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*On the Same Page*TM

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What Can Schools Do to Reduce the Achievement Gap?

What Is the Achievement Gap?

When educators talk about the “achievement gap,” they are usually referring to the fact that poor minority students, as a group, score lower on student achievement measures than do middle-class non-minority students. This is certainly the most troubling achievement gap affecting policy making at the national level. However, the term “achievement gap” means different things to different people. Some people mean the achievement gap between African American students and white students at all income levels; others mean the gap between female and male students, or the gap between students of different cultures, primary languages, ethnicities, or socio-economic statuses. Each school or community will experience different kinds of “gaps”—different groups within their student population that tend to have lower achievement.

How Severe a Problem Is the Achievement Gap?

Efforts to close the achievement gap seemed to be paying off in the 1970s and 80s as the gap narrowed, especially between African American and white students. Between 1970 and 1988, the African American/white achievement gap decreased substantially in reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, as well as high school graduation, college attendance, and college completion rates.

Since 1988, however, the gap has been widening again. Minority students’ achievement scores today are lower than minority students’ scores were ten years ago. The reasons for this reversal are not clear, but the social and economic impact of the gap make it a severe national problem. However, some districts have been successful in decreasing the gap.

What Are the Causes of the Achievement Gap?

The causes for the achievement gap are complex. According to research, they fall into two main categories: 1) factors related to students’ socioeconomic status, cultural environment, and family background; and 2) factors related to students’ schools.

Socio-Cultural Causes

One of the main factors associated with low student achievement is poverty. Students living in persistent poverty are more likely than other students to suffer from many conditions that impede their learning, including:

- poor health care (including inadequate prenatal care for their mothers);
- frequent changes in residence, requiring transferring to new schools repeatedly;
- lack of books and other educational resources in the home;
- parents with lower levels of education; and
- unstable family structure.

Cultural attitudes and racism also play a part in the achievement gap. Research suggests that some minority students perceive that the majority culture sees them as less capable and expects little of them. These students may not try in school, since they believe they won’t succeed anyway. Some researchers believe minority students may maintain low levels of achievement purposely to avoid “acting white” and to

What Can We Do to Narrow the Achievement Gap?

gain the approval of their peers, while others see the problem as partly consisting of stereotype threat.

School-Related Causes

Unfortunately, students who start out with disadvantages often encounter school conditions that only add to the problem. They are more likely to attend schools with inadequate funding staffed with teachers who are not as qualified to teach their subjects as they could be. In addition, especially in schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students, teachers often have low expectations of these students, leading them to have low expectations for themselves.

Some of the work necessary to reduce the achievement gap is outside the control of schools and needs to be done on the national level—efforts to reduce poverty, for example. But there are some things that schools can do—and are doing—to raise achievement for *all* students. School efforts should be guided by research that suggests that the following factors can help narrow the achievement gap:

- **High expectations for all students.** Teachers need to become more conscious of their own attitudes and behaviors, so that they don't unintentionally communicate low expectations for low-achieving students—by calling on them less frequently, for example, or giving them less time to answer questions.
- **Cultural congruence in instruction.** When there is a good match between the student's knowledge base and the teacher's, as there usually is between white, middle-class students and their teachers, then achievement tends to be high. If teachers can find ways to structure their curriculums so they tap into their minority students' stores of knowledge, their achievement may improve dramatically.
- **Teaching strategies that promote meaningful participation.** These include cooperative learning activities, as well as instructional approaches that are flexible enough to appeal to individual students' interests and abilities.
- **Smaller class size.** Research has demonstrated that the positive effects of smaller K-3 classes are particularly strong for disadvantaged students.
- **Higher teacher quality.** Many argue that the most important determinant of success for students is teacher quality, especially for at-risk students.
- **Summer enrichment programs.** These programs operate on the idea that children from lower socio-economic environments lose ground over the summer in comparison to other students, contributing to lower cumulative achievement over many years of schooling.

Resources

On the Same Page provides a balanced overview of the topic based on a thorough review of the research. Some of the resources used in writing this issue were: "Closing the Gap," by E.L. Baker and R. L. Linn, in *The CRESST Line* (Newsletter of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing), Fall 2000 © *Academic Challenge for the Children of Poverty: The Summary Report* prepared for the U.S. Department of Education by SRI International and Policy Studies Associates, 1993. For a list of all references used for this issue of *On the Same Page*, along with other related resources, visit the ERS Web site: www.ers.org.

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Educational Research Service

2000 Clarendon Boulevard, Arlington VA 22201-2908

Phone: (703) 243-2100 or (800) 791-9308 ♦ Fax: (703) 243-1985 ♦ Email: ers@ers.org ♦ Web site: www.ers.org