



# Achievement Gap

State-level action

Education Commission of the States

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## Closing the achievement gap: Four states' efforts

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The achievement gap separating economically disadvantaged students from their more advantaged peers disproportionately affects students of color and has been the focus of discussion, research and controversy for more than 40 years. While the gap between black and white students narrowed considerably from the 1950s to the 1980s, that gap has remained stubbornly stable since then. Some research suggests that the income achievement gap (separating wealthy and poor students) is widening.<sup>1</sup> Below-par achievement of minority and economically disadvantaged students remains one of the most concerning problems in education.

This brief highlights the efforts of four states — Connecticut, Massachusetts, Washington and Wisconsin — to reduce their achievement gaps through state-level task forces or commissions and other legislative action. These four states historically boast average or strong academic achievement levels, but all are facing achievement gaps, some of them significant.<sup>2</sup>

States take very different approaches to address this complex issue. These variations and nuances are highlighted in the appendices, which contain policy recommendations from three state task forces on closing the achievement gap. While many of the efforts highlighted are quite recent and their overall impact and success is yet to be determined, these efforts were chosen because they are robust, long-term, creative or unusual approaches to addressing this ongoing issue.

### ***Key takeaways***

- Even states with track records of above-average and strong academic achievement — such as Massachusetts and Connecticut — still grapple with how to close persistent achievement gaps.
- Although recommendations and goals from state task force or commission reports vary widely, some common themes include:
  - Offering professional development specific to teachers and administrators in low-performing schools and districts.
  - Creating programs to recruit and retain teachers and administrators of color.
  - Assisting English language learners (ELLs) and ELL teachers through special programs and extra teacher training.
  - Creating initiatives to address housing and food insecurity.
  - Expanding early childhood education programs.
  - Exploring alternative disciplinary actions to suspensions or expulsions, as they disproportionately affect students of color.

## Connecticut

### State Initiatives

#### *Achievement Gap Task Force*

The state's ambitious goal of eliminating the achievement gap by the year 2020 is actively overseen by The Achievement Gap Task Force, which was created by legislation in 2011 and will exist until 2020. In 2014, the task force released the Master Plan to Eliminate the Achievement Gap in Connecticut. This master plan provides recommendations in four action areas: outside the schoolhouse, inside the schoolhouse, inside higher education and inside state government.<sup>3</sup> (See Appendix A for a full list of the topics and policy recommendations under each of the four action areas.)

#### *Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap*

The Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap was formed by legislation in 2011 to implement the task force's Master Plan.<sup>4</sup> This council, which includes representatives from multiple state agencies, oversees the implementation of specific provisions of the master plan and identifies any areas where legislation is needed to implement the plan.

### Legislative Action

Over the past five years the Connecticut General Assembly has enacted three bills with measures to forward the state's efforts at closing the achievement gap.

1. **Public Act 10-11:** In 2010 the General Assembly enacted legislation creating a one-time task force to study and address the state's achievement gaps.
2. **Public Act 11-85:** In response to the task force's 2011 report, the General Assembly that same year enacted legislation formalizing The Achievement Gap Task Force and refining its purposes and responsibilities, including:
  - Directing the task force to create a master plan for eliminating the achievement gap.
  - Implementing a fair and equitable funding formula.
  - Requiring schools and districts with the largest achievement gaps to report progress.

This legislation also created the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap to oversee implementation of the task force's Master Plan.

3. **Public Act 12-116:** During the 2012 legislative session, the General Assembly passed an education reform bill making substantial changes to the state's public education system, including several measures specifically targeted at narrowing the achievement gap:
  - Increased annual per-student grants to various schools (as part of the public schools' funding formula).
  - Created an intensive K-3 reading intervention program, and the commissioner of education will select low-performing schools to participate.
  - Required low-achieving schools and districts to devise academic improvement plans.
  - Required the commissioner to select up to 25 schools that must have turnaround plans that may include extended school days, weeks or years.
  - Created 1,000 spaces in school-readiness programs in priority districts.
  - Required a facilities study for space needed for a universal pre-K program (this study will be conducted depending on funding availability).

