The gap in achievement separating poor and minority students from less disadvantaged students has been the focus of discussion, research and controversy for nearly 40 years. While the gap narrowed considerably through the late 1980s, particularly between blacks and whites, progress since then has been marginal - and below-par achievement of poor and minority students remains one of the most pressing problems in education.

Today, the average black or Hispanic high school student achieves at about the same level as the average white student in the lowest quartile of white achievement. Black and Hispanic students are much more likely than white students to fall behind in school and drop out, and much less likely to graduate from high school, acquire a college or advanced degree, or earn a middle-class living.

Research has identified a variety of factors that appear related to the achievement gap – students’ racial and/or economic background, their parents’ education level, their access to high-quality preschool instruction, peer influences, teachers’ expectations, and curricular and instructional quality. There is also a small but growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of various reforms and strategies that states, districts and schools are using to help lift the achievement of poor and minority students – from class-size reduction and increased testing, to vouchers and expanded early childhood education programs.

The No Child Left Behind Act greatly increases pressure on states to address the achievement gap, requiring them to publish test scores separately for racial and ethnic groups and to work to eliminate disparities. In the words of Harvard University researcher Ronald F. Ferguson, “For the first time in the nation’s history, raising achievement levels among racial and ethnic minorities and closing achievement gaps are explicit goals of federal policy.”

This issue of The Progress of Education Reform provides summaries of the latest research on the causes, dimensions and effects of the achievement gap, along with links to other sources of information.
Here are highlights from several recent reports on the achievement gap and on the efficacy of various approaches to reducing it.

Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School (Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam, Economic Policy Institute, 2002) www.epinet.org/books/starting_gate.html

According to this report from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), variations in children’s cognitive ability are substantial as they begin kindergarten – and socioeconomic status accounts for more of these variations than any other factor, including race/ethnicity, family educational expectations and access to quality child care. The EPI report was based on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Study/Kindergarten Cohort – an up-to-date and comprehensive data-collection effort that provides a nationally representative picture of kindergarten students. Among the report’s conclusions:

• There are substantial differences by race and ethnicity in test scores as children begin kindergarten.
• Race and ethnicity are highly associated with socioeconomic status.
• Family structure and educational expectations have important associations with socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and young children’s test scores.
• Socioeconomic status is strongly related to cognitive skills.
• Students of low socioeconomic status begin school in systematically lower-quality elementary schools than their more advantaged counterparts, reinforcing the inequalities that develop even before children reach school age.

The report concludes, “despite widespread faith in the role of schooling to address or ameliorate social inequalities ..., our nation’s schools actually play a major role in magnifying such inequalities.” It closes with a review of possible approaches to reducing inequality in terms of both student achievement and school resources.


This report – one in a series prepared in conjunction with North Carolina’s First in America initiative – provides a concise review of strategies that research shows are crucial to closing gaps in achievement between black and white students. According to the report, research on the black-white achievement gap “does not point to any dramatic ‘breakthrough’ interventions, but rather to a series of apparently straightforward changes that schools could make to close the gap.” The strategies include the following:
Find Out More about the Achievement Gap

Education Commission of the States (ECS)
Our new Closing the Achievement Gap Issue Site features a variety of up-to-date information, including “quick facts,” selected readings and research, and a look at how states are addressing the achievement gap.
http://www.ecs.org/CTAG

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
NAEP’s reports on the achievement of students in geography, mathematics, reading, science and history include a breakdown of scores by gender, race or ethnicity, and parents’ highest level of education.
http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/

Education Trust
This Web site features individual state profiles of student performance on national and state tests, as well as detailed analysis of achievement gaps both within and across states.
http://204.176.179.36/dc/edtrust/states.html

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
The Student Learning and Development section features several dozen digests, monographs and links on achievement gap issues.

National Urban League
The Campaign for African-American Achievement – a $25 million, five-year initiative supported by the Lilly Endowment – is aimed at mobilizing black parents and local leaders to demand high achievement as the norm for their children and schools.
http://www.nul.org/caaa/caaa/index.html

The Minority Student Achievement Network
The network, a national coalition of 15 multiracial suburban school districts across the United States, focuses on identifying and developing the means to ensure high academic achievement for students of color, specifically black and Hispanic students.
http://www.msanetwork.org

• Extend high-quality, academically focused early childhood education to all children at risk of school failure.
• Ensure well-prepared and experienced teachers teach black children.
• Reduce class sizes in the early grades.
• Adopt sound and equitable grouping practices in elementary schools.
• Ensure black students are equitably represented across curriculum tracks in high schools.
• Bridge home and school cultures by adapting teaching and discipline practices to suit students’ backgrounds.
• Find reasons to expect each student to succeed.
• Demand success by holding both schools and students accountable.
• Support students with individual tutoring, more comprehensive reforms, summer programs and follow-up assistance.
• Desegregate schools and programs within schools.

Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools (Ronald F. Ferguson, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, December 2002)

Harvard University researcher Ronald F. Ferguson’s survey of secondary school students in high-performing suburban school districts found that strong, supportive teacher-student relationships may be critical resources for motivating black and Hispanic students in particular. Such relationships, Ferguson concludes, may help black and Hispanic students seek help more readily, engage more deeply in their studies and ultimately overcome skill gaps that are due in substantial measure to disparities in family backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances.

The sample for Ferguson’s survey – conducted in the 2000-01 school year in 15 middle- and upper-middle-income school districts in 10 states - included more than 30,000 black, white, Hispanic, Asian and mixed-race students. Questions in the survey covered family characteristics, opinions about the quality of instruction, enjoyment of studies, achievement motivations, course-taking patterns and grade point averages.

According to Ferguson, one of the most interesting findings is “the distinctive importance of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation for nonwhite students.” Even in well-to-do suburban schools, Ferguson concludes, there is a need for professional development that better prepares teachers to “inspire the trust, elicit the cooperation, stimulate the ambition and support the sustained industriousness” of students, particularly those achieving at low levels.


According to Jencks and Phillips, reducing the black-white test score gap “would do more to move America toward racial equality than any politically plausible alternative.” But despite decades of discussion and debate, evidence as to both what accounts for the gap and how to reduce it is fragmentary and inconclusive.

Nevertheless, because the gap between blacks and whites on tests of cognitive skills has narrowed in recent years, it must be to a significant extent malleable, Jencks and
Phillips say. Drawing on a range of past and current research, they identify the following as the most promising avenues for narrowing the gap still further:

- Making a greater social investment in early cognitive development, from promoting better parenting practices to strengthening Head Start programs’ emphasis on cognitive skills
- Reducing class size
- Requiring higher levels of academic competence from teachers
- Raising teachers’ expectations for students who have trouble with schoolwork.

Traditional theories about the causes of the black-white achievement gap, Jencks and Phillips predict, will give way to successful new theories that differ in three important ways:

- Instead of looking mainly for resource differences between predominantly black and predominantly white schools, new theories will concentrate on differences in the way schools spend the resources available to them. These differences, deriving in large part from the disproportionate number of black children with severe academic or psychological problems, probably prevent ordinary black children in the same schools from getting as much attention and support as their counterparts in white schools.

- Instead of concentrating on whether teachers treat black and white children differently, new theories will pay more attention to the way black and white children respond to the same classroom experiences, such as having a teacher of a different race or having a teacher with low expectations for students who read below grade level.

- Instead of emphasizing families’ economic and educational resources, new theories probably will pay more attention to the way family members and friends interact with one another and with the outside world, how much parents talk to their children, how they deal with their children’s questions and how they react when their children either learn or fail to learn something.