

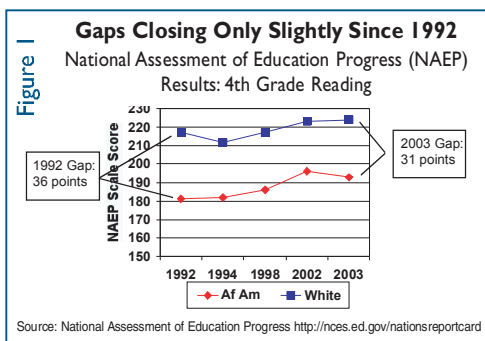


African American Achievement in California

As Black History Month comes to a close and we prepare to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, we examine an educational system in California that remains very much separate and unequal. Opening the schoolhouse doors to all students has not meant equal opportunities or equal outcomes. And it certainly hasn't meant equal or equitable access to high-quality teachers, rigorous classes and resources that would help low-performing students achieve. When we look at the data, we see that, tragically, the spirit and promise of Brown have yet to be realized in the Golden State.

How far have we come?

Since 1992, reading and math achievement among California's African American students has climbed steadily. But, unfortunately, the broad gaps that continue to divide the performance of African American students in California from that of White Californians have not closed significantly (trend analysis of National Assessment of Education Progress data).



Indeed, since 1999 African Americans have improved at a significantly slower rate than low-income and Latino students on our own

Academic Performance Index (API). So while gaps are closing, for African American children they are closing slower than they are for other subgroups.

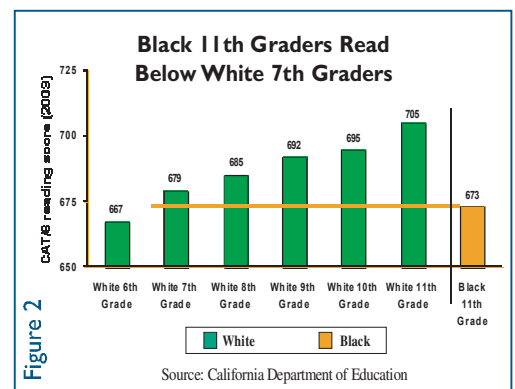
Where are we now?

Despite some progress raising overall achievement, though, there are still far too few African American students reading or doing math at proficient levels. A mere 27% of California's African American 4th graders reach proficient or above on our English/language arts standards. A heartbreaking 35% have not been taught even to the basic level.

The magnitude and impact of California's low African American achievement is even more troubling when we consider what the numbers mean in term of skills:

- Reading: Only 37% of African American 4th graders can grasp the message of a storybook;
- Math: Only 35% of African American 8th graders can determine the correct change from a simple purchase or solve a basic percentage problem. (NAEP 2003).

California's African American students haven't just been left behind—they've been left *years* behind. (Results on the CAT/6 test allow us to compare the achievement levels of students across grades.) As early as 4th grade, African American students are reading and doing math two years behind their White peers. By middle school, they are three years behind. And by the time they reach the end of high school, California's young adult African Americans read and do math at the same levels as White middle-schoolers, they are now four years behind their peers.



What about high-school graduation?

If something doesn't change, far too many African American students are going to be denied a diploma when the punitive measures of the California High School Exit Exam kick in two years from now. Students in the class of 2006 will not receive a high school diploma unless they pass both the math and English/Language Arts sections of the high school exit exam. But just last year, only 55% of African American 10th graders in California passed the English/language arts section and only 31% passed the math section.

Even without the requirement to pass the CAHSEE, however, too many Black Californians are not making it to high-school graduation.

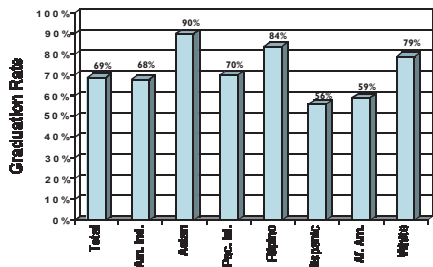
Drop out rates for African Americans in California are dramatic, and are often under-reported by official sources. We've used a more accurate method here. Comparing the number of African Americans who started in 9th grade to the number who graduated four years later, we get a far better estimate of the percentage of our African American students



who graduate on time. We find that more than 40% of our African American youngsters drop out of high school before graduation day. This means that we lose about 9,400 African American young people after they enter our high schools. And without a statewide data system that monitors the progress of individual students year to year, we have no way of determining when we lose those students, or why.

