

Equity and opportunity threatened by growing national "excellence gap"

National report examines the growing gap among high ability student groups -- as determined by economic, racial and linguistic backgrounds -- in all 50 states

EDITORS: Authors of this report are discussing the findings during a news conference in the Murrow Room at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. (529 14th St. NW, 13th Floor) at 9:30 a.m. today (Feb. 4). Access to the full report is online at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/mindthegap>. Contact Chuck Carney at ccarney@indiana.edu for more information about the news conference and the report.

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- A new report from the Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) finds that achievement gaps among high ability students from different economic, racial and linguistic backgrounds in the U.S. are large and growing, and some of the top achieving groups aren't performing as well as in the past.

"Mind the (Other) Gap!: The Growing Excellence Gap in K-12 Education" is a comprehensive study of student achievement test results from every state released today (Feb. 4) by CEEP, a center of the Indiana University School of Education. The study's authors announced the findings during a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The report indicates that at the current pace of achievement, even improving gaps could take more than a century to close.

The report estimates it could take 72 years to close the gap between whites and Hispanics in grade four mathematics; 31 years to close the gap between whites and blacks; and 128 years to close the gap between grade four English Language Learners (ELL) and non-ELL students.

The U.S. Department of Education is pushing for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The federal education legislation was first passed in 1965 and was most recently reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation eight years ago. While NCLB has focused heavily on helping disadvantaged students reach at least minimum competency, the report finds there is little correlation between improving basic competence and trends in the excellence gap. For example, the analysis shows that as a larger share of fourth-grade African American students reached minimum competence, the excellence gap increased.

"Our entire national conversation about education has focused on struggling students," said Jonathan Plucker, the report's lead author and the CEEP director. "Although helping these students is important, clearly we can also focus some energy on higher levels of achievement."

The report defines the "excellence gap" as the difference in the proportion of students in different demographic groups who score at the advanced level on student achievement tests. The report analyzes the state-by-state results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), nicknamed "The Nation's Report Card," which assesses subject-matter knowledge for students in grades four, eight and 12 across the country, as well as state assessments.

Using multiple methods for data analysis from 2000 to 2007, the report concludes that excellence gaps on most NAEP results at grades four and eight are growing. The report also finds mixed evidence of progress

when presenting the results on a state-by-state basis. In the few cases where the excellence gaps are shrinking, some are shrinking because the top-achieving group is performing more poorly than in the past.

"I think the evidence is pretty clear that we have a very long way to go when it comes to ensuring equal opportunities for all high ability students," said Nathan Burroughs, co-author of the report. "That such a small percentage of lower income, minority and English language students are scoring at the advanced level on the NAEP is simply indefensible."

Among the key findings in the report:

- In both grades four and eight reading and mathematics, the excellence gaps among different racial groups widened. In grade four mathematics, the growth was particularly stark -- the percentage of white students scoring at the advanced level increased by 5 percentage points, while the percentages of black and Hispanic students increased by only 1 percentage point.
- Considering socio-economic status, the excellence gap in grade four mathematics again showed the fastest growth. The percentage of students eligible for the federal government's National School Lunch Program free meals (children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level) who scored at the advanced level increased only 1 percentage point to 1 percent. The percentage of students not eligible for the program scoring at the advanced level increased 5 percentage points to 9 percent.
- The excellence gap in grade four mathematics between genders is widening. The percentage of male students scoring at the advanced level in grade four increased by 4 percentage points to 7 percent; female students increased by just 2 percentage points to 4 percent. In grade eight, the percentage of male students scoring at the advanced level increased by 3 percentage points to 8 percent while female students increased their percentage by 3 percentage points to 6 percent.
- The study also examined the NAEP data using percentiles, examining performance within subgroups for those above and below the 90th percentile. While this look at scores from 2003 and 2007 revealed a slight decline in the excellence gap among subgroups, the change was very small and some changes were due to stagnation or decline among the highest achieving subgroup. At the current rate of change, the report estimates it would take grade four English Language Learners (ELLs) 128 years to close the gap with non-ELL students. Similarly, the report estimates it could take 72 years to close the gap between whites and Hispanics in grade four mathematics, and 31 years to close the gap between whites and blacks.
- Examining state assessments in elementary, middle and high school, the report concludes that the majority of states experienced increased excellence gaps.

The study's authors conclude that among the policies that impact the persisting excellence gaps are inconsistent efforts to target gifted students. In 2007 around one-third of states had mandates to identify and/or serve gifted students, but 18 provided no dedicated funding. Plucker said the findings are troubling since they suggest little focus on students with great potential to contribute to the nation and the world. "Policymakers increasingly worry about where the next generation of innovators will come from," Plucker said. "Yet as a country, we simply haven't given much attention to students who excel academically or have the potential to excel. This disconnect between our concerns for the future and lack of attention to an obvious solution needs to be addressed quickly."

The authors recommend several potential solutions to the problem of persisting excellence gaps:

- Policymakers should ask during the upcoming ESEA debate how any new policy will affect the brightest students and help other students begin to achieve at high levels.
- Set realistic goals for shrinking excellence gaps to improve chances for achieving a target.
- Focus on both student minimum competency and excellence.
- Include the performance of advanced students in discussions on common standards and value-added accountability systems.

- Determine how to best mix federal, state and local policies and interventions for excellence in education.
- Each state should examine policies that may help or hinder the promotion of high achievement in K-12 schools.
- Conduct much more research on developing advanced learning and talent development.
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"Mind the (Other) Gap' should be the wake-up call to all education policymakers that our nation is failing to serve its highest-potential students, particularly those students from underserved and disadvantaged backgrounds," said National Association for Gifted Children Executive Director Nancy Green. "The ever-widening excellence gap is a tragedy-in-waiting that can only be addressed by devoting attention and resources to meet the unique learning needs of high-potential students"

The full report, including state profile pages, is accessible at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/mindthegap>. CEEP, one of the country's leading non-partisan education policy and evaluation centers, promotes and supports rigorous evaluation and research primarily, but not exclusively, for educational, human services and nonprofit organizations. Center projects address state, national and international education questions. CEEP is part of the IU School of Education. To learn more about CEEP, go to <http://ceep.indiana.edu>