

Educational Achievement: Bridging the Gap?

by Kerra L. Bolton

Karen Tam

With the exception of Asians, many minority students do not perform as well as their white peers in the public schools. The results of North Carolina's 2002–2003 end-of-grade tests confirmed the continued existence of a gap between the races in educational achievement, though the gap has narrowed. Nearly nine out of 10 white students (88.8 percent) achieved a passing score (at or above grade level) in both reading and math for grades three through eight. That's compared to only 66.9 percent of African-American students scoring at or above grade level in combined reading and math—a difference of 21.9 percent. While the gap is most pronounced for African Americans, it also exists for other racial and ethnic minorities. Among Hispanic/Latino students, the passing rate in 2002–2003 was 70.2 percent, while Native Americans passed at a rate of 72.3 percent. Asian students are the exception among minorities, with their performance on end-of-grade tests being similar to whites at 87.4 percent.

The educational achievement gap is not limited to **performance on end-of-grade tests**. African Americans traditionally have lagged behind white peers on **Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)** scores—by 211 points in 2003. The test is required for college admissions in North Carolina and is an indicator of college readiness. African Americans also are under-represented in **classes for gifted students** and among students who take **advanced placement exams**. African-American male students are overrepresented among students **suspended, expelled for disciplinary reasons, or placed in alternative schools**. White male students and Hispanic/Latino male students also are overrepresented, though to a lesser degree.

In addition, African Americans are more likely to be **identified as needing special education**, particularly in somewhat subjective categories such as behaviorally or emotionally disabled or mentally disabled. Indeed, North Carolina has a higher percentage of African-American students labeled mentally disabled than any of its neighboring states.

Experts point to a range of possible causes for this phenomenon of lower school achievement among minorities compared to the white majority—everything from less support for learning in the home to bias among a predominantly white teaching corps to reluctance to perform well among black students for fear of “acting white.” Whatever the cause, North Carolina has pledged to address the achievement gap and has made some progress. Yet it is clear that more progress must be made if students in North Carolina's public schools are to have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

It's a spool of thought that reels in the minds of many African-American parents with children enrolled in North Carolina's public schools: Is my child getting a high-quality education? I know he (or she) can do better. But why isn't that happening? Do the teachers and principals who don't look like me care about what happens to my child in the classroom?

African-American students in North Carolina and the nation consistently score below their white peers on standardized tests. That means that they are less likely than their white peers to read, write, or solve math problems at their grade level.

Regardless of one's vantage point, the consequences of the minority achievement gap are the same. African-American students are more likely to be under-represented in academically gifted or challenging classes that prepare students for college and overrepresented among the ranks of suspended, expelled, or disabled students.

Education attainment helps determine whether African-American students earn a living wage, have access to quality health care, enter the prison system, or tumble into cycles of poverty and dependency on the public welfare system.

Central to closing the achievement gap is a communal process of answering uncomfortable questions. Why are African-American children under-represented in academically gifted classes and overrepresented among suspended, expelled, or special education students? What roles do a teacher's expectations, race, and quality play in student achievement? Do poverty and re-segregated schools lead to poor student performance? Or are they excuses to pour more money into failing schools? What responsibility do parents have as the co-creators of their child's academic success? Are black children intentionally performing poorly to fit in with their peers?

Achievement Gap in Black and White

Despite the multiplicity of theories, the minority achievement gap is confirmed every year in the black and white data of: (1) the state's ABCs school accountability system; (2) Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores; (3) the disproportionate share of long-term suspensions, expulsions, and placement in alternative schools among African-American students; (4) under-representation of African Americans in classes for gifted students and

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"Sometimes [racial prejudice] is like a hair across your cheek. You can't see it, you can't find it with your fingers, but you keep brushing at it because the feel of it is irritating."

—SINGER MARIAN ANDERSON

among students who take advanced placement classes; and (5) the overrepresentation of African Americans among "mentally disabled" and "behaviorally emotionally disabled" classifications of students receiving special education services.

North Carolina measures the achievement and academic growth of its students primarily through the ABCs of Public Education, although other barometers such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores also are used. Based on end-of-grade tests in reading and math given to third through eighth-graders, state education officials determine whether students can read or solve math problems at or above their grade level and whether test scores show improvement from the previous year. Public schools also must report the progress of minority students as part of a new requirement under the federal No Child Left Behind law.¹

Now in its seventh year, the ABCs of Public Education is a system of carrots and sticks that carry tremendous consequences. Test results help determine whether students are promoted, whether teachers and principals get performance bonuses, and whether schools get remedial assistance from the state to improve test scores.² For African-American students, the test scores paint shades of a complex portrait of the role of race in North Carolina's public schools.

White and minority students perform differently on **end-of-grade tests** on every level. In 2002–2003, nearly nine out of 10 (88.8 percent) white students scored at or above grade level in both reading and mathematics in grades three through eight (see Table 1, p. 79). This is up from the 84.4 percent of white students who scored well in 2001–2002.

There were 407,550 African-American students attending North Carolina's traditional public

Table 1.
N.C. End-of-Grade Test Results by Race and Ethnicity,
2000–2001 through 2002–03*

	White	African-American	Hispanic/Latino	Native American	Asian	Multi-racial	All
2002–2003	88.8%	66.9%	70.2%	72.3%	87.4%	83.9%	88.8%
Percent Change from Prior Year	+4.4	+13.3	+8.1	+9.6	+5.3	+6.3	+4.0%
2001–2002	84.4	56.6	62.1	62.7	82.1	77.6	84.8%
Percent Change from Prior Year	+2.4	+4.7	+3.4	+2.7	+3.4	+2.4	+13.1
2000–2001	81.9	51.9	58.7	60.0	78.7	75.2	71.7%

* Results represent percentage of children achieving at grade level or above based on combined math and reading scores on end-of-grade tests for grades 3 through 8.

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

and charter schools in 2002–2003, representing 31.2 percent of the state's 1,304,325 students.³ However, only two-thirds, or 66.9 percent of the African-American students could read or solve math problems at or above grade level, according to 2002–2003 ABCs results. This is a considerable improvement from the 2001–02 school year, when slightly more than half, or 56.6 percent of African-American students performed at or above grade level. The 2002–2003 gain for African-American students was the most improvement shown by any racial or ethnic group.

Latino, Native-American, Asian, and multiracial students all outperformed their African-American peers. About 70.2 percent of Latino students scored at or above grade level in 2002–03, up from 62.1 percent the previous year.

For American-Indian students, 72.3 percent performed at or above grade level in reading and math, up from 62.7 percent in 2001–02. Asian students' performance on end-of-grade tests improved to 87.4 percent, up from 82.1 in 2001–2002. For multiracial students, 83.9 percent performed at or above grade level on the tests, an improvement from 77.6 percent in 2001–2002.⁴

The widest and most persistent gap among

ethnic groups occurs between white and African-American students. White students outperformed their African-American peers by 21.9 points in 2002–2003. This is down from 34.3 points in 1996–97, the first year the ABCs program was implemented.⁵

The Gap in Scholastic Achievement Test Scores

This trend continues even among African-American students who plan to attend college. Average scores for African-American students lagged behind those of their white peers by 211 points in 2003 on the **Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT)**, an indicator of college readiness (see Table 2, p. 81).

