

African-American Students Lagging Far Behind

A new analysis provides a sobering gut-check on the achievement gap in U.S. schools.



African-American students perform at lower levels than white students at nearly all levels, a new analysis shows.

By [Lauren Camera](#) | Dec. 11, 2015, at 5:15 p.m.

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A [sweeping portrait](#) of the performance of African-American students in U.S. schools today shows while strides have been made over the past 25 years, they are performing at significantly lower levels than students nationally.

On the [2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), only 18 percent of African-American fourth-graders were proficient in reading and only 19 percent scored as proficient in math, according to an analysis by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation released Friday. The eighth-grade numbers were even worse, with only 16 percent of African-American students proficient in reading and 13 percent proficient in math.

By comparison, the report said, the national average for proficiency among all students in fourth-grade reading was 36 percent, while it was 40 percent in fourth-grade math, 34 percent in eighth-grade reading and 33 percent in eighth-grade math.

"It is easy to look at this report and despair," its authors wrote. "It puts front and center the fact that too many of our nation's young people are failing to achieve their potential, and that African-American students are disproportionately impacted by the shortcomings in our education system."

The foundation drilled down to produce-state specific reports, but also drew several top-line conclusions.



For starters, there is a clear mismatch between graduation rates and rates of college readiness for African-American students in many states. For example, graduation rates for African-American students range from 84 percent in Texas to 57 percent in both Nevada and Oregon. But, according to data from the ACT test, the percentage of African-American students who are college-ready in English, math, reading, and science ranges from 17 percent in Massachusetts to only 3 percent in Mississippi.

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In addition, while African-American students are gaining more access to rigorous classes, they aren't to the degree they should be, and it's also not clear that those who do enroll in higher-level courses are succeeding. In three states, more than 40 percent of

African-American students graduated having taken at least one Advanced Placement exam, but Hawaii was the only state to see more than 15 percent of African-American students actually pass those exams.

Additionally, the report found that far too few African-American students are excelling in science, technology, engineering and math – or **STEM** – subjects. Only three states saw more than 5 percent of African-American students in their graduating class pass at least one Advanced Placement test in a STEM subject during high school, and four states saw less than 1 percent of African-American students graduate having passed one STEM subject exam.

The report noted, however, that success on AP STEM exams has been an issue among all students, not just African-American students.

"We have to reject the narrative that just because a student is African-American or Puerto Rican, like I am ... [that] doesn't mean we give up," said soon-to-be [Education Secretary John King](#), who spoke at the Chamber on Friday in concert with the study's release. "No. Instead we invest, nurture and create opportunity."

While there are no silver bullets, the report authors wrote, the Boston public school system has experienced some success thanks in part to the system's achievement gap office, which it founded in 2009. The office oversees a variety of programs, including the 10 Boys Initiative, which selects and provides individualized attention to African-American students who are at the cusp of proficiency.



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The initiative matches such students with a mentor and offers additional resources to improve proficiency. A 2014 study found that in just one year, there was a 12 percent increase in participants scoring proficient or advanced on the state's English and language arts test, as well as a 7 percent increase in attendance and a 10 percent reduction in number of suspensions.

The Boston school system also has developed a robust early education program that the report credited. A Harvard University study found the program resulted in a 4 percent achievement gap between white and black students enrolled in the program versus an 11 percent gap between white and black students not enrolled. The gap between white and Hispanic students also fell by 14 percent for those enrolled.

Today, the Boston school system spends approximately \$10,000 per preschool student compared with the declining national average of \$4,125.

The report authors additionally underscored the important role of accountability.

"The requirement that states set academic achievement goals for sub-group populations, disaggregate data to bring shortcomings to light, and intervene when goals are not met remains groundbreaking," the report said in specific reference to No Child Left Behind, the federal K-12 law. "Accountability can do wonders for motivation."

Notably, the report comes a day after President Barack Obama signed into law the [Every Student](#)

[Succeeds Act](#), a measure that replaces No Child Left Behind, which in 2002 ushered in a robust role in K-12 education for the federal government and helped shine a light on achievement gaps.

The new law shifts much of the power over decision-making back to the states. Yet despite broad support for it from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and the diverse community of education groups – including most civil rights organizations – there are still some concerned the legislation will allow states to [shirk their responsibility](#) of ensuring [equal access](#) for the most disadvantaged students, including African-American students.



King sought to ease those concerns during his speech Friday, conceding that everyone will need to be vigilant but that the new law will allow states to unleash a flood of innovation.

"We have the opportunity to ask ... 'Why is it that schools are more segregated today than they were 10 or 20 years ago?'" he said. "We can use this flexibility for states to look and ask, 'Why is it that African-Americans make up 17 percent of those in pre-K but more than 70 percent of those who are suspended from pre-K?'"

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King also hammered home the Obama administration's belief that the new legislation preserves the equity intent of the original federal education law, which was passed in 1965 during the height

of the civil rights movement.

"The reason the president signed the law is because we believe it does protect the civil rights aspect of the law," he said, adding that the Education Department will retain at least some important enforcement levers, like the ability to withhold funds in extenuating circumstances.

"I'm optimistic that the community of state chiefs realizes that this law gives them new flexibility, and with that comes new responsibility," King said.

TAGS: education policy, minority students, No Child Left Behind, K-12 education, race

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