

Awareness to Action: Addressing Achievement Gaps in Delaware Schools

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Making Good on the Promise to Leave No Child Behind: Closing Delaware's Achievement Gap
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Introduction

The existence and persistence of achievement gaps between groups of our nation's children have drawn increased attention as states and local districts have begun to implement accountability systems anchored around annual assessments of student learning. The heightened attention on achievement gaps has been further bolstered by the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.¹ This act reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and places a priority on improving the academic performance of disadvantaged students.

In an effort to ensure that no students are left behind, the NCLB Act of 2001 requires states seeking Federal Title 1 funds to develop accountability systems based on rigorous standards; test students in grades 3 through 8 on an annual basis; and, monitor statewide progress annually in order to ensure that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. In order to monitor the progress of all groups of students, the NCLB Act of 2001 requires that assessment results and state objectives be broken out by student characteristics (i.e. race, income status, disability, etc.).

Research Findings

The challenge of helping all students reach proficiency may seem daunting in the face of national and state level data indicating major disparities in the academic performance among minority and low income students relative to other students but there is evidence to suggest that these gaps can and must be narrowed.² But, given that these gaps complex social, psychological, and economic processes, complex solutions are required that draw on the resources of schools, communities and individual students.³ On the pages that follow is an overview of promising school, home/community, and student focused approaches for addressing achievement gaps. This review is not meant to be exhaustive nor is it meant to endorse any single practice as there are often obstacles to implementation associated with any of these approaches.

School-Focused Approaches

For more than three decades, researchers have sought to identify district, school, and classroom practices that distinguish effective schools from those that are less effective with respect to student achievement.⁴ More recent analyses of unusually effective schools (i.e. effective schools serving large percentages of minority and low income students) indicate that these schools place a priority on:⁵

Unusually effective schools place a priority on:

- Effective instructional leadership;
- On-going monitoring of student learning;
- Quality teaching;
- Increased instructional time; and,
- An achievement oriented and orderly learning environment.

- **Effective Instructional Leadership** on the part of the building principal as well as the teachers in the school. In these schools principals and teachers *work collaboratively* to develop a *clear and focused mission* that emphasizes *high expectations for all students* and the *shared responsibility* of achieving those expectations. The faculty of effective schools are aware of the strengths and weaknesses within their schools and actively seek out solutions to mutually identified problems.
- **On-going monitoring of student learning** in an attempt to *gauge student progress* and adapt instruction to student needs. Being able to *individualize instruction* to meet student needs requires on-going assessments that provide teachers with *timely diagnostic information*. Effective schools use a variety of means (classroom grades, curriculum assessments, standardized test scores, etc.) for monitoring

student learning. Researchers also emphasize the importance of providing feedback to students so that they will know what is expected of them and whether additional assistance may be needed.⁶

- **Quality teaching.** Many studies have examined the impact of quality teachers on student achievement and have found that relative to other school-level variables (i.e. class size, school climate), teacher quality exerts the largest influence on student achievement.⁷ Yet all too often, schools with high poverty and minority enrollments have been staffed by teachers with fewer years of experience and lower scores on teacher certification tests.⁸ Ensuring that all students have access to the highest quality teaching is therefore a necessary first step in narrowing existing achievement gaps. Beyond the emphasis on quality instruction more generally, effective schools also place a priority on multicultural instruction and sensitivity. Although the research on the effectiveness of multicultural programming is sparse, there is some evidence to suggest that students benefit from *culturally relevant instruction* that builds on their prior experiences and places learning within a meaningful context.⁹

- **Increased instructional time.** Many strategies have been developed for the purpose of extending students' learning time. These strategies range from reducing the number of distractions during class time to re-vamping school schedules to provide students with *longer blocks of instructional time*. Other strategies for extending learning time include *after-school programs, full-day kindergarten, year-round schooling, and summer school*.¹⁰ Summer learning opportunities may be particularly important for minority and low income students because research suggests that these students gain less in achievement during the summer months. Regardless of the strategy employed, the additional time created must be filled with quality instruction in order to affect student learning.
- **An achievement-oriented and orderly learning environment** designed to provide students with individualized attention and instruction in a safe environment. A variety of organizational arrangements (i.e., smaller *class size*, creation of "*schools-within-a-school*") and instructional arrangements (i.e., *student grouping strategies*) have been proposed for creating more conducive learning environments.

The effectiveness of increasing instructional time on student learning depends on the quality of the instruction provided.

Creating smaller classes and schools have been found to be effective with minority and low-income students.