The average total SAT score for African-American students remained the same at 839 out of a possible score of 1,600. This is lower than the national average for African-American students of 857 and the average score for white students in North Carolina of 1,050. The gap in the average SAT score between whites and African Americans widened by three and four points respectively in 2003 in North Carolina and the nation.⁶

Under-Representation in Academically Gifted Classes and Advanced Placement Exams

African-American students make up 31.2 percent of the overall student population in North Carolina's public schools. But they account for only 10 percent of the students **enrolled in academically gifted classes** compared to 35.5 percent of the total population of students who are not in academically gifted classes. In raw numbers, there were 144,662 students enrolled in academically or intellectually gifted classes. Only 14,558 of them were African Americans (see Table 3, p. 81).

Black students also continue to be under-represented among North Carolina students who **take Advanced Placement (AP) examinations** relative to their proportion of the general school population. Students can earn college credit and/or placement if they do well on the AP exam. White students represented 78.8 percent of the 24,084 North Carolina youth taking AP tests while black students accounted for 10.1 percent⁷ (see Table 4, p. 82). By contrast, white students represented 59.4 percent of the overall student population in 2002–2003, while black students represented 31.2 percent of the student population.

Over-Representation of African Americans in Long-Term Suspensions, Expulsions, and Mentally Disabled and Emotionally Disturbed Classifications

While African-American children are under-represented among students who are in academically gifted classes or score well on end-of-grade and SAT tests, they are overrepresented in the ranks of students who are suspended, expelled, and identified as "mentally disabled" or "behaviorally or emotionally disturbed," according to state and national studies.

African-American male students are more likely than children of any other ethnic group to be suspended from school for long periods of time, expelled—or permanently excluded from the school population, placed in alternative schools, or identified as mentally disabled or emotionally disturbed, according to a study by the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center's Education and Law Project.⁸

African-American male students accounted for the highest percentage of **long-term suspensions** in both 1999–2000 and 2000–01, 38 and 40 percent respectively, though they represented only 15.7 percent of the overall school population in 2000–2001.

African-American male students are the most over-represented group among students with long-term suspensions, accounting for 2.5 times more than their representation in the general student population.⁹

Almost half of the students **expelled from school** from 1999 to 2001 were African-American male students, though, again, they accounted for only 15.7 percent of the overall student population. However, white and Latino male students also were slightly overrepresented among expelled students when considering their presence in the overall student population.

African-American males were also more likely to be **placed in alternative schools** and are over-represented there. While African-American male students accounted for 15.7 percent of the overall student population in 2000–2001, African-American males made up 41 percent of all students sent to alternative schools that year.

In comparison, white males constituted 25 percent of all alternative school placements but about 30 percent of all children enrolled in North Carolina's public schools. The study also found that African-American students, male and female, and Native-American males also were overrepresented among the alternative school population relative to their presence among the overall student population.

This trend extended to charter schools as well. About 66 percent of all students transferring from charter to alternative schools in 2000–2001 were African-American male students.¹⁰ They also accounted for about two-thirds of all charter school students who were given long-term suspensions. Most of the students expelled from charter schools from 1999 to 2001 were African American.¹¹

Alternative learning *schools* are one option for providing an alternative learning *program* for students who have been suspended or expelled, are at risk of juvenile crime, have dropped out of school and desire to return, are returning from a juvenile setting or psychiatric hospital, or whose learning styles are best served in an alternative setting, according to the State Board of Education, which adopted alternative program and school definitions in January 2000. While these guidelines set a broad framework for alternative education, actual programs vary by school district. Students typically are referred to an alternative school, though some parents request them as a better fit for the learning style of a particular child.

Minority children, specifically African-American and American-Indian students, also are significantly more likely than white students to be **identi-**

**Table 2. Mean SAT Scores by Race and Ethnicity for
North Carolina and the Nation, 1994–2003**

	White	African American	Hispanic/ Latino	Native American	Asian	N.C. Avg.	U.S. Avg.
2003	1050	839	961	923	1052	1001	1026
2002	1046	839	961	914	1025	998	1020
2001	1041	835	975	891	1031	992	1020
2000	1035	835	970	897	1024	988	1019
1999	1031	837	966	900	1026	986	1016
1998	1026	839	984	906	1014	982	1017
1997	1023	834	956	900	1023	978	1016
1996	1018	840	*	887	1017	976	1013
1995	1012	830	*	887	1016	970	1010
1994	1008	826	*	860	1021	964	1003

* Data not available

Source: SAT Report: North Carolina 2003, N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Accountability Services Division, Reporting Section, August 2003, p. 8.

**Table 3. Number and Percentage of Students in North Carolina
Identified as Academically Gifted
by Race or Ethnicity and Gender, 2003**

Race or Ethnicity	Number and Percent	Number and Percent of Overall Enrollment
White	120,784 (83.5%)	774,635 (59.4%)
African American	14,558 (10.1%)	407,550 (31.2%)
Hispanic/Latino	2,187 (1.5%)	77,485 (5.9%)
American Indian	1,029 (0.7%)	19,081 (1.5%)
Asian	4,151 (2.9%)	25,574 (2.0%)
Multicultural	1,953 (1.4%)	N.A.
Total	144,662 (100.0%)	1,304,325 (100.0%)

N.A. = Data not available.

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Exceptional Children Division, April 2003.

Table 4.
Number and Percentage of Students in North Carolina Taking
Advanced Placement (AP) Examinations
by Race or Ethnicity, 1999–2002

	White	African-American	Hispanic/Latino	American Indian	Asian
2002	18,984 (78.8%)	2,438 (10.1%)	494 (2.1%)	115 (0.5%)	1,147 (4.8%)
2001	16,942 (80.5%)	2,005 (9.5%)	350 (1.7%)	113 (0.5%)	953 (4.5%)
2000	15,622 (81.2%)	1,677 (8.7%)	297 (1.5%)	94 (0.5%)	943 (4.9%)
1999	14,169 (79.0%)	1,524 (8.5%)	247 (1.4%)	101 (0.6%)	802 (4.5%)

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction, *State of the State: Educational Performance in North Carolina—2002*, p. 20.

fied as being mentally disabled or emotionally disturbed and in need of special education services that may separate them from the general student population in self-contained classes, and the trend is not peculiar to North Carolina. Indeed, in most states, African-American children are more likely to be identified as mentally disabled or emotionally disturbed than are whites, according to a study conducted by researchers from Harvard University's Civil Rights Project, published in June 2002.¹²

The Harvard researchers found that the process of identifying students as mentally disabled is rife with subjectivity. Educators decide whom to test, what test to use, when to use alternative tests, and how to interpret the results. Southern states, including North Carolina, constituted nearly three-quarters of the states with unusually high incidence levels, where between 2.75 and 5.41 percent of African-Americans enrolled in public schools were labeled as mentally disabled.¹³

North Carolina had the highest rate among neighboring states of African-American children labeled as "mentally disabled" during the 2000–01 school year at 3.58 percent. This compares to South Carolina at 3.51 percent, Georgia at 2.80 percent, Tennessee at 2.66 percent, and Virginia at 1.80 percent.¹⁴

Removing special education students from the regular classroom has devastating consequences, the Harvard University researchers note. "Once identified, most minority students are significantly

more likely to be removed from the general education program and be educated in a more restrictive environment," the report says. "Given that students with special needs benefit most when they are educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate, the data on educational settings raise serious questions about the quality of special education provided to Latino, black and other minority students compared to whites."¹⁵

The implications of these trends are three-fold. One is that more African-American male students are identified as behaving in ways that result in long-term suspension or expulsion. The definition of misconduct varies in each school district. But the reasons for suspension or expulsion can range from truancy and disruptive behavior, to chronic discipline problems, to violence and even criminal acts.