## Massachusetts

### Commonwealth Initiatives

Although Massachusetts has some of the highest academic achievement levels in the country, the commonwealth still struggles with significant achievement gaps and regularly takes steps to address these issues. For example, in the Massachusetts' 2012 Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waiver application, the department of education established a goal of cutting student proficiency gaps in half by 2017.<sup>5</sup> In addition, former Gov. Deval Patrick made closing the achievement gap one of the central education priorities of his tenure.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Proficiency Gap Task Force*

In 2009, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education convened the Proficiency Gap Task Force, a one-time initiative to study the commonwealth's achievement gap and prepare a set of "actionable recommendations" to significantly impact these proficiency gaps. In their 2010 report, the task force proposed the following four recommendations:

- **Assessment objectives:** Set a goal that 85 percent of students will score proficient or advanced on the commonwealth assessment by 2020.
- **Operational structure:** Create the Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG) within the department of education to track progress and coordinate efforts at meeting the proficiency goal.
- **Interventions:** Develop focused interventions for underperforming schools and districts, including additional assessments, additional school performance indicators and quarterly data analysis meetings.
- **Best practices:** Direct the OPRCPG to disseminate best practices and support to underperforming schools and districts in areas such as ELL programs, professional development and teacher training requirements; early literacy programs and teacher training; access to high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten in low-performing districts; and creating community outreach and family engagement standards.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Diversity Task Force*

In 2013, the department of education convened the Massachusetts Advocates for Diversity in Education Task Force to help meet the goal of cutting proficiency gaps in half by 2017. The task force was asked to focus on two strategies: increasing the diversity of the educator workforce and decreasing the disproportionate number of suspensions and expulsions of students of color. In the resulting 2014 report, the task force made 10 recommendations in these two areas, which include attracting students of color to the teaching profession, changing some of the existing out-of-state educator requirements and creating alternatives to out-of-school suspensions.<sup>8</sup> The department of education prepared an action plan for each of these recommendations.<sup>9</sup> (See Appendix B for a full list of the task force's recommendations.)

#### *Gateway Cities Education Agenda*

Proposed by former Gov. Patrick in 2011, the Gateway Cities Education Agenda initiative is a plan to close achievement gaps for students of color, students living in poverty, students with disabilities and ELLs.<sup>10</sup> It is specifically targeted to the commonwealth's Gateway Cities, which are mid-sized cities and former manufacturing centers with high poverty rates and low levels of education attainment.<sup>11</sup> The focus areas of this initiative are:

- Improve third-grade reading proficiency.

- Provide supports for ELLs.
- Prepare students for the 21st century workforce.<sup>12</sup>

The initiative provides grant funding to local education agencies, universities, local governments and other organizations for programs centered in the Gateway Cities Education Agenda's focus areas. For example, after a recent round of grant funding, career academies were launched in nine Gateway Cities to provide students with career exploration opportunities and with greater access to postsecondary and career pathways.<sup>13</sup>

### **Legislative Action**

#### *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*

In 2010, the legislature enacted Senate Bill 2247, An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, in an effort to close the achievement gap by improving low-performing schools and expanding successful charter schools. This legislation included the following:

- Requires a school turnaround process in underperforming schools, including input from local stakeholders and a turnaround plan.
- An expedited process to dismiss, with good cause, teachers with a professional status in turnaround schools.
- Increases the number of successful charter schools by lifting the charter school cap.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Budget Measures*

Commonwealth budgets from fiscal years 2012-14 included provisions specifically aimed at closing the achievement gap, including some in direct response to the governor's Gateway Cities Education Agenda initiative goals. These budget measures included the following:

- A new investment of about \$15 million in early childhood education programs aimed at reducing the waitlist for these programs.
- Funding for adult college transition programs for low-income and entry-level workers.
- Funding to public universities and colleges to avoid tuition and fee increases.
- Requirements and funding for teacher training in math and science.
- Directing the commissioner of education to create goals and metrics related to closing the achievement gap for low- and moderate-income students, adult students and students needing remediation.
- Funding for a nonprofit organization to provide instructional software and teacher support in helping close the achievement gap.<sup>15</sup>

## **Washington**

### **State Initiatives**

#### *Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee*

The Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee, first convened in 2009 under a different name, is responsible for making policy recommendations in several areas related to closing the achievement gap and meeting the needs of underserved students.<sup>16</sup>

The committee makes annual recommendations to the legislature, department of education and other agencies. Although the committee's recommendations have varied from year to year, there are a few topics and recommendations that have regularly appeared in the committee's reports.

