Achievement gaps are an all-too-present reality in today’s educational landscape. Despite decades of overall progress in narrowing achievement gaps, disparities in educational outcomes related to poverty, English language proficiency, disability, and racial and ethnic background persist. In recent years, closing these gaps was a focal point for education policy. But as the political winds have changed, the focus on closing achievement gaps has been eclipsed by often heated debates about teacher evaluation, Common Core State Standards, and other hot topics in the education arena. Moreover, the complex intersections of economic, housing, and education policy that have led to a resegregation of America’s public schools make the multidimensional solutions that might improve student achievement over time difficult to sustain in an age of quick fixes and fractured political discourse.

Despite the complexity of the issues, renewing a collective commitment to closing the gaps must be at the forefront of efforts to ensure educational opportunity for all students. With poverty rates rising among public school children, and America continuing its demographic shift to a majority-minority population, the task of scaling up and better supporting the practices and interventions that effectively close gaps and promote positive achievement outcomes is more urgent than ever. While the Black-White achievement gap has been widely described in academic research and media outlets, other groups of students experience significant gaps in academic achievement, and an increasing number of these same students will be enrolled in America’s public schools in the years ahead. Understanding who these children are and just how far they have been left behind, is a critical, foundational step if we are to better address their educational needs and increase positive achievement outcomes for all students.

What are Achievement Gaps?
Achievement gaps are broadly defined as the differences in academic performance between groups of students of different backgrounds and have been documented with respect to students’ ethnic, racial, gender, English language learner, disability, and income status. Gaps may exist on a range of data points, such as:

- Student performance on national and state tests and classroom assessments
- Measures that affect performance like tardiness, absences, access to qualified teachers, and access to modern materials, facilities, technology, and books
- Access to and success in courses (e.g., algebra, calculus, physics) and special educational opportunities (e.g., Advanced Placement, Honors, dual enrollment) that are gateways to higher education
- Early childhood readiness factors and access to quality early learning and full-day kindergarten programs
- Readiness for college or career technical education certification programs without need for remediation
- High school dropout and graduation rates
- College completion rates and employment later in life

These and other indicators point to gaps in the opportunities that are provided to students, as well as gaps in the educational attainment achieved by students.

Gaps in Achievement Persist for Many Students
Distinct groups of students persistently lag behind their more privileged peers on various indicators of academic achievement. Since they were first administered in the early 1970s, results from the
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have documented overall increases in student performance in reading and math. Although achievement gaps between groups of students have narrowed over this time, substantial gaps in NAEP test scores have persisted for low-income students, English language learners (ELL), students with disabilities, and students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

While standardized test scores are not the only means of comparing achievement outcomes by student group, the NAEP test results have provided a consistent source of national level assessment data for more than 40 years and demonstrate the scope and complexity of the achievement gap challenge. Graduation rate data released in March 2015 by the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) National Center for Education Statistics provide additional insight into achievement gaps between student groups, while select state level data point to achievement gaps for homeless students and students in the foster care system. In addition, exposure to trauma and violence cuts across socioeconomic categories and poses significant barriers to educational achievement in the classroom.

While intersections between student subgroups—such as between race and poverty, ethnicity and English language proficiency, or gender and race—heighten the complexity of analysis that is needed to move a conversation toward solutions, the data that follows provides a baseline for understanding the gaps in achievement that persist for too many of our students.

**Students from Low-Income Families**

The income achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families increased 40 percent between the mid-1970s and 2000 and is even more pronounced than the Black-White achievement gap that many often emphasize.\(^1\) Whether looking at standardized test scores, grades, high school completion rates, or college enrollment and completion rates, there are significant achievement gaps between low- and high-income students on most measures of academic success.\(^2\) For example, the low-income graduation rate reached 73.3 percent during the 2012-13 school year (an increase of 3.3 percentage points since 2010-11), but was still 8.1 percentage points lower than the record-high national graduation rate of 81.4 percent.\(^3\)