For some African-American parents, charter schools hold the promise of the individualized attention and positive reinforcement that they think traditional public schools lack and troubled youth need. But the high rates of suspension, expulsion, and alternative placements for African-American males in charter schools suggest that such parental expectations fall short.

Most importantly, the less time a student spends in the classroom, the more difficult it is for that student to catch up when he or she returns. Long bouts of suspension, expulsion, or displacement can force some students to drop out altogether. For some

troubled students, dropping out of school can lead to criminal behavior.

Does Tracking Slow African-American Students Down?

Students don't have to be considered disciplinary problems or mentally disabled in order to be placed in certain groups. Based on teacher observations and test scores, students are labeled in the early elementary grades. The consequences of the labels, often called "tracking," stay with the child throughout his or her academic career, some education experts say.

"We say that doctors think they are God, but teachers think they can look at a child and decide what that child will be," says Michael Wynn, an educator and motivational speaker who works with teachers in the Triangle and abroad.¹⁶ "We stereotype the minute they walk in the door. It's not because we are mean-spirited. It's because we do what was done to us."

A 15-year case study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools followed the careers of students who scored in the top 10 percent of their class in the second

grade. More than seven of every 10 white children who scored well in second-grade were taking advanced English classes by the eighth grade. But less than two out of every 10 African-American children who scored equally well on the second-grade test were taking advanced English classes by the eighth grade.¹⁷

Once a student is labeled as a slow-learner or identified for special education, it may be difficult to catch up. "In theory, remedial classes are designed to help students fill in particular knowledge gaps," say the authors of a national study of racial discrimination in the public schools.¹⁸ "Once remedial work is completed, students are supposed to rejoin the mainstream classes. In practice, remedial classes usually act to permanently deny students access to more advanced subject matter." Rather than catch up with mainstream classes, students in remedial classes tend to fall further behind their peers every year.

Ronald Ferguson, a Harvard University scholar, found that grouping children into different classes by ability and varying the pace, but not the curriculum or instructional methods, had little effect on achievement. Ferguson also found that in high

Brenda Alderón, Saydi Alderón, Estefani Hernández and Evelyn Morales (left to right) of Siler City, at the March 2004 Latino Forum.



Karen Tan



schools the black-white differences in curriculum track placement are smaller than in the past. But African-American students remained under-represented in the most challenging classes.

"This is not necessarily evidence of bias," Ferguson says. "Blacks are represented in rough proportion to what one would predict, given the proficiencies with which they enter high school. The potential consequences of making classes more heterogeneous in terms of student preparation or motivation are unclear."¹⁹ In other words, African Americans are being channeled into the high school classes based on their elementary and middle school preparation. Ferguson says he isn't sure what the impact would be on individual student achievement of broadening the mix of students in more challenging classes to include those with less proven abilities.

The Impact of Teacher Expectations and Perceptions on Black Student Performance

Educators are fond of saying that "every child can learn." But how much do a teacher's expectations and beliefs influence student performance?

Harvard professor Ronald Ferguson cites research that shows teachers, including black ones, have different perceptions and expectations for African-American students than white students.²⁰ Those differing expectations lead to teacher behaviors that, in turn, reinforce lower student performance, says Ferguson.

"Stereotypes of black intellectual inferiority are reinforced by past and present disparities in performance, and this probably causes teachers to underestimate the potential of black children more than that of whites," Ferguson says. "My bottom-line conclusion is that teachers' perceptions, expectations and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even expand, the black-white test score gap."²¹

In one experiment, teachers were asked to listen to a tape of a student's response to a question about their favorite television show. They were shown a photograph of the student who was speaking. Students varied in gender and race. The teachers were then asked to rate the student responses for personality, quality of response, current academic abilities, and future academic potential.

The outcome of the experiment showed a highly significant relationship between the race of the student in the photograph and the teacher's

estimation of the student's response and academic abilities. Ferguson said that the teachers weren't necessarily racist, but may have been conditioned by previous experiences with different types of students.

Such assumptions can have a negative impact, depending on how a student responds to teacher attitudes. Some students are influenced by their teacher's expectations of them while other students seem less influenced by teacher expectations. However, Ferguson says that there is evidence that suggests that African-American children are more likely than whites to want to please their teacher.

If a teacher's previous experience is that African-American students don't perform as well academically as white students, then a teacher is likely to use that experience in forming expectations of new students, Ferguson asserts. A student's past performance may also influence a teacher's predictions of how well the student will perform.

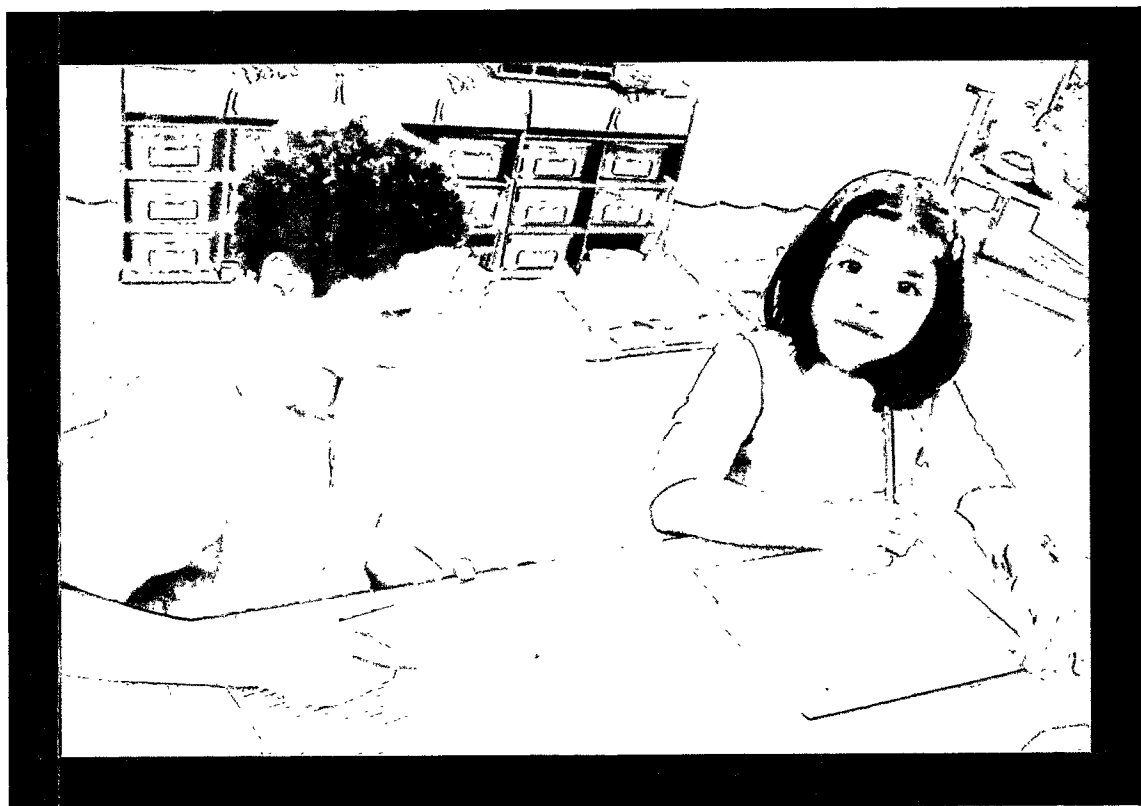
Teachers also may perceive low performing African-American students as "difficult students." Rather than spending time with the difficult students who cause disruptions, teachers might prefer to spend time with students who appear eager to learn.

