

# Dismantling the Achievement Gap

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*Equal outcomes remain elusive for African American students.*

## Five Decades of Brown V. Board of Education

Racial segregation in US schools was effectively outlawed with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in the court's decision "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." In the 53 years since that decision, American education has changed dramatically. Codified segregation was swept away with the court ruling, but the ingrained practice has taken much longer to overcome. In fact, current trends indicate increased segregation based on ethnic and socio economic factors in recent years. More importantly, parity among dominant and minority ethnic groups has been especially elusive following noticeable gains in the early years of institutional desegregation.

## The Intricacies Abound

The achievement gap among American students is an intricate issue. There are some notable trends found through research, but the numerous variables that affect student learning make conclusions fleeting and solutions rare. A glimpse at the Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project webpage reveals some informative trends. Overall, the assessment scores of Hispanic and black students have increased at a greater rate than white students, but at current rates, parity will take centuries. Likewise, achievement gaps have been narrowing in most states, but that improvement has not been realized in several areas of the country. The connection between socioeconomic status and student achievement was also demonstrated in most states. These trends are notable, but when details like reading in the home, involvement in extra-curricular activities, gender and school facilities are considered the situation defies easy analysis.

## Decoding it All

For school leaders, the achievement gap may seem like an overwhelming issue. It has defied the greatest minds in education and public policy for decades and the issue can prove treacherous if not carefully considered. Stanford researcