

Too Many Children Left Behind

How Can We Close the Achievement Gap?



Preface

This policy guide for citizens describes how the academic performance of many African American, Hispanic, and Native American students lags behind that of their Asian American and white counterparts. The problem occurs in virtually every type of school system in the United States and is often exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, such as poverty. There is widespread disagreement about what causes this problem and what to do about it.

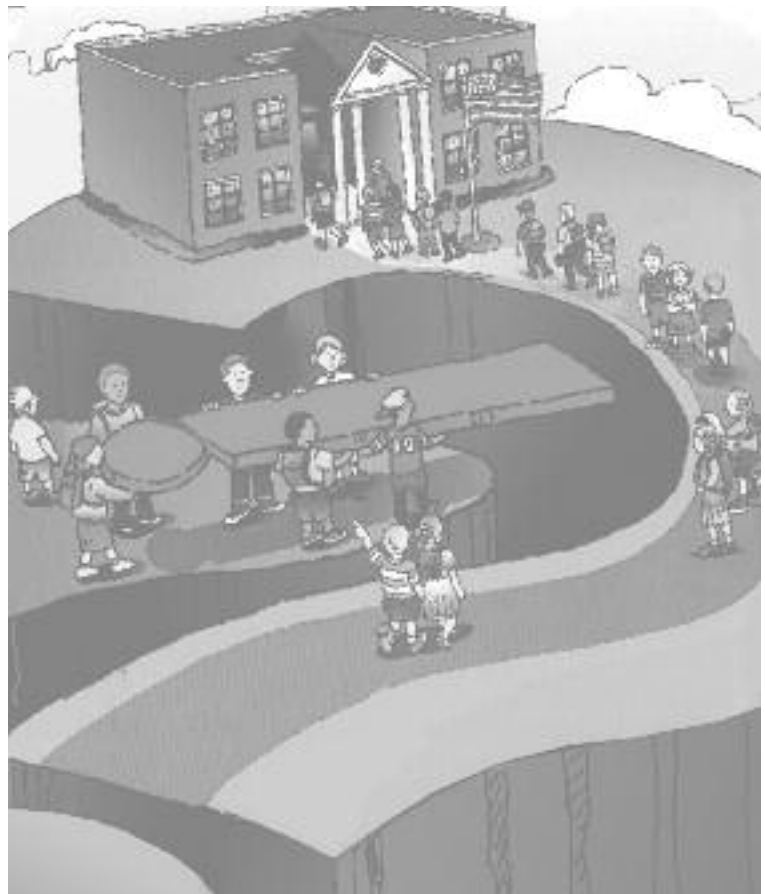
By laying out three possible approaches to the achievement gap and presenting the advantages and disadvantages of each, the guide is well suited for use in classrooms and public forums facilitated by a moderator in a respectful, nonpartisan manner. When used in this way, the guide is an effective tool for stimulating open, authentic dialogue among diverse groups of people on this complex policy issue. Forum participants gain a deep understanding of what is at issue and the trade-offs and consequences of taking certain actions.

Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? was prepared by Kettering Foundation for use in a two-year study designed to learn how public dialogue affects understanding of this issue and influences individual and community action. Civic and religious organizations and institutions like schools, libraries, colleges, and universities are encouraged to use this and other resources—which include a special kit of materials—to organize forums and share results with the Kettering Foundation. The special kit includes guidance on organizing and moderating a forum, a sample press release, an issue guide, a starter video-DVD, and 15 copies of an 8-page version of the issue guide with questionnaires. These items are also available separately (see ordering information on the inside back cover of this booklet). To learn more about this study, log on to **www.kettering.org**.

Organizing a community forum may be the very first step in addressing the achievement gap for many people; for others it may be one of many steps in an ongoing process designed to improve education in their community. Whatever the circumstances, the Kettering Foundation is interested in learning about your experience with this issue. Please complete the questionnaire, which is included with each booklet, and return it to the forum moderator or mail it to Kettering Foundation, Public Education Research, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459. If you are interested in participating in the follow-up study, complete the section of the questionnaire that will allow Kettering researchers to contact you.

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In a nation that prides itself on providing equal opportunity for all, too many low-income and minority children are falling behind their peers in school. In an increasingly competitive global arena, the United States cannot afford to ignore this widening achievement gap. What can be done to close it?

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African American, Hispanic, and Native American students in many schools have become victims of what President George W. Bush calls “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” If we are to close the achievement gap, we must push for increased academic performance of *all* students and make educators accountable for the results.

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Schools in low-income, high-minority districts often lack science labs, computers, up-to-date textbooks, and well-qualified teachers, who most often choose to work in better-paying, better-equipped suburban school districts. We cannot realistically expect more of poor, minority students until these resource and funding inequities are addressed.

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Problems that show up as poor academic performance begin long before low-income, minority children come to school. And they cannot be remedied unless we address underlying causes, such as unresolved health problems, poor nutrition, stressful living conditions, and lack of parental support, which are the source of these deficits.

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Experts say the economic consequences of not educating all our children are enormous. The United States is already falling behind in global competitiveness, quickly losing ground to countries like China and India in preparing students for the best technological jobs.



AP/Wide World Photos

Too Many Children Left Behind

A FEW YEARS AGO, Jane Hannaway, then director of the Education Policy Center at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., shared a personal story in lamenting the decline in the number of American kids who can do basic math:

My son, when he was in the 8th grade . . . I took him to take the PSAT. . . and so we come screeching into the parking lot and behold, we're early. So, I pulled out—last minute, of course, probably the worst thing you can do—the instruction manual. I said, "Let's go over a few of these items." So, we started going over a few. . . I asked him something, and it was clear: he was in the 8th grade and he didn't know his times table. I said, "What's nine times seven?" And he couldn't get it. "But I can figure it out," he told me, "because I know three times seven. Three times seven is 21, three times seven is 21, three times seven is 21; if I add up those 21s, it's 63." "Well that's great," I said. "Now what are you going to do on this timed test?" He went in and he did all right.

I called him last night. He's now a junior in college. He's gone through advanced calculus, done math in college, dean's list all the way through. I called

him up, and he picks up the phone in his dorm, "Yo." I said, "Jeff, what's nine times seven?" And he said to me, "64 or right around there."

Hannaway knew her son was lucky. He can't immediately and confidently answer a basic simple—math question. But it doesn't appear to have hurt him much. He did take advanced calculus in college, and he can figure out the answer.

But many U.S. public school students are not so lucky. Far too many are leaving school unable to make change at the local McDonald's when the computerized cash register fails. Many can't write a readable essay, or sometimes a readable sentence. Nearly 30 percent drop out and never complete high school.

These failures are occurring in every nook and cranny of this country—in urban America, in suburban America, even in rural America. Rural school needs finally got the attention of Congress a few years ago when the Rural Education Achievement Program was passed to tackle the deficit of teachers, facilities, and resources in the area. More than 30 percent of the nation's children attend rural schools, many in vulnerable, poverty-plagued communities in states like Mississippi and Alaska where students

drop out and perform poorly in school at rates to rival urban areas.

For African American and Hispanic students, particularly those from low-income families, the situation is dire. According to the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan public policy research group, those students have only a 50 percent chance of finishing high school with a diploma. Rural and low-income whites face daunting educational challenges as well.

Experts say the economic consequences of not educating these children are enormous. The United States is already falling behind in global competitiveness, quickly losing ground to countries like China and India in preparing students for the best technological jobs. U.S. students continue to do poorly on international tests for mathematics, while Asian countries excel.

Economists say the United States is losing almost \$200 billion a year by failing to do enough to improve the quality of the education system. Many of those poorly educated students will end up on public assistance—or in prison.

As the educational readiness of children in the United States continues to be eclipsed by other nations, thoughtful and systemic educational and political change is badly needed to ensure that our children are educated competitively and to their potential if we are to continue to meet the economic and social challenges of the future, compete globally, and sustain a cohesive, progressive, democratic society.

Failure to undertake this task is detrimental to the nation's ability to thrive and prosper in the twenty-first

century, a time when a higher level of education is not only desirable but essential. The low-wage factory and service jobs of a generation ago are no longer readily available in this country. Many of these jobs have moved to third-world countries where U.S. businesses can often get the labor cheaper. And technology has replaced others. The U.S. economy now demands more high-skilled labor. The students who don't get it will be left behind.

According to the National Center on Education and the Economy, by the year 2020, the United States will need 14 million more college-trained workers than it will produce. "Nowhere is college participation lower than among African American and Hispanic youth," researchers at the center say. At the same time, they add, "nowhere is the potential to meet our nation's need for college graduates higher."

Communities nationwide have begun to recognize the seriousness of the situation.