Figure 3

These Gaps Affect Our Students Futures
California Graduation Rates by Ethnicity



Source: Education Trust—West analysis of California Department of Education data using the “Greene method”. For more info on this methodology of calculating graduation rates, go to: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_03.htm

But it doesn't have to be this way.

There are some schools, districts and even entire states where African American students are taught to the highest levels.

Far West Elementary School, in Wheatland, California, has completely closed the black/white achievement gap. At Far West, 72% of students receive free or reduced price lunches and 16% are African American. There, African American students reached an API of 820, above the state's goal of 800 for all students. Kelso Elementary School in Inglewood is another good example. African American students at Kelso had an API of 802. Kelso is 38% African American and 68% poor.

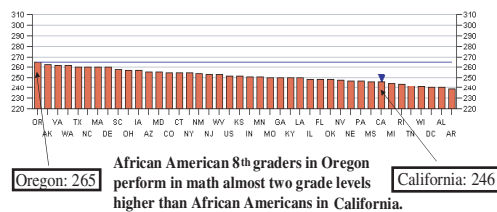
Some whole counties in California are doing far better for their African American students than are others. Take San Diego County, where Black students outperform their Black peers in San Francisco County by 80 points on the API.

There are even entire states where African American students excel. For example, African American 4th graders in Washington read almost two full grade levels ahead of African American 4th graders in California on NAEP. And African American 8th graders in Oregon do math almost two full grade levels ahead of African American 8th graders in California. Indeed, California's Black 8th graders perform akin to Black kids in Mississippi and Tennessee.

Figure 4

Some Entire States Get Higher Achievement from Their African American Students

2003 Grade 8 NAEP Math Average Score (African American)
From Highest to Lowest Performing



What do we know about the places that are improving results?

Successful systems have clear goals: the role of standards

Clear standards for what students should learn at each grade level are a critical tool for solving the inequities in California education. Standards are a guide—for teachers, administrators, parents and students themselves—to what knowledge and skills are crucial for students to master. Moreover, standards represent a contract between schools and their communities that reaching these standards is the expectation for all students.

Experts consider California's standards to be some of the best in the nation. When they were crafted, California's policy leaders promised, loudly and clearly, that all children—not just some groups—would learn to their high levels.

But today our assessments show us that too few African American students are taught to these levels. These assessments are crucial if we are to measure whether we're keeping our promise to young African Americans. Indeed, our assessments are our thermometer, and they tell us clearly we've got a high fever when it comes to our African American kids in California. No, assessments aren't perfect, but moaning about them ignores the huge deficits in our students' skills. Assessments are our best way to measure student performance objectively. We use their diagnosis to protect the students who need the most help in our system.

Successful systems provide all students with a challenging curriculum aligned with standards

New standards and assessments won't make much of a difference if they are not accompanied by a rigorous curriculum and assignments lined up with those standards. This is especially important in high school, where a rigorous core curriculum is necessary to prepare a young person for most career paths and

for admission in college. Yet in too many cases some students are taught a rich and challenging subject matter while others are relegated to a low-level curriculum—one better aligned with assembly-line jobs that are disappearing than with today's job market or college-entry requirements.

In California we have a rigorous high-school sequence that prepares students for all options in the 21st century marketplace. It's called the “A-G” curriculum. But only 25% of African American graduates complete A-G, compared with 40% of White and 58% of Asian American graduates. Part of the reason is that these students never even have the opportunity to take the right courses. Schools serving large numbers of African Americans are far less likely to offer the full range of courses. (for more information on A-G visit our website at www.edtrustwest.org).



