

RESEARCH

Closing the Achievement Gap

for African American Students of Color

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision. Yet despite half a century of efforts to improve educational opportunities for African American students and other minorities, a large achievement gap persists.¹

By 12th grade, the average African American student reads at the same level as a white student in 7th grade. In fact, based on results of predictive tests, certain (randomly chosen) students were expected to perform

ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A public school in an African American community in Baltimore saw significant test score gains after implementing a rigorous instructional program used by Calvert, a private school. The Calvert program's philosophy of high expectations included weekly homework sheets, monthly report cards, and learning with attention to details such as punctuation.

After one year, average reading comprehension scores in three first-grade groups ranged from the 40th to the 49th percentile; scores for a comparison group averaged at the 18th percentile.¹¹ This success demonstrates that exposing underrepresented students to a rigorous curriculum coupled with high expectations enables academic excellence.

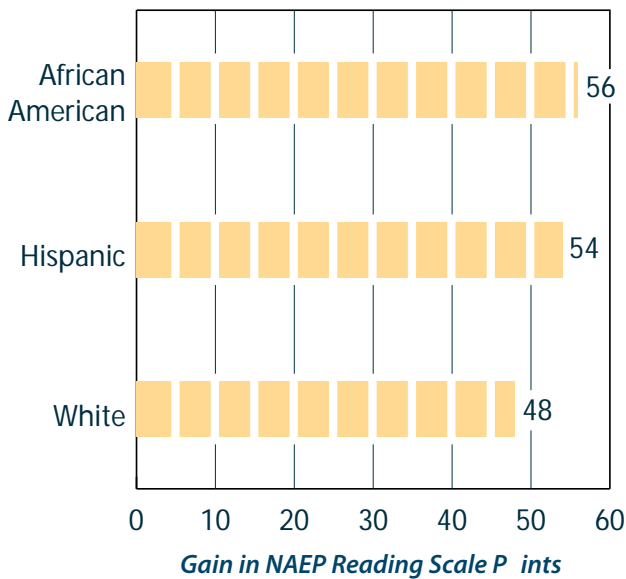
Another model is the Knowledge Overload Program (KIPP), which provides underprivileged fifth to ninth graders with a rigorous academic program. KIPP schools encompass a social support system that expects student commitment to school and peers and enforces a contract, signed by parents and students, supporting extended school days, Saturday classes, and summer sessions.

An independent analysis of three KIPP schools showed impressive improvements in one year.¹² In North Carolina, for example, 93 percent of KIPP students passed the end-of-year reading exams in 2002, a 36 percent jump from the year before when the students were at other schools.

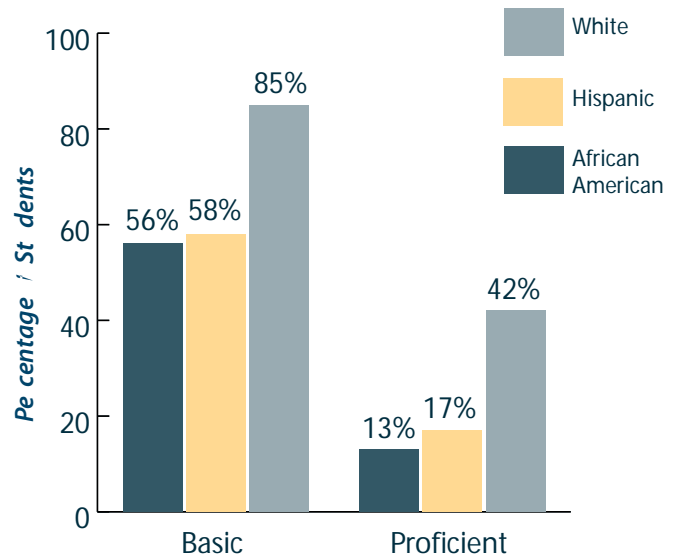
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Minorities Gain, but Gap Persists

Traditional assessments of student achievement compare the performance of students in a given year with that of students in the same grade in previous years. By that measure, little progress is being made in closing the achievement gap. However, a different picture emerges



Source: Lee, J. (2000). Growth in School Revisited: Achievement Gains from the Fourth to the Eighth Grade. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2000 Reading Assessments.

Facts at a Glance

▶ Academic performance improves when all students have the opportunity to learn the same challenging curriculum marked by high standards and expectations.

▶ Effective academic programs surround students with evidence that the people they care about most think that academic success is important and worth pursuing.

In Meyerhoff's first decade, 29 percent of graduates had earned or were working toward science and mathematics-based PhDs, compared to less than 6 percent of similar students at other schools.¹⁹

Focusing on freshman calculus, the gateway to scientific and technical degrees, the **erg. g. . . olar** **rogra** (ESP) is modeled on Philip Uri Treisman's Mathematics Workshop at the University of California at Berkeley. ESP raises students' sights with smaller and longer lecture-linked discussion sections and with extra-challenging problems that students work on individually or in small groups. Like Meyerhoff, ESP links students with similar academic goals, both in and out of the classroom. Studies have found that ESP participants are more likely than nonparticipants to have high calculus grades and to continue on to higher-level math courses.²⁰

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The programs noted here share two common threads: a demanding curriculum and a strong social support system that values and promotes academic achievement.

Providing a rigorous educational experience means giving students the chance to study a mainstream, undiluted curriculum with the best possible teachers. Performance improves when all students have the opportunity to learn the same challenging curriculum, marked by high standards and expectations.