

# Focus On

## What Works

### Learning While Black

This year, Black students watched as Barack Obama became America's first Black President, Black day camp kids were "uninvited" from a Philadelphia pool club, and a preeminent Black scholar was arrested in his own home. Whatever your opinion of these events, there's no denying their powerful impact on Black schoolchildren. From dizzying heights to painful lows—it's a crash course for educators about the surreal world Black students navigate every single day.

#### Great Gains

Small wonder Black education reflects a similar dichotomy. Studies show Black students have made remarkable strides in school readiness, standardized test gains, high-school curriculum gains, and all-time-high college attendance rates, with some of the nation's most elite colleges reporting higher graduation rates for Blacks than Whites.

Yet, this progress is tempered by sobering realities: Achievement gaps between Black and White students, although narrowing, continue to dog educators.

The performance of Black boys continues to lag behind that of girls. And as the economy contracts, low graduation rates limit opportunities for Black youth without a diploma. A new study of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district has even found that when schools experience an influx of Black students, the best teachers—both White and Black—are more likely to leave.

#### Lighting the Way

It takes an event as world-changing as Barack Obama's election to counteract the "you're not welcome" messages many Black students receive regularly. After the inauguration, a team of researchers documented that a performance gap between Blacks and Whites on a test administered before Obama's nomination all but disappeared when the same test was administered after his acceptance speech and election. Of course, the ultimate effect of Obama's presidency on Black student achievement continues to be debated, but as the President himself notes, "It changes how Black children look at themselves, and I wouldn't underestimate the force of that."

### HOT TOPIC

#### The Color of Discipline

Imagine being four years old and put into handcuffs because you and your friend won't take a nap in your pre-K class. Or being five years old and taken away in handcuffs by the police after throwing a tantrum in kindergarten. Across the country, Black students, especially boys, are punished far more harshly than their peers. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reports the suspension rate for Black males is nearly three times the rate for White males. In many districts, virtually all students who are expelled are Black. In fact, if Black male students were suspended and expelled at the same rates as Whites, there would be half a million fewer suspensions and at least 10,000 fewer expulsions.

#### FROM ISSUES

ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

GRADUATION RATES

STEREOTYPING BLACK STUDENTS

#### TO ACTION

AFFILIATE-DISTRICT COLLABORATION

CULTURALLY COMPETENT POLICIES

FAMILY-SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



## WHAT'S WORKING

### 1 Affiliate-district collaboration fuels district-wide gains.

Thanks to a partnership between the predominantly Black Kansas City school district and the Kansas City Kansas Association, K-12 students are benefiting from a district-wide reform initiative that strengthens relationships among all stakeholders, and promotes culturally responsive teaching and learning. Research on the first district-wide cohort of graduating seniors who have gone through the initiative from K-12 shows that their performance has improved on state assessment tests at each school level—elementary, middle, and high. Across the district and grade levels, reading scores increased from 11 percent of students scoring at proficiency in 1996 to 62 percent proficiency in 2009, while math scores rose for all students from 3 percent of students at proficiency in 1996 to 63 percent in 2009. In the 2008-09 school year, high school students (who are grouped into small learning communities with a core group of teachers who stay all four years) performed higher in both reading and math than any other school level. Achievement gaps are narrowing as scores for Black and Hispanic students rise faster than scores for White students.

### 2 Culturally competent policies and family-school engagement yield results.

After receiving NEA's Priority Schools Initiative pilot training in 2001, the Alabama Education Association (AEA) joined with the state department of education and school board,

state PTA, classroom teachers, and administrators to turn around five struggling elementary schools. AEA's efforts focused on putting low-income Black learners at the center of the change effort and drew upon the students' cultural strengths, unrecognized abilities, everyday resilience, and inherent interests to engage them in their academic work. In just one year, the schools moved off the state takeover list and have sustained their achievements to make NCLB's Average Yearly Progress, increase attendance, and improve family/school engagement.

### 3 When staff development increases, student performance improves.

The NEA Foundation's support of a partnership led by Tennessee's Hamilton County Education Association, school district, and community organizations has helped accelerate the achievement rate for disadvantaged and minority students. By placing educators at the center of efforts to improve teaching and learning in four predominantly Black middle schools, gaps in reading/language arts between the target schools' scores and the district average were more than halved. In math, gaps shrank from 22.7 percent to 13.5 percent from 2004 – 2008. Instructional resources, coaching, mentoring, and other teacher effectiveness-focused supports are the key to these successes for Black students and the adults who educate them.

## WHAT STUDENTS SAY

“My best friend and I talk about race all the time—this conversation has gone on since the 7th grade. We've been trying to prove the stereotypes wrong. I'm always wondering whether I'm being a credit or a debit to society. I'm afraid of being a statistic.”

—High School Student  
Albany, New York

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