Organizational arrangements: Research indicates that as the size of the school increases, student achievement decreases, drop-out rates increase, and college enrollment rates decrease.¹¹ Reductions in class size and the creation of smaller school units within a school are frequently cited strategies for creating environments more conducive to student learning. Reductions in class size have the most promising effects in the early elementary grades and have been found to be particularly effective with minority and low income students.¹² The school-within-a-school model has shown some benefits for inner-city middle and high school students in terms of improved student achievement, attitudes, and attendance.¹³

Instructional arrangements: Reviews of the effective schools literature indicate that no single student grouping strategy (i.e. homogenous grouping, heterogeneous grouping, multi-age or multi-grade grouping) has emerged as the most commonly used or the most effective.¹⁴ A variety of strategies have been used in effective schools and the success of these strategies depends on the extent to which the instruction students receive is high quality and tailored to the needs of students. Research is clear, however, that rigid academic tracking policies based on prior performance and remedial pullout programs that take students out of their regular classes are ineffective.¹⁵ Minority and

Tracking and remedial pullout programs are ineffective strategies for improving student learning.

low-income students are often over-represented among the lowest performing track and often receive less rigorous instruction that covers less material.¹⁶

- **Engaging parents in the school community** and encouraging them to take an active role in providing instruction to their children, supporting classroom and extracurricular activities, and participating in school level decision-making. Such activities have been linked with improved student achievement and student attitudes. Unfortunately, research indicates that low income and minority parents are often reluctant to become involved due to language barriers, previous negative experiences, work schedules, and perceptions that a school is not receptive to parents. Effective communication, positive teacher practices, and a strong commitment from the school district are all essential for engaging parents in the school community.¹⁷

Home and Community Focused Approaches

Research clearly demonstrates a relationship of family and community level factors to student achievement.¹⁸ As further evidence that schools alone are not responsible for achievement gaps, several studies have documented that achievement gaps are present even before children start school.¹⁹ Researchers have suggested that some of the achievement gaps that exist at the end of 12th grade could be reduced by at least half by eliminating the differences that exist before children start first grade.²⁰ The most common strategies for addressing gaps before children start school include: preschool programs, parent education programs, and the coordination of community services.

Early gains made by participating in preschool programs often fade over time without proper follow-through.

- **Preschool programs:** Research indicates that the benefits associated with preschool programs can include increased achievement and lower rates of special education referrals, retentions, and drop-out rates. The earlier the program begins, the longer it lasts, and the extent to which it involves follow-up activities or coordination in elementary school determines how long lasting the effects will be. Without these elements, early gains in student achievement often fade over time.²¹
- **Parent education programs:** Many early childhood programs involve a parent education component designed to help parents provide their children with a developmentally appropriate environment that fosters student growth and learning. Other parent education programs are designed to provide parents with specific job-related skills to improve the likelihood of gainful employment or future schooling. One recent study found that when mothers received literacy training to improve themselves, seek employment, or further their education, the amount of literacy activities they engaged in with their children increased.²²

- **Coordination of community services:** According to several sources, the coordination of social services and other community resources is absolutely critical in meeting the physical and psychological needs of low-income students.²³ These students often have health related needs and family problems (i.e. addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) that interfere with their ability to learn. Providing coordinated services may also reduce the incidence of student mobility that often occurs among low-income students. Research indicates that high rates of student mobility affect the achievement of students who move and slows down the pace of instruction for all children in the school.²⁴

Sample practices for making school, family, and community connections:

- Providing information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services;
- Creating one-stop shopping for family services through partnerships of school, counseling, health, recreation, job training, and other agencies;
- Encouraging service *to* the community by students, families, and schools; and,
- Encouraging school-business partnerships.

Student Focused Approaches

In many ways all of the approaches previously mentioned focus on students and improving their educational outcomes. However, there is a body of research that specifically focuses on fostering resiliency even among the most at-risk students. Researchers have found that even children exposed to the worst risk conditions can emerge into adulthood without permanent damage. These researchers have found that resilient children tend to have had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally and one skill that served as a source of pride for them.²⁵

Early childhood education and social service interventions have been found to be an effective means of developing resiliency, even among those students who started school with little or no coping skills.²⁶ Resiliency can be fostered by providing students with opportunities to become involved in community-sponsored programs and mentoring programs that provide students with adult role models. School climates characterized by caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful student participation in decision-making have also been linked to increased resiliency among at-risk students.²⁷

The Good News

Based on the research cited above, it is clear that schools, families, and communities can all have a powerful influence in the lives of children and play an important role in closing the achievement gap. In an effort to spread this news and learn from the work of others, a next step for addressing existing achievement gaps could include the creation of networks specifically focused on this issue.

