



# Opportunity Lost:

## The Story of African-American Achievement in California, 2010

California touts some of the highest educational standards in the country. Yet when it comes to the state's African-American students, these standards have proved to be little more than a mirage, forever out of reach.

Over the past decade, the achievement gap between African-American and white students has barely budged. On nearly every benchmark of learning and achievement, African-American students trail their white peers.

This educational inequity is set in motion prior to elementary school. Compared with white children, African-American children are more likely to grow up in poverty and enter school with critical educational disadvantages. But instead of aggressively responding with supports and resources, we do exactly the opposite. California's education system provides African-American students with less of everything that makes a difference—high-quality preschool, great teachers, stable learning environments, and access to college and career-ready coursework.

Instead of vigorously addressing these disparities, California's leaders have been satisfied to convene task forces and organize conferences to highlight problems almost everyone knows exist and to propose solutions that either failed before or never were implemented.

The results are unconscionable. As Table 1 illustrates, for every 100 African-American students who walk into a ninth-grade classroom in California, 65 students leave high school with a diploma in hand. Of these, only 23 are eligible to attend a four-year public university in California. These alarming data illustrate that, year after year, California's public education system fails to prepare a large proportion of its roughly 450,000 African-American students for success in elementary

and secondary schools, much less college or a career. The data should serve as a wake-up call for immediate change.

In this report, we analyze the most recent data on African-American achievement and opportunity gaps from the elementary grades through high school and into college. We also examine performance trends over the past eight years (2003-10). We counteract negative perceptions and low expectations for African-American students by identifying the state's top-performing, moderate-to-high-poverty school districts, both in terms of overall African-American achievement and improvement over time. We also reveal which districts have the lowest rates of African-American achievement and smallest performance gains. We conclude by recommending a series of reforms that can transform the educational conditions that produce our state's achievement and opportunity gaps.

### Table 1: African-American Student Performance by the Numbers

- 8 percent of African-American children enroll in a high-quality preschool, compared with 30 percent of white children.
- 42 percent of African-American second-graders are proficient in English Language Arts.
- 40 percent of African-American eighth-graders are proficient in English Language Arts.
- 17 percent of African-American middle school and high school students are proficient in Algebra I.
- 65 percent of African-American students graduate from high school in four years.
- 23 percent of these African-American graduates complete high school with the coursework needed for admission to the University of California or California State University—yet many of those students will not have the test scores and grades necessary to be truly eligible to enroll.
- 11 percent of African-American public high school graduates enroll in a four-year public university in California.

## LEFT AT THE STARTING GATE Elementary Performance

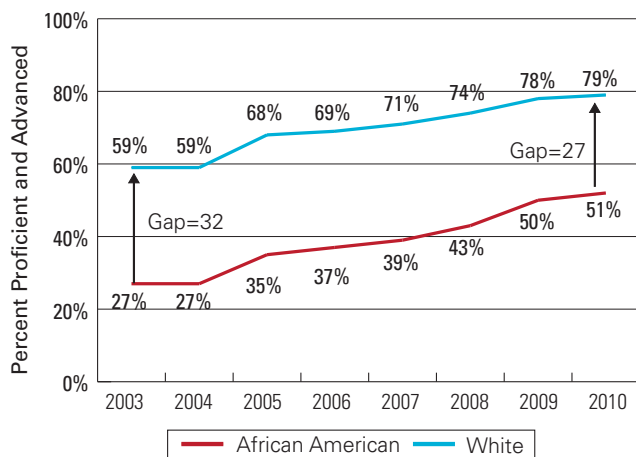
Most African-American students are concentrated in just five of California's 58 counties, and 87 percent attend schools in which minorities constitute the majority of students. Additionally, 38 percent of those students go to intensely segregated schools where more than 90 percent of students come from minority backgrounds.

Research demonstrates that African-American students in high-poverty, high-minority schools receive less of everything we know matters most in education—from effective teachers and resources to sufficient interventions and supports. Studies also show that enrollment in a high-quality preschool can have a lasting impact on student achievement in the early elementary grades. Yet African-American children are far less likely than white students to be enrolled in a high-quality preschool (8 percent compared with 30 percent).

