



Clarifying
Complex
Education
Issues

Executive Summary:

Narrowing the Achievement Gap

Student achievement tests consistently show that certain groups of children score far below children in other groups. The data document a strong association between poverty and students' academic success or lack of it. And while poverty is not unique to any ethnicity, it does exist in disproportionate rates among African Americans and Hispanics, and among English learners.

The reasons behind the achievement gap are multi-faceted. They do to some degree stem from factors that children bring with them to school. However, other factors that contribute to the gap stem from students' school experiences.

Some children begin school at a disadvantage

Poverty is the single best explanation research has found for why children differ in ways that affect school performance, both before they enter school and once they are enrolled. While poverty does not cause low achievement, many children living in poverty are also exposed to certain risk factors that are thought to contribute to poor student performance.

The achievement gap emerges early in children's lives as the result of physical, social, and emotional deprivations. Adequate food, shelter, and medical care, as well as sensory experiences such as being read, sung, and talked to are critical to the healthy cognitive development of young children.

Exposure to oral and written language before entering school is also known to broaden children's vocabulary and to facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills. Children, however, differ in their exposure to early literacy activities, and often along socioeconomic lines.

Solutions target school readiness and poverty

Every poor child is likely to benefit to some extent when a family's economic situation is improved. Strategies for raising families out of poverty include: providing temporary financial assistance while parents acquire the skills necessary to enter the job market or to secure better paying jobs; and/or reducing the drain on limited financial resources by eliminating the tax burden on low-income families. Other possible strategies—such

as guaranteeing a living wage and changing the tax structure to narrow the gap between wealth and poverty—might be effective but are politically challenging to develop and implement.

Another way to offset the effects of poverty is to provide poor children with opportunities to develop the cognitive and social skills they will need to succeed in school. Strategies include providing free or inexpensive programs that help parents learn how to create nurturing and stimulating environments for their infants and young children. Another approach—providing stimulating environments for children through organized preschool activities—is the focus of the federal Head Start program and is promoted by universal preschool advocates.

California attempts to mitigate poverty

California has a number of policies to help improve the economic circumstances of poor families and to compensate for some of the conditions of poverty likely to influence cognitive development and schooling success. Some—such as a high income tax threshold and relatively generous minimum wage law—attempt to mitigate the impact of family poverty. Many programs subsidize participation in preschool and childcare programs. California and the federal government in recent years have also put substantial resources into improving access to health care. These policies vary in their effectiveness and coverage.

In addition, Californians in 1998 passed Proposition 10, which provided a new revenue source for county-level programs aimed at helping preschoolers. This voter initiative created the Children and Families First program to “promote, support, and optimize early childhood development” of children from before birth to their fifth birthday.

The belief that schools can and should narrow the gap propels education reform

For decades a driving force in education reform has been confidence—or at least optimism—that schools can help students overcome the factors they bring with them to school that limit academic achievement. In pursuit of that goal, researchers have for more than 40 years doggedly pursued answers as to why some students and schools perform better than others.

The findings from much of this work are mixed and provide little guidance in designing discrete solutions with reliable and predictable results. To the extent that conclusions have been drawn, they indicate that no silver bullet exists. Instead, narrowing the achievement gap requires a comprehensive set of strategies that are interdependent and crafted to meet local needs.

The philosophy of the current standards-based reform movement reflects this research conclusion. Standards-based reform includes multiple components that integrate a unifying vision and goals with coherent instructional guidance and restructured governance systems. Central to this movement is the notion that all children can learn and that schools control the factors necessary to assure student mastery of a rigorous core curriculum.

California and many other states enthusiastically responded to the theory of standards-based reform. They drafted content standards for students in core subjects and aligned teacher preparation standards, accountability systems, and student and teacher assessments with these standards. However, despite theorists' call for shifting authority to those closest to the work, most states have been less successful at providing flexibility so local schools can adapt the policies to meet local needs. Experts believe such a shift would require a fundamental change in the top-down organizational structure that characterizes much of public education and thus continues to challenge policymakers and local educators alike.

So far, it is difficult to come to any definitive conclusions on the specific effects of standards-based reform on student achievement. What is known, however, is that states such as Texas, North Carolina, and Connecticut that have sustained reform policies across governors and parties have met with success in narrowing the achievement gap.

California's efforts are both more recent and more fragmented than has been the case in some of these other states. State leaders have crafted many reforms, including some specifically aimed at narrowing the achievement gap:

- **Education funding**, including equity between school districts, earmarking of funds to support underprivileged students, and most recently a look at the overall adequacy of funding.
- **The preparation and distribution of highly-qualified teachers**, including some efforts to provide incentives for teachers to work in the lowest-performing schools and some emphasis on teacher professional development.
- **Extra help and motivation for underperforming students**, including more prescriptive state policies on the instruction and assessment of English learners; funds for supplemental instruction programs; and motivational strategies ranging from the

California High School Exit Exam to scholarships rewarding good performance on statewide tests.

- **Reforms aimed at school organization, management, and climate**, including school improvement plans required through the state's accountability system, some increased emphasis on school site leadership, and a major taxpayer investment in school facilities.
- **Increased pressure on schools**, including encouragement of charter schools as an alternative to the regular public school system, and the public ranking of schools through the state's Academic Performance Index (API).

In some cases these policies have unintentionally exacerbated the achievement gap, with class size reduction a case in point. In others, it is too soon to assess their impact.

New and far-reaching federal legislation may be the next step in this evolutionary story of education reforms and the achievement gap. The stated goal of the 2001 law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is to "close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers." NCLB calls for "stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work." California leaders are currently at work to develop or adapt state policies in order to carry out these objectives in the manner required by federal regulations.

Research and experience offer direction

An extensive body of research documents the multiple factors associated with the achievement gap. Some of these are factors children bring with them to school. Other factors—such as how well a school is organized and managed, how qualified its teachers and other staff are, what subject matter and curriculum they teach, and how high the expectations are for all a school's students—are within local control, including that of district school boards, administrators, and union leaders.

State policymakers have put some effort and resources into addressing the achievement gap, and NCLB attempts to require more. But state and local educators need better data and definitive research about how K–12 students are doing and what practices make a difference in their performance. Perhaps more importantly, state leaders need to sustain their investment in reform efforts in order to maximize their effectiveness even when facing severe financial constraints.

To learn more, contact EdSource or go online to order the full report, *Narrowing the Achievement Gap*, and see a list of resources at: www.edsource.org/pub_abs_achgap.cfm



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