

MIND THE GAP

ELIMINATING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION DEMANDS COMMITMENT

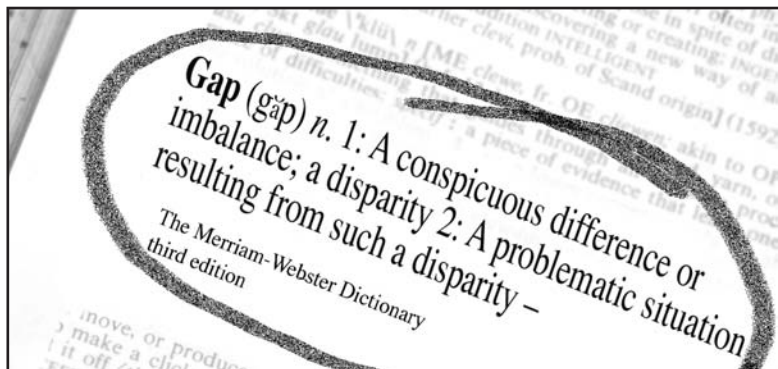
Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, editors of *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, wrote, “If racial equality is America’s goal, reducing the black-white test score gap would probably do more to promote this goal than any other strategy that commands broad political support.”¹

Inequity is like the unwanted guest that arrives early and stays late. Nowhere is this more evident than in the significant disparities which exist between children of color and white children in the area of educational achievement. Before children enter kindergarten, the gap in their readiness for school is profound. Sadly, while our state is not unique in this struggle, in some cases, the gaps between white children and children of color in Wisconsin are the worst in the nation.

The gap can be closed, and there are strategies that have been proven to effectively improve student academic performance. Access to high quality early education, summer and after-school programming, smaller class sizes and increasing the availability of highly qualified teachers can make a dramatic difference in the success of Wisconsin students. To be successful, we must also acknowledge the existence of institutional racism in our communities – the systematic policies, practices and stereotypes that create barriers to success for children of color and their families – and must work toward the elimination of such practices.²

What do we mean by achievement gap?

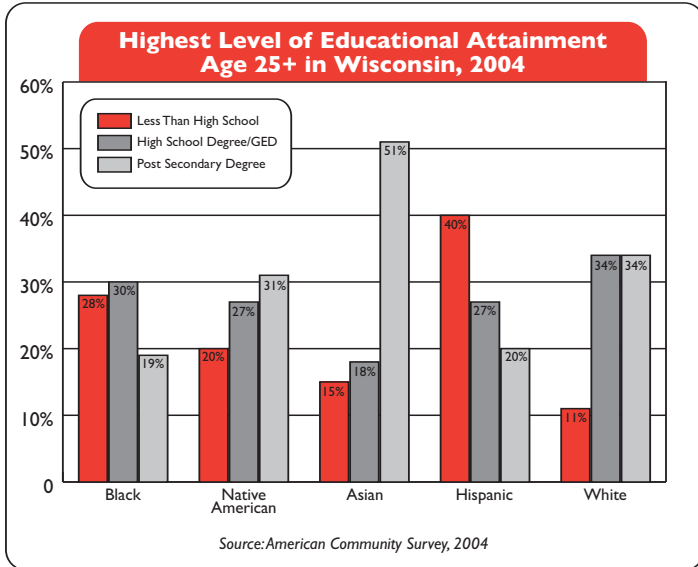
In this brief, the term achievement gap refers to a difference in the academic performance between groups of students as measured by standardized testing, graduation rates, school readiness, college preparedness, number of college graduates, etc. In all of these areas, students of color in Wisconsin on average are achieving less than white students.