Ferguson also observes that both black and white teachers tend to be less supportive of African-

American students, on average, perhaps because they have lower expectations. The shrinking support may actually breed the low performance they expect, causing a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Wake County Schools Superintendent Bill McNeal, national schools superintendent of the year in 2004, told *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, N.C., that many white teachers compound the problem by promoting unprepared African-American students, partly to show they aren't racist. "The message to the child was clear," he said. "You don't have to do much. Then you had what I call the missionary complex, which was that these downtrodden children need all the help they can get. 'Poor things, they'll never be able to do this work, so if they behave, I'll just give them a C.'"²²

McNeal's position is reiterated by Elaine Tutterrow, principal at Valmead Basic School in Lenoir, N.C. Tutterrow's school has the distinction of having more than 90 percent of students score at grade level or above on end-of-grade tests despite having 90 percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunches—a basic measure of school poverty. As for the achievement gap, African-American students at Valmead Basic were more likely to pass end-of-grade tests in reading and math in 2002–2003 than were whites. Tutterrow



Karen Tam



attributes most of this success to hard work and innovations such as accelerated reading, accelerated math, smaller classes, and interventions for students who fall behind. "We've tried a lot of different things," says Tutterrow. "There is not one answer, but one of the big things we did was raise expectations. For years and years, we just patted them on the heads and said, 'Bless your heart,' but you get what you expect."

Does a Teacher's Race Matter in the Classroom?

The typical North Carolina teacher is a 42-year-old white female. The current teaching force is less racially diverse than the student population they teach. Thirty-eight percent of North Carolina's students are ethnic minorities, while only 16 percent of the teachers are minorities, according to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction's latest annual report.²³ Of these minority students, 31.2 percent are African American, 5.9 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 2 percent are Asian, and 1.5 percent are American Indians.

There is conflicting research about the impact of the teacher's race in assessing student performance. One study, for example, found that African-American and white students scored higher on reading and math tests when their teachers were of the same race as the students, according to the survey of 6,000 Tennessee students.

Thomas S. Dee, author of the study, re-analyzed the landmark Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio) experiment conducted in the 1980s that was used to determine whether students learned more in smaller classes during their early elementary years. The STAR study followed children from kindergarten through third grade. Ninety-four percent of the white students and 45 percent of the African-American students were assigned to teachers of their own race.

Dee's analysis found that students who had a teacher of their own race for at least one of the four years of the study tended to score an average of three- to four points higher on standardized reading and math tests than their peers who had teachers of different races. This advantage gained steam each year a student had a teacher of the same race. African Americans, poor children, those with inexperienced teachers, and children attending segregated schools benefited most from having a teacher of the same race.²⁴

However, the study did not pinpoint the reasons for the improvement. Did students blossom when

they viewed a same-race teacher as a role model? Do same-race teachers have higher expectations for students that become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

"All these findings suggest is that race in the classroom appears to matter," says Dee, an associate professor of economics at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pa. "But we still don't understand the nature of that dynamic."

Teacher Quality Counts in Boosting Student Achievement

Some researchers argue that the quality of the teacher is more important than his or her race. Roslyn Mickelson, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte and an expert on the effects of segregation and resegregation on school performance, has performed in-depth studies of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools. She says elementary students who are educated in schools with disproportionate numbers of minorities and poor students are more likely than those at racially balanced schools to be taught by teachers who are uncredentialed, who got into the classroom through a lateral-entry program, or who were long-term substitutes. As for middle and high school, African-American students are more likely to be tracked into lower-level courses regardless of standardized test performance, and these classes

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*I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in
Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham,
then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.*

...

So will my page be colored that I write?

...

*You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.*

—FROM "THEME FOR ENGLISH B"

LANGSTON HUGHES

are "more likely to have teachers teaching out of field who are not credentialed."²⁵

Like a snowball rolling down a hill, the effect of unqualified teachers accumulates over time. Students who were assigned ineffective teachers for three consecutive years scored 50 percentile points below their peers who were taught by competent teachers, according to the analysis of William Sanders, a statistician and researcher for the education division of SAS Institute in Cary.²⁶ And, at least one study concluded that teachers of color are more likely than white teachers to continue teaching at hard-to-staff urban schools, where teacher turnover is a major barrier to high-quality education.²⁷

Parents As Co-Creators of Their Child's Educational Success

Parents, education experts say, are the child's first teachers. Numerous studies suggest that a parent's attitude toward education, his or her parenting habits, and a child's home environment greatly influence student performance.

Surveys show that African-American parents are deeply concerned about whether their child gets a good education. One study found that African-American children (64.5 percent) were more likely than whites (57.8 percent) to report that their parents telephone teachers and/or attend school meetings.²⁸

African-American parents also say they're disturbed by a social and cultural climate that discourages young people from working hard to get good grades and excel in school.²⁹ But African-American parents often communicate more ambivalence and less commitment to the school's mission than white parents. If African-American parents are ambivalent about education, then the expectations of their children's teachers may take on a special significance.³⁰

Anecdotal evidence of dismal attendance by African-American parents at school functions, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and one-on-one conferences frustrates teachers and fuels speculation that African-American parents just don't care. "Most of my parents would be on board if I called them in and told them we needed to set something up to help their child," says Bob Lindquist, a seventh-grade math teacher at Carrington Middle School in Durham. "But I don't know how many would follow through. We have a lot of parents who talk a good game, but the next day at school nothing has changed."³¹

Debbie Pethel, a math teacher at East Millbrook

Middle School in Raleigh, made a direct connection between parental involvement and student achievement when she confronted a classroom of students, mostly African-American girls, who failed the state math test and had to retake it. "These were the kids whose parents I never saw," Pethel says. "They were the ones who didn't sign the papers that went home or return phone calls. They were the ones who didn't send things in when asked."

Hugh B. Price, president of the National Urban League, a national civil rights organization, argues that parents have a responsibility to continue their child's learning experience long after the bell rings, signaling the end of another school day. "Remember—children spend most of their waking hours outside of school," Price writes in his book, *Achievement Matters: Getting Your Child the Best Education Possible*. "As your children's first teacher, you set the tone at home. To turn your youngsters on to school, you have to take the time and expend the effort to salute them for doing the right thing and publicly celebrate their academic success. You must remain steadfast and unwavering in order to provide a supportive and encouraging environment for the youngsters you are raising."³²

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*Young, gifted and black
How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth
Oh but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black
Is where it's at.*

—"TO BE YOUNG, GIFTED & BLACK"
SINGER NINA SIMONE, BORN IN TRYON, NC

But the environment in an African-American child's home is likely to be dominated by television and other entertainment media, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation of Menlo Park, Calif., which found that African-American children watch, on average, nearly two hours more television per day than whites. A greater percentage of African-American children live in homes with three or more television sets and subscribe to premium cable channels.