NAEP test scores also reflect persistent income achievement gaps between students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and their higher income peers which have not narrowed appreciably since 2003.\(^4\) Half of the fourth and eighth grade students who took the NAEP in 2013 were eligible to receive free or reduced priced lunch through the NSLP based on their families’ low levels of income.\(^5\) As compared to their higher-income peers, students eligible for free and reduced price lunch demonstrated lower proficiency levels in fourth and eighth grade math and reading, and much larger percentages of NSLP eligible students performed below basic on NAEP tests than their non-NSLP eligible peers.\(^6\) (See Tables 1 and 2)

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 NAEP - % Proficient</th>
<th>Eligible for NSLP</th>
<th>Not Eligible for NSLP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free Lunch</td>
<td>Reduced - Price Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Math</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Reading</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade Math</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade Reading</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poverty and low economic status have a particularly negative impact on young children as they enter school and make their way through the K-12 system. The income achievement gap is already large when students enter kindergarten, and researchers have identified school readiness gaps in preliteracy, math, and cognitive skills, which are among the most important predictors of later school success. Researchers have also found that children who experience repeated or continued poverty fall farther and farther behind, with the differences in reading scores increasing over time between them and their high-income peers.

English Language Learners
Achievement gaps between ELLs and non-ELL students are deeply rooted, pervasive, complex, and challenging. As a group, ELLs face some of the most pronounced achievement gaps of any student groups. The 2013 NAEP test scores document large ELL achievement gaps that have remained relatively unchanged over the preceding 10 years. In 2013, ELL students demonstrated proficiency levels that were 23 to 30 percentage points below their English-speaking peers, with only 3 to 4 percent of ELL eighth graders demonstrating proficiency in math or reading. More than two-thirds of ELL eighth graders scored below basic in math (69 percent) and reading (70 percent). Almost half of ELL fourth graders scored below basic in math (41 percent) and more than two-thirds scored below basic in reading (69 percent).

While the graduation rate for students with limited English proficiency increased 4.1 percentage points between 2010-11 and 2012-13, their graduation rate stood at only 61.1 percent—a full 20 points below the national graduation rate of 81.4 percent, and 25 points below their White peers (86.6 percent).

According to data released by ED’s National Center for Education Statistics in March 2015, ELL students graduate from high school “at the lowest rate of all student subgroups.”

Students with Disabilities
Interpreting data regarding academic achievement for students with disabilities is a complex task impacted by decisions at the local level regarding instructional delivery, inclusion, testing, and other policies. For example, determinations as to whether students with disabilities take standardized tests with their same-age peers or with their academic placement level and the processes for making that determination vary across districts. Even understanding this context, however, the significant gaps in academic achievement that persist between students with disabilities and their peers raise the question of what more the education community should do to address their learning needs.

The 2013 NAEP test scores and graduation rates document large achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. In 2013, students with disabilities demonstrated proficiency levels in reading and math that were 20 to 27 percentage points below their nondisabled peers, with few fourth and eighth grade students with disabilities demonstrating proficiency in math or reading. Almost two-thirds of eighth grade students

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**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 NAEP - % Below Basic</th>
<th>Eligible for NSLP</th>
<th>Not Eligible for NSLP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free Lunch</td>
<td>Reduced - Price Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Math</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Reading</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade Math</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade Reading</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Poverty and low economic status have a particularly negative impact on young children as they enter school and make their way through the K-12 system. The income achievement gap is already large when students enter kindergarten, and researchers have identified school readiness gaps in preliteracy, math, and cognitive skills, which are among the most important predictors of later school success. Researchers have also found that children who experience repeated or continued poverty fall farther and farther behind, with the differences in reading scores increasing over time between them and their high-income peers.
with disabilities scored below basic in math (65 percent) and reading (60 percent), while almost half of fourth grade students with disabilities scored below basic in math (45 percent) and more than two-thirds scored below basic in reading (69 percent).17

Graduation rates for students with disabilities have been a source of more encouragement, with rates improving from 59 percent in 2010-11 to 61.9 percent in 2012-13.18 Even with this improvement, however, the graduation rate for students with disabilities is a full 20 percentage points below the national graduation rate of 81.4 percent.