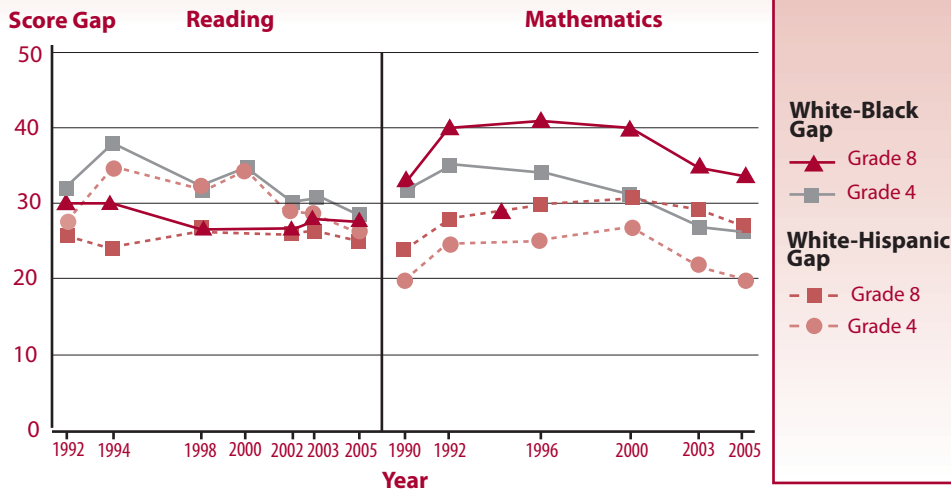
Take Ithaca, New York, for example. Recently, a crowd of more than 450 adults and children gathered on a Saturday night for the annual Lift Every Voice, Tear Down the Walls concert. Two downtown churches, Calvary Baptist and St. Paul's United Methodist, organize the event each year, with the proceeds going to support the Village at Ithaca, a not-for-profit organization that aims to close the persistent achievement gap between whites and African American, Hispanic, and other low-income students in Ithaca schools.

Addressing the achievement gap more aggressively is gaining momentum nationwide. Educators, parents, policymakers, and the general public have recognized that



AP/Wide World Photos

Differences in White-Black and White-Hispanic 4th- and 8th-Grade Average Reading and Mathematics Scores: Various Years, 1990-2005



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), various years, 1990-2005 Reading and Mathematics Assessments (previously unpublished tabulation, 9 December 2005).

disenfranchisement and inequality and has made inroads.

But inequities and problems remain. Many public school systems have resegregated, as communities turn to neighborhood schools. Schools in many of those systems are predominantly African American or Hispanic, and mostly poor. The students often attend inferior schools with less-qualified teachers. Instead of preparing students to be leaders of tomorrow, these schools are warehousing children and crushing their dreams. Observers say we are wasting them and their talents.

work on closing the gap will boost academic performance for all students. It will also increase the global competitiveness of the United States and establish long-term economic viability.

Demographic changes in the United States have made tackling the problem vital. Over the last few years, the Hispanic population has skyrocketed. In the last three years, half of the nation's 9.4 million new residents were Hispanic, a growth rate nearly four times that of the total population.

These changes are mirrored in the nation's public schools. Many are predominantly minority, with African Americans and Hispanics the largest percentage of students. But the public schools are increasingly failing to educate these students.

In fact, the gap in the academic performance between these minorities and whites and Asian Americans is large and daunting. According to Harvard professor Gary Orfield, the gaps are widest and most persistent between African American and white students and between low-income and more affluent students. But as the Hispanic population swells, the gap between Hispanics and whites is rapidly approaching the size of the gap between African Americans and whites.

By failing to educate children to their potential, the United States won't produce the good citizens it needs to sustain and support our democracy. Education advocates say the great strength of this country has been its diversity and the opportunities for advancement for people of all ethnicities and races and all socioeconomic groups. The United States has fought to overcome its long history of

As a nation committed to upholding justice and equality, many believe the public schools highlight a disconnect between our stated beliefs and our actions. The public schools reflect a decided lack of commitment to providing all children an equal opportunity to the high-quality education they deserve. Structural inequities and inadequate resources persist in the current public school education system.

Our "states' rights education system," as one politician calls it, has erected substantial barriers to providing the high-quality public education every American child deserves and needs to succeed in a much more competitive world.

One recent national report said that:

One of every five children in the United States lives in a family whose income is below—often far below—the poverty level; that rate doubles among blacks and Hispanics. While poverty levels rise and fall, children remain the most impoverished group, and obstacles to their well-being continue to mount. The realities of impoverishment should horrify a wealthy nation but we shut our eyes to the social context of childhood in the inner city.

But shutting our eyes is not an option. These children's failure will be this country's failure.

How do we "fix" a system of public education in which too many children—mostly poor and mostly minority—are being left behind? This book provides a framework for that discussion.

Many experts say that high expectations and accountability are the two factors that hold the key to improving student performance and closing the achievement gap.



AP/Wide World Photos

>> Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability

RONALD HARRILL GREW UP in rural Shelby, North Carolina. He had worked for years pushing youngsters in his community to achieve. But eight years ago, he recognized a growing problem that required more than one-on-one efforts.

The academic performance of students in Cleveland County, where Shelby is located, was poor and getting worse each year. There was a widening gap between the performance of black students and white students. African American boys especially were being left behind.

For Cleveland County, that news had resonance. Like many communities in the South, particularly in the Carolinas, the town had seen manufacturing jobs decline. Undereducated residents of all races could no longer depend on abundant low-wage jobs. High unemployment ravaged the county. More and more residents sought help from social service agencies. In the public schools, the number of children receiving free lunches increased dramatically.

As a vice president of Wachovia Bank, Harrill saw clearly the future for many of his county's youngsters. It

would be bleak, especially for African American youngsters, if the community didn't do something to improve education. So he and other black professionals got together and did something: they started the Committee to Close the Achievement Gap in Cleveland County.

The results have been dramatic. Since 2000, black third-graders have gone from 46 percent at or above grade level to 78 percent; black fifth-graders have gone from 61 percent to 86 percent above grade level; and black eighth-graders have gone from 61 percent to 70 percent. As important, black males are making as much progress as other students, with at least 74 percent on grade level in elementary grades. White youngsters continued to show progress as well, with 92 percent of white third-graders, 94 percent of white fifth-graders, and 89 percent of eighth-graders at or above grade level.

In the three city school systems (since merged into one) academic performance zoomed as well. In Cleveland County schools, the percentage of black student performance at or above grade level rose in the last four years from 37 percent to 60.7 percent; white performance rose

from 66.7 percent to 78.9 percent. In Kings Mountain, blacks went from 36.4 percent to 71.5 percent; whites from 65.4 percent to 85.3 percent. In Shelby City schools, blacks went from 42.9 percent to 60.1 percent; whites from 81.4 percent to 84.8 percent.

What's the Secret of Their Success?

The committee began work a few years before passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, but the program has focused on some of the same goals: It is results oriented which is to say building in accountability; it sets high expectations for every student; and it articulates clearly defined student achievement goals. An annual public summit is held to discuss progress and to push increased academic performance for all students regardless of race; students are put in more rigorous courses; colleges and universities provide Saturday school and summer and after-school tutoring; separate discussion groups for black females and black males are held about responsibility and life goals; and an annual awards program is held to celebrate black student achievement.

Cleveland County also has a committed group of citizens who have galvanized the whole community to tackle the issue. Harrill is one of two bank executives who are leading a group that includes educators, lawyers, doctors, social-service workers, health-care workers, university leaders, law-enforcement personnel, religious leaders, and county commissioners and other politicians who really believe that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

It’s a “heart thing for the people of Cleveland County. It’s not about having children in the schools. Most of those involved don’t. But it is about the children, making sure they know they’re special, they have potential, that they can make a difference,” said Mary Accor, chairwoman of the Cleveland County Commissioners.

Cleveland County shows what can happen when communities focus on two important goals: high expectations and accountability. Approach One advocates cultivating both.

Many experts say those two factors hold the key to improving student performance and closing the achievement gap. For the most part, they don’t cost a lot. They depend on commitment and attitude.

High expectations and accountability have paid off for students like Dimayquoaye Smith, now attending Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina. As a senior at Burns High in 2002, he acknowledged he benefited from the focus and commitment Cleveland County’s Committee to Close the Achievement Gap has put on those issues. At the county’s annual education summit, Smith exhorted students and adults to be individually accountable for closing the gap.



President Bush speaks about the “No Child Left Behind” education program at Woodridge Elementary and Middle Campus in Washington, D.C.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act was largely launched on the premises that more should be expected of students and that schools should be accountable for how well their students do. In 2001, when President George W. Bush pushed for passage, he often talked about how the public education system in America fostered “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” What he meant was that in schools nationwide, minority students were not being pushed to perform or take more difficult classes because educators, and indeed many others in the public, didn’t think they could. Expectations for African Americans and other minorities were low, and it was a form of prejudice.

But the reauthorized secondary education act, which President Bush dubbed the No Child Left Behind Act, targeted those low expectations by requiring that schools and educators be held accountable for the progress of *all* students.