- Recruit and retain educators of color.
- Enhance cultural competence in the following areas: school and district systems, including assessment tools and intervention systems; cultural competence training for educators, staff and pre-service teachers; ensure academic standards are vetted for cultural competence.
- Invest in and support family and community engagement initiatives.
- Improve services to ELLs, including requiring all teachers to hold an ELL or bilingual endorsement.
- Rethink disciplinary actions for students of color to reduce their disproportionate representation and the length of time they are excluded from school due to disciplinary measures.
- Disaggregate data by ethnic subgroups, make it more widely available and allow schools to track students and their credits if they transfer schools.<sup>17</sup>

### Legislative Action

In 2014, the legislature included funding for “strategies to close the opportunity gap” in the state’s appropriations bill, Senate Bill 6002.<sup>18</sup> Funds were appropriated to do the following:

- Create a clearinghouse of best practices for alternative instruction for expelled students.
- Create a workgroup to form and implement professional development content for cultural competence.
- Convene an ELL task force to design a performance-based accountability system for the bilingual instruction system.
- Fund a professional standards board examination of language acquisition principles.
- Convene a work group to create cultural competence standards for career and technical education courses.
- Incorporate cultural competence in the state’s teacher and administrator evaluation program.<sup>19</sup>

### Washington’s priority areas

Washington’s efforts at closing the opportunity gap are driven by 10 priority areas. These priority areas were identified in a series of studies conducted in 2008 to identify causes of the achievement gap in five different ethnic, racial and minority groups.

1. Supporting and facilitating parent, family and community involvement and outreach.
2. Identifying data elements and systems needed to monitor progress in closing the gap.
3. Enhancing the cultural competence of current and future educators and the cultural relevance of curriculum and instruction.
4. Expanding pathways and strategies to prepare and recruit diverse teachers and administrators.
5. Recommending current programs and resources that should be redirected to narrow the gap.
6. Making closing the achievement gap part of the school and school improvement process.
7. Exploring innovative school models that have shown success in closing the achievement gap.
8. Health and wellbeing.
9. Post-secondary education and job training.
10. Early learning — seamless birth to 20 support continuum.

## Wisconsin

### State Initiatives

Wisconsin has one of the largest race-based achievement gaps in the nation, particularly for African-American students.<sup>20</sup> In an effort to address these gaps, the state superintendent of education recently unveiled Agenda 2017. This plan includes several target goals to achieve by 2017, including goals around the graduation rate, third-grade reading and eighth-grade math proficiency rates, and creating a more equitable and transparent funding system.<sup>21</sup>

As part of Agenda 2017, a task force was convened in 2014 to identify best practices for addressing achievement gaps. This task force was comprised of school- and district-level educators and administrators with demonstrated successes in closing the achievement gap. Rather than focusing on state-level policies, the task force was charged with reviewing, developing and recommending school- and district-level strategies and policies.<sup>22</sup> (See Appendix C for a full list of the task force's recommendations.)

Both the task force's final report and Agenda 2017 highlight strategies and make recommendations in four broad focus areas:

- Effective instruction.
- Student-teacher relationships.
- Family and community engagement.
- School and instructional leadership.<sup>23</sup>

## *Appendix A*

### **Master Plan to Eliminate the Achievement Gap in Connecticut**

Connecticut's Achievement Gap Task Force created a master plan to guide their efforts in reducing the state's achievement gap. It defines four broad areas for state action — outside the schoolhouse, inside the schoolhouse, inside higher education and inside state government — and provides numerous policy recommendations for each action area. The list below includes all the action areas and provides samples of recommendations for each area.

#### *Outside the Schoolhouse*

##### **Family economic stability**

- Expand rental assistance programs, structured to increase eligible families' incomes.
- Provide child care subsidies.
- Increase participation in safety-net programs like subsidized housing, Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called food stamps).

##### **Affordable housing**

- Incentivize zoning for affordable, mixed-income housing.
- Ensure affordable and mixed-income housing is available near new public transit lines.
- Create initiatives for towns to provide housing vouchers in neighborhoods with high-performing schools.

##### **Family Engagement**

- Provide parent universities in public housing to teach parents how to prepare their children for school and engage with teachers and schools.
- Require local boards of education to review and improve parent involvement policies every two years.
- Allow some Title 1 funds to be used to support parent involvement.

##### **Early Care and Education**

- Provide full-day preschool for all low-income and foster care children, including students in priority school districts.
- Provide training for early childhood teachers working with ELL preschoolers.
- Increase wages of early childhood professionals.

### **Social Emotional Health Prevention and Intervention**

- Expand access to mental health care in school settings with wraparound initiatives and school-based health clinics.
- Link schools and community mental health resources.
- Seek mental health treatment as a juvenile justice system alternative.

### **Hunger and food insecurity, policy recommendations**

- Increase participation in the summer meals programs through marketing.
- Breakfast delivery at schools.

