

Windows of Opportunity



State Strategies to
Close Educational Gaps
and Raise Achievement
Levels for All
Students



Executive Summary
and State
Self-Assessment

The NASBE Study Group
on Closing the
Achievement Gap



October 2004

NASBE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

Windows of Opportunity:

State Strategies to Close Educational Gaps and Raise Achievement Levels for All Students

Executive Summary and State Self-Assessment

Today, as states, districts, and schools move forward in fulfilling the requirements and the vision of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), this nation is being confronted more explicitly than ever by the wide gaps in academic achievement that exist between successful students (preponderantly middle and upper income whites and Asians) and those students who are far from achieving to their potential (generally low-income students of every race and ethnic group, students in special education, and students attending low-performing schools). And while large numbers of students from all backgrounds can be found in the under-achieving groups, the situation for minorities, particularly African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, is especially alarming. All too frequently these students carry multiple burdens, as they are stuck in poverty, stuck in special education, and stuck in low-performing schools.

But performance gaps don't just exist in terms of test scores. There are also significant gaps among groups of students in terms of dropout rates, placement in advanced classes, who gets good teachers, and who goes to college.

At the same time, other gaps appear when it comes to system performance. In this case, states themselves can differ markedly not only in terms of student achievement, but in terms of the financial and other support they offer their neediest districts. And significant gaps in performance exist between school districts and between individual schools, even when they are provided with equal resources and serve families and students with roughly the same characteristics.

All of these gaps were considered by NASBE's Study Group on Closing the Achievement Gap when it began its deliberations in January 2004, charged with recommending ways states can successfully and on a broad scale address this issue. Below are some of the numbers that gave concrete

meaning to the Study Group's discussions. It's true that by now many educators are all too familiar with the achievement data. But it is helpful to reiterate some of the numbers or put them in a new light, because the statistics are indeed discouraging—and yet there are also positive signs.

A. Achievement Gaps by the Numbers

It is frequently noted that achievement gaps among different racial and ethnic groups, as measured by results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), narrowed somewhat in the 1970s and 1980s, only to stagnate or even widen during the 1990s. How significant are these gaps today? Following are results from recent NAEP exams and other sources that portray a stark picture of education gaps in America today.²

Percentage of 4th and 8th graders scoring below basic in reading (2003)

	<u>4th</u>	<u>8th</u>
White	26	18
Asian/Pacific Islander	31	22
African-American	61	47
Latino	57	46
Native American	53	41

We should not lose sight of what these numbers mean: ***well over half of all African-American, Latino, and Native American 4th graders are below basic in reading*** compared with about a quarter of white students. None of these scores are terrific (the National Assessment Governing Board, which runs NAEP, says the "overall achievement goal for American students is performance that qualifies at the Proficient level or

higher.”)³ But they are disastrous for the future well being of most minority groups.

Size of the gap in average 4th grade reading scores for various groups (2003)

White	228.6	African-American	197.9	Gap = 30.6
White	228.6	Latino	200.5	Gap = 28.1
Not Poor	229.4	Poor	201.3	Gap = 28.1

What is striking about these data is that the gap between poor and not poor students (using eligibility for free or reduced lunch as the qualifier for being “poor”) is nearly identical to the gaps between other groups. The same is true in terms of the percentage of poor students scoring below basic. For example, nationally 56 percent of poor students scored below basic on the 2003 4th grade reading exam and 53 percent of poor students scored below basic on the 2003 8th grade math exam, compared with 25 percent and 22 percent respectively for students who are not poor.⁴ Poor students comprise every racial and ethnic group, but the majority of poor students are white. Indeed, in a number of states that have small minority populations, the vast majority of poor students are white—and yet the poor versus non-poor achievement gaps are still very large. So while African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are disproportionately affected by poverty, policymakers seeking to improve the achievement of all students should not think only in terms of minorities.