Across the country several such networks have been formed to pool resources for addressing achievement gaps. Specific examples include the Network for Equity in Student Achievement (NESA) and the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). These networks were designed to share data, resources, and ideas for closing the achievement gap in their partnering districts.²⁸ The creation of local networks could aid in the sharing of information about effective practices and foster support among schools and the surrounding community.

Delaware Data: Understanding the Scope of the Challenge

Many groups inside and outside of education in Delaware have become active in the pursuit of strategies for addressing the gaps. As a starting point for gauging the size of the challenge and opening up dialogue around the achievement gap in Delaware schools, a school-by-school examination of the achievement gap separating minority and low-income students from other students was produced.

In the report, *Awareness to Action: Recognizing and Addressing the Achievement Gaps in Delaware Schools*^{*1}, achievement disparities in the areas of reading and mathematics were documented by comparing minority students (i.e. African Americans and Hispanics) to non-minority students (i.e. Caucasians) and low income students to non-low income students in terms of the percentage of each student group at or above the standard.^{**2} Two measurement cycles, each containing two years worth of data, were used to make cross-sectional comparisons of student performance. Therefore, the individual school reports were produced based on four years worth of DSTP data.

*¹ The full report is available online at www.rdc.udel.edu and <http://www.doe.state.de.us/>

**² Students identified as eligible for free/reduced lunch are classified as low-income students.

State Level Gaps in Reading Achievement

As reported in *Awareness to Action: Recognizing and Addressing Achievement Gaps in Delaware Schools*

When aggregating the performance of Delaware schools to the state level the following findings emerged within the area of reading:

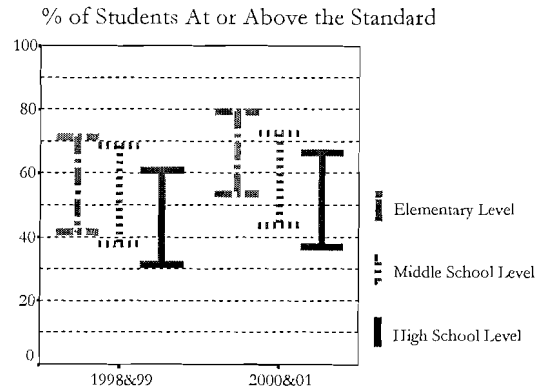
- Sizable gaps exist statewide for each of the three student comparisons in the report (i.e. African Americans—Caucasians, Hispanics—Caucasians, Low Income—Non Low Income) with fewer minority and low-income students meeting the standard relative to their non-minority, non-low income peers.

- At the elementary level, the gaps among African Americans and Caucasians and Low income—non low-income students decreased slightly over time but remained relatively unchanged among Hispanics and Caucasians.

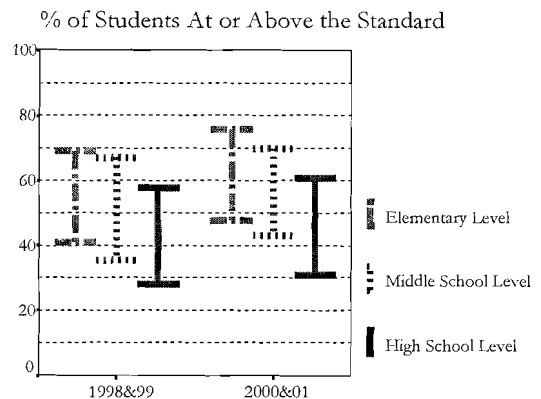
- Among middle schools, the gaps in performance among all student groups appeared to decrease slightly over time.

- Among high schools, the gaps in performance among all student groups were relatively unchanged over time.

