

Closing the Achievement Gap: Where Are We? What Are the Most Important Roles for Education Leaders?¹

By Kati Haycock, President, Education Trust



THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Let's start by taking a look at where we are.

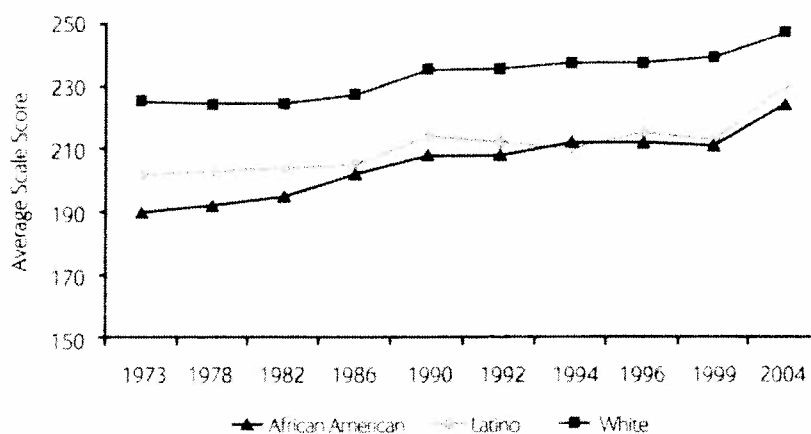
As many of you know, we made a lot of progress during the 70's and 80's in raising achievement, especially among low income kids, and kids of color. But all throughout the 1990's, the gaps between groups were stagnant or growing.

The good news is that this pattern has begun to turn around again. In the last five years there have been sharp improvements in reading for all groups of fourth graders. We now have record performance for all groups of children, and the smallest gaps separating black children from white children, and Latino children from white children, that we have ever had in this country's history.

There's good news, too, in fourth grade math: again, sharp improvements in the last five years for all groups of kids, record performance for all groups of kids, and the smallest gaps separating black and Latino children from white children, that we have ever had in this country's history.

When we move up to middle grades, the news is a little bit more mixed: a little improvement in eighth grade reading for black and Latino kids, but not much to write home about. Better news in mathematics, where again we're seeing improvements for all groups of kids and record performance for all groups of kids.

NAEP Math, 9 Year-Olds:
Record Performance for All Groups



Note: Long-Term Trends NAEP

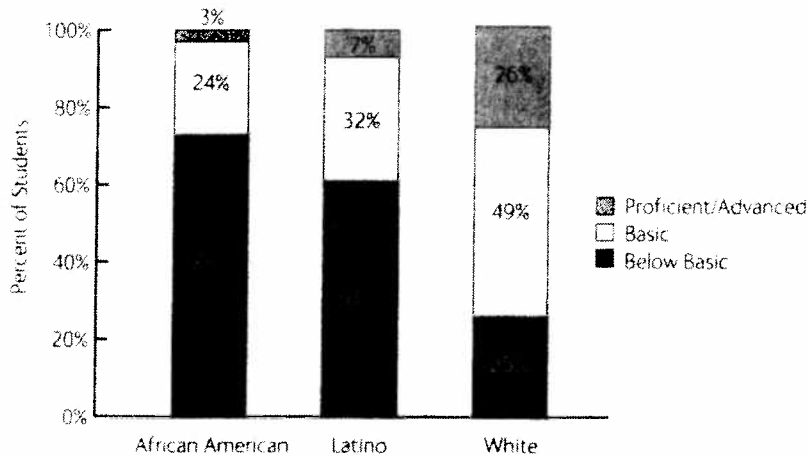
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress

¹ This paper is based on remarks delivered at The Wallace Foundation's National Conference, "Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform," in New York City on October 24, 2007.

Look in particular at the accomplishments possible because of a decade or more of effort in mathematics. Back in 1996, seven in ten African-American fourth graders performed at the Below Basic level, as did six in ten Latino fourth graders. Fast forward ten years, and those

numbers are cut in half. Meanwhile, at the top end, African-Americans are five times as likely now to be proficient or advanced; for Latinos, three times as likely. That's a huge change.