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Gaps in achievement between racial and ethnic minorities and their White peers have been well documented over the last 40 years. Across the spectrum—from indicators of readiness for kindergarten among young children, through achievement outcomes in the K-12 system, to success in completing college and career technical education programs without the need for remediation—we see signs of progress mixed with signs of significant concern about the effectiveness of America’s public education system in addressing the needs of the growing population of racial and ethnic minority students.

The data make clear that achievement gaps among Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students and their White peers have narrowed considerably over the past 40 years. For example, more than three-quarters of Black students (83 percent) performed below basic on the NAEP fourth grade mathematics test in 1990 as compared to 41 percent of White students.19 In 2013, that number stood at 34 percent for Black students and 9 percent for White students—a marked improvement for both groups. Similar progress has been made by other racial and ethnic groups.

But while the magnitude of the achievement gaps has changed, the gaps, nonetheless, persist for racial and ethnic minorities.20 The 2013 NAEP test scores indicate that Black, Hispanic, and AI/AN students in the fourth and eighth grades scored significantly lower than their White peers in reading and math. Moreover, Black, Hispanic, and AI/AN students demonstrate proficiency in reading and math at much lower levels than White students and perform below basic in these subject areas at much higher rates than White students.21

In stark contrast, Asian/Pacific Islander (API) students as a group consistently outperform their White peers and other racial and ethnic minorities with respect to NAEP test scores and proficiency levels. As some have pointed out, however, “[t]he Asian Pacific American demographic includes 48 distinct ethnic groups from various regions, including East Asians … South Asians, Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, and more,” and the needs of many API students have been rendered invisible by “the model minority myth.”22 This perspective is supported by research that disaggregates student data to examine the performance of various ethnic subgroups that make up the broader category of API students. One such study found that some Southeast Asian groups experienced socioeconomic barriers similar to other racial and ethnic groups, as well as lower levels of educational attainment such as high school diplomas.23

Graduation rates also point to a story of progress that is overshadowed by persistent disparities. As of the 2012-13 school year, America’s overall high school graduation rate was at a record high 81.4 percent.24 Between the 2010-11 and 2012-13 school years, the graduation rate grew for American Indian students by 4.7 percentage points, for Hispanic students by 4.2 percentage points, and for Black students by 3.7
percentage points. Moreover, the gap between White and Black students and between White and Hispanic students receiving high school diplomas is closing. Despite this progress, however, the graduation rates of ethnic and racial minorities remain troubling, with the American Indian graduation rate standing at only 69.7 percent, the Black graduation rate standing at 70.7 percent, and the Hispanic graduation rate standing at 75.2 percent, as compared to the White graduation rate of 86.6 percent.

Other Vulnerable Students: Youth in Foster Care, Homeless Youth, and Youth Exposed to Trauma and Violence

Youth in foster care and homeless youth face significant barriers to success in school. Frequent moves for these students undermine academic success and can be caused by a changed foster care placement, family homelessness, or transient or unstable housing arrangements. Far too often, these factors combine with the challenges they may face as a racial or ethnic minority—and as a result of their low-income economic status—to further hinder their educational attainment. While national NAEP data is not specifically reported for these two subgroups, analysis of state data points to significant achievement gaps for homeless youth and youth in foster care.

One longitudinal study of students in Minnesota found that, “students who experienced homelessness or high mobility had chronically low levels of reading and math achievement compared to their peers—gaps that either stayed the same or worsened as students approached high school.” Homeless or high mobility (HHM) students, “showed lower levels of achievement, and slower growth in math achievement, during years in which they experienced homelessness and high mobility compared to their own achievement and growth during years in which they did not experience homelessness or high mobility.” Variation in achievement among HHM students suggests that homelessness and high mobility affect individual students differently, and that other factors related to resilience bolstered the achievement of some HHM students. This study pointed out that additional research is needed to better understand the impact of homelessness and high mobility on student achievement.

Another study found that, “Compared to all other student groups in California—including those already identified with the widest achievement gaps, such as English learners, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with disabilities—students who are in foster care drop out of school at much higher rates and graduate at much lower rates, with only about 58 percent of grade 12 students earning a high school diploma.” Test results from the California Standards Test show that, “results for students in foster care fell into the two lowest performance levels for English language arts and mathematics at twice the rate of those for the statewide student population.” Moreover, “high school students in foster care had the highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate,” with students in upper grade levels and those who experience three or more foster care placements experiencing the greatest achievement gaps.