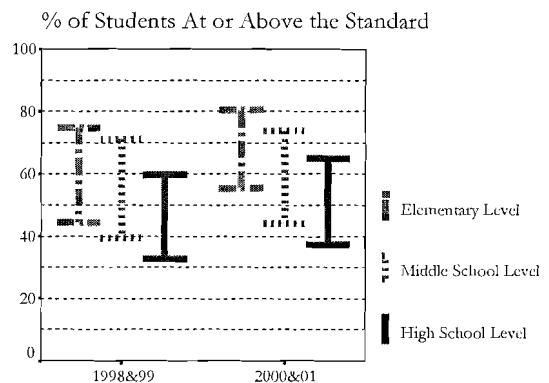
Caucasians vs. African Americans



Caucasians vs. Hispanics



Non-low Income vs. Low Income



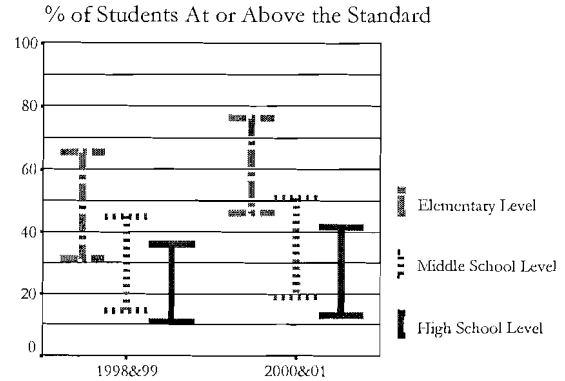
State Level Gaps in Mathematics Achievement

As reported in *Awareness to Action: Recognizing and Addressing Achievement Gaps in Delaware Schools*

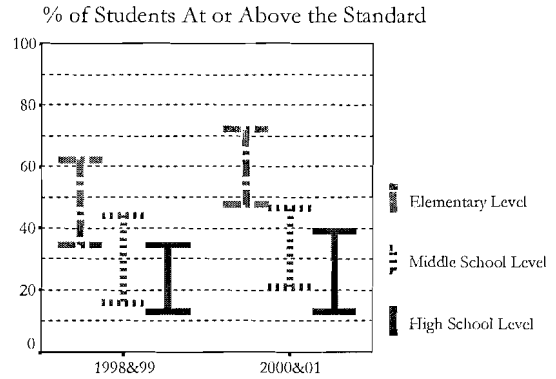
When aggregating the performance of Delaware schools to the state level the following findings emerged within the area of **mathematics**:

- Sizable gaps exist statewide for each of the three student comparisons in the report with fewer minority and low income students meeting the standard relative to their non-minority, non-low income peers.
- Among elementary schools, the gaps in performance among all student groups appeared to decrease slightly over time.
- Among middle schools, the gap among African American and Caucasian students evidenced slight increases, the gap among Hispanics and Caucasians decreased slightly, while the gap among low income and non-low income students remained relatively unchanged.
- Among high schools, the gaps in performance among all student groups appeared to be increasing over time. Overall performance in the area of mathematics was relatively low for all student groups.

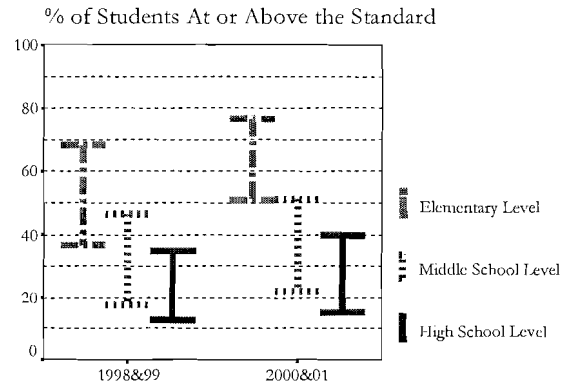
Caucasians vs. African Americans



Caucasians vs. Hispanics



Non-low Income vs. Low Income



Summary

Delaware is currently facing the same challenge as other states and local districts—to ensure that no child is left behind when it comes to receiving a quality education. The data outlined in the last section clearly indicate that there are currently large achievement gaps separating minority and low-income students from other students. While the sizes of the gaps do appear to be reducing in certain areas, other areas have evidenced relatively unchanged or increasing gaps.

The strategies for addressing existing achievement gaps are not new, what is new is the way in which schools and communities are taking these strategies and using them in innovative ways that meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. The most important lesson learned from the review of the literature is that everyone has a role to play in addressing existing achievement gaps and improving the academic performance of all students.

Policy Questions for Consideration

- How can the state more effectively coordinate services to fully address the complex learning, physical, and psychological needs of children and their families?
- In the current accountability environment that may promote competition, not cooperation, what can the state do to encourage networking among schools and districts in order to share resources and effective strategies for addressing the achievement gap and improving the learning of all student?
- Considering the current fiscal constraints of the state, what can be done to ensure that dialogue concerning the achievement gap becomes more than an awareness raising activity and is instead translated into meaningful action?
- How might the state accountability system be used to specifically address the achievement gaps that exist in Delaware schools?
- What can be done to promote constructive action within the schools and districts across the state to close the achievement gap?

References

For a complete list of the references indicated through out this document visit our website at <http://www.rdc.udel.edu>

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