The law requires school systems to report annually on the state test results achieved by all students, as well as their school attendance, special education placement, and other factors associated with student performance. So far, these test results have amplified the academic divide between white students on the one hand and African American, Native American, and Hispanic students on the other. They have also served to spotlight the differences so school systems can no longer ignore lagging student performance.

Because of NCLB, schools that don’t meet their state’s academic requirements two years in a row are identified as failing schools. Students must be given a chance to move out of the school to another public or public charter school in the district. If they don’t meet state standards for three years, students must be offered free tutoring or other academic services.

Some frustrated parents would go even further in demanding accountability. Schools and school systems should face heavier sanctions for the poor performance of students. They say that failing schools should be closed down; teachers and principals who are not getting results should be fired. And that is happening in some schools across the nation.

Teachers and Schools

It's the teachers, stupid. Many parents, politicians, and other citizens think that educators have fallen down on their jobs, and unless that changes, the academic achievement gap will remain wide and yawning.

According to Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, coeditors of the book *The Black-White Test Score Gap*:

Narrowing the test score gap would require continuous effort by both blacks and whites, and it would probably take more than one generation. But we think it can be done. The most promising school-related strategies for reducing the black-white test score gap seem to involve changes like class size, setting minimum standards of academic competency for teachers, and raising teachers' expectations for low-performing students. All these changes would benefit both blacks and whites, but all appear to be especially beneficial for blacks.

Teachers' competence shows a stronger association with how students learn than any other widely used measure. Screening teachers for verbal and math competence thus is likely to boost children's performance. But the teachers who fail competency tests are concentrated in black schools. Harvard University professor Ron

Ferguson's review of the literature on teachers' expectations concludes that teachers do have lower expectations for blacks than for whites, and that the lower expectations have a more negative effect on black children than on their white classmates.

Some kids know they've been written off and don't try any more. Said tenth-grader Reggie Hilton in the Baltimore County school system: "A lot of people are like, 'I'm not going to college anyway. . . so why do I need to get a high school diploma?'"

Some educators acknowledge that certain school practices may be barriers to student achievement. Notes consultant Dorothy Battle:

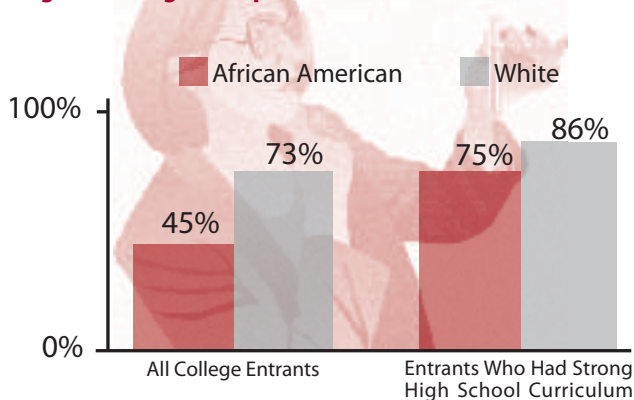
One is a tendency to place African American and Hispanic children in special education programs when their school performance is not what it should or could be. . . . The behavior of minority students often prompts school personnel to recommend students for special education placement, without exploring underlying reasons.

Roslyn Mickelson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte notes that harmful discriminatory practices are at work in many school systems. Her research shows that African American students are concentrated in lower academic track programs. In those lower tracks, students are often assigned less-credentialed and less-experienced teachers. As these students go from elementary through high school, they are increasingly more likely to be put in lower track programs and to show lower achievement.

Glenn Singleton, founder of the Pacific Educational Group, goes further. He says there is subtle, but pervasive racism at work in the public schools. Few African Americans are usually in advanced classes and as a result "students are unconsciously learning that white equates to smarter. . . . (Students) don't learn how to interact with people of color and their perspectives on color, which nourishes the seeds of racism," he told the *Journal of Staff Development*, an organ of a national teacher-staff development group.

And because public schools have mostly white teachers, principals, and other administrators, there is often a disconnect between educators and minority students, he said. "Teachers do not have the daily experiences of urban black kids in order to affirm their reality and create classroom conditions that support their needs," he said. Even minority educators are at fault. "Through the power of a Eurocentric education, some educators of color have lost their racial perspective or have greatly devalued the importance of these cultural connections in the classroom."

A Strong High School Curriculum* Equals Higher College Completion



*Completing at least "Algebra II" plus other courses.

Source: Adapted from Adelman, Clifford, U.S. Department of Education, "Answers in the Toolbox," 1999.

>> What Critics Say

Accountability and high expectations only go so far, critics say. If schools with high numbers of poor and minority students don't have good teachers and principals, and their facilities and materials are inadequate, these are meaningless aspirations. The lack of such essentials is exacerbated when students come to school hungry or with other needs because parents can't or won't provide the basics. Data show that few schools or school systems with such deficits overcome them.

In fact, critics say the public obsession with testing or accountability and the culture surrounding it in schools has created the illusion of achievement without much evidence of progress. The performance gap is widening, not closing, in most public schools. This environment is driving many good educators, such as Caryn Long, away.

Long, a high-school science teacher who left teaching to take a job at NASA's Stennis Space Center in Mississippi lambastes public schools as too test-driven and bureaucratic. "The only thing that counts is the test scores; it's the only measure of achievement."

Raising expectations and increasing accountability is an unrealistic goal when teaching has become such an unattractive job, some critics point out. As one teacher put it:

I retired from teaching on my 51st birthday. (There's) not enough money to tempt me to return. I will NOT miss the paperwork, the long hours of work done at home, the endless meetings, the parents who think their children can do

no wrong, the parents who think their children can do no right, the parents who never think of their children, the politicians who apparently think that posing for a publicity shot at a school makes them an expert on the situation, the administrators who say they support the teachers—but don't, or the concept that the classroom teacher can solve the ills of the world and raise test scores with limited resources, little support, almost no recognition, and a pervasive atmosphere of "test scores went down only because the teacher is a lazy, incompetent bum."

Many teachers echo these sentiments.

Experts say U.S. students are the most tested in the world, taking more than 100 million tests each year. With government and public demands for tests to gauge whether schools are adequately teaching, the number continues to grow. And so does student anxiety. Said one Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, middle-school student: "When my homeroom teacher told us to take out our No. 2 pencils for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, I immediately started sweating. I got cramps in my stomach. I thought I was really going to get sick."

Some health officials admit the anxiety does reach a level to interfere with the performance on tests.

Long's description of third-graders throwing up on test days and a fifth-grader falling to the floor in relief when



Experts say U.S. students are the most tested in the world, taking more than 100 million tests each year.

she passed her exams are familiar to teachers from districts in California to Florida. A San Bernardino, California, elementary teacher said of the teaching atmosphere: “There is simply no joy in learning anymore. It’s become such a rote process. The goal of everything is to improve test scores.”

Still other critics of Approach One lament the lack of accountability of parents. Indeed educators blame parents for students’ academic problems as much as parents blame educators. Parents often point the finger at other parents whose children’s performance is lagging. Many policy-makers do too.

That view was reinforced by results of a controversial experiment conducted by Nigerian-born anthropologist John Ogbu in 1997. The study of a high school in Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, created a firestorm.

For nine months, the University of California at Berkeley professor put the Shaker Heights high school under the microscope to probe why middle-class black students didn’t do as well on standardized tests as their white counterparts. His answer was not what many black parents and academics and researchers wanted to hear. The fault, he said, was with black parents and black students. Neither the parents nor the students gave education enough time and attention. Students didn’t work hard, and their parents didn’t push them to.

His theory about students’ and parents’ lackadaisical attitudes was at odds with the view that socioeconomic, school funding, and racism were the culprits in the lower

academic performance of blacks and the persistent achievement gap between whites and minorities. But Ogbu reviewed data and test scores, observed 110 different classes—from kindergarten through high school—and conducted numerous interviews with school personnel, black parents, and students. What he found put another context on the black-white achievement gap. It became the basis of his book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2003). His view has been embraced by many people.

These critics say parents should face stiff consequences for failing to meet their responsibilities and obligations to their children, including fines and criminal charges if their children are neglected or consistently get into trouble.

But even that isn’t enough for some parents. They have left and turned to schools other than traditional public schools for help—schools they feel will have high expectations and show better results.

There is plenty of blame to go around, some critics say, but Approach One can only go so far, given the inequities of U.S. school systems. Children face high hurdles to learning when their schools are located in decaying buildings, lack essential equipment, and employ the least-qualified teachers. In this view, which we will look at next, we need to level the playing field in order to give all children a chance to succeed.



Illustration by Dick Simms

Where poor and minority children are in the majority, schools and school systems get less state and local money, and their facilities tend to be in poor shape and have insufficient materials.



>> Close the Spending Gap

DAVEENA NIXON WAS SMART, motivated and fed up. Petite and exuberant, the 16-year-old was in her last year at E.E. Waddell High School, an inner-city North Carolina public school where most of the students had low-income, working-class parents. Like Daveena, many lived with a single parent.