The estimated 46 million children affected by violence, crime, abuse, or psychological trauma in a given year—almost two out of every three children in the U.S.—represent a large presence in America's public schools. Education is one area in which negative, long-term effects of trauma and violence can be observed. “Chronic stress caused by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have permanent effects on the chemical and physical structures of a child's brain, creating issues with
attention, concentration, memory, and creativity—making it far more difficult for the child to succeed in the classroom.” Even more immediately, between 2011 and 2022, White student enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools is projected to decrease from 52 percent of all students enrolled in public schools to 45 percent, while students who are Hispanic will increase from 24 percent to 30 percent, bringing the total enrollment of minority students in public schools to more than half.

English language learners represent a growing population in America’s public schools. During the 2011-12 school year, there were almost 4.4 million ELL students in the United States, comprising 9.1 percent of all preK-12 students nationwide. Data collected in 2009 indicate that 37 percent of Hispanic fourth graders and 21 percent of Hispanic eighth graders are English language learners. Attending to the needs of ELL students is not just a western state issue. While the eight states with ELL public school enrollment rates of 10 percent or more are in the West (Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Texas), ELL student enrollment increased by more than 100 percent in seven states in other regions of the country between 2004-05 and 2011-12: Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

Against this backdrop of growing racial and ethnic diversity in our nation and in our schools, there has also been a marked increase in economic inequality. As of 2013, for the first time in recent history, a majority (51 percent) of public school students come from low-income families. This reflects a persistent increase in the growth of low-income public school students over the past several decades, from 32 percent in 1989, to 38 percent in 2000, to 51 percent in 2013. While most of the states with a majority of low-income students enrolled are found in the South and West, the growth of the low-income student population is national in scale. In 21 states, half or
more students in public school were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2013, and in 40 of 50 states, at least 40 percent of students were low-income.

Meeting the Challenges Ahead
The achievement outcomes, demographic trends, and projected shifts in student population described here foreshadow the significant challenges that lie ahead for America’s public schools. Beyond the moral imperative of fairness and equity, there are enormous economic benefits to closing achievement gaps, and significant economic costs if we fail. Yet despite ample forewarning, we face this educational future without the political and educational strategies in place and at the scale that will be needed to produce the highly skilled workforce called for in the years ahead—unless we make a different choice.

Advancing an opportunity agenda in the policy arena that expands equity, access, and opportunity for the students we are currently leaving behind is critical if we are to change the story of achievement gaps to one of achievement for all students. Providing resources for schools and students that face the greatest challenges, expanding education models like community schools and parent/community engagement that address the holistic needs of students, and increasing diversity and cultural competence in and across the education workforce are cornerstones of a policy and practice agenda aimed at eliminating achievement gaps.

But closing the gaps and raising achievement outcomes will require more than just changes within school systems. Curricula, instructional methods, and other aspects of educational practice are an important part of the solution, but they alone are not enough. We must also address the social and economic factors outside the classroom, including the very complex issues of economic inequality and socioeconomic segregation in housing that intersect with race and ethnicity to profoundly impact educational opportunity and outcomes. This will require unprecedented collaboration across the spectrum. Whether we are decision makers in the policy arena, educators in our schools, or advocates and parents in the community, closing achievement gaps and expanding opportunity for all students must remain at the forefront of our efforts.
Notes


Students eligible for NSLP are from families that have incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty line ($29,965 for a family of four) or between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line ($29,965 to $42,642 for a family of four). See Interpreting NAEP Reading Results. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/interpret_results.aspx


nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups


25 National Center for Education Statistics. (2015) Achievement gap narrows as high school graduation rates for minority students improve faster than rest of nation

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Teixeira, R., Frey, W.H., and Griffin, R. (February 2015). “States of Change: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1974-2060.” American Enterprise Institute, Brookings Institution and Center for American Progress. Students who are Black are projected to decrease from 16 percent to 15 percent, students who are API will remain at 5 percent, AI/AN students will remain at 5 percent, and enrollment of students who are two or more races will increase from 3 percent to 4 percent.