### *Inside the Schoolhouse*

#### **Administrator and Teacher Hiring and Retention in Under-Performing Schools**

- Improve incentive programs for teachers and administrators hired into low-performing schools.
- Provide statewide training for teachers and administrators in low-performing schools.

#### **English Language Learners**

- Establish a state ELL center to develop programs and methods to help ELL teachers and students.
- For pre-service teachers, incentivize dual certification in bilingual/teaching English as a second language.

#### **Use of Curriculum in Closing Achievement Gaps in Low-Performing Schools**

- Department of education should develop or identify model Common Core-aligned K-8 curricula for districts with the largest achievement gaps.

#### **Role of Time in Closing Achievement Gap**

- Develop guidelines for schools and districts to increase learning time.

#### **Creativity and Innovation and the Achievement Gap Synopsis**

- Districts and schools with persistent achievement gaps should provide innovation-promoting arts and creative programs.

#### **Chronic Absence**

- Track individual student attendance in state longitudinal student databases.
- Adopt a standard definition of chronic absence.
- Regularly share chronic absence data statewide, including on school report cards.

#### **Reading**

- Create a reading director position in the department of education.
- Create incentives for teachers who improve reading outcomes.

#### **School Climate and the Achievement Gap**

- Direct schools to use climate assessments and resulting data to develop climate improvement plans.
- Clarify the definition of bullying.

#### **Narrow the High-End Opportunity Gap: Find the Missing Advanced Placement Students**

- Automatically enroll students scoring proficient on state exams in AP classes and allow them to opt out.
- Require all high schools to offer a minimum number of AP classes and provide support.

### *Inside Higher Education*

#### **Leaders that Close the Gap: Administrator Preparation and Development**

- Encourage internship opportunities for administrators-in-training in schools with achievement gaps.
- Provide achievement gap seminar program for school leaders in at-risk schools.

#### **Highly Effective Teacher-Preparation Programs**

- Create a program to encourage effective pre-service teachers to work in at-risk schools.
- Provide specialized professional development programs and incentives for teachers working in low-performing K-12 schools.
- Encourage higher education to develop relationships with low-performing K-12 schools and districts.

### *Inside State Government*

#### **Students in State Care**

- Enable coordination between state agencies to track educational progress of children in state care.<sup>24</sup>

## **Appendix B**

### **Recommendations from the 2014 Massachusetts Advocates for Diversity in Education Task Force**

- Design opportunities to attract students of color to the teaching profession.
- Expand the acceptable out-of-state educator requirements.
- Increase the transparency and accountability of teacher preparation programs' efforts to diversify their enrollment and program completers through increased reporting of recruitment, retention and program completion.
- Requests the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to review technical recommendations from the 2008 Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure Pass Rate Task Force report, particularly those designed to reduce disparities in pass rates regarding race/ethnicity and first language.
- Develop a system search process protocol for recruiting and retaining educators of color.
- Create a system to monitor all state-level student suspension and retention data.
- Create and implement strategies to support transition points for students.
- Create a Cultural Responsible Education Academy for Educators and require all teacher and administrator-preparation programs to offer effective cultural proficiency training.
- Create a second form of Commendation School Status to recognize schools offering excellent cultural proficiency strategies.
- Develop a guide for alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and zero-tolerance policies.<sup>25</sup>

## **Appendix C**

### **Wisconsin: Achievement Gap Task Force Focus Areas and Strategies**

#### **Effective Instruction**

- Differentiation.
- Gradual release of responsibility.
- Personalization (voice/choice).
- Rigorous, integrated content.
- Engagement.
- Comprehensive literacy instruction.
- Grouping decisions based on data.
- Explicit instruction.
- Formative assessment.
- Soft skills.

### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

- Angel list (pairs a student with few adult connections in the school with a teacher mentor who helps the student establish relationships with teachers and other staff).
- Celebrate success.
- Classroom culture.
- Cultural competency.
- Extended time.
- Honor students as individuals.
- Reclaim unstructured time.
- Acknowledge students for accomplishments.
- Talent management.
- Mentor students.
- Schoolwide behavior system.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

- Consider families and communities as experts on their children.
- Family engagement.
- Welcoming environment.
- Community schools.
- Community partnerships.
- Focused events.
- Communication with families.

### **School and Instructional Leadership**

- All staff responsible for all students.
- Capacity building.
- Comprehensive leadership process.
- Data analysis.
- Intentional design of systems.
- Math and reading interventions.
- Relationship building.
- School and district common planning.
- Shared vision and leadership.
- Instructional coaches.
- Professional learning communities.<sup>26</sup>

## Author

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## Endnotes

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