By second grade, the earliest tested grade, these disadvantages result in lower levels of student achievement. Forty-two percent of African-American second-graders score proficient or advanced in English, compared with 68 percent of white students. In second-grade math, 47 percent of African-American students reach proficiency, though 76 percent of white students do so. Alarming, English and math proficiency rates have actually *decreased* for African-American second-graders since 2009.

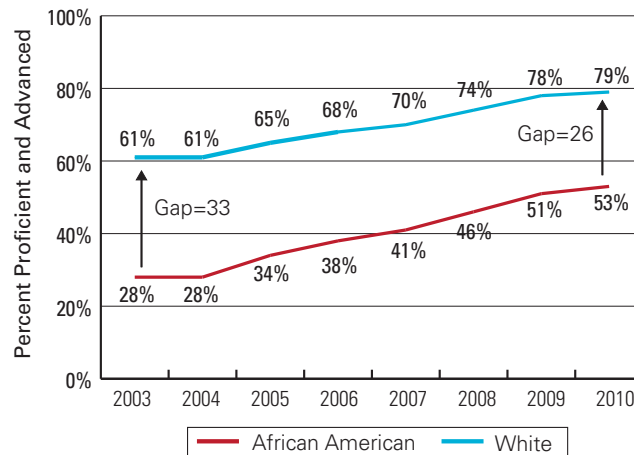
These achievement levels and gaps stubbornly persist through fourth grade. The fourth-grade achievement gap between African-American and white students stands at 27 and 26 percentage points in English and math respectively—similar to the gaps among second-graders.

**Figure 1: Performance Trends Among African-American and White Students on the Fourth-Grade English Language Arts CST, 2003-10**



Source: California Department of Education, 2003-10.

**Figure 2: Performance Trends Among African-American and White Students on the Fourth-Grade Mathematics CST, 2003-10**



Source: California Department of Education, 2003-10.

Despite unacceptably low achievement levels and stubborn achievement gaps, not all of the news is bad. From 2003-10, proficiency rates for fourth-grade African-American students improved in both English and math at a slightly faster rate than for their white peers. The result: Fourth-grade achievement gaps narrowed by five percentage points in English and seven in math during this eight-year period (see Figures 1 and 2).

Even as we applaud this progress, we should not be satisfied. If California continues to close gaps at the rate of one percentage point per year, it will take more than 25 years to eliminate them once and for all. African-American students and their communities cannot afford to wait that long.

## District Performance

Although state trends are important, they fail to reveal the substantial variation in performance at the local level. In some large unified districts, African-American achievement rates far outpaced state gains from 2003-10, with increases of up to 40 percentage points in fourth-grade English and math.<sup>1</sup> However, the lowest gaining districts posted comparatively modest increases—in some cases fewer than ten percentage points (see Table 2).

In these low-gaining districts, growth in African-American achievement failed to keep pace with gains among white students, further increasing achievement gaps. For example, during the same eight-year period, math proficiency rates among white fourth-graders in Elk Grove Unified (Sacramento County) have improved more than two times faster than the rates among African-American students (13 percentage points compared with six percentage points), and gaps have grown larger.

**Table 2: Top and Bottom Performers: Gains in CST Scores Among African-American Fourth-Graders in California's Largest Unified School Districts, 2003-10**

		District	Change in Proficiency Among African-American Students (Percentage Point Increase)
<b>English Language Arts</b>	Top-Gaining Districts	Fontana Unified ( <i>San Bernardino County</i> )	+36
		Compton Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	+35
		Riverside Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	+33
	Lowest Gaining Districts	Hemet Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	+15
		Elk Grove Unified ( <i>Sacramento County</i> )	+14
		Hayward Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	+12
<b>Math</b>	Top-Gaining Districts	Compton Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	+40
		Palm Springs Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	
		Fresno Unified ( <i>Fresno County</i> )	+34
		Long Beach Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	
	Lowest Gaining Districts	Oakland Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	
		Sacramento City Unified ( <i>Sacramento County</i> )	+31
		Pomona Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	+7
		Elk Grove Unified ( <i>Sacramento County</i> )	+6
		Hayward Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	+4

Note: Districts only included in analysis if 2008-09 enrollment was ≥ 5 percent African American and if 2008-09 free or reduced-price lunch rates ≥ 40 percent. Source: California Department of Education, 2003-10.