Still, Daveena had dreams. She was student body president and wanted to become a dentist. But her school wasn't providing the education she needed to realize those dreams. So Daveena fired off a letter to her school board.

"I have a few concerns about the teachers being chosen to teach at our school," she wrote:

This year we have a variety of foreign teachers who all seem unqualified for a teaching position. My junior year, I took calculus. My teacher did not know how to teach it and, as a result, I did not learn. Not only did I not learn [but] the entire class was put in discrete math for our senior year to learn pre-calculus all over again. This time our teacher is from Africa and Korea. I am not learning, and I should. I want to be prepared before going to college. Please find qualified pre-calculus teachers and geometry teachers for those of us who value education.

The facts bear out Daveena's concerns. At her school, 68 percent of the teachers had ten years or less experience; 47 percent had three years or less. Across her school district, just 27 percent of the teachers had three years or less experience—statewide, just 21 percent. And just 54 percent of the faculty at her school were fully licensed teachers, compared with 75 percent in the district and 81 percent in the state.

Daveena had picked up on something educators are all too aware of and low-income parents have suspected: public schools with predominantly poor and minority students are often shortchanged when it comes to resources.

A September 2006 report from the Education Trust, a nonpartisan education advocacy group, bluntly agrees. In *Telling Truths and Dispelling Myths About Race and Education in America*, researchers found that public schools tend to give poor children and children of color less of everything that makes a difference in high-level student performance. They get lower-quality preschool, for example. And when poor and minority children are in the majority, schools and school systems get less state and local money, and their facilities tend to be in poor shape and have insufficient materials. Their teachers, principals,

and other administrators tend to be less qualified, less experienced, and more likely to be teaching out of their fields. Their coursework tends to be less rigorous and insufficient to prepare students for college or other higher-level learning. This inequity has persisted for years. These students start out with less, and continue to get less. They fall behind and are never given a real chance to catch up.

A 1998 report for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future backs that up. Researchers found that in high-school classrooms where 49 percent or more of the students were low income the percentage of teachers who taught out of field or lacked a minor or major in their field was nearly double the percent in schools with less than 20 percent low-income students. In math and science, just half the teachers in schools with 90 percent or more minority students met their states' minimum requirements to teach those subjects.

Science and math teachers are a particular problem for most public schools. Filling those jobs is a struggle. The void is so deep that scientists, lawmakers, and educators have joined to push for students with doctorates in those disciplines to commit to teaching. Some universities are providing special incentives to lure them. Some public schools are providing their own incentives to get those with such degrees who are working in other professions to switch to teaching. Getting such teachers is crucial because U.S. students continue to perform among the worst of all industrialized countries on science and math tests.

In high-poverty, high-minority schools, it's just one more need that's going unfilled. But students in urban schools aren't the only ones being shortchanged.

Rural school districts face similar deficits in teacher quality, facilities, and other resources. Many are small and isolated and can't afford to attract more highly qualified

teachers. Many have had trouble getting teachers certified as highly qualified as the No Child Left Behind Act demands, given that many teachers must teach several subjects rather than just one. In rural Alaska, many towns and villages have only one school with limited resources for tutoring or after-school programs to help boost performance.

According to the Rural School and Community Trust, which advocates for strong rural schools and does regular academic studies on their funding and performance, poor rural schools face the same disadvantages as poor urban schools. A recent study showed teacher quality lags, per-pupil spending is lower, and there's a dearth of needed equipment, including science labs and computers. Schools can't afford to hire separate specialists in English, math, science, social studies, and other disciplines.

Kati Haycock, who heads the nonprofit advocacy group Education Trust, says students recognize the teacher deficiency better than adults. In fact, students tag it as the biggest reason for a gap in academic achievement. She said in a recent paper:

Over the past five years, staff members at the Education Trust have shared data on the achievement gap with hundreds of audiences all over the United States. During that time, we've learned a lot about what people think is going on. When we speak with adults, no matter where we are in the country, they make the same comments.

Of the low-performing students, Haycock said those interviewed gave these assessments:

"They're too poor." "Their parents don't care." "They come to school without an adequate breakfast." "They don't have enough books in the home." "There aren't enough parents in the home."



AP/Wide World Photos

First-grade students work intently at their computers as a language skills software program helps them with reading comprehension at Edgewood Elementary School in Roswell, New Mexico.

Their reasons, in other words, are always about the children and their families.” Haycock also said:

Young people, however, have different answers. They talk about teachers who often do not know the subjects that they are teaching. They talk about counselors who consistently underestimate their potential and place them in lower-level courses. They talk about principals who dismiss their concerns. And they talk about a curriculum and a set of expectations that feel so miserably low-level that they literally bore the students right out the door.

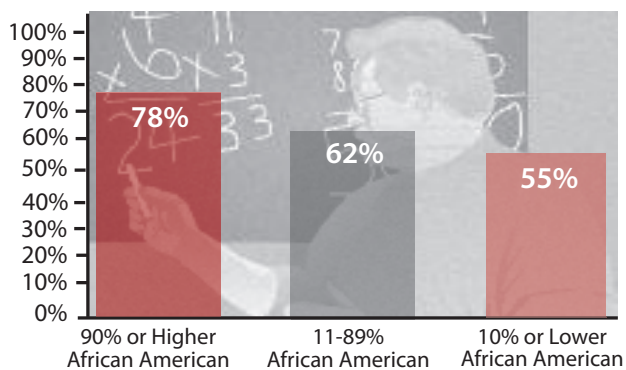
Haycock also noted that a study of Texas school districts in the late 1990s showed what could happen if low-income students got as good or better resources than students of more affluence. The 1998 study by Harvard professor Ronald Ferguson looked at districts with initially high-performing students (more affluent) who hired teachers in the bottom level of qualifications and districts with low-performing students (low-income) who hired the highest-qualified teachers. By the time the students got to high school, the low-income districts were generally outperforming the more affluent, the study showed.

Those results are more than encouraging. But getting the highest-qualified teachers into low-income, minority schools is a no easy task. Many teachers and principals just don’t want to be there.

It’s easy to see why.

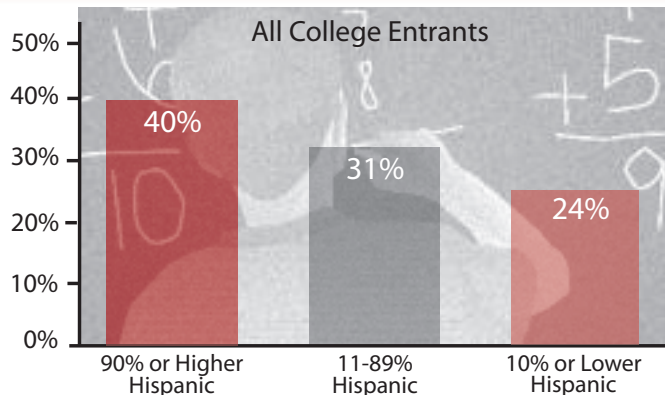
Many educators say these students often don’t come to school well prepared to learn. They’ve already gotten off to a poor start because of insufficient books and other resources at home. Their parents often work long hours and don’t have the time or education level to help their children with school work. Some come to school hungry. Some come with discipline problems that disrupt class.

More Math Courses in Middle Schools with High Percentages of African Americans Are Taught by Out-of-Field Teachers



*Completing at least “Algebra II” plus other courses.
 Source: Richard M. Ingersoll, University of Pennsylvania. Unpublished data from original analysis for the Ed. Trust of 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey.

More Classes in High-Hispanic High Schools Taught by Out-of-Field* Teachers



*Teachers lacking a college major in the field. Data for high school core academic classes only.

Source: Richard M. Ingersoll, University of Pennsylvania. Unpublished data from original analysis for the Ed. Trust of 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey.

Not only that, but these predominantly minority, low-income schools are often old, in disrepair, and don’t have the infrastructure to handle new technology like computers. In the same mostly black section of town where Daveena’s high school is located, aging Cochrane Middle School lacks science and biology labs. Worse, sewage backs up in the hallways because the sewage system is old and decrepit. The school has been waiting for funds to get things fixed for nearly a decade.

A North Carolina schools task force underscored what the result of inadequate funding has meant in many inner-city schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the state’s largest school system. Said John Kramer, who cochaired the task force:

When we entered elementary school bathrooms with no paper supplies or witnessed discolored water in drinking fountains we knew that this community was not paying the price to care for its children which it would be willing to pay if everyone had experienced this.

The resulting inadequacy of many existing facilities has prompted some families to leave the system. The general lack of equity in school facilities has created barriers to academic success for many remaining students.

A local community group, Helping Empower Local People (H.E.L.P.), did its own audit and some members “left the schools in tears” because of the unaddressed problems, said Chris Bauman. Fixing some problems, like replacing pipes in old plumbing systems, required millions of dollars the school system did not have.