Quality Education Lasts a Lifetime

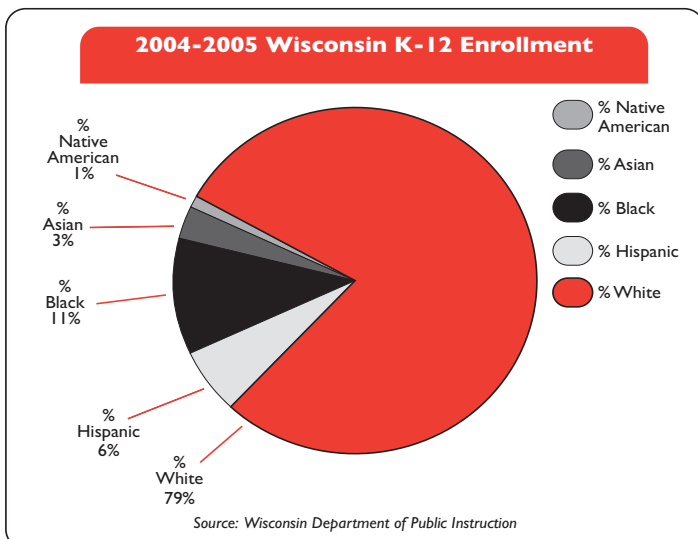
Clearly, education is the established gateway to greater opportunity. Future employment, earning potential, asset building and the ability to participate in the larger community are all inextricably linked to a successful school experience.

A recent study of the country's largest cities by CEOs for Cities found that educational levels were the single biggest driver of economic growth in cities, and that high school degrees were not enough to be economically self sufficient.³ In addition, studies continue to show that educated people are more likely to be able to sustain family supporting jobs, and are less likely experience frequent job changes.



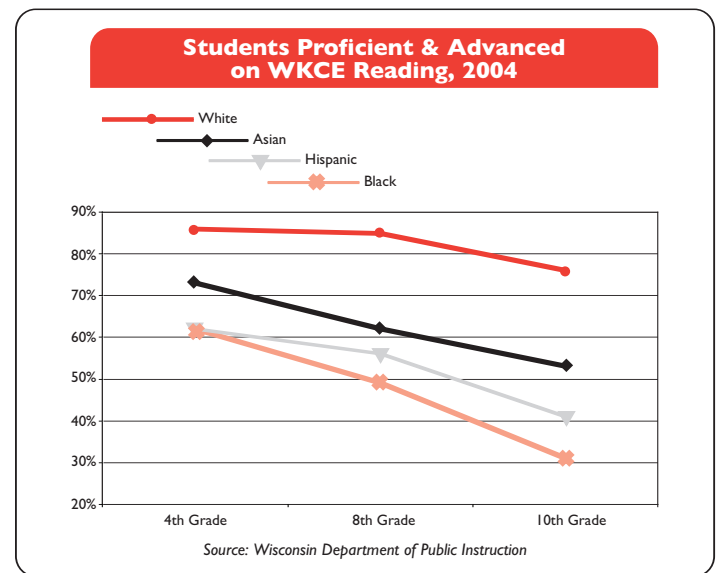
Minding the Gap in Wisconsin

There are perhaps dozens of child well-being indicators that are correlated with student achievement (access to health care, student mobility, safe housing, parents' education, poverty are just a few examples). We have chosen, in this brief, to focus on only a few which touch directly on school based practices.



Test Scores

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) – or *Nation's Report Card* - measures student achievement by testing a sample of students in each state on a national norm-referenced exam. In 2004, NAEP results show that the average reading score for a black 17-year-old is the same as that of a white 13-year-old.⁴ In eighth grade reading, and fourth grade math the achievement gap between black and white students was larger in Wisconsin than in any other state on the *Nation's Report Card*. In addition, test scores for black students in Wisconsin fall below national averages in every category. On the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) which public school students take in the 4th, 8th, and 10th grades, 48 percent of white 4th grade students performed at the advanced level in reading while only 17 percent of black students scored at the advanced level.⁵



The preceding chart shows a fairly large gap in reading performance at the 4th grade level. However, this gap actually widens by 10th grade: 76 percent of white 10th grade students scored at the proficient or advanced level, while only 31 percent of black students achieved that level. Disparities in math and science are even more pronounced.ⁱ

The 2002 federal law dubbed, No Child Left Behind, has been instrumental in highlighting this issue in the national press. It has not, however, offered much new funding or solutions to help educators close the gap. The law seeks to increase educational attainment by holding schools accountable for student achievement on a series of standardized tests and offering support services for low income students whose schools do not perform well. Advocates for NCLB maintain that the law has the potential to be a force in closing the achievement gap. To date there is little evidence to suggest that these measures will close the achievement gap.