**Table 3: Top and Bottom Performers: Overall CST Proficiency Rates for African-American Fourth-Graders in California's Largest Unified School Districts, 2010**

		District	Percentage of African-American Students Scoring Proficient and Advanced
<b>English Language Arts</b>	Top-Performing Districts	Corona-Norco Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	67%
		Riverside Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	63%
		Vista Unified ( <i>San Diego County</i> )	60%
	Lowest Performing Districts	Hayward Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	37%
		San Francisco Unified ( <i>San Francisco County</i> )	36%
		Stockton Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	35%
<b>Math</b>	Top-Performing Districts	Corona-Norco Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	72%
		Vista Unified ( <i>San Diego County</i> )	65%
		Long Beach Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	64%
	Lowest Performing Districts	Stockton Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	39%
		Lodi Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	37%
		Hayward Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	31%
		San Francisco Unified ( <i>San Francisco County</i> )	

Note: Districts only included in analysis if 2008-09 enrollment was ≥ 5 percent African American and if 2008-09 free or reduced-price lunch rates ≥ 40 percent. Source: California Department of Education, 2010.

**Table 4: CST Scores and Gaps for Elementary and Secondary African-American Students, 2010**

	Grade	African-American Students Scoring Proficient and Advanced	White Students Scoring Proficient and Advanced	Achievement Gap Between African-American and White Students (Percentage Points)
<b>English Language Arts</b>	2	42%	68%	<b>26</b>
	4	52%	79%	<b>27</b>
	8	40%	71%	<b>31</b>
	11	28%	58%	<b>30</b>
<b>Math</b>	2	47%	76%	<b>29</b>
	4	53%	79%	<b>26</b>
	Algebra I EOC	17%	42%	<b>25</b>
	Algebra II EOC	14%	37%	<b>23</b>

Note: EOC stands for "end of course."  
Source: California Department of Education, 2010.

Results from the 2010 California Standards Test (CST) highlight disparities in English and math proficiency among districts. In some districts, fewer than 40 percent of African-American fourth-graders reached proficiency, yet in other districts more than 65 percent reached or exceeded the proficiency goal. Districts such as Corona-Norco Unified and Riverside Unified (both in Riverside County), for example, are showing rapid growth and high achievement rates for African-American fourth-graders (see Table 3). Although all of the districts examined had poverty rates higher than 40 percent, substantial differences in poverty rates between districts may partially account for some of the variation in results. Regardless, the success of these high-performing districts should prompt other districts to aim for similar outcomes.

## A DOWNWARD SPIRAL Secondary School Performance

For African-American students in California's public schools, advancing to the next grade level does not necessarily mean

advancing in achievement. In fact, the opposite is true: Student performance declines and achievement gaps persist from one grade to the next. Although proficiency rates drop for all subgroups as students move through the grade levels, achievement gaps persist and at times become proportionally more pronounced for African-American students. For example, for every three white students who achieve proficiency in second-grade math, only two African-American students achieve at that level. But by high school, for every three white students who achieve proficiency in Algebra II, only one African-American student reaches proficiency (see Table 4).

At the middle and high school levels, rates of participation and proficiency in math courses provide signals about college eligibility and readiness. Algebra I is a "gatekeeper" course for the higher level math classes that students need to become eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. Yet Algebra I is effectively closed to many African-American students.

**Table 5: Top and Bottom Performers: Gains in CST Scores Among African-American Eighth-Graders in California's Largest Unified School Districts, 2003-10**

	District	Change in Proficiency Among African-American Students (Percentage Point Increase)	
<b>English Language Arts</b>	Top-Gaining Districts	Corona-Norco Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	+33
		Riverside Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	+30
		Vista Unified ( <i>San Diego County</i> )	+28
	Lowest Gaining Districts	Los Angeles Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	+18
		Hayward Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )	+17
		Hemet Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	+17
		Elk Grove Unified ( <i>Sacramento County</i> )	+17
	Manteca Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	+9	

Note: Districts only included in analysis if 2008-09 enrollment was ≥ 5 percent African-American and if 2008-09 free or reduced-price lunch rates ≥ 40 percent.  
Source: California Department of Education, 2003-2010.