Successful systems know good teaching matters more than anything else

If we have learned anything over the years it is how much good teaching matters. On this point, the research is unequivocal: the teacher is the single most important factor in whether students learn.

Yet, in our highest-African American schools in California, students are 2 1/2 times more likely to have an underqualified teacher than students in the lowest-African American schools.

What if we had the courage to change these patterns? Recent research by economists Kain, Rivkin and Hanushek shows that having an above-average teacher five years in a row can completely wipe out the achievement gap.



Do we spend enough on our African American kids?

We don't spend enough on education, period. California spends a lower share of its total spending on K-12 education than other states—according to recent research by PPIC, California schools spent as much as 9% less per pupil.

Moreover, in California, as in too many states, school districts that educate the greatest number of minority students receive less funding per student than districts with the lowest percentage of minority students. Research by the Education Trust has shown that high-minority districts in California receive \$269 less per student in state and local funds, even without using a standard cost-adjustment for the additional cost of educating low-income students. For a school like South Gate Middle in Los Angeles Unified, that translates into \$1.15 million in unrealized funds per year.

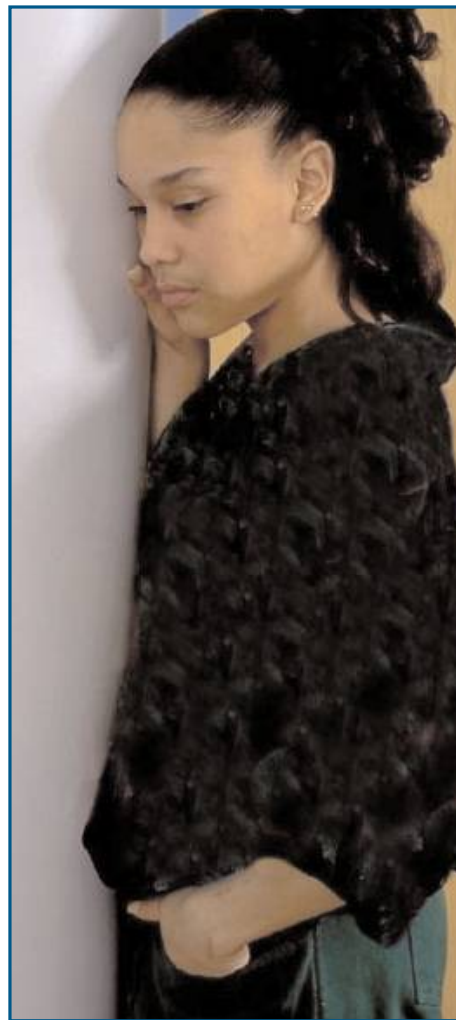
At a time when schools, districts and states are rightly focusing on closing the achievement gap, California can and must do more to close this funding gap. Certainly more money would help. But spending it more

wisely is key and, until more money comes, schools and districts can and do improve.

What would happen if we had the courage to change these patterns?

It should go without saying that African American students can learn the same material to the same high levels as every other student group. One need only look at the schools, districts, counties and states doing this work successfully every day. Indeed, the data show us that California has left all of its students to flounder. Even White, non-poor students are trailing the nation in reading and math. But African American students get the shortest end of this already short stick.

Underachievement among African Americans is a crisis and a civil rights tragedy. A full fifty years after the Brown decision, we're left asking whether Linda Brown's challenge was in vain. Will the dream of racial equality in our public schools take another fifty years to manifest? And what of the consequences to our communities, our state and our nation if it does?



About the Education Trust West

The Education Trust West is the West Coast presence of the national policy organization, the Education Trust. We work for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, we concentrate on the institutions most often left behind—those serving low-income, Latino, African American or Native American students.

The Education Trust West works alongside policy-makers, parents, education professionals, business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We especially work to ensure that all students have the opportunity to enroll in and successfully complete California's college readiness curriculum. In today's and tomorrow's economy, Ready for Work and Ready for College mean the same thing: Ready for Life. Our goal is that high school graduates are empowered and prepared to choose among all postsecondary options.