ⁱLimitations of standardized testing - Standardized testing is just one tool that is used to measure student achievement. While it is a tool that can be used to track trends in groups, it is not always an accurate portrayal or predictor of individual student achievement, especially for students of color, students with special needs, or students for whom English is not their first language.

Advanced Placement Classes and College Readiness

Research shows that students of color in Wisconsin who do graduate from high school are less likely to be prepared for college or to go on to college. A study by the Manhattan Institute reports that in 2002, only 11 percent of black students, 15 percent of Hispanic students and 20 percent of American Indian students were college ready in Wisconsin.⁶ That same study found that 41 percent of white students were adequately prepared for college. As students enter high school, they begin to have more options in their course work. Those who take more challenging classes are more likely to be prepared for college. High school students who are preparing to go to college may take advanced placement classes (AP), based on the availability of the class in their district. In Wisconsin, 2003 data shows that while African-Americans make up 10 percent of K-12 enrollment, they are only 1 percent of AP test takers in Calculus, English Language and Composition and Biology.⁷

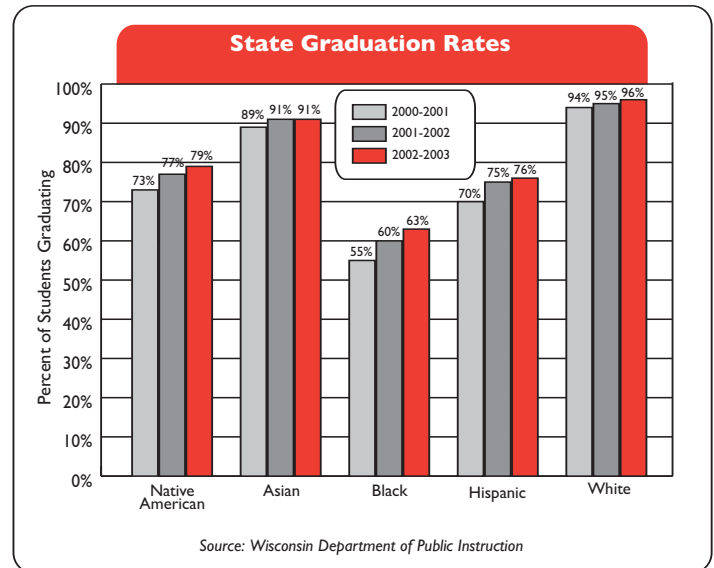
	Public K-12 Enrollment	Calculus AB	English Language & Composition	Biology
African American	10%	1%	1%	1%
Asian	3%	4%	3%	4%
Latino	5%	1%	1%	2%
White	81%	94%	95%	93%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number	866,841	3,054	1,896	1,744

Source: The Education Trust, EdWatch Online 2004 State Summary Reports, www.edtrust.org



Graduation Rates

In order to compete for family supporting jobs, students must, at a minimum, gain a high school diploma. Recent data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction indicate that populations of color have shown improvement in high school completion rates but still lag significantly behind whites. In Wisconsin an estimated 81 percent of those who enter ninth grade will graduate from high school. That rate masks a significantly lower rate for African-American students. In 2003 only 63 percent of African American students graduated from high school.⁸ Statewide, the gap between high school graduation rates for black and white students is 32 percent. The gap between Latino and white students is 19 percent.⁹ Students who do not graduate from high school face lower lifetime earnings and fewer career choices than those who finish high school.