**Table 6: Top and Bottom Performers: Overall CST Proficiency Rates for African-American Eighth-Graders in California's Largest Unified School Districts, 2010**

		District	Percentage of African-American Students Scoring Proficient and Advanced
<b>English Language Arts</b>	Top-Performing Districts	Corona-Norco Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	60%
		Riverside Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	51%
		San Diego Unified ( <i>San Diego County</i> )	48%
	Lowest Performing Districts	San Bernardino City Unified ( <i>San Bernardino County</i> )	32%
		Compton Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	31%
		Manteca Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	
		Los Angeles Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	
		West Contra Costa Unified ( <i>Contra Costa County</i> )	
		Stockton Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	29%
Oakland Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )			

Note: Districts only included in analysis if 2008-09 enrollment was  $\geq$  5 percent African American and if 2008-09 free or reduced-price lunch rates  $\geq$  40 percent. Source: California Department of Education, 2010.

**Table 7: Top and Bottom Performers: Overall Proficiency Rates for African-American Students in End-of-Course Algebra I CST in California's Largest Unified School Districts, 2010**

		District	Percentage of African-American Students Scoring Proficient and Advanced
<b>End-of-Course Algebra I</b>	Top-Performing Districts	Elk Grove Unified ( <i>Sacramento County</i> )	25%
		Riverside Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	24%
		Vista Unified ( <i>San Diego County</i> )	23%
	Lowest Performing Districts	Palm Springs Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	12%
		San Francisco Unified ( <i>San Francisco County</i> )	
		Stockton Unified ( <i>San Joaquin County</i> )	
		Compton Unified ( <i>Los Angeles County</i> )	11%
		Colton Joint Unified ( <i>San Bernardino County</i> )	
		Moreno Valley Unified ( <i>Riverside County</i> )	
Oakland Unified ( <i>Alameda County</i> )			
Rialto Unified ( <i>San Bernardino County</i> )			
West Contra Costa Unified ( <i>Contra Costa County</i> )	4%		

Note: Districts only included in analysis if 2008-09 enrollment was  $\geq$  5 percent African American and if 2008-09 free or reduced-price lunch rates  $\geq$  40 percent. Source: California Department of Education, 2010.

Only 47 percent of African-American students took Algebra I in the eighth grade, which means the other half entered high school still needing this foundational course. More disturbing, only 17 percent of African-American middle and high school students who take the Algebra I exam achieve proficiency. This rate is substantially lower than the 42 percent passing rate posted by their white peers. By the end of high school, roughly 35 percent of African-American students have taken Algebra II—the higher level math course required for UC/CSU eligibility.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, just 14 percent of African-American middle and high school students taking Algebra II score at the proficient level, compared with 37 percent of white students.

## How Districts Fare

Some districts have made far more headway than others in boosting the achievement levels of African-American eighth-graders. All of California's large unified school districts posted improvement in eighth-grade English scores from 2003-10. Some of these districts gained 30 percentage points or more during that eight-year period. But the progress of others hovered below 20 percentage points (see Table 5).

In looking at the 2010 English proficiency rates by district, we see large disparities between districts in eighth-grade student performance similar to those in fourth grade. In some large unified districts, passing rates among African-American eighth-graders in English are double those of other districts (see Table 6).

The overall proficiency rates for African-American students in Algebra I were dismal in 2010. Large unified districts posted appallingly low passing rates: In West Contra Costa Unified (Contra Costa County), fewer than 5 percent of African-American students achieved proficiency. In the highest performing district, Elk Grove Unified, only 25 percent scored proficient or advanced (see Table 7). Even in this district, an achievement gap of 25 percentage points exists between African-American and white students in Algebra I.