Comparing 8th grade white achievement with 12th grade African-American and Latino achievement

Several researchers have made the following disturbing observation based on NAEP scores: achievement levels for 12th grade African-American and Latino students basically mirror 8th grade white achievement levels. We can tell this because NAEP 4th, 8th, and 12th grade exams are all scored on the same scale. For these groups, there are serious implications for finishing high school, getting a job, and getting into and being successful in higher education.⁵

Achievement gaps begin early

There is no doubt that gaps, both in terms of opportunity to learn and achievement, show up very early, well before children get to school. As Demographer Harold Hodgkinson concludes in his 2003 report, *Leaving Too Many Children Behind*,

Long before children knock on the kindergarten door—during the crucial period from birth to age five when humans learn more than during any other five-year period—forces have already been put in place that encourage some children to “shine” and fulfill their potential in school and life while other forces stunt the growth and development of children who have just as much potential. The cost to the nation in terms of talent unfulfilled and lives of promise wasted is enormous.⁶

It is also clear that most of the negative “forces” on children are related to poverty and the educational attainment of parents. Following are some of the census and achievement data that flesh out these early gaps.

- In 2000, about 17 percent of all children in the United States lived in poverty, up from 15 percent in 1971. This is higher than for any other industrialized country.⁷
- In 1999, about one-third of all births were to single mothers; by race/ethnicity, 26 percent of white births were to single mothers, 68 percent of African-American, 42 percent of Hispanic, 58 percent of Native American, and 5 percent of Asian. Statistically, children raised by single parents are two to three times more likely to live in poverty than those raised by both parents.⁸
- Head Start rarely manages to reach even half of those children who are eligible to attend.⁹
- Math and reading achievement data show that even at the beginning of kindergarten, children from the lowest socio-economic status (SES) quintile are already substantially behind their better-off peers. For this group, the average cognitive score of children in the highest SES group are 60 percent higher than the scores of the lowest SES group.¹⁰
- It is estimated that preschool children from literacy-rich families come to school having been read to for 1,000 to 2,000 hours, while those from literacy poor families have been read to for 25 or fewer hours.¹¹ This can translate into a developmental gap in prereading skills of almost six months by age five.¹²
- A study of California children found that almost 90 percent of the white–Latino mathematics gap observed on the 2003 NAEP 8th grade test is already apparent at entry to kindergarten.¹³

Gaps in dropout rates and high school completion

Some educators are concerned that when confronted with higher expectations and high-stakes exit exams, many struggling students will simply choose to drop out, especially if there is a lack of support. Evidence of an increase in dropout rates in the face of higher standards is mixed, but without question school systems already face a huge problem with dropout and lack-of-completion rates—and again it mirrors the achievement data in terms of which students are most affected. This issue has remained somewhat masked because of varying definitions of “dropout” and difficulties in recordkeeping at the school level. Recently, however, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have taken a no-nonsense approach to this problem, and their results are stunning.¹⁴

Simply put, the Johns Hopkins researchers went to the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data for enrollment numbers for every high school in the country with at least 300 students. Then they compared the number of students enrolled as freshmen (or as 10th graders in high schools with a 10–12 grade configuration) with the number still enrolled as seniors to gauge a school’s “promoting power.” While granting that this calculation is not the same as a dropout rate, the researchers believe that when a high school’s senior class is only half the size of the freshman class, there is a very high probability of a significant dropout problem.

Following are just a few of the findings:

- Nearly one in five high schools across the country (about 2,000) has such a weak promoting power that the senior class is 60 percent or less than the size of the freshman (or 10th grade) class. In 900 to 1,000 of these schools, the senior class is less than half the size of the freshman class.
- The number of these struggling high schools has grown by 75 percent since 1993 (there was only an 8 percent growth in the overall number of high schools during this period).
- High schools with poor promoting power are overwhelmingly majority minority. Nearly two-thirds of high schools that are at least 90 percent minority have senior classes that are less than 60 percent the size of the freshman class.
- The researchers note that “Poverty appears to be the key correlate of high schools with weak promoting power. Majority minority high schools with more resources (e.g., selective programs, higher per-pupil

expenditures, suburban location) successfully promote students to senior status at the same rate as majority white schools.”