Fifty-six percent of African-American children report that the television is on "most of the time" and are more likely to live in homes where the television is on during meals. They also are more likely to have some type of media such as a television, radio, CD player, or video game system in their bedrooms. Interestingly, more African-American children than whites say they learn things when watching television.

Despite this access to technology, African-American and/or low income children have less access to computers each day. Seventy-eight percent of white children come from homes with at least one computer, compared to 55 percent of African-American children and 48 percent of Hispanic youngsters. But they average the same

amount of time using computers each day as their white and Hispanic classmates because those who do have computers tend to spend more time at the keyboard each day than do whites.³³

The Economics of Parental Involvement

Many of these differences in parenting habits between whites and African Americans may come down to dollars and cents. The national average income for white families is \$46,305, compared to \$29,470 for blacks. The history of racial discrimination in the United States, especially as it pertains to education and jobs, makes African-American children more likely to live in single-parent families or families where both parents work to make ends meet, according to Jacob Vigdor, an assistant professor of public policy studies and economics at Duke University whose research centers on the economic impact and causes of minority student achievement.

"In low-income families, a parent faces a choice between helping the kids with schoolwork and working so they can put food on the table," Vigdor says. "People on a higher rung on the economic



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moted. The plan travels with the child to help guide instruction at the next grade level. The intent is that the "receiving teacher" has a better understanding of the educational needs of the child, says Pittman. "What has the school done before for the child? What are the weaknesses? What are the strengths?"

The plan also becomes important if a child is retained—or asked to repeat a grade. "If you are retaining a child, you don't want to just give the child more of the same," says Pittman. "It didn't work the first time. It's probably not going to work this time." Pittman describes the personal education plan as "focused intervention" to help struggling students improve.

Pittman says the state also has put in place dual language sites for Hispanic/Latino students who struggle to learn in English, set up a center in the Closing the Gap Section where people across the state can call to learn about best practices and resources, and encouraged school systems across the state to create their own local task forces to examine what can be done to close the achievement gap for minority students.

But despite a clear focus on improving minority achievement, Pittman says it's also important to remember what the effort is not about. "It's not about taking resources from certain groups and focusing all our resources on minorities and the poor," says Pittman. "It's about targeting to where the needs are. When lower performing students perform better, the whole school performs better."

Keeping a watchful eye on the progress is the appointed State Board of Education, chaired

by former state legislator Howard Lee of Orange County. "There are numerous efforts that are being made to move the gap closer," observes Lee. "Different systems are trying different things with varying results. In addition to looking at the gap between ethnic groups, we need to look at the gap within ethnic groups. If we cure the intra-ethnic group gap, we will have made huge steps toward curing the inter-ethnic group gap.

"Looking back five years ago to now," says Lee, "I think we have had incredible results. Blacks and American Indians have made the most remarkable growth. The gap between white and black students seems to be the one that is closing the fastest. If we look within groups, the gap between groups will close even faster."

But Lee, an African American who has been elected to offices ranging from mayor of Chapel Hill to multiple terms in the state Senate, believes there is danger in focusing too much on race as it relates to school achievement. "We need to put more emphasis on socioeconomics as opposed to ethnicity," says Lee. "If we are not careful, we will assume that all white students are functioning well when they are not."

Lee believes a three-pronged approach to addressing the gap will yield the best results: (1) base work more on socioeconomics rather than ethnicity, focusing on high income, middle income, and low income students; (2) address the gap within each ethnic group, causing the group as a whole to rise; and (3) last, put the focus on the gap between ethnic groups.

—Mike McLaughlin

ladder never have to make that choice."

Growing numbers of children in North Carolina live in low-income families. About 20 percent of North Carolina's children live below the poverty line, according to a September 2003 census survey.³⁴ That's up from 18.5 percent in 2000. It also means that in a playground of 100 children from various economic backgrounds, one in every five would come from families that struggle to meet the basic needs of their children.

"Solving the family resources problem is very difficult," Vigdor says. "We can try to give parents

more guidance on what it takes to keep their kid performing well in school. But talking at them is not going to relieve the economic pressure they feel. You have to be cautious about expecting very large changes in the way parents behave."

Low-income African-American parents may feel uncomfortable at school, may distrust the teacher or staff, or may have had a difficult time themselves when they were in school. That has as much to do with socio-economics as race, says Nancy Hill, an associate professor of psychology at Duke University.

Research shows that poverty concentration at a school doesn't have to be extreme in order to negatively affect student achievement.³⁵ Schools in low-income communities tend to have high teacher and student turnover rates, which often slows down the curriculum. Since minority students are much more likely to be poor or to attend schools with high concentrations of poverty than white students, poverty takes a greater toll on the education achievement of poor and non-poor minority students.

"We can try to steer the best teachers toward the schools that serve disadvantaged students," Vigdor says. "But the best way to ensure that disadvantaged kids and wealthy kids have the same resources is to put them in the same room."

However, the racial and ethnic achievement gap persists across socioeconomic lines. For example, the mean total SAT score (931) in 1999 for African-American students from families whose income was more than \$70,000 a year was 51 points lower than white test takers from families who earned less than \$20,000 a year.³⁶ Researchers say the difference in test scores by race—independent of income differences—suggests that other factors may have had a larger effect on children's test scores. However, education demographer Harold Hodgkinson argues that children of low socioeconomic status arrive at kindergarten already behind their more affluent peers in terms of school readiness.³⁷ Without adequate support at home, they stand little chance of catching up. Hodgkinson advocates broadly available public preschool programs as part of the answer.

There also are differences in cultural values and communications styles that could account for the troubling relationship between African Americans and the school system, according to professor Nancy Hill, who studies the way diverse parenting and family socialization influence student performance. "The school culture is often different from the home culture," she says. "In some ethnic cultures, you're not supposed to talk back to adults. The child may end up in a classroom where questioning authority is part of the learning dynamic. If the child doesn't respond accordingly, the teacher might assume they are not really engaged. But the child may be interacting in a way that's consistent with their ethnic background."

Hill gives another instance of a child who doesn't respond according to the teacher's expectations and thus may be perceived as disruptive or ill-behaved. But the difference could be cultural communication styles. A teacher may say, "Why don't you sit down?" instead of making a command.

However, an African-American child may be used to hearing directives, such as, "Sit down."

Another study found that African-American parents are more likely than other ethnic groups to place greater importance on ensuring that the classroom is friendly and accepting. It is less important to them that their children can master letters and numbers in preschool, according to a study by Oscar Barbarin, a Preyer Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Social Work.³⁸ "There appears to be more of a belief among black parents that once their child acclimates to the classroom, they can catch up quickly if they are behind," Barbarin says.

True to parental expectations, the children did catch up on simple skills such as recognizing numbers or sounding out letters one at a time. But by the end of kindergarten, a clear gap emerged when looking at higher-level skills such as adding, subtracting, or identifying the sound of a letter at the end of a word. These skills indicate a child's readiness to handle more advanced challenges in first grade.

But the best way for parents to offset the achievement gap is to become a stronger presence in public schools, Hill says. "When African-American parents can volunteer at school, it increases student achievement," Hill says. "All families are busy. They send their children to school and go to work. But it seems to make a bigger difference for African-American students when their parents can visit the classroom."³⁹ Hill's research did not examine the reasons behind this phenomenon, but she surmises that this is because both the teacher and the student see that education is important to the child's parents. This prompts the teacher to raise expectations and the child to work harder.