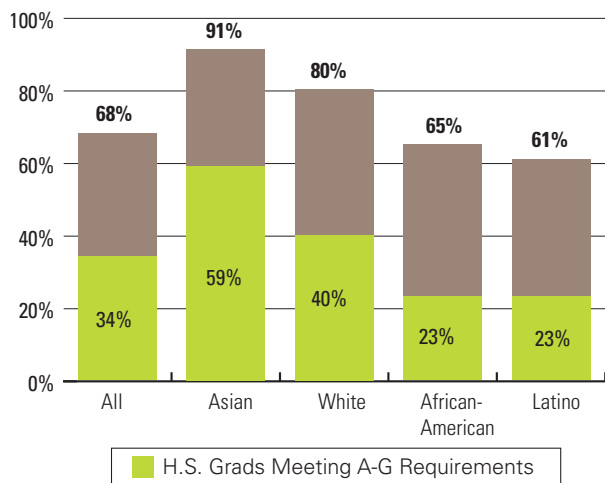
### LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

African-American students who lack access to and a strong grounding in Algebra I and Algebra II face insurmountable obstacles to college eligibility and postsecondary success. For too long, the vast majority of California’s African-American students have found this important gateway to college closed because they (1) received poor instruction in middle and high school, (2) were tracked into lower level math courses, and (3) lacked access to highly qualified teachers and resources.

An inadequate education can cause students to lose hope that they will earn a diploma and attend college. African-American students graduate from high school at a lower rate than their white classmates (65 percent compared with 80 percent). In the 2007-08 school year, African-American students represented 14 percent of all high school dropouts, despite making up only 7 percent of the total student population in California. In total, roughly 11,000 African-American students left high school without a diploma.

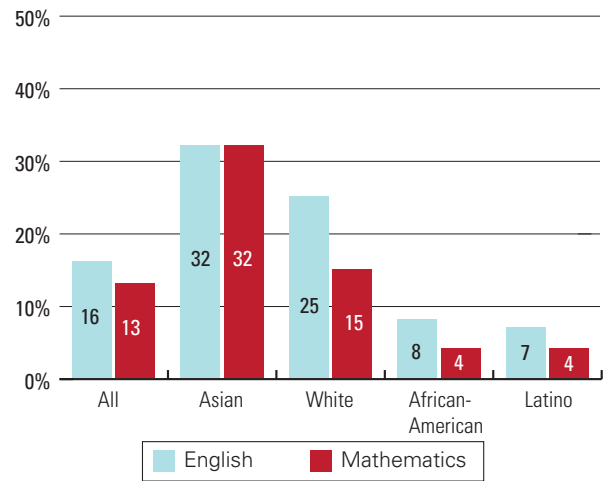
Even when African-American students make it to graduation, they are too often unprepared for postsecondary education and career opportunities. In 2008, the most recent

**Figure 3: High School Graduation Rates by Ethnicity, 2007-08**



Source: California Department of Education, 2009; Graduation rates calculated using Average Freshmen Graduation Rate (AFGR) Raising the Roof data tool.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Students by Ethnicity Deemed “Ready For College” on California Early Assessment Program (EAP) English and Mathematics Exams, 2009**



Source: California Early Assessment Program, 2009.

year for which data are available, only 23 percent of African-American high school graduates completed the A-G coursework required to be eligible for admission to the UC and CSU systems. This is nearly half the rate of their white peers (see Figure 3).

Again, the disparities are more pronounced in some districts than others. But even in the districts that lead the pack in African-American A-G graduation rates, fewer than half of these students graduate with the credits needed to attend a four-year public university in California. In the worst districts, fewer than 10 percent of students leave high school with that opportunity.

Even after completing the A-G coursework needed for UC/CSU eligibility, students still may not be well equipped for college. California’s voluntary Early Assessment Program (EAP) measures students’ readiness for college-level work during their junior year of high school.<sup>3</sup> The latest results reveal that the vast majority of African-American eleventh-graders lack the skills necessary for college-level English and math work, even if they have taken A-G courses. In contrast, white students are roughly four times more likely to be “ready for college” in math and three times more likely to be “ready for college” in English (see Figure 4).

Although the eleventh-grade EAP is voluntary, the exam’s results roughly align with eventual college-going rates. For example, in 2008, 11 percent of African-American public high school graduates enrolled in a UC or CSU as first-time freshmen. Those students found themselves considerably underrepresented on these campuses. African-American students

represent a scant 3 percent of UC undergraduate enrollment and 6 percent of CSU undergraduate enrollment, despite the fact that African Americans represent 8 percent of the California population between the ages of 18 and 24.