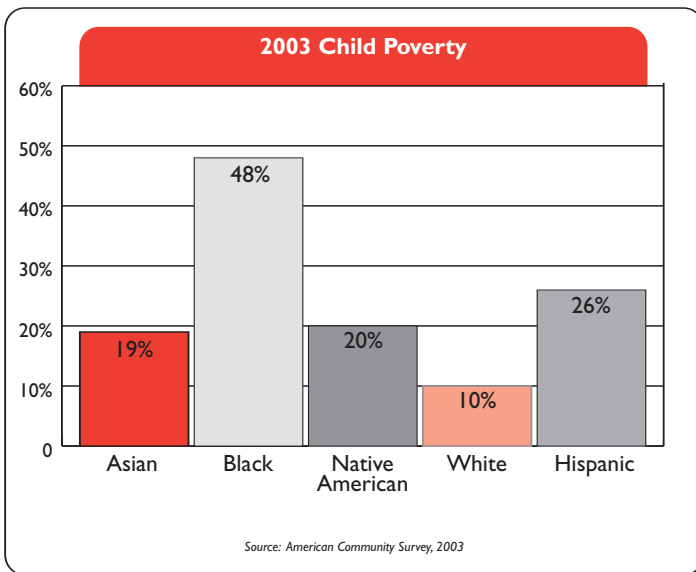
Brief History of the Achievement Gap

After the Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling in 1954, desegregation followed in America's public schools. However, the tension surrounding desegregation and the institutionalized racism in our public schools is still felt today. For years, students of color have, on average, performed consistently below white students in all academic testing, school readiness rates, graduation rates, and college readiness and graduation. The gap narrowed during the period between 1971 and 1996. Much of the narrowing of the gap can be attributed to smaller class sizes, more demanding course work, and desegregation. During the last decade, however, the achievement gap has widened.¹⁰ Wisconsin's white students have consistently scored above national averages on standardized testing, while their African-American, American Indian, Latino, and Southeast Asian counterparts have continued to lag substantially behind their progress.

Barriers to Achievement

It is impossible to write of the academic achievement gap in a vacuum. Children of color and low-income children in Wisconsin are, in many instances, at a disadvantage from the start. Forces outside of the school's control such as, poverty, lead poisoning, inadequate health and dental care and unstable housing all conspire to keep children from achieving their potential.

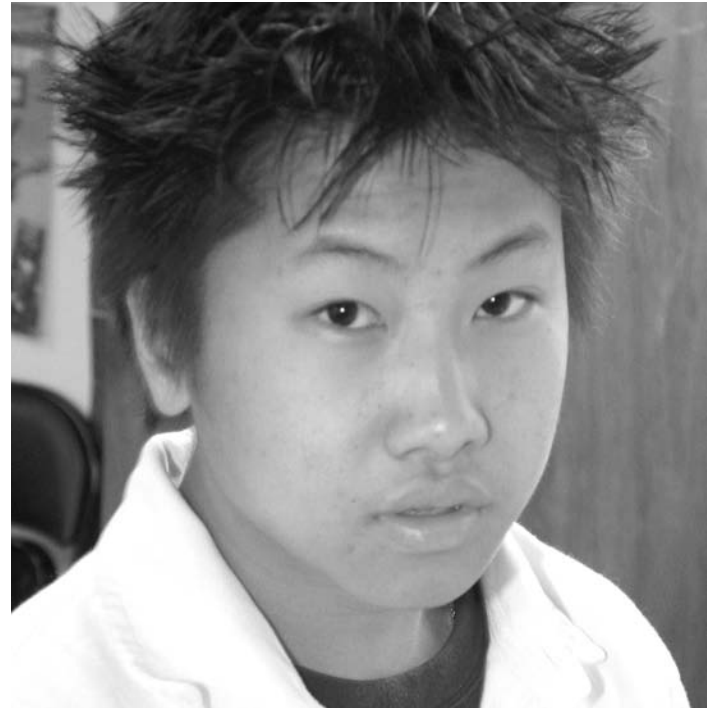
It is necessary to mention poverty's influences on the school achievement gap because, in Wisconsin, children of color are significantly more likely to live in poverty. Black children are seven times more likely than white children to be poor. Children in low income families are more likely to have parents with low levels of education, less likely to be read to as preschoolers, more likely to move one or more times during the school year, and more likely to have parents who are unavailable or unable to assist with school work.



Access to High Quality Early Learning

Research has shown that about half of the achievement gap between black and white high school students is present when children begin kindergarten.¹¹ This disparity is, in part, attributable to the lack of access for children of color to high quality early learning settings. Black children nationally, as an example, are more likely to attend lower-quality preschool programs than their peers.¹² Early childhood brain development research tells us that the child's ability to learn is influenced more by their environment than by genetics. High quality early learning environments can mitigate the influences of poverty, low maternal education and even poor health. Increasing access to successful early childhood programs for children of color would help to narrow the achievement gap that is present when students enter school. Currently, in Wisconsin, 15 percent of 3-year-olds and 42 percent of 4-year-olds participate in kindergarten or Head Start programs.¹³