- The struggling high schools are concentrated in northern and western cities and throughout Southern states. For example, Atlanta, Cleveland, Dallas, Houston, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Oakland, New York City, and St. Louis are just a few of the cities where more than 80 percent of high schools have senior classes that are less than 60 percent the size of the freshman class. In South Carolina, 58 percent of schools across the state are in this category, and over one-quarter of the state’s high schools have lost more than half their class enrollment by the time students are seniors.

Where do all these students go? Some will sooner or later earn a GED. But that number is nowhere near a majority of the missing, and even GED officials state that this alternative is not as good as a high school diploma. Many simply end up on the streets, unemployed or in a life of intermittent, low-paying employment. And far too many will end up in prison, costing taxpayers much more than the extra support these young people would need to stay in school and succeed.

Performance gaps among states

Finally, policymakers should not forget that there are also serious gaps among states. On the 2003 NAEP 4th grade reading exam, for example, the top eight states in the nation had an average score of 226, while the lowest-scoring eight states had average scores below 210.¹⁵ (See chart.) Looking at the data in another way, for the lowest 12 performing states, *this meant that nearly half of all students scored below basic*, while for the highest 12 performing states, on average 29 percent of students scored below basic.

On the 2003 8th grade math test, there were even greater gaps, with the highest state average at 291 and the lowest at 261. Discouragingly, this meant that for the poorest performing state, the **average** state score was below the Basic level.

B. Hopeful Signs

Despite the litany of achievement and other gaps provided in this overview (which could be far longer), the Study Group was impressed by the abundance of the positive research on teaching, learning, and school leaders, the emergence of data and evaluation systems that can help educators pinpoint problems and improve practice, and the number of success stories that can be found at the state, district, and school levels. For example:

At the state level

Latinos in Virginia regularly score higher than Latinos in other states on the NAEP 8th grade reading exam, and on the 2003 exam outscored white 8th graders in eight other states. All this despite an influx of immigrants that more than doubled the state's Latino population since 1990. On the same 2003 test, Latinos in Ohio outscored whites in nineteen other states (although that is the only year for which the Ohio data are available).¹⁶

At the school level

There are literally hundreds of schools that have made great gains in achievement levels in recent years despite having many students from challenging backgrounds. A typical example of such schools is Samuel Tucker Elementary in Alexandria, Virginia, which has a student population that is 25 percent Latino, 43 percent African-American, and 17 percent white, with 56 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Students in every subgroup beat the state average in terms of percentage passing state math and language arts tests, but even more impressively, the subgroup passing rates at the school nearly equal or exceed the passing rates for whites statewide. For example, the 2003 statewide passing rate for whites in math was 84 percent. At Tucker, the math passing rate was 84 percent for African-Americans, 85 percent for Latinos, 84 percent for all economically disadvantaged, and 93 percent for limited English proficient.¹⁷

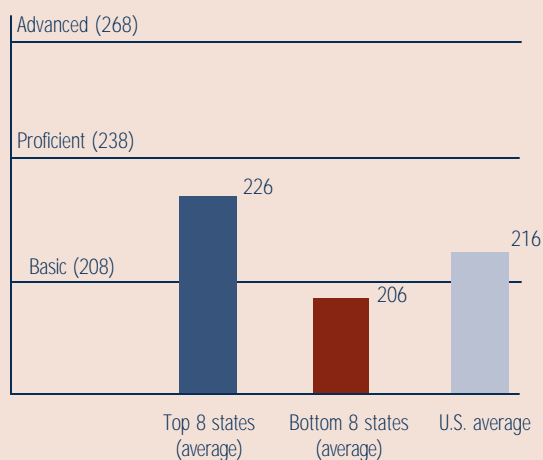
A *Washington Post* columnist (and high school English teacher) who visited Tucker agreed that it was a model elementary school. "And what makes it one seems so simple: an outstanding principal and a team of dedicated teachers, all working in unison," he wrote. On a more sober note, he added that this "fundamental formula is amazingly—and distressingly—difficult to duplicate.... "[B]ottom line, it just seems that there aren't enough great principals and teachers in Alexandria, or any school system, to create many schools like Tucker."¹⁸

But is this statement really true? Note the following district-level example from the same state:

At the district level

The Norfolk, Virginia public school system began its serious reform program in the late 1990s, based on world class standards, a multi-tiered and data-driven accountability system, and a laser-like focus at the school and district level on instruction and assessment, among many other components. Since then, the 37,000-student district has won several national performance awards. With a student population that is about two-thirds African-American, closing the achievement gap has been a

Gaps between States: 2003 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Results



Source: NASBE calculations using NAEP data, available online at nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/stateavgscale-g4.asp.

priority—and in many areas the gap has been cut by 50 percent or more, and by 75 percent in high school English and Algebra II. Several of the elementary schools and middle schools are among the elite group that have high rates of poverty, a high percentage of minority students, and have now improved to have high passing rates on state tests.¹⁹

Many other large school systems, in cities ranging from Boston to Chattanooga and from Aldine, Texas to Long Beach, California are also making significant gains in raising overall achievement and closing achievement gaps.

C. A State Self-Assessment: The Power of the Question

For states faced with discouraging data on achievement gaps and isolated examples of success, *the fundamental issue becomes bringing to scale what has been shown to be possible at the school and district level*. If it can happen in several schools or districts, why not in hundreds? But while abundant research has shown what is needed to succeed at the school level, and more research is beginning to define what must be done systematically at the district level, much more work is needed at the state level.

Today, a look across the country reveals many differences in how much and how effectively states have addressed seriously raising achievement levels for all students and closing

learning gaps. Some states began serious efforts 10 to 15 years ago and have taken many strong actions since; others have taken only a few. Some have taken well-meaning steps that, in the end, have not done the job in relation to the one thing that really matters: raising student achievement.

Despite the uneven record, the Study Group is optimistic and is convinced that there are many actions states can take to close achievement gaps. But the first task for state boards of education and other leaders is to find out where their state is at in terms of getting the job done—in short, to do an inventory of what has been done to raise achievement and close gaps. For policymakers, the foundation for this self-assessment lies in the power of the question. Simply put, states must ask themselves a series of tough questions about the steps that should be taken, answer them forthrightly, and then be willing to take action where needed. The Study Group offers just such a list of questions below.

One note of caution in beginning this self-assessment: There are a lot of questions, many with far-ranging implications—and we don't presume that our list is inclusive. No one should fool themselves that the task ahead is not enormous.

In hearing from school districts and states that have had some success in raising achievement and closing gaps, the Study Group was very impressed with how many different but coordinated, focused, and sustained steps and actions had to be taken. But this in itself makes it all the more important for states to know what needs to be done and to accurately track their progress in accomplishing these objectives. The list of fundamental questions below is intended to be of general use by all states.

D. Questions for States on Steps Taken to Raise Achievement and Close Gaps

These questions are organized around four key areas states must address if they are to bring isolated examples of success to scale statewide. The full edition of this report is also divided into these four areas in order to provide more background and analysis for each of the questions. Appendices A and B present examples of large-scale efforts to close the achievement gap at the state and district level, and Appendices C and D provide annotated resource guides of organizations, websites, books, and reports that may be helpful in efforts to close achievement gaps.

Final Thoughts...

The Study Group defined the importance of closing the achievement gap in the following ways:

- i) It is a moral imperative—as Education Secretary Rod Paige and others have said, a high-quality education is a civil right;
- ii) It is imperative for the health of our democracy—we need a highly educated citizenry that can understand public issues as they become more complex and to ensure that we do not become a society of haves and have-nots; and
- iii) It is an economic imperative in order to maintain the United States' place in the world economy.

But the Study Group did not see these imperatives as just a crisis scenario. Rather, it also saw the issue as an historic opportunity, given that a

confluence of educational advances—ranging from new research on best practices and the evolution of more robust data systems to a growing consensus on the importance of high standards—has now made the reality of educating all children in the country to high levels of achievement a real possibility.

Indeed, throughout the meetings and discussions, the Study Group members remained confident that America has the means and the knowledge to close the achievement gap. What we have been lacking is the will. Principals and teachers are frequently and properly reminded that they must not use the disadvantaging social conditions many students grow up in as a justification for poor performance. But policymakers, administrators, and citizens must recognize that such admonitions apply to themselves as well in terms of maintaining focus and support for a full-out effort to bring all students to high standards.