The Impact of Re-Segregation on Black Students

Public schools across the state are becoming more racially diverse. However, "white flight," the dismantling of mandatory school busing, and support for neighborhood schools and school choice as reflected in charter schools and school vouchers is creating a re-segregated system of schools.

An analysis by *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, N.C., found that the number of North Carolina schools with minority enrollments of 80 percent or more has doubled in the past seven years to 226 out of roughly 2,100 schools. "Of the 226 schools with minority enrollments of at least 80 percent, fewer than a dozen can claim the



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achievement levels typically found in middle-class suburban schools," writes Tim Simmons. "Most are in rural counties or small towns where teachers who want to stay in the profession have little choice about where to work." The racial balance in 302 other schools throughout the state has shifted and produced enrollments that are 60 to 80 percent minority, triggering white flight among parents.⁴⁰

But the most watched school system is in the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, with its emphasis on school choice and neighborhood schools. A federal judge declared in 1999 that Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools no longer had to bus students outside of their communities to achieve integration. In 2002, the school system began its first year operating under a plan that does not include race in assigning students to schools. A *Charlotte Observer* analysis showed that the plan resulted in schools with high concentrations of poverty, as well as black majority schools.

"There is a very strong correlation between the percent poor in a school and its average test score," says Gary Orfield, a professor of Education and Social Policy at Harvard University. "Therefore, minority students in segregated schools, no matter how able they may be as individuals, usually face a much lower level of competition and average preparation by other students. Such schools tend to have teachers who are themselves much more likely to be teaching a subject they did not study and with which they have had little experience."⁴¹

However, not all African-American parents are bemoaning re-segregation. Some black parents of a certain age romanticize their own days in segregated schools. Despite the lack of adequate textbooks and resources, they say teachers at all-black schools cared about students and took a personal interest in their achievement.

"Too many times, what is missing is the sort of bond between the teacher and the student that makes a child want to excel," says Henry Johnson, a former associate state superintendent in North Carolina who now serves as Mississippi's statewide public schools superintendent.⁴²

Frustrated with plodding education reforms that take too long to trickle down to black students, some parents are seeking alternatives to traditional schools such as: all-black charter schools; vouchers to attend specialized private schools; or home-schooling. Parents say these choices offer students smaller class sizes and individualized attention, factors in improving test scores.

But Helen Ladd, an economics professor at

Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, contends that widespread use of school vouchers will not generate substantial gains in student achievement. Ladd argues that a large voucher system would result in large numbers of disadvantaged students being grouped together in schools that more motivated and/or talented students fled.

"At the same time, there are good arguments for giving families, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, more power to choose the schools their children attend," Ladd said. "The challenge for policymakers is to find ways to expand parental choices without excessively privileging the interests of individual families over the social interests that justify the public funding of K-12 education."⁴³

Keeping It Real: Peer Pressure and Student Response to the Minority Achievement Gap

"**K**eeing it real" is a phrase that hip-hop and rap recording artists use to signify that they have remained true to their racial identity despite achieving financial success in mainstream society. But some education experts say that the pressure to "keep it real" could create a false sense of identity for African-American students who equate getting good grades with "acting white."

"Many rappers couple biting social commentary with positive lyrics about how to improve things," says National Urban League President Hugh Price. "Still, there's no question that some rappers see only the dark side of life and dismiss trying to succeed on society's terms. That message is ruinous and leads nowhere."

Cheryl, a fifth-grader from Detroit, told Price about the tug of war African-American students feel between keeping it real and acting white. "Some black kids will shoot you down if you're smart in school and accuse you of having 'airs' and thinking you're better than anyone else. I love school, but I don't want people to say stupid things about me or leave me out. It's hard to know what to do."⁴⁴

Such feelings have real world consequences, says Ferguson, who disputes a study that discounts the "acting white" phenomenon. "Black students may hesitate to raise their hands in class, to participate in class discussions, or to seem eager to learn because they fear social ostracism by their peers," Ferguson says. "Some blacks may moderate their speech because they worry about sounding too much like an 'Oreo.' Others may try to 'act ghetto' in an effort to assert their racial authentic-

Now I see the importance of history
Why my people be in the mess that they be
Many journeys to freedom made in vain
By brothers on the corner playing ghetto games.

-FROM "TENNESSEE"

BY RAP GROUP *ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT*

ity, but as a consequence may convince teachers that they are disruptive and uncommitted to academic matters."⁴⁵

The history of racial discrimination in the United States has led some African-American students to value education less than other groups and to associate academic success with acting white, according to John Ogbu, a recently deceased University of Berkeley at California researcher who devoted much of his career to studying minority achievement. "The equation of the school curriculum, the standard classroom behaviors and instructional language, the standard English, with white American culture and language results in conscious or unconscious opposition or ambivalence toward learning and using instrumental behaviors to make good grades and obtain the school credentials that the students say they need and want," Ogbu said. "This phenomenon, which has to do with identity choice, is a dilemma that cuts across class lines. It

may partly explain the low school performance of some middle-class students."⁴⁶

Some students have a strong inner drive or community/parental support that causes them to succeed despite the taunts, while other students who grapple with their racial identity are more vulnerable.

"Once students have figured out their African-American identity, it is actually positively associated with achievement," says Duke University professor Nancy Hill. "When you look historically at African-American people's experience in the United States . . . the message was clear that getting an education was an important key to getting ahead."

Philip Cook of Duke University and co-author Jens Ludwig of Georgetown University find that high-achieving African-American students are no more likely to be unpopular than other students. They find that high-achieving African Americans, overall, have similar attendance rates and spend almost as much time on homework. African-American students also tend to frame certain types of peer pressure in racial terms while white students taunt over-achieving peers as "nerds" or "geeks."

"Newspaper accounts of African-American valedictorians and honor students who are elected officers in student government provide some support for our view that high-achieving blacks are not particularly socially isolated," Cook and Ludwig say. "It seems unlikely that these high achievers would have been elected class president or vice president had their popularity been limited to one small clique within the school."⁴⁷

Beyond Black and White: Educational Achievement Gap Also Affects Hispanics/Latinos and Native Americans

While it's tempting to lump all minorities into a single category when discussing the educational achievement gap, there are differences among ethnic groups that call for targeted solutions and strategies.

Latino Achievement Gap

Latinos are quickly replacing African Americans as the nation's largest minority group, according to recent U.S. Census data. And, the number of Latino students enrolled in traditional North Carolina public schools increased in the past decade from

1.1 percent (12,641) of the overall student population of 1,146,657 students during the 1992-1993 school year to 5.9 percent (77,485) in 2002-2003.

About 70 percent of Latino children enrolled in North Carolina's public schools could read and solve math problems at or above their grade level, according to the 2002-2003 ABCs of Education results. "It amazes a lot of people that with language being a barrier, they are making that kind of progress," says Charlotte Hughes, section chief in the N.C. Department of Public Instruction's Effective Practices Section. Despite significant language barriers, Latino children outscored their African-American peers.

No exceptions are made for Latino or other limited English proficiency students when it comes to state and federal education testing. Latino students are tested for their language abilities once they are enrolled in school. They are given one type of test if their English is limited and another type of test if they are fluent. Alternative testing is available for students who score below "intermediate/high" in the IDEA Proficiency test, which was initially created to allow disabled children to be tested.⁴⁸

The average SAT score for Latinos in 2003 was 961.⁴⁹ North Carolina Latino students scored 122 points higher than black students in the state and 49 points higher than their national counterparts. But the Latino average score dipped by nine points (970) from 2000. In that year, Latino students in North Carolina scored 52 points above their national counterparts.