“We got a chance to see the extent of the damage, the extent of the problems. It’s like a lottery. If you’re lucky, you’d get in a school without these problems.”

If you were lucky, and if you were not in Charlotte’s inner city.

A 1999 report from the National Commission on Education Statistics said that public schools, on average, were built 40 years ago. The oldest and those in need of the most repair and renovation are in inner-city, minority communities. The cost to fix these schools nationwide was a whopping \$127 billion. In many states, the buildings languish as new schools are built in the suburbs because inner-city neighborhoods don’t have powerful residents lobbying for them as many suburban residents do.

Educators who have a choice between working in newer facilities with the best resources or aging buildings without adequate equipment usually opt for newer and better, and in many cases, safer.

Most educators also choose schools where the students are better prepared, have fewer problems they bring from home for the school to deal with, and who, as a consequence, are more likely to perform better on state tests. That’s particularly true now since the No Child Left Behind Act, the 2001 reauthorization of the federal secondary education law, holds educators accountable for how well students do on state tests and federal assessments.

When low-income students don’t do well enough, teachers are blamed. Often, they don’t get bonuses while teachers with few challenging students do. Sometimes they’re fired or moved elsewhere if the low performance leads to a schoolwide restructuring. Most educators get little or no extra pay to take on the risks, challenges, and additional work required at low-performing schools.

Deborah Meier, educator and author, says that’s unacceptable. In her book *In Schools We Trust*, she writes:

Some of the gaps we need to worry about require a direct political assault. These include

the gap between the resources that are available to some kids and not to others—including those that we’ve denied kids because we claim they don’t affect test scores. One gap to focus on is the quality of teacher expertise provided, which is a tougher task than imposing more tests, but one not made easier by our relentless bashing of the people who teach poor kids—not to mention their lower salaries and inferior working conditions. I’ll believe money doesn’t count the day that the rich stop spending so much on their own children.

Educators say one big step toward fixing this problem would be to provide better incentives for educators to teach in low-performing schools and more support for them once they are there. In Baltimore County schools, Superintendent Joe Hairston gets that.

The leader of the 107,000-student system, the twenty-fourth largest in the country, has a policy to place and keep high-quality teachers in schools with high numbers of minority and low-income students. There are also training programs for educators to help them improve their instructional techniques and learn how to teach for different learning styles.

Still, at a time when many say more resources are needed to bridge the performance gap between student groups, a 2005 report from the Education Trust shows pervasive underfunding of schools attended by poor and minority students nationwide. Nationally, about \$900 less per student is spent on students in the poorest school districts than on those in more affluent schools. In some states, the gap is \$1,000. In Illinois more than \$2,000 separates the poorest and more advantaged districts in per-pupil spending. New York’s gap is \$2,280.

State and local governments are aware of these inequities, often the result of inadequate funding for public



AP/Wide World Photos

Nancy Loomer, a member of the Northside Elementary Parent-Teacher Association in Clinton, Mississippi, speaks at a news conference where Loomer and other education advocates delivered more than 9000 signed petitions urging lawmakers to maintain current funding levels for K-12 education.

schools in general and an uneven distribution of tax dollars that leaves high-poverty schools especially deficient. A few states, such as Kentucky, are focusing on the problem. Kentucky gives high-poverty schools extra funds every year to enhance instruction before school, after school, and in the summer. North Carolina has begun providing additional money to low-performing, low-income districts through a state-mandated Disadvantaged Students Fund. The fund was established after the state lost a school-equity lawsuit.

Some education experts and citizen groups are touting a move to “weight student funding”—that is, distribute money to schools based on the needs of individual students attending the schools. Public dollars would be tied to students. Schools would get more money if the children attending them needed more help. School systems in Ohio, Hawaii, and Washington state have tried this formula with mixed success. Some school officials say it has led to less spending on administrators and more on teachers,

while others say it has created waste and school rivalries over money. Some critics say it is unfair to provide this extra money to some schools and not to others. It’s robbing Peter to pay Paul because the pot of money isn’t changing. Other schools that need money too must now do with less, they say.

Parents and other citizens have filed lawsuits across the nation to force states to provide adequate resources for public schools, especially low-income, low-performing schools. The courts have ordered more than two dozen states to address deficiencies.

Unfortunately, proponents of this approach say, many states have fought those court rulings with appeals and other legal maneuvers. Many have failed to address inequities in school funding for a decade or more, despite court orders.

By way of contrast, Maryland stands out as a shining example. In 1999, as the result of a lawsuit brought by the City of Baltimore school system, lawmakers created a

>> What Critics Say

Critics of this approach point out that the public has been pouring more money and other resources into the public schools for years with negligible results. It’s time to stop.

Harvard professors Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom agree that “the failure of most public schools to teach poor children is a national tragedy.” By the federal government’s own reports, they note, most low-income fourth-graders can’t read, and most low-income eighth-graders can’t do basic math. “Of the roughly 20 million low-income children in K-12 schools, 12 million aren’t even learning the most elementary skills.”

But money won’t solve the problem. It hasn’t for dozens of years. The Thernstroms point out in their book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* that 21 high-achieving, high-poverty schools nationwide are showing how it can be done. Those schools are not spending a lot of money to get those results, they say. They are focusing on student and family habits and attitudes, and home and school environments.

Some critics point out that one unintended consequence of greatly increased spending on inner-city schools would be to ensure that these school districts remain segregated.

Charter schools and voucher programs need to be boosted more, some say. These alternatives are pushing regular public schools to improve through competition and show what really works in improving academics.

Amistad Academy, a charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, provides a good example. The school was established in 1999 and has students that director and founder Dacia Toll says “come to us testing, on average, two grades below grade level, (and) go on to achieve significant improvements in reading, writing and math.”

Amistad’s performance has been so stellar that the academy has set up an organization called Achievement First to operate other schools and try to replicate Amistad’s success. What accounts for the success?

“Simply put,” Toll says, “there is no substitute for good instruction, a tight school culture and very hard work.”

Other school models bear out the success of this approach. Take the Knowledge Is Power Program, for example. KIPP was the brainchild of two 20-something Houston elementary-school teachers in 1994. Initially a program for low-income middle-schoolers grades 5 to 8, the program now includes a few elementary and high schools. As *Washington Post* education columnist Jay Matthews says of KIPP, founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin had little teaching experience and “freely admit making it up as they went along.” But they had an excellent mentor.

With the help of Harriett Ball, a black teacher who had grown up in a racially segregated Houston neighborhood and “whose classes were high achieving and very well behaved,” the two mapped out a program that became KIPP. The program involves long school days—often 8

commission to examine its education policies and funding. The panel was instructed to make recommendations for changes to bring all Maryland school systems in compliance with the prime directive: providing a “thorough” and “adequate” education for all students.

In 2003, that effort was culminated when lawmakers voted to double state education spending over the next six years, a spending increase of \$1.3 billion. With that money, the state said it would provide resources to ensure that all schools meet Maryland’s stated performance goals: attendance over 94 percent, a dropout rate no higher than 3.75 percent, and a 70 percent passing rate for elementary and middle-school students on state tests.

All-day kindergartens would be provided for all students and pre-kindergarten for at-risk students.

The first two years of the changes were to be paid for by a 34-cent-a-pack increase in the state’s cigarette tax, bringing the cost to \$1 a pack.

Schools in Maryland got the additional money within

weeks. The Baltimore City school system planned to use the funds for changes already proven successful in boosting achievement: reducing class sizes, recruiting and retaining quality teachers, and hiring content coaches to focus on reading and math.

Approach Two proponents point to what happened in Maryland as a key strategy in tackling the achievement gap. They say the public must commit more resources to address this issue. They must pay to get more teachers and better teachers in struggling schools. The public must pay for better buildings and sufficient equipment and other resources. Those who need help the most should not be the ones who get the least.

Parents can help by not only advocating for more resources but by actively getting involved in the schools themselves. Parents can provide the extra tutoring and mentoring students in many schools need. They can work on projects that can bring the schools grants and monies that could help underresourced schools.

a.m. to 5 p.m.—character and behavior development, empowered principals, a focus on high-quality teaching and high student expectations, and a results- and data-driven curriculum.

In 2006, there were more than 3600 charter schools serving more than one million children in 40 states. And polls show that most Americans, 74 percent, favor expanding them and want state legislatures to lift caps which restrict the numbers of charters.

Many Americans also favor providing vouchers so public money can be used to send students to private schools. Washington, D.C., has the nation’s first federal voucher program, and about 1,700 low-income, mostly minority students in Washington attend 58 private and parochial schools through the program, now in its second year.

Still, the largest one-time study of student achievement recently compared math scores of pupils from similar backgrounds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and found that neither private school nor charter students perform better than those in public schools. But supporters say that these schools provide a

badly needed choice for children failing in traditional public schools.

