the disparity in performance on standard assessments used for student teaching entry and licensure upon completion of a teacher preparation program. One consequence of this is that many education majors and teacher candidates of color never get to the classroom.

Essentially, the gaps in test performance that exist throughout students' primary and secondary education experiences follow them into their post-secondary careers. Therefore, if most of these assessments are measuring basic skills, then the timing of taking these assessments is crucial. Since the ACT and SAT have already been taken prior to entering college, encouraging teaching candidates to take the Praxis in high school or earlier in their

post-secondary careers may do a great deal to alleviate the issues students of color encounter in undergraduate. Additionally, better collaboration among higher education faculty responsible for teacher preparation and P-12 would increase awareness around the requirements for assessments, and the needs of teacher candidates of color.

As the NEA has been aware of this issue for several years, it has done a significant amount of work to assess the magnitude of the situation. Additional work is required to provide a fully investigation of the ongoing work that has proven successful within affiliates. Additionally, the work of the former NEA Praxis Cadre should be revisited—and potentially revived.

An additional consideration in terms of barriers to successfully entering the classroom for teacher candidates of color is the affordability of licensure exams. Even if the pass rates improve through the aforementioned efforts, many teacher candidates are unable to pay for the assessments. Therefore, an additional next step may be to assess the extent to which the cost of examinations is an issue for prospective teachers of color.

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All links are current as of June 20, 2018.

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