But Latinos still lag behind white students. The Latino-white achievement gap reached its narrowest in 1992, but widened thereafter. They trailed white students by 18.6 points on the 2002–03 end-of-grade tests. On SAT tests in 2003, there was a 89-point gap between Latino and white students in North Carolina.

The Latino achievement gap can be measured in other ways. By the end of high school, Latino students nationwide had skills in both reading and math that are comparable to an eighth-grade white student. A 1999 study revealed that only 1 in 50 Latinos could read and gain information from specialized texts, such as the science section in the newspaper, compared to 1 in 12 whites by the end of high school.⁵⁰

A consistent pattern emerged in mathematical ability. About 1 in 30 Latinos and 1 in 100 African-American students could comfortably do multi-step problem-solving and elementary algebra, compared to 1 in 10 white students. Less than one-quarter of Latinos could read complicated but less specialized texts that more than half of white students could read. Only 4 in 10 Latino 17-year-olds and 3 in 10 African-American 17-year-olds had mastered the usage and computation of fractions, commonly used percents, and averages, compared to 7 in 10 white students.

Student achievement also affects **dropout rates and college attendance**. Hispanics made up 5.9 percent of North Carolina's student population and 6.9 percent of students who dropped out of school in 2002–2003. Nationally, in the 18 to 24-year-old group, 63 percent of Latinos have completed high school or earned a GED (General Education Development) credential. This compares to

the 81 percent of African Americans, 90 percent of whites, and 94 percent of Asians who finish high school. Among high school graduates, nationally, some 71 percent of Hispanics/Latinos go directly to college, a figure similar to that of African Americans but less than the 76 percent of whites, and 86 percent of Asian high school graduates who go directly to college. Young Latinos are only one-third as likely as whites to earn a bachelor's degree by age 29, with 10 percent earning a degree compared to 28 percent for whites. Young African Americans, at 16 percent, are a little more than half as likely as whites to earn a bachelor's degree by age 29.⁵¹

Overcoming the language barrier is often the first and most significant hurdle that Latino students encounter when entering the classroom. Depending on the student's level of language proficiency, it could take from one to seven school years for students to learn English. The first two years are often spent developing social language and the next three to seven years for academic language development.

Language affects learning in overt and subtle ways. Spanish-speaking students, for example, are able to recognize English letters. But they will have different names for the letters and may associate different sounds with perhaps a third of the letters. This will interfere with their oral reading and spelling abilities. In mathematics, students from South America use a period instead of a comma when writing large numbers. Students from South America and the Caribbean may mentally solve arithmetic problems while U.S. students write out long division problems. Overcoming these barriers could help Spanish-speaking students improve their math skills in U.S. schools.⁵²

Latino immigrants come willingly to the United States to seek a better life and often earn more money in the U.S. than they do at home. But in North Carolina, 25.2 percent of Latinos live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census, and per capita income is less than half that of whites.

Nationally, Latinos tend to be in more segregated schools. In 1968, 54.8 percent of all Latino students in the nation attended segregated schools, but almost half went to majority white schools, according to Gary Orfield, a Harvard University professor of education and social policy.⁵³ By 1998, 75.6 percent of Latinos were in predominantly minority schools and less than one-fourth in majority white schools. Latinos are substantially more segregated and have less contact with whites than black students since 1980, Orfield found.

Latinos, like black students, often attend schools with the highest levels of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, a measure of family poverty. "Minority students in segregated schools, no matter how able they may be as individuals, usually face a much lower level of competition and average preparation by other students," writes Orfield in his article, "Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation."⁵⁴

Latino students in schools with high concentrations of poor students tend to suffer, Orfield says, because such schools have more inexperienced teachers and teachers instructing in subjects they have never studied. Fewer students are ready for advanced courses, and opportunities are eliminated for those students who are because of their relatively low numbers.

Latino students also face possible stereotypes by teachers regarding student achievement and parental involvement. School administrators and teachers misread the reserved, non-confrontational manners and non-involvement of Latino parents as a lack of interest in their child's education. But like African-American parents, Latinos care deeply about their child's education and have high goals for their children.

A review of literature regarding Latino parents found that they view their role in school involvement differently than the school or the teacher.⁵⁵

Parents, according to this study, think their role is to nurture their children and teach them such lessons as proper behavior, good character, and respect for adults. They think the role of the school is to instill knowledge. When parents are asked to take on some of the responsibilities of the school, such as going over lessons at home, Latino parents may feel they are doing the job of the school.

"In the Latino culture, teachers are highly respected and any interference from parents may be considered rude and disrespectful," says Barri Tinkler, admissions coordinator at the University of Denver in a paper that summarizes Hispanic/Latino Parent Involvement in K-12 Education.⁵⁶ "Therefore, though teachers view parents asking questions about assignments and grades to show caring for their child's education, Latino parents may view this as a sign of disrespect."

Native-American Achievement Gap

Native-American students have made up 1.5 percent of the state's average student membership in recent years. In 2003, that totaled 18,651 of 1,332,140 students. While Native-American students often test well among ethnic groups on the end-of-grade and SAT tests, they are still overrepresented among students who serve long-term suspensions or leave high school.



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About 72.3 percent of Native-American students in the state could read and solve math problems at or above their grade level in 2003. This is up from 62.7 percent in 2001–2002. Following Asian students, Native Americans had the second-highest test scores among ethnic groups on end-of-grade tests.


Only 115 Native-American students in North Carolina took the Advanced Placement (AP) test in 2002 compared to 494 Latinos and 2,438 blacks. But of the Native-American students who took the AP test, 45.1 percent scored a “3” (qualified) or better.⁵⁷ Most institutions use a “3” or higher as a benchmark for awarding credit or advanced placement.

The average SAT score for Native-American students in North Carolina in 2003 was 923. This is up nine points from 2002. Nationally, Native-American students achieved an average score of 962 in 2003. North Carolina’s American-Indian students reduced the gap between their performance and that of American Indians nationally from 48 points in 2002 to 39 points in 2003.⁵⁸

Education advocates say they are deeply concerned about the significant dropout rate among

American-Indian students relative to their small presence among the state’s overall student population and relative to the dropout rate among white students. “The overall achievement of Native-American students is complicated by their diverse cultural context,” writes Louise C. Maynor, chairman of the State Advisory Council on Indian Education in its annual report. “These students expressed some tension in maintaining their identity as Native Americans and succeeding in achieving the goals of the mainstream culture.”⁵⁹

That tension causes some Native-American students to fall behind in classes or drop out all together. Native Americans represented 1.5 percent



“It is a great shock at the age of five or six to find that in a world of Gary Coopers you are the Indian.”

—NOVELIST JAMES BALDWIN

Table 5.
Percentage of Dropouts by Race and Ethnicity
Compared to Overall Public School Membership
by Race and Ethnicity, 2002–2003

	% of All Dropouts, Grades 1–12*	% of Average Public School Membership
Whites	54.75%	59.4%
African Americans	33.42%	31.2%
Hispanic/Latino	6.87%	5.9%
American Indian	2.48%	1.5%
Asian	1.38%	2.0%
Multiracial	1.00%	N.A.