Some students, like Amie Fuwa who left D.C.’s Shaw Junior High where she struggled with math and didn’t have the textbooks and supplies she needed, found help with the aid of a voucher. The 14-year-old child of immigrants from Nigeria and the Dominican Republic now attends Archbishop Carroll High School, a Catholic school. Her teacher stays with her after school to help her with algebra, and a mentor keeps her on course. She told the Associated Press, “It’s a lot of people behind my back now.” Before, she said, she “felt like it didn’t really matter to different people I know, like my teachers, if I failed.”

Still other critics maintain that the problem lies not in the school system but in the larger society. Poverty, poor housing, and inadequate health care are obstacles to

learning that many children can’t overcome. The public must look at the underlying causes of students’ failure to learn. And that trail leads back to family, home, and community.



AP/Wide World Photos

Eighth-grade teacher Luke Harrison works with his students in reading class at Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut.

“One of every five children in the United States lives in a family whose income is below—often far below—the poverty level; that rate doubles among blacks and Hispanics. While poverty levels rise and fall, children remain the most impoverished group, and obstacles to their well-being continue to mount.”



AP/Wide World Photos

>>Address the Root Causes

THE *CUS* HAD THE TEACHER STUMPED. There it was. Stuck at the end of sentences she had asked her elementary-school students to write. So many of them included the word that, finally, she just had to ask, “What is this word? Is it supposed to be *cousin*?”

Turns out the *cus* was *because*. For the kids in an inner-city school in Augusta, Georgia, it was a word that perfectly conveyed what they meant. But for their teacher, it was a revelation.

Those same children didn’t know what the word *handkerchief* meant, the teacher told a reporter. They’d seen one but they knew it only as a *rag*. *Saucer* was just another dish to them. As a specialized plate in an ensemble that includes a cup and saucer, it was not on their radar screens.

Approach Three proponents say that investing more in schools, having high expectations for all students and making sure the system is accountable won’t move the needle on shrinking the achievement gap and boosting academic performance if no one tackles the root causes of this problem.

That’s no easy task, because educators don’t have a good understanding of what those root causes are. More research is badly needed to pinpoint the underlying factors and more training and resources to help teachers and others address them, experts say.

Still, a considerable body of data underscores the view that schools and educators alone aren’t the solution.

Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, has an apt analogy. He likens the achievement gap to “AIDS or cancer in health care. It is a scourge that robs children of their futures.” He points to writer Richard Rothstein’s 2004 book, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, which:

shows that schools alone cannot provide a remedy. . . . (It) presents evidence debunking the popular myth that there are super-schools capable of eliminating the gap. Presenting study after study, Rothstein highlights the far greater impact of health care, nutrition, parents, home, and community. (And he) makes a series of policy recommendations on how to narrow the

gap focusing on education, health, housing, and income differentials. He proposes earned income tax credits, policies to stabilize family housing, school-community health clinics, early childhood education, after-school programs, and summer programs.

Rothstein is straightforward in his assessments:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with a student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding—raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform.

Many people agree. And though the problem appears overwhelming, educators, public officials, parents, business leaders, and other citizens in numerous communities are already doing things to tackle it:

- Churches are conducting preschool health screenings for children and education sessions for parents;
- Some communities have set up weekend free health clinics;
- School systems and religious groups are providing high-quality preschool classes, which are subsidized by donors or public agencies;
- Parents and business people are volunteering in schools to provide tutoring, mentoring, and a variety of other help;
- Community centers and churches are offering after-school learning activities for students and lessons on health care and nutrition to parents;

- Parents are lobbying local officials for changes in housing and business development; and
- Local governments have responded by demanding that builders provide some affordable housing in new developments and by providing incentives for more businesses to locate in low-income areas.

Researchers have drawn the link between poverty and learning for decades. It was an acknowledged factor in the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision against separate but equal schools for black and white school children. (Without the socioeconomic advantages and the power that comes with it, black children had been relegated to inferior schools. In addition, when legal segregation existed, black children didn’t have access to resources to improve their educational status.)

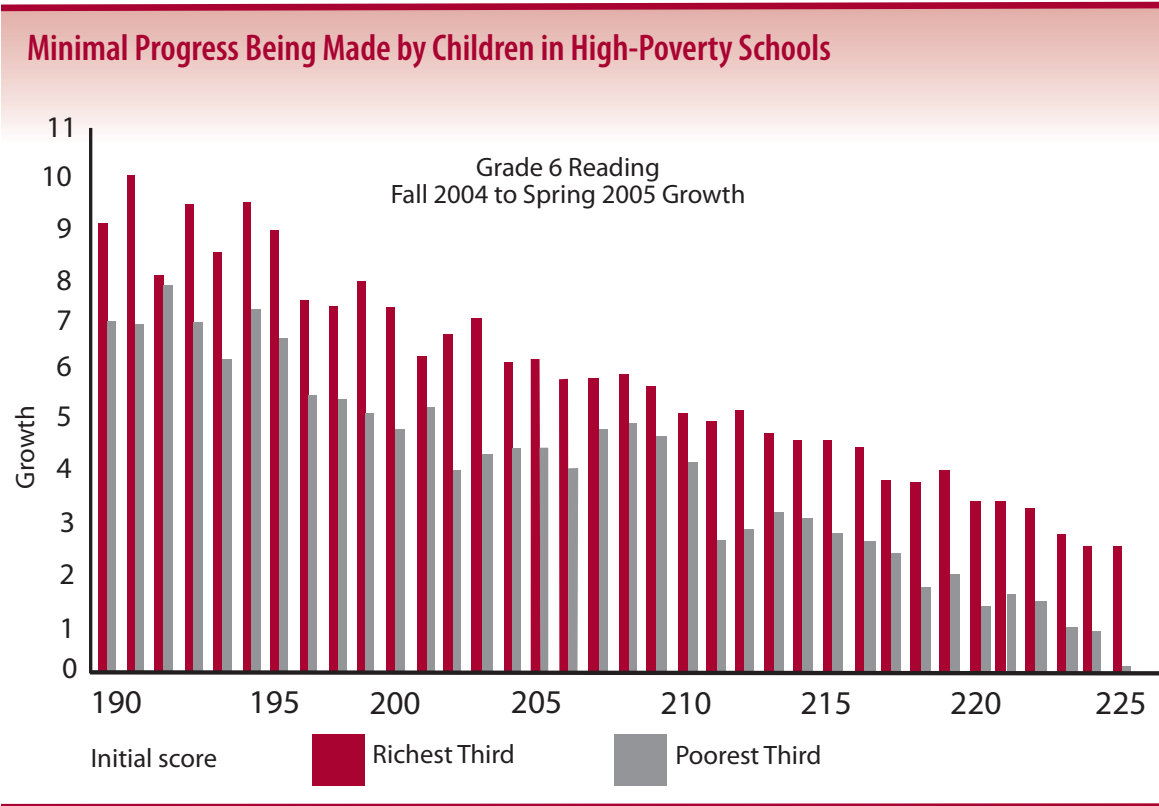
Poor minority children are still at a disadvantage. Three national studies confirm that African American, Hispanic, and Native American children start kindergarten or first grade with lower levels of readiness than do white and Asian American children. The studies show lower skill levels in oral language, pre-reading, and pre-mathematics, lower general knowledge, and behavior less well suited to the school environment. Earlier studies showed similar results. “All of these studies have found that significant portions, but not all, of the race gaps in school readiness disappear after controls for social class background,” researcher George Farkas said. “The first five years of life are a period of extraordinary cognitive and behavioral development, and it is not surprising that family structure and parental education, occupation, and income should affect this process.”

Given that, experts say ensuring that children in poor neighborhoods get health screenings early and often and

Texas schools are pushing forward with their own initiatives to make sure students stay healthy. Posters touting good nutrition hang above these third-graders.

AP/Wide World Photos





health care when they need it is crucial. Undiagnosed and unresolved health problems like poor vision and poor hearing can have a devastating impact on learning. Such problems have started a chain of events for many children, which put them in classes for slow learners and kept them there.

William Bainbridge, an education consultant and former school superintendent in Ohio and Virginia, says not all children have high-quality nutrition, stimulating homes, and extensive learning opportunities prior to entering school. It is crucial to give them as much help as possible as soon as possible.

He and fellow consultant M. Donald Thomas told the American Association of School Administrators that:

Research in cognitive brain development shows that most of the brain gets built after birth and that environment matters greatly in brain development. Those who have high-protein diets and lots of sensory stimulation tend to have more synaptic connections. Brains that do not get enough protein and stimulation in their environments develop fewer synaptic connections and some potential neural pathways are impaired.

The research findings help to explain what educators long observed:

Children from impoverished environments, where they do not receive good nutrition and

stimulating experiences, generally achieve at lower levels than children from more enriching environments. This concrete evidence from neurological science should be enough to convince us that we should concentrate on improving the lives of children prior to their enrollment in school. Rather than sermonize that all children can learn, we must enact proper public policy to provide economic opportunity for families, nutrition support and education, health care for all children and parenting education for young mothers.