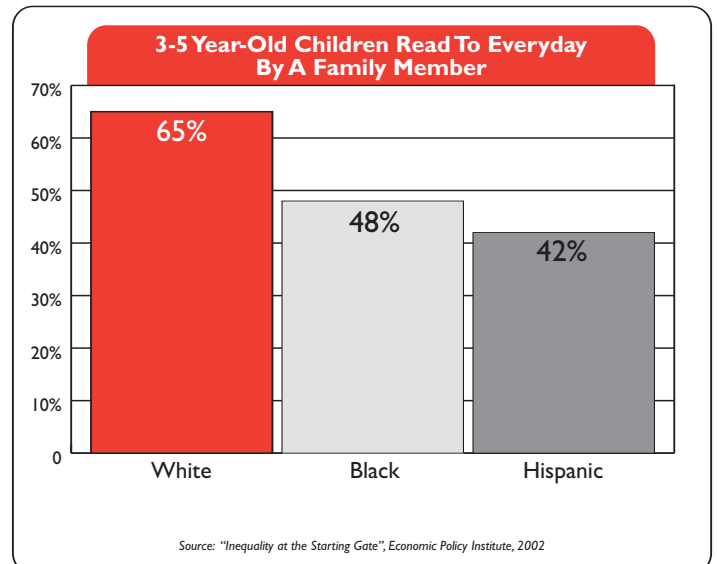
A number of high profile studies demonstrate that high quality early



education narrows the achievement gap for African-American children and children in poverty.¹⁴ In addition, the same long term studies show that it can also improve children's intellectual and social performance as well as economic performance later in life.

Family Learning Environments

Increasing parental involvement in early education, particularly with Black and Hispanic families can reduce the gaps in school readiness.¹⁵ In national studies, low income Black and Hispanic parents have been found to be less likely to talk responsively and read to their infants and young children, and have fewer books and other educational materials available to them. Family circumstances such as non traditional work schedules, limited income or literacy, may contribute to the significant disparity in the rate in which preschool age children (three to five year olds) are read to every day by a family member.¹⁶

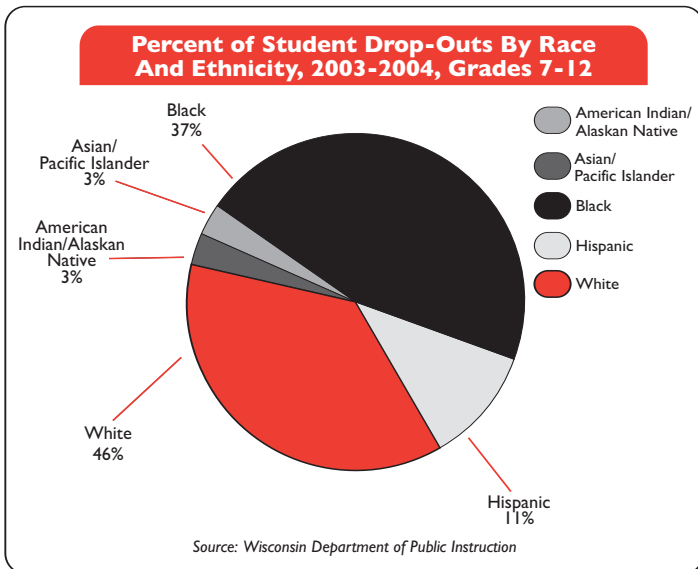


Unequal Expectations

An expectation of what children can learn and achieve certainly drives the teaching and curriculum in a given school and classroom. Growing evidence exists to suggest that low income students and students of color are subject to a different set of expectations. University of Wisconsin professor, Adam Gamoran suggests that even at the same grade level, the academic content and classroom experiences can vary widely between instructional groups, classes and schools based on socio economic status. These lower expectations result in an overemphasis on student compliance and teacher direction to the exclusion of genuine learning activities that foster independent thinking and problem solving.¹⁸ This classroom methodology or “pedagogy of poverty” (a term coined by Martin Haberman of UW- Milwaukee) is typical of many urban schools.¹⁷

