

Mississippi failing black students: Report



Kate Royals, The Clarion-Ledger

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(Photo: Illustration/Gannett)

Black students in Mississippi are in worse shape when it comes to being prepared for college and the workforce compared to their white counterparts and, in some cases, compared to other black students nationwide, according to a study released Thursday by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

The study, “The Path Forward: Improving Opportunities for African-American Students,” measures how these students in K-12 schools are performing across the country. In the past 25 years, the performance and graduation rates of black students have improved but still remain well below the national average and white students’ average performance.

Despite overall gains by Mississippi fourth-graders in reading and math over the years, the number of black fourth-graders scoring proficient on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test was 14 percent, one of the lowest percentages in the nation. And the numbers were worse for African-American eighth-graders — 8 percent scored proficient in reading.

In comparison, 18 percent of African-American fourth-graders nationwide scored proficient in reading and 19 percent scored proficient in math. The eighth-grade numbers were more dismal, with 16 percent rating proficient in reading and 13 percent rating proficient in math.

State Superintendent Carey Wright said although she has not had time to review the entire report, she is aware of significant achievement gaps in Mississippi between black and white students.

“That is absolutely unacceptable. I’ve always said that behind every data point is a face, and that school districts should be reviewing their data to see which students need additional supports,” Wright said in an emailed statement. “Every student deserves the opportunity to achieve at high levels, no matter who they are or where they live.”

Students score in three categories on NAEP: basic, proficient and advanced. Students who score proficient are described as having demonstrated competency over the subject matter, according to the National Assessment Governing Board.

The foundation’s report used scores from the NAEP, also referred to as the Nation’s Report Card, as the benchmark for student achievement. The test is given to public and private school students and is the largest ongoing assessment of students across the nation.

Wright cited several recent initiatives by the state she hoped will improve academic performance for all students, including a heightened focus on literacy, increased professional development for teachers and administrators and the implementation of high learning goals for all students.

Mississippi tied with Alabama in the bottom five states for college readiness for African-American students. Researchers measured college readiness by looking at graduation ratios, ACT scores, participation and passage rates on AP tests, and post-secondary remediation rates, or the rate at which students take remedial classes in college.

Mississippi had the lowest percentage of black students — 3 percent — attaining a college-ready score on the ACT in all four subjects.

The state also had the smallest percentage passing at least one Advance Placement exam in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics field: 4 percent of black students passed an AP STEM exam during high school in Mississippi, while not a single black student in Mississippi passed the AP World Languages exam.

But the picture was not drastically better in other states. Only three states — Colorado, Massachusetts and Hawaii — had more than 5 percent of its black students pass an AP STEM exam, and the rate for World Language hovered around 2 percent for Vermont, which had the largest percentage to pass.

The report also notes sample size can affect the results. For instance, African-Americans make up 4.7 percent of all students in Colorado, 2.1 percent in Hawaii and 8.7 percent in Massachusetts, compared to 49.3 percent in Mississippi, the highest in the nation for the school year studied.

“The numbers are just abysmal,” Cheryl Oldham, vice president of education policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said of the numbers of African-American students accessing and passing advanced courses in STEM. “For the business community, the employer community, this is where there are industries.”

Superintendent Wright said Mississippi is applying for an AP grant that would help the state come up with ways to close the achievement gap seen in AP and other advanced programs.

And as for those students who do not plan to go on to college, Wright said the state is working through other programs to provide them opportunities.

"We are also working to expand access to dual credit/dual enrollment programs, as well as career pathways, to meet the needs of students across the state," she said.

The report's release coincides with the demise of the No Child Left Behind Act, which authors of the report say could be responsible for many of the improvements that occurred among low-performing students. The Every Student Succeeds Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law on Thursday, gives more control to states and local school districts in evaluating and working to improve their schools.

Oldham said the foundation will be pushing members to encourage state policymakers to create accountability plans now that states are responsible for creating standards and goals.

"If those academic goals aren't met, it's going to be up to states and districts to decide what kind of interventions take place ... That's where a report like this comes into play," Oldham said of the study, which also highlights successful state and national incentives to increase African-American students' performance.

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CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported the proficiency rate of African-American eighth graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress was 15 percent for reading and 12 percent in math. The correct numbers are 16 percent for reading and 13 percent for math. The embargoed version of the report from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation contained the incorrect numbers.

Study takeaways:

Percentage of African-Americans nationwide to score proficient in reading:

Fourth grade: 18 percent

Eighth grade: 15 percent

Percentage of African-Americans nationwide to score proficient in math:

Fourth grade: 19 percent

Eighth grade: 12 percent

States with highest percentage of African-American graduates who took at least one AP exam:

District of Columbia (47.5 percent)

Hawaii (43.7 percent)

Florida (43.6 percent)

States with highest percentage of African-Americans who passed at least one AP exam in a STEM subject:

Colorado (5.9 percent)

Massachusetts (5.4 percent)

Hawaii (5 percent)

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