College admission does not guarantee success. Six-year graduation rates for African-American first-time freshmen are disturbingly low, ranging from 29 percent to 33 percent in the CSU system and 70 percent to 73 percent in the UC system (depending on the source). Because not all African-American CSU and UC students come from California public high schools, we should interpret these numbers cautiously. Nevertheless, the data paint a picture of a leaking college pipeline: Too few African-American students are prepared for college, and only a small handful enroll as freshmen in a four-year university. Of those, significant numbers fail to make it all the way through to graduation. Given the impact of college attendance and graduation on a student's long-term employment and wages, these data amount to a large-scale denial of educational and economic opportunity.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Fifty-six years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and more than a decade after the California Public Schools Accountability Act, California has failed to provide African-American students with the quality of education that could eliminate pervasive opportunity and achievement gaps. We believe the following strategies are essential to reverse these trends:

- **Learn from success, and hold districts accountable for failure.**

Our state does a poor job of leveraging the success of top-performing districts and holding the lowest performing districts accountable for failure. We need more research into the practices of districts that successfully serve African-American students, and those findings should inform district improvement efforts. Across the state, high-poverty districts with significant African-American populations are demonstrating that high achievement is possible. We should benchmark improvement goals for lower achieving districts against the outcomes demonstrated by these districts. When low performance persists, the state should forcefully intervene.

- **Provide universal high-quality preschool for every child.**

Research shows that children attending high-quality preschool programs one or two years before they enter kindergarten are more ready for school and score higher on achievement tests. We must ensure that African-American students arrive in kindergarten prepared for academic success by providing universal access to preschool.

- **Identify and assign the most effective teachers to the students with the greatest needs, and remove ineffective teachers.** The most important in-school factor in determining student success is the quality of the classroom teacher. We must create systematic evaluations of teacher effectiveness that include an assessment of the teacher's impact on student achievement. In addition, the state should target incentive funds to attract the most effective teachers to work in high-need schools. And the state and local districts must dismantle barriers that impede the speedy removal of persistently ineffective teachers in high-need schools.
- **Protect high-poverty schools with large proportions of African-American students from staff churn and instructional instability.** Policymakers must remove legal obstacles (such as seniority-based layoff requirements) that interfere with equitable access to highly effective teachers, result in high rates of staff turnover in high-need schools, or both.
- **Guarantee access to college and career-ready coursework, and provide students with the supports they need to succeed.** African-American students must have equitable access to Algebra I and Algebra II. And districts must ensure that these students have the instructional supports to succeed in regular coursework and "credit recovery" opportunities such as online courses, summer school, and independent study so that students who fail a course do not have to retake courses and fall further behind. To increase the eligibility of African-American students for UC or CSU admission, districts also must ensure equitable access to A-G courses taught by effective teachers.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For this analysis, we concentrated on California's largest unified school districts with poverty rates at or above 40 percent (n=26).
- <sup>2</sup> The Algebra I and Algebra II enrollment statistics were calculated using the most recent statewide enrollment data (2008-09).
- <sup>3</sup> In 2009, 79 percent of African-American juniors elected to take the English portion of this exam, and 71 percent chose to take the math section (compared with 82 percent and 76 percent of their white peers).

## Additional Information About African-American Student Achievement

- "California's Hidden Teacher Spending Gap: How State and District Budgeting Practices Shortchange Poor and Minority Students and their Schools." A Special Report by The Education Trust—West, 2005.
- "Closing the Achievement Gap." The report of Superintendent Jack O'Connell's California P-16 Council, January 2008.
- "Inequality and the Right to Learn: Access to Qualified Teachers in California's Public Schools," by Linda Darling-Hammond. Teachers College Record, 2004.
- "Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California," by Lynn A. Karoly, Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar, Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, and Lynda Fernyhough. RAND Corporation, 2008.
- "Racial Transformation and the Changing Nature of Segregation," by Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2006.
- "Raising African-American Student Achievement: California Goals, Local Outcomes," by Matthew Rosin and Kathy Wilson. EdSource, May 2007.
- "The Grades Are In—2008: Is California Higher Education Measuring Up?" by Colleen Moore and Nancy Shulock. Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento; February 2009.

## Data Sources

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- University of California, Office of the President, StatFinder. <http://statfinder.ucop.edu/reports/schoolreports/default.aspx>.



## The Education Trust—West

### ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST—WEST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels—pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people—especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families—to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.