Drop Outs

Dropping out of school obviously puts young people at a disadvantage. Studies confirm that there are lifelong implications on earnings for those without even a high school degree or GED. A John’s Hopkins University study confirms that 17 – 24 year olds with less than a high school degree are three times more likely to be under-employed or unemployed than those with a college degree. Over the course of a lifetime, individuals with a college degree earn \$500,000 more than high school dropouts.¹⁹ According to data from the Department of Public Instruction, in the 2003-2004 school year, over four thousand 7th through 12th graders dropped out of school. Children of color are more likely to drop out of school than their white peers. For example, while African American children make up about 9 percent of the 7th through 12th grade students, they represent 37 percent of the total dropouts. Hispanic students comprise 5 percent of the student body but 11 percent of those who drop out.



Although there are a myriad of reasons children leave school, a 2006 report by Civic Enterprises asked teens why they left school and the results are telling. An overwhelming percent of kids described a process of dropping out over a number of weeks or months and not a sudden departure from school. A process that many comment could have been halted by interventions. Nearly one in seven kids reported that they were not inspired or motivated to work hard. Two-thirds reported that they would have worked harder if more was expected of them. Thirty-five percent said that they could not keep up with the school work or had missed too many days and were too far behind to ever catch up.²⁰

Availability of Qualified Teachers

There is significant agreement in the research that the quality of teachers available to students greatly influences the quality of education children receive. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, “What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn. There is just no way to create good schools without good teachers.”²¹ This makes the research on the teachers available to high-need students of special concern. Nationally, predominantly low income and minority schools get a larger share of teachers from the least selective colleges and those who have attained lower scores on the ACT or SAT college entrance exams.

One measure of the quality of teaching available to students is to what extent teachers are teaching in the field for which they have received a degree (i.e. math teachers with a BA in Math). In Wisconsin, teachers lacking at least a minor in the subject they teach, teach 14 percent of middle and high school classes in core subjects.²² Teachers cannot be expected to teach what they do not know. Availability of qualified teachers is a struggle in high poverty areas, where schools do not have the financial incentives to attract them.

Racial Segregation

The residential racial segregation of families, particularly families with low incomes has led to a *de facto* segregation of many of the state’s schools. A 2001 study by the Civil Rights Project of Harvard University found that Wisconsin was the 11th most segregated state for black and white students. In fact, Wisconsin and Rhode Island have the dubious distinction of having the most dramatic decline in black student contact with white students since 1980.²³ Even with the state’s equalization aide formula, children of color are more likely to be taught in under-resourced schools. Students attending under-resourced schools are less likely to have high quality curriculum, qualified teachers or important social networks than students from wealthier districts. According to a study by the Education Trust, the funding gap between the highest and lowest poverty districts school aide is \$521 per student or \$13,025 for a classroom of 25 students.²⁴

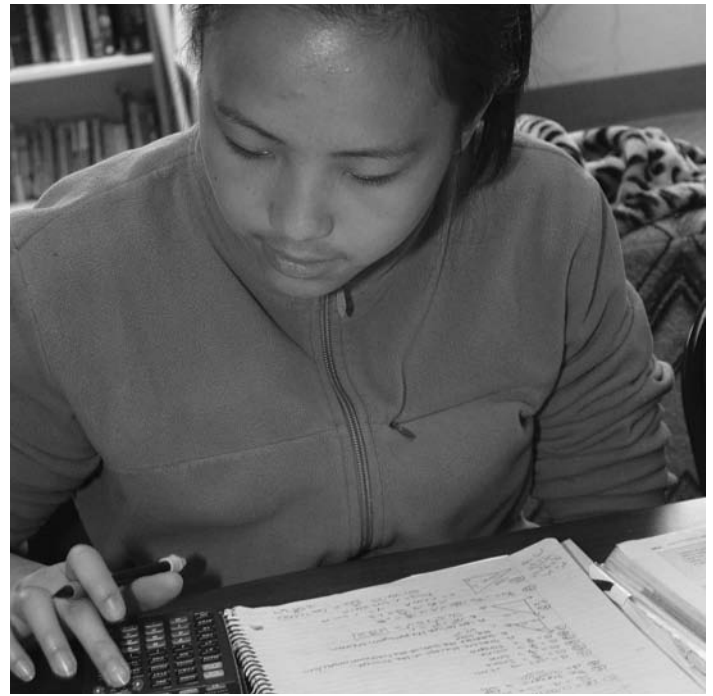
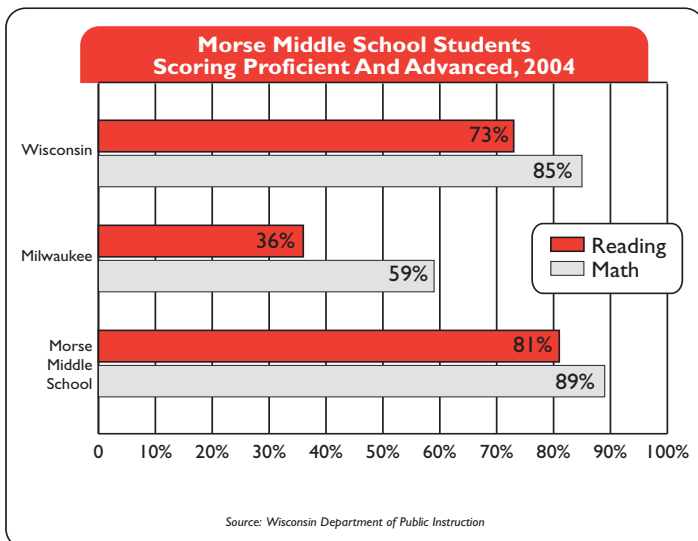
Ideas That Work!