A State Self-Assessment: Steps Taken to Raise Student Achievement and Close Educational Gaps

Policymakers using this self-assessment can think of each question as having two parts. The first part deals with priority: *how important is it for the state to address this particular policy issue in order to close achievement gaps* (ranging, for

example, from “not important” to “crucial”)? The second part deals with actions taken or anticipated: *To what extent is the state addressing policies in this area* (ranging, for example, from “have not addressed this issue” to “major changes made or planned”)?

Building a State System to Close the Achievement Gap

1. Does the state have a specific comprehensive policy framework for closing the achievement gap?
2. Does the state have an infrastructure that provides districts and schools with reliable, transparent, and timely data to drive targeted improvement?
3. Has the state made a priority of ensuring that preparation programs and professional development provide educators with the knowledge and skills to continually monitor students' achievement and to intervene quickly when students are not progressing sufficiently?
4. Does the state have policies and intervention systems in place to promote the use of research-proven strategies and monitor their implementation and impact?
5. Does the state review on a regular basis policies and strategies to determine their impact and unintended consequences?

Ensuring an Opportunity for All Students to Learn

1. Does the state regularly collect and analyze data that describe the degree to which different groups have access to educational opportunities (e.g., graduation and dropout rates, advanced placement course-taking, suspensions, special education placement)?
2. Does the state have aligned policies (e.g., curricular frameworks, school improvement planning, professional development, supplemental services, and technical assistance) that promote a rigorous curriculum at every school?
3. Does the state have equitable and consistent policies to avoid sorting students and ensure all students achieve high standards?
4. Does the state have policies that support equitable distribution of academic and other resources such as quality staffing, facilities, and instructional materials?
5. Are policies on curriculum and instruction aligned with evidence-based instructional strategies linked to improved student achievement?
6. Do curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and instructional materials emphasize reading and writing at all levels and across all curricula?
7. Does the state provide high-quality, universal voluntary preschool for all three- and four-year-old children and full-day kindergarten for all five-year old children in order to promote school readiness?

8. Does the state have a plan for or support a variety of school structures for high school students who are struggling in traditional settings (e.g., charter schools, alternative schools, alternative programs within regular schools)?
9. Has the state defined what it means and how much it costs to provide an adequate education?
10. Has the state targeted significant resources to help districts and schools educate disadvantaged students.
11. Has the state invested in the capacity of the state department of education to help schools and districts improve?

Improving Teacher Quality for All Students

1. Does the state have a multi-year support or induction program that includes staff development and mentoring for every new teacher?
2. Has the state investigated the potential of value-added models of teacher evaluation to improve teacher practice, inform state and local policy, and provide additional accountability indicators for school systems and teacher preparation programs?
3. Does the state have a comprehensive professional development plan focused on improving student performance (such as differentiating instruction, developing diagnostic assessments, and using assessment and evaluation results to improve teaching)?
4. Does the state have a plan for recruiting and retaining teachers for hard-to-staff schools?
5. Does the state have options for differentiating teacher pay, both in terms of building career ladders for teachers and in terms of what and where they teach?

Building School Leadership

1. Does the state provide districts with the flexibility, resources, and information to adjust incentives and working conditions to attract qualified candidates?
2. Has the state developed policies to promote the recruitment, hiring, and support practices that will draw more effective leaders to work in high need schools?
3. Does the state promote university/district partnerships as a way to expand recruitment, school-based training, and professional development and support for leaders?
4. Do preparation and professional development programs for school leaders emphasize the core functions of high-performing schools (i.e., curriculum, instruction, and student achievement)?
5. Does the state review administrator preparation programs to ensure that they foster the skills and dispositions of effective leadership.
6. Has the state incorporated performance-based measures, including student achievement, as part of accreditation, licensure, and administrator evaluations?
7. Does the state allow for alternative preparation programs to admit promising candidates with varying professional backgrounds?