* Because North Carolina law requires school attendance from grades 1–12, students who attended school at some point during the prior year and do not show up for school within 20 days of the beginning of a new school year without transferring to a school in another district, a home school, a private school, or any other state or district approved educational program, are counted as dropouts.

N.A. = Data not available.

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Dropout Data Report, 2002–2003*, p. 11.



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of the average student membership in 2002–2003, but they accounted for 2.48 percent of total dropouts (see Table 5, p. 98). The dropout rates among Native Americans had dipped since 2000, but turned up again in 2002–2003. Moreover, Native Americans continue to have the highest dropout rates per ethnic population, with 3.21 percent for males and 2.45 percent for females.

In one student account documented in the State Advisory Board's annual report, Native-American students expressed weariness from refuting pervasive stereotypes about their culture. They felt disconnected from the school and weighed down by changing school policies about graduation requirements. In some cases, entire Native-American families dropped out of school.

"Well, back to Donnell, it was like he just didn't have a connection with anybody," a student said in a personal account. "I mean he couldn't even pick the guidance counselor out of a line-up. I know he kind of felt like I did—classes were boring a lot of the time, and a lot of our teachers just didn't seem to care all that much whether we learned anything or not."

Some strategies proposed at a May 2003 meeting of the State Board of Education to help Native Americans stay in school included: increasing the demand and use of textbooks that

fairly and accurately represent Native Americans, creating boards or commissions within the state Department of Public Instruction to address issues affecting Native-American students, reviewing policies on use of Native-American images as mascots for sports teams, diversity training for teachers, and recruiting more Native Americans to become teachers.⁶⁰

According to current State Board of Education Policy, schools must review the use of Indian mascots and imagery each year to "educate themselves on the educational, curricular, and psychological effects of using sports mascots and logos." Currently, 42 North Carolina schools retain Indian mascots despite this requirement.⁶¹

North Carolina's Search For Solutions

Closing the educational achievement gap is a high priority on the federal and state level. Federal education reforms under the "No Child Left Behind" law require school systems to meet yearly education targets for minorities and other groups.⁶² Still, there is a nagging sense among some segments of the public that minority students count for less. "I feel like teachers pay more attention to white children . . . and that's why black children are having a hard time in school," says

Brenda Valines, a black resident of Alamance County.

North Carolina educators are working hard to dispel that notion. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Ward initiated a 10-step plan to raise achievement levels and close achievement gaps by 2001 (see "State Superintendent of Public Instruction's 10-Point Plan," page 101, for more). The N.C. Department of Public Instruction instituted a new section, Closing the Achievement Gap, within the Division of School Improvement to address this issue.

An Advisory Commission on Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps was appointed in the summer of 2000 to make recommendations to the State Board of Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and local school systems. The group published its first report in December 2001 and held a series of town hall meetings in the fall of 2003 to solicit input.

Some solutions include teacher training in understanding multicultural differences, smaller classes, requiring early identification for students who are at risk of failure, improving services for students with limited English proficiency, and using

more than just test scores when making promotion decisions.

Other solutions attack internal causes of the minority achievement gap. They include encouraging more minorities to take challenging classes, establishing mentoring programs for public school students with minority students at historically black colleges and universities, and creating events to better integrate parents with schools.

While these efforts have made some headway as indicated by the shrinking of the existing gap, there remains significant ground to cover. Howard Lee, chairman of the State Board of Education, advocates focusing on improving the performance of students with low socio-economic standing in the effort to raise overall achievement. Mike Ward, the state superintendent, advocates redoubling efforts to educate minorities while attending to the needs of all students.

Both are undoubtedly correct. The long-term health of public education depends upon meeting the needs of all students, rather than a select few—but in the short run, educators must strengthen their efforts to attend to the needs of minorities who have been the victims of past neglect. ■

*Image of Indian warrior in Louisburg High School cafeteria.
Such Native American imagery has become controversial in the public schools.*



State Superintendent of Public Instruction's 10-Point Plan To Close the Achievement Gap Between Whites and Minority Students:

1. Children at every performance level should improve academically. Students experiencing difficulty should be helped to reach proficiency and beyond. High-performing students should reach even higher levels of achievement. The goal should be growth across all levels—with performance lines converging. The most immediate goal is closing the gap in percentages of students who are achieving at grade level.
2. Create a permanent advisory committee to the State Superintendent/Department to address the issues of higher standards and closing performance gaps by race, gender, and socioeconomic status. This group's actions will include issuing an annual report on the status of and progress to close gaps and challenge all students to higher levels.
3. Establish a section within the department to provide technical assistance to schools and school systems to help close the gaps. The ABCs assistance team approach will be used as the model for this section. These staff members and teachers-on-loan will work with other department staff to address best practices, alternative education, dropout prevention, instruction and testing, parent and community involvement, staff development and other areas.
4. Require local school systems to develop annual plans for closing gaps and challenging all students to higher levels. Conduct random reviews of these plans.
5. Develop budget requests for the short session and the next biennium and subsequent years of the legislature for funds for DPI, local school systems, and local schools to use in closing gaps and challenging all students to higher levels of performance.
6. Direct \$4 million in Goals 2000 funds to assist local school systems in closing the gaps. Also, coordinate with other state, federal, and private agencies and groups to secure funding and services that can help close gaps and challenge students.
7. Calculate each school's progress under the ABCs accountability program based on the second and third retests for students in grades 3, 5, and 8 (gateway years under the student accountability standards). This change will reward the schools for making progress with students who need extra help. Also, work with the five local districts participating in the ABCs pilot program that rewards schools for improving performance of subgroups of students.
8. Seek funding and legislation to pilot dual language demonstration sites to help meet the needs of English language learners.
9. Develop a resource center for schools and school systems for information on best practices in closing gaps. This center would include information on available training in multicultural issues, what's working in high-performing schools, and other resources.
10. Encourage local collaboration of school leaders, parents, the faith community, students, historically minority colleges and universities, other higher education institutions, and other stakeholders to hold community forums and take action to support closing gaps and challenging students to higher levels of performance.



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FOOTNOTES

¹ PL 107-110, *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

² North Carolina's multi-year commitment to the ABCs of Public Education defies a tendency on the part of the state to flit from reform to reform in its approach to educating young people. For more on this topic, see S.D. Williams and Joanne Scharer, "Random Acts of Public School Reform—Will New Elections and Budgets Undo Current Reform Efforts Again?" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2, October 2000, pp. 58-107. The ABC program is discussed on pp. 84-97.

³ N.C. Department of Public Instruction, "North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile 2003," p. 18.

⁴ "The ABCs of Public Education: 2002-2003," N.C. Department of Public Instruction at <http://abcs.ncpublicschools.org/abcs/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ N.C. Department of Public Instruction press release "North Carolina's SAT Score Increases Three Points; Breaks Thousand-Point Threshold," Aug. 26, 2003, at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/news/03-04/082603.html>.

⁷ N.C. Department of Public Instruction, "State of the State: Educational Performance in North Carolina, 2002," pp. 19-20, at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/news/03-04/082603.html>.

⁸ Sheria Reid, *The Achievement Gap 2002, An Update—How Minority Students Are Faring in NC's Public Schools*, Education and Law Project, North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, Raleigh, N.C., July, 2002, pp. 5-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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