In many respects the persistent gap in school achievement is daunting. However, there are programs, schools and entire school districts where efforts are changing the outcomes for kids.

Schools of Hope, a 10-year-old partnership between the Madison Metropolitan School District and United Way of Dane County, has sharply narrowed the racial achievement gap on the third grade reading test. This program combines evidence-based, effective teaching techniques with one-on-one tutoring using an army of volunteers. The program has also partnered with the Americorps VISTA program to manage the volunteers at each elementary school site. The program has recently expanded to work on algebra at the high school level and to work with local preschools in a new *Preschools of Hope* initiative.

Chicago Child Parent Centers - Run through the Chicago public school system for 34 years, the Chicago Child Parent Centers have yielded impressive results for children with significant barriers to academic success. Children participate in up to six years of intervention with a significant emphasis on reading from pre-school through grade three. A long term study of the program has found that participants scored higher in reading achievement through seventh grade and had lower rates of retention than children who did not receive the intervention. The study of this program is notable for its large scale unlike the Abecedarian program or the Perry Preschool program (two well-known long term studies) which yielded similar success but with a smaller number of children.

Samuel Morse Middle School is a model Milwaukee public school. It has been named a New Wisconsin Promise School of Recognition for three years in a row. In the 2005-2006 school year, 66 percent of Morse Middle's students were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. The student body is 84 percent students of color. The school attributes its academic success to a great attendance rate, advanced degreed teachers, an effective educational plan, and high parental involvement.²⁵



Morse Middle School has done an excellent job of pursuing excellent academic performance while serving a student population that traditionally would have fallen behind state averages, not surpassed them. As an example, 95 percent of Morse Middle School students will go on to graduate from high school.²⁶

Success for All, a whole-school reform model that began in Baltimore in 1987, has been replicated in other school districts. SFA provides schools with research-based curriculum, instructional strategies and professional development. A study of Texas schools found that scores of African-Americans and Latinos gained significantly more in SFA schools than in the rest of the state.²⁷ The program can also be widely replicated with similar results.

Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) - Smaller class sizes have been shown to be beneficial to the test scores of all students, and of African-American students in particular.²⁸ Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) class reduction program began in 1999. SAGE is available to elementary schools where at least 30 percent of their children are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Schools are required to reduce their student teacher ratio to 1:15 in five-year-old kindergarten through grade three, increase collaboration between the school and community before and after school activities, develop a rigorous curriculum, and create a system of staff development and accountability.²⁹

A study by the Education Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University found these gains in the academic achievement of students in schools that participate in the SAGE program:

- Increased student achievement.
- Is most beneficial to African-American students.
- Narrowed the achievement gap between African-American and white students.³⁰

Policy Recommendations

Continue the public dialogue on the impact of race and ethnicity on school achievement.