Michigan State University professors Patricia A. Edwards and Lauren S. Jones Young note that in the best of circumstances the many forces that shape children's lives help guide children's development into the informed and "economically independent adults" we hope for them to be. "The best of circumstances, however, elude large numbers of children, especially poor children of color," they say. Often the childhoods of poor children start them on a downward spiral from which they never recover.

"One of every five children in the United States lives in a family whose income is below—often far below—the poverty level; that rate doubles among blacks and Hispanics," Edwards and Young point out. "While poverty levels rise and fall, children remain the most impoverished group, and obstacles to their well-being continue to mount."

Among the obstacles that society should address is housing. Poor children overwhelmingly are found to live in inadequate housing. Their homes are often rentals that sometimes have poor heating systems and poor lighting. The homes are often in crime-ravaged communities where gunfire provides the background noise.

Over the last decade, another housing factor has exacerbated the achievement gap: segregated neighborhoods.

Educator and consultant Dorothy Battle notes that the achievement gap began to narrow in the 1970s and 1980s but “this trend reversed itself in the late 1980s when the gap began, once again, to widen.” The reason is not clear, she said, but:

Some claim it was due to federal court mandates, which curtailed many of the efforts to integrate schools. Housing patterns are the usual determinants of where children attend school, and there are many communities in America that are more segregated than integrated. . . . As the federal courts diminished reliance on school busing, students (particularly in urban areas) found themselves in segregated school settings. The general reliance on property taxes in most states left urban schools with less funding than schools in suburban areas.

Advocates for poor children say developers, regional planners, school officials, and other policymakers should develop strategies for more affordable housing and more diverse neighborhoods. They also say policymakers should look at ways to fund schools other than property taxes, which leave many of the urban schools that most poor kids attend with insufficient resources.

Ready for School

Experts say making sure poor kids are ready for school requires work on several fronts. More parents need to read to their children at a young age to accustom them to language that correlates to reading comprehension. Studies show that early reading comprehension is related to general success in school.

But African American and Hispanic children are read to considerably less than white children. Children in poverty are read to less than children who are not impoverished.

Data also show pre-kindergarten programs have helped close the academic gap in the early school years. In one North Carolina district, the pre-kindergarten program has helped hundreds of poor African American youngsters match the grade-level proficiency of whites. Advocates say universal pre-kindergarten and kindergarten would go a long way in helping to close the academic gap.

Still, researchers admit that though many preschool programs have been tried as interventions to reduce the readiness gap, none have succeeded in eliminating the gap. That’s partly because the gap grows over time. Though, on average, African American children begin school about a year behind whites, they finish high school about four years behind whites.

Parental involvement in schools is also a factor. When parents are involved in their children’s schools, the students tend to have fewer behavioral problems and better academic performance. Teachers give greater attention to



Corpus Christi Islanders’ mascot Stephen Reader and Denise Walraed of Strategic Health Care Initiatives participate in a NonStop Pep Rally at the early Childhood Development Center in Corpus Christi, Texas. The rally officially kicked off the NonStop program, which encourages children to have at least one hour a day of physical activity and to make healthier food choices.

Sandy Gilpin, a parent volunteer at Lakeview Elementary School in Smithville, Indiana, reads a book with second-grader Makenzie Stewart. Gilpin has three children in school, and volunteers twice a month in each classroom.

AP/Wide World Photos



students whose parents are involved, and parents can monitor school and classroom activities and support teachers. Research shows students perform better if their fathers, as well as their mothers are involved in school, regardless of whether the father lives with the student. Research also shows that schools that welcome parent involvement are likely to have highly involved parents.

Advocates say schools must develop innovative partnerships to get parents involved with their child's school. Teachers in schools with economically and ethnically diverse populations acknowledge the challenges for low-income parents. Many parents don't have the means to provide computers, tutors, or other resources their children may need. Because of their jobs—many hold more than one to make ends meet—they may find it difficult to attend parent-teacher conferences or to become involved in school activities. Is it fair, proponents of this approach ask, to relegate children to a life of academic failure because their parents are unable or unwilling to help them succeed in school?

It Takes a Village

One strategy that's working in some places is community schools. According to the Coalition for Community Schools:

A community school is a place as well as a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of

the community, open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends. By sharing expertise and resources, schools and communities act in concert to educate children; schools are not left alone to do the work.

In other communities, schools have been located next to facilities that parents and other adults need. For instance in Medina, Ohio, the Medina High School was located on the site of a community recreation center. In Saint Paul, Minnesota, a state-of-the-art community elementary school was located next to a new YMCA that serves both students and the public. Already test scores have gone up for all groups of students.

In Donaldsonville, Michigan, a local university professor created a program to attract parents to a reading program so they could help their children. She asked community leaders to recruit parents and even enlisted ministers to preach about the program from their pulpits. A grandmother organized a telephone campaign, and a local bar owner talked it up to his customers and provided transportation to school and back home.

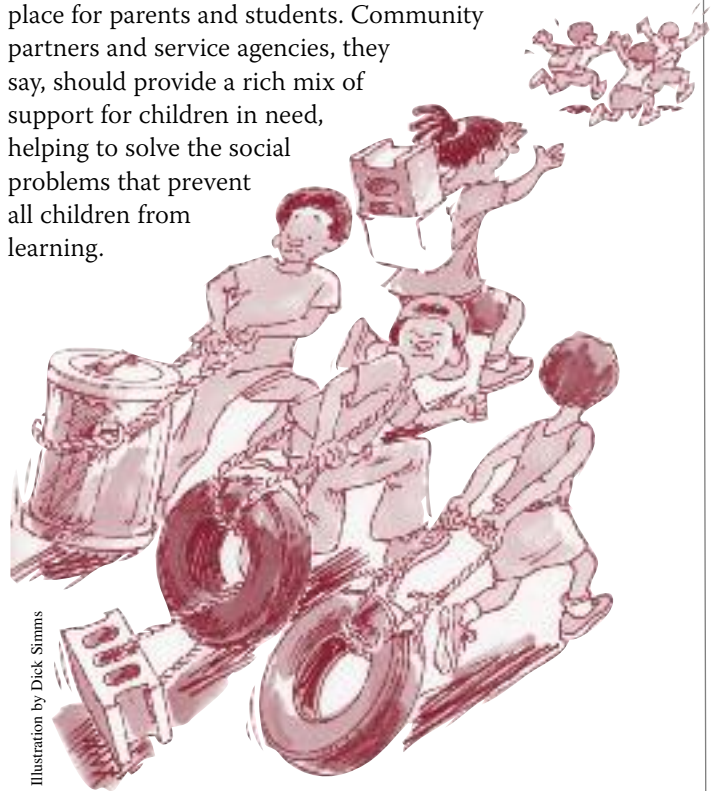
The No Child Left Behind Act encourages parents to get involved. The law requires schools to develop strategies to promote parental involvement. When a school is found to be in need of improvement, school officials are required to work with parents and others to develop a plan to turn the school around.

A March 2006 national survey illuminates the impact of parental involvement. In a survey of nearly 470 dropouts, including several face-to-face interviews, two-thirds said they would have worked harder to graduate if they had personal support from parents and family to help them. Nearly 70 percent of the dropouts said their parents became involved in their education only when they were on the verge of leaving school. The survey was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has been actively promoting high-school reforms. With at least one million students dropping out every year, the group is recommending options to help students and engage their parents and guardians in their education.

These findings have led some to agree with Robert Evans' assessment. The author of *The Human Side of School Change* says, "America doesn't have a crisis in schooling, it has something much worse: a crisis in child raising."

Advocates of this approach recognize that it is costly but insist that it can reap enormous benefits. They see achievement rising and the achievement gap closing only if society as a whole embraces schooling, and a sup-

port system that will foster learning is put in place for parents and students. Community partners and service agencies, they say, should provide a rich mix of support for children in need, helping to solve the social problems that prevent all children from learning.



>> What Critics Say

Critics of this approach point to two big problems: First, requiring public funds to address daunting issues, such as health and housing needs, is a very costly strategy and, practically speaking, out of reach for the communities that need it most. Second, there is no guarantee that tackling these problems will do anything to improve performance or close the achievement gap. As Professor John Ogbu has noted, middle-class students can perform poorly as well. These students have the means to meet these needs on their own. Why are they still struggling?

Furthermore, Temple University sociology professor Annette Lareau told *Time* magazine in 2005 that low-income parents face some cultural obstacles in helping their children academically. "Working class and poor families don't have college educations," she said. They look up to teachers and are inclined to leave the education of their children to the professionals.

Lareau also pointed out that race continues to be a factor for black parents, especially middle-class parents who attended segregated schools. They fear that teachers—most of whom are white and middle class—will have lower expectations for black children, especially black boys and will treat them more harshly than their white or Asian American counterparts.

Some opponents of this approach say that it embodies unnecessary government intervention. Parents should be encouraged to provide for their children through programs that help put them to work and get access to better jobs. The government should provide a leg-up, not a hand-out.