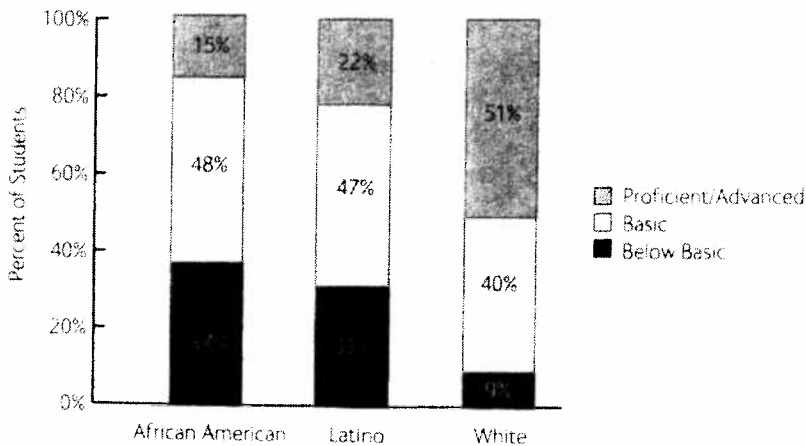
1996 NAEP Grade 4 Math by Race/Ethnicity, Nation



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/index/>

If there is one message from all of this, it is that when we really focus on something as a country, we make progress. Indeed, if there's one message from our history it is this: when we focus on something, we make progress.

2007 NAEP Grade 4 Math by Race/Ethnicity, Nation



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/index/>

Now, in focusing on the progress in elementary and middle grades, I do not want to suggest that there is not a lot that remains to be done. Everybody today who is working at the high school level knows there are still an awful lot of kids entering high school who are not even close to having the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. But, at least we have some traction on those problems.

The same, unfortunately, is not yet true of results in our high schools. The bottom line in reading is really quite clear: our kids are exiting high school today with weaker skills than their counterparts had 20 years ago.

In mathematics, on the other hand, 12th grade achievement is trending upwards. In fact, kids are exiting high school with stronger skills in math than their counterparts had

20 years ago. But, before you say, well, at least our high schools are getting better at something, it is very important for you to know that those improvements have occurred largely be-

cause students were entering high school with much stronger mathematics scores. Value-added in high school mathematics actually declined somewhat over the past decade.

So why are we making so much more progress in our elementary schools than we are in our high schools? Many high school educators, of course, think they know the answer. “It’s raging hormones,” they say. If it is primarily about hormones, though, you would expect to see the same pattern in other countries. Yet when you look closely at the international data, what you learn is that our students grow less during their secondary school years than in most other countries.

That’s why our students do relatively better in international comparisons of elementary students, than they do in the PISA² assessments of 15-year-olds. Indeed, the only place we rank high in current international comparisons is in the gaps between our highest and lowest achieving students.

UNDERSERVING THE UNDERSERVED

So, let’s talk about those gaps. The gaps that are evident in the data, of course, begin before kids even arrive at the school door. Indeed, every year, there are countless children who arrive at school already behind. Sometimes that’s because of poverty, sometimes that’s because of language issues, sometimes that’s because of family issues. But regardless of the reason, a lot of kids arrive behind.

The question for us is: knowing that, how do we organize our education system in response? Sadly, what you learn when you look honestly at that question, is that rather than organizing our educational system in this country to ameliorate that problem, we actually organize the system to exacerbate this problem.

How do we do that? We take the kids who come to school with less and we turn around and give them less in school, too. Some of the “lesses,” it turns out, flow from choices that policy makers make, including the choice that many states have made to just plain spend less on schools serving concentrations of poor and minority kids than they do on schools serving concentrations of white and affluent kids. But many of the most devastating “lesses” in the education of poor children and children of color flow not from the choices that the policy makers make, but rather from the choices that we educators make. Choices about what to expect of whom. Choices about what to teach to whom. And, perhaps the most devastating choice of all, the choice of who teaches whom.

When you add up the effects of both sets of choices — both the choices that the policy makers make and the choices that we educators make — the results are simply devastating. The gap that separates poor kids from middle class kids and kids of color from white kids grows wider and wider, the longer they remain with us in school.

² The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) compares student proficiency among 15-year-olds in the 30 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, including the United States, and in some 27 less developed nations. The last reported scores were in 2003.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF FAILURE WITH LEADERSHIP

What can we do about all of this?

There are a fair number of people in this profession of ours who have basically decided that we can't do much about these gaps. When we show them the numbers and ask what is going on here, what do we hear? "What do you expect?" they say. "The children are poor, their parents somehow don't care, they come to school without an adequate breakfast, they don't have enough books at home, they don't have a place to study at home, they don't have a set of parents at home, they live in a poor neighborhood." A whole set of reasons, in other words, that are always about the kids and their families.

Our question back to them is a very simple one: if you are right, if things like poverty and difficult home circumstances actually make low achievement inevitable, how can it be that very poor kids and kids of color are performing so high in some places?