Individual schools and school districts in Wisconsin have made great gains in student achievement and the State Superintendent of Public Education has announced that closing the achievement gap is her number one priority. This momentum must be maintained. Strides must be taken to identify and remedy persistent policies and practices that continue these inequities.

Quality Early Childhood Experiences –

Regardless of the early care and education setting families choose for their children, they should be assured of a high quality experience which includes:

- Well educated teachers and staff
- Developmentally appropriate curricula that follows Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards
- Strong parental engagement – programs which seek to involve parents in ways that best fit the needs and circumstances of the child and her family.
- Small class size and appropriate student/teacher ratios

Support Small Class Size SAGE – Continue to support SAGE based on the evidence that smaller class sizes lead to greater success for children at risk, particularly children of color.

Increase funding for Summer and After School Programs

Johns Hopkins University researchers Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle suggest that summer learning differences, rather than differential school-year learning rates, explain the widening of the achievement gap as students progress from grade to grade. Students of color often have less access to quality, well-supervised after-school activities. Quality after-school programs are key to arresting the widening achievement gap. It has been shown that gaps in achievement are often due to the differences in the number of hours spent in structured activities outside of school.³¹ Quality after-school programs can also provide access to a large range of enrichment activities that may not be available to these students otherwise. They can also provide students with academic support that may not be available for them anywhere else. After-school programs are key to helping close the achievement gap. It is important that students of color have the same access to after-school programming as their white peers.

Attract the most qualified teachers to our public schools

Improving teacher quality has been linked to improved achievement, especially for students of color. Offering incentives to attract quality candidates to teacher education programs, college loan forgiveness, and scholarships for incoming teachers who plan to teach in these areas is one way of attracting more teachers to the field.³² In addition, resources need to be targeted toward recruiting teachers in shortage areas such as math

and science. Finally, teacher education and continuing education must assist educators in becoming increasingly culturally competent in their classroom practices and in their work with families.

Provide sufficient funding of public education

– An adequately funded public education system is a key factor in making progress toward eliminating the achievement gap. The state should maintain the two-thirds funding commitment for public schoolsⁱⁱ and needs to relax or repeal the current revenue caps. Spending caps and tax freezes are forcing schools to make significant cuts in existing programs, are locking into place inequities between school districts, and may preclude schools from addressing the achievement gap. Providing an adequate level of general aid for schools is necessary to enable schools to take advantage of more targeted state aid for programs such as SAGE and pre-school investments.

ⁱⁱ Although the state statutes no longer contain a requirement for state funding of two thirds of schools costs, the 2005-07 budget bill provided enough state aid to achieve the two-thirds standard.

Conclusion

The right to a good education is as fundamental as any in this state. Yet, as is evident in Wisconsin's achievement gap, for many children these rights are compromised. The results can be disastrous. As the gap continues, staggering numbers of young people enter adulthood ill-equipped to fully participate not only in the workforce but in society in general. This wasted potential has frightening implications for both our economy and our democracy.

Yet, there is ample evidence to suggest remedies to this gap. It is clear, that expanding access to quality early learning opportunities is critical. Small class sizes are effective and the state should prioritize increasing SAGE statewide to more schools. We must create incentives for highly qualified teachers to teach in low-performing schools. Increased research on promising models for cultural competency training for teachers and strategies to increase parental involvement are also needed.

Closing the achievement gap is the continuation of a long fight for civil rights. It is a problem that has its roots in a long history of disenfranchisement that continues in many forms today. Yet it is crucial to addressing inequities in other areas of children's lives. Even beginning to bridge the gap will have major impacts on the numbers of students of color graduating from high school, pursuing higher education, obtaining higher paying jobs, and thus eliminating many of the adverse outcomes facing children of color, and indeed everyone, in Wisconsin.

End Notes

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Acknowledgements

MIND THE GAP was produced through the generous support of:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation
The Joyce Foundation

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This *WisKids Policy Brief* is a publication of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, co-written by Aubrie Divine-Scott and Martha Cranley with contributions by WCCF board members Jacquelyn Boggess and Marcia Engen.

Design and Layout by Michael Martin Design
Photography by Julie Laundrie, John Urban, Melissa Sargent