Finally, some critics maintain that this approach does not go far enough. Only simultaneous interventions by families, schools, and the larger society will lead to sustained academic improvement for low-income and minority children. "Children develop in many contexts," researcher Gina Burkhardt says:

They are influenced by in-school and out-of-school factors—factors that vary across place, time and cultural identity. . . . These factors require us to think differently about the neighborhoods in which children live and the supports and challenges within these neighborhoods; to think differently about the skills and knowledge teachers need to propel a child from one trajectory of performance to another; and to think differently about the intersection between research, policy and practice necessary to close the gaps.

>> Comparing Approaches

AT A TIME WHEN HIGHER LEVELS of education are becoming not only desirable but essential, low-income African American and Hispanic children are progressively losing ground. The achievement gap between these minority students on the one hand, and middle-class white and Asian American students on the other, is widening. Rural and low-income whites are falling behind as well.

As a nation committed to justice and equality, we cannot allow this to continue. And as a player in a competitive global economy, we cannot afford it.

But what, exactly, has gone wrong? And what must be done to remedy the problem? This issue book is an invitation to talk about a pressing national problem. Careful thought and deliberation are needed to understand the nature of the issues involved and to consider possible courses of action. An outline for talking through this troublesome issue appears on these pages.



Illustration by Steve Long

APPROACH ONE

>> Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability



Larger numbers of low-income, minority students are falling behind their peers each year. If this nation is to flourish in the twenty-first century, we cannot afford to lose so much potential ability. The

most promising strategies for closing this achievement gap include establishing the expectation that virtually all students can meet higher academic standards and making teachers and school administrators accountable for how well their students do.

What Can Be Done?

- Raise teachers' expectations of low-performing students.
- Set minimum standards of academic competency for teachers.
- Encourage low-income and minority students to take courses that prepare them to enter college.
- Publicize test score results for all schools in the district to let communities know how their schools are performing.
- Teachers and principals who are not getting results should be let go.

Trade-Offs

- Establishing high standards that all students are expected to meet will require continuous testing.
- Expecting more from low-income students may involve teachers in a number of social support activities such students need to improve their academic performance.
- A curriculum focused on helping children pass achievement tests may reduce emphasis on music, fine arts, sports, and other skills that are not measured by tests.

What Critics Say

- When teachers are forced to "teach to the test," they cannot make the best use of their skills, and real learning suffers.
- Studies have shown that the home environment is the most important factor in predicting how well children will do in school.
- Although, overall, test scores continue to improve, the gap between minority and nonminority student achievement remains wide.
- Inner-city schools with inadequate facilities and overcrowded classrooms cannot expect their students to do as well as those in school systems that provide computers, science labs, and up-to-date textbooks.

APPROACH TWO

>> Close the Spending Gap



Public schools with predominantly poor and minority students are most often located in districts that have the fewest resources. Buildings are falling apart. They lack basic facilities and equipment. And good teachers most often choose to

work elsewhere. If we expect to close the achievement gap, we must first close the resource gap. Funding and other resources must be more equitably distributed in order to give all our children an equal chance at success.

What Can Be Done?

- Provide better incentives and more support for highly-qualified educators to teach in low-performing schools.
- Give extra funds to school districts with serious deficits, as states like Kentucky and North Carolina have begun doing.
- Restructure school-funding systems which, in most states, now depend on property taxes—a system that badly short-changes schools in poor neighborhoods.
- Lobby state legislators to increase education spending. Maryland recently doubled school spending, in part by raising cigarette taxes.
- Involve parents in mentoring and tutoring programs to help boost performance.

Trade-Offs

- Significantly increasing school funding for all schools will likely involve more state taxes.
- Most plans for equalizing school funding without raising taxes involve taking money away from districts with higher tax rates and giving it to districts that do not raise enough to support their schools adequately.
- Although poor school districts may be able to attract highly-qualified teachers, they may not be able to keep them.

What Critics Say

- We have been throwing more money at public schools for years with negligible results. Money is not the answer.
- A focus on providing resources for schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods would deemphasize the need to diversify their student bodies, and perpetuate a separate system of education.
- Charter schools are the answer for many failing students, some critics say. These schools also serve to spur public schools to improve. Home schooling is another option.
- Other critics favor voucher programs that make it possible for underachieving students to attend private schools.

APPROACH THREE

>> Address the Root Causes



School-reform schemes will only treat the symptoms, not the root causes of this troubling problem. The real problems here are poor housing, poor nutrition, poor health care, and poor parenting. If we are to close the

achievement gap, we must address the socioeconomic problems that handicap children long before they get to school and continue to keep them lagging behind.

What Can Be Done?

- Developers, planners, school officials, and other policy-makers should develop strategies for more affordable housing and diverse neighborhoods.
- Universal pre-kindergarten and kindergarten would go a long way in closing the achievement gap.
- School districts should provide health screening when children enter school and periodically thereafter.
- Schools must develop innovative partnerships to get parents involved with their children's schools.
- In some areas, schools have become community centers, open every day to provide community support services, such as health clinics.

Trade-Offs

- Tackling the socioeconomic causes of academic failure will involve much more research to pinpoint the specific factors that affect children's performance in school.
- Bringing all our resources to bear on improving the lives of children before they enter school will likely result in the continued neglect of many underresourced schools.

What Critics Say

- Addressing daunting social issues like housing needs is very costly. High levels of funding are not likely to be available to the communities that most need them.
- There is no guarantee that this approach will be of any use in improving school performance of poor minority children.
- Approach Three calls for unnecessary government interference in the lives of poor minority families.
- This approach has the worthy aim of reforming society at the expense of seeking practical solutions to specifically educational problems.



>> Too Many Children Left Behind

How Can We Close the Achievement Gap?

Lessons Learned

1. Which statement best describes your knowledge about the achievement gap **before** the forum started?
 - I had never heard of the achievement gap.
 - I had heard the term, but did not know what it was.
 - I knew a little bit about the achievement gap, but not very much.
 - I had a basic understanding of the achievement gap.
 - I knew a lot about the achievement gap.
2. Which statement best describes your knowledge about the achievement gap **after** the forum ended?
 - I heard the term, but still do not understand it.
 - I know a little bit more about the achievement gap, but not enough.
 - I have a basic understanding of the achievement gap.
 - I know a lot about the achievement gap.
3. Which of the following approaches offers the most promise for addressing the achievement gap in your community?
 - Raise expectations and demand accountability.
 - Close the spending gap.
 - Address the root causes.
 - A combination of “raise expectations and demand accountability” and “close the spending gap.”
 - A combination of “raise expectations and demand accountability” and “address the root causes.”
 - A combination of “close the spending gap” and “address the root causes.”
 - A combination of all three approaches.
 - None of the approaches is appropriate for our community.
4. During discussions of important social issues, participants often experience a few moments of surprise when they learn something for the first time, or come to understand the point-of-view of other people in a new way. What surprised you most about the achievement gap discussion?

- | 5. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. I feel that the achievement gap is a very important issue. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. As a result of the forum, I feel a greater desire to learn more about the test scores in my community. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. As a result of the forum, I feel a greater desire to understand what the local schools and community organizations are doing to reduce the achievement gap. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. As a result of the forum, I feel a greater desire to get involved in local efforts to reduce the achievement gap. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. Ordinary citizens need to take this issue seriously and participate in efforts to reduce the achievement gap. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. The achievement gap is an issue for the schools and not the community. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g. The achievement gap is an issue for the community and not the schools. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

6. As you look forward to next week, what one action do you think you could take to improve the educational experience of a single child in your neighborhood?

How likely are you to take that action?

- Not at all likely
 Somewhat unlikely
 Not sure
 Somewhat likely
 Very likely

7. How old are you?

- 17 or younger
 18–30
 31–40
 41–50
 51–60
 61–70
 Over 70

8. What is your race or ethnic heritage?

- African American/Black
 Asian American/Pacific Islander
 Caucasian/White
 Hispanic
 Native American
 Other (please specify) _____

9. Are you: Male Female

10. How much schooling have you had?

- No high school
 Some high school
 High school graduate
 Some college, university, or technical school courses
 Degree from a college, university, or technical school
 Some graduate level courses
 Graduate degree or higher

11. Please put a “check” by each of the following descriptions that apply to you today:

- Student
 Parent
 Employee of a school district
 Employee of a social service organization
 Volunteer associated with a local school district
 Volunteer associated with a local social service organization
 Employed by the government (not elected or on the staff of an elected official)

As part of our research effort, we would like to conduct a follow-up interview with people who participated in the achievement gap discussion. If you are willing to participate in an interview, please provide your name and phone number below. Not everyone will be contacted and your information will not be used for any other purpose.

Name _____ Phone number _____

City where your deliberative forum was held _____

Please give this form to the forum leader, or mail it to The Public and Public Education Research, Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio, 45459.

The Public and Public Education Research

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