Let's look at some examples:

Ten years ago M. Hall Stanton Elementary in Philadelphia was the subject of a PBS documentary on the horrors of American urban public education. The kids are all African-American and most of them are really poor. About nine years ago a new principal arrived at that school named Barbara Adderly. Barbara saw the chaos, she saw the neighborhood. But unlike some of her predecessors, she did not think the school needed to stay this way. And, together with her teachers, they have turned this school into what I can only describe as a kind of joyous learning machine. This is not a school where kids sit in narrow rows at desks and fill in bubbles on standardized worksheets. This is a school that is rich in art and music. But, this is a school that is totally focused on teaching and learning. In their judgment they are in a race against the clock — and not, by the way, the No Child Left Behind clock. This is a clock that says to them, our kids come in so far behind we cannot waste a single minute. The school's data tell the story of their progress. The school's fourth graders are now performing higher than mostly white, mostly middle class Pennsylvania. They said these kids couldn't possibly achieve at this level, but they are.

Atlanta's Capitol View Elementary School is another school with a fabulous principal. This is a principal who said our kids don't need narrow, they need rich. So they became a Core Knowledge school. Again, this school serves all African-American kids, most of whom are very poor. But these children now perform among the highest in all of Georgia.

Frankford Elementary school in Frankford, Delaware is a school quite different from these. It's a rural school. Most in this school are children of agricultural workers. Ten or twelve years ago you look at the data on this school and it looked just like the higher education professors always project in their regression charts: lots of poor kids, not so good achievement. Again, these kids are now among the highest performing in the entire state.

Finally, welcome to Elmont Junior/Senior High School, in Elmont, NY. It's a school that serves about 2,000 kids, virtually all African-American and Latino. They, too, got a new

principal eight years ago, a gentleman by the name of Al Harper. Al tells an interesting story. He said, “when I walked up to the front door the first day on the job, I was greeted by my two assistant principals who said, ‘welcome, Mr. Harper, to one of the best minority high schools in the state of New York.’” And Al said, “as a black man I said to myself, ‘what does that mean? One of the best minority high schools in the state of New York. Why aren’t we one of the best high schools in the state of New York?’” And, that is in fact what they set out to do.

Al Harper is a fabulous leader. But the real leaders at Elmont are the department chairs. These teachers feel a deep sense of responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning that goes on in their department. Just to give you one example, when they get new teachers at Elmont, in addition to the observations that the principal and vice principal do, the department chairs do a minimum of eight, one-hour unscheduled observations per year.

Take a look now at their results: on the New York Regents English and math exams, this high school now is in the top five or six percent of all high schools in the entire state of New York.

Now a lot of people say, “OK, Kati, we know you Ed Trust folks have your high performing schools. But all of this washes out at the district level. Poor and minority kids perform about the same no matter where they go to school.”

That myth holds on, but it’s dead wrong.

One of the reasons we know that is that about seven years ago a group of big urban school systems decided to give their kids the same test — NAEP³ third grade reading, eighth grade math. So we can look across those districts at the performance of the “same” group of kids and ask the question: does what districts do matter, or is it mostly just the kids?

Here’s what you learn when you look honestly at the data. By fourth grade, poor black children in New York and Charlotte read about two grade levels ahead of poor black children in Los Angeles. By eighth grade, they’re performing almost three years higher in math. And the same differences hold for Latinos.

Two or three grade levels are not minor, statistically interesting but meaningless distinctions. Those are big, life-shaping differences. Don’t ever let anybody tell you that what districts do doesn’t matter. Districts **do** matter. Indeed, no matter what level you work at — school level, district level, state level — what you do matters a lot.

“Leaders in high performing systems are not blind to the ravages of poverty. But they succeed by focusing on what they can do, not on the things that they can’t.”

³ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

NARROWING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: LESSONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

So, what are the cross-cutting lessons from the places that are getting the job done? Let me suggest a few:

1) The leaders who succeed with poor and minority kids focus on the things they can change, not on the things that they can't.

As closing the achievement gap becomes a big issue, it often seems as if almost every school district in America is creating some kind of a commission on closing the achievement gap. So, what happens? In the first meeting everybody sits in a room and says, "what are all the things that might possibly be correlated with the achievement gap?" Then they make long lists of things that might somehow be related to the achievement gap, and somebody goes out and finds the relevant data. They collect numbers on things like the percentage of babies born at low birth weight, the percent of children born to single moms, the percent of children born to families receiving government assistance, the education levels of their mothers. Then they come back together and have all these charts, and what happens? They feel thoroughly depressed and totally frustrated.

The leaders in high performing systems don't do this. They're not blind to the ravages of poverty. But they succeed by focusing on what they can do, not on the things that they can't.

2) Leaders in high performing schools and districts rarely talk or act like the ones you hear at big conferences.

I go to conferences all the time and they always have this superstar principal: somebody who comes up and tells a story about how they turned this school around on the sheer force of their personality. Two things are scary about that. First, it makes everybody in the room who is a regular kind of person say, 'if that's what it takes, I'm never going to be able to do this.' The second thing is, it's just wrong.

When you meet the leaders in the places that are really getting the job done, they are not the kind of leaders that just turn things around by the sheer force of their personality. They are regular people. They are totally focused. They are totally relentless. But they are not these big outsized personalities and they are not the only leaders in their schools. Especially in the larger schools, the principals know that they can't get it all done themselves. Those are the places that improve. Leadership is not about one person, it's about building a shared commitment and building a leadership team.

3) The leaders in high performing schools or districts don't leave much of anything about teaching and learning to chance.

That means that they are always looking at their data and looking at it every which way. It also means that their data aren't just the usual pieces of data, not just test results in the aggregate, but also things like assignments and student work. They are always looking underneath the numbers. That's why for example, superintendents like Vicki Phillips, when she was in

Portland, didn't just look at the data and exhort teachers to get better. She knew that she had to look at data of a different kind. She had to get underneath instruction to look at the actual assignments that teachers were giving. Because it is the work that kids are asked to do that makes the difference. The leaders in these places that work for kids are methodical about all of this. When they expect something, they inspect it. Hugely important.

4) Good leaders don't just mouth the mantra — "teachers are the most important thing, teachers matter a lot." They actually ACT like teachers matter.

Research is unequivocal that there are big differences amongst our teachers in their ability to take kids from wherever they are when they enter a classroom and grow their knowledge and skills. Kids who have three strong teachers in a row literally soar, no matter what their family background. Kids who have even two weak teachers in a row never recover. So, teachers matter a lot.

But strong teachers are not evenly distributed no matter how you measure teacher quality. Poor and minority kids, for example, are considerably more likely than other children to be taught by teachers who never even studied the subjects they are teaching. The same thing is true when you look at brand new teachers. Poor and minority kids

are more than twice as likely to be taught by brand new teachers. Even in places like Tennessee, where we actually know who the strongest and weakest teachers are, African-American kids are more likely than other kids to be taught by that state's least effective teachers, and less likely to be taught by that state's most effective teachers. Yet when the kids don't do so well on tests, who do we blame? Them, their parents, their poverty.

Good leaders do not let this happen. They work very hard to extract, support and hold strong teachers. They make very sure that their strongest teachers aren't just teaching the high end kids, but are actually teaching the kids who most need them. And they chase out teachers they think are not good enough for their kids.

5) Finally, a few words for those who are leading from outside of schools and districts: gutsy, good school and district leaders do not need you to go fuzzy on them.

Good leaders need and use the leverage that ambitious policy and aggressive advocacy provide for them. If you are a principal in a high poverty school who is working to attract and stabilize a high-quality teacher force, you don't need your local community advocacy group to just pat you on the back. You need those parents to say, "we need strong teachers now!" Good leaders use leverage like that to move further, faster. Similarly, good urban school district leaders know that they don't need the federal government right now to say, "oh, we didn't

"Good leaders make very sure that their strongest teachers aren't just teaching the high end kids, but are actually teaching the kids who most need them."

mean for you to help your kids do basic reading and math, we'll give you lots of extra credit if the kids feel good about themselves, or if they attend school."

I had a conversation recently with Michelle Rhee, the new chancellor of the Washington, DC schools, about this very subject. She wanted to know what was going on about the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. And I said, well, there are a lot of proposals on the table. Many of them involve introducing more measures of school progress. The core idea is that if the school is not doing so well in reading and math they could get points for having high attendance or doing some other thing. She said, "oh my God, I hope they don't do that."

Now, understand the context. Michelle is running a school system where 60% of the schools are in some kind of improvement status. So, it would be very easy for this leader to say it would be really lovely for my schools to get a little extra credit for attendance, or extra credit for something else. But, that's not what she said. She said, "I want them to focus on making sure kids master those core academic skills. If Congress does this, they'll cut the knees out from under me."

So, those of you who are outside of the schools should remember that it may feel nice to just pat education leaders on the back. While God knows they sometimes need a pat on the back — and need your support to obtain more resources — the leaders who are really trying to drive change do not need you to back off. They need you to keep pushing because they use the leverage that your advocacy provides to move things further and faster for kids.

This job of closing the achievement gap is not an easy one. It is a very serious challenge and I know that there are people out there who are saying to educators everywhere, "It's unfair and it's undoable."

Well, it may be unfair. If ours was a just nation, we wouldn't allow so many children to be trapped in poverty, and we wouldn't allow so many families to be without nutrition and healthcare.

But it is not undoable. Education transforms lives, and schools turn out to be very powerful agents. If we are going to really make a difference, we've got to use that power. We've got to harness our power and take kids from where ever they come from and go as far as we can get them. That's the job of leadership today. There is no more important work.

• • •

Kati Haycock is a leading national spokesperson for standards-based education reform and serves as president of the Education Trust, an advocacy organization that addresses the needs of children, especially those from poor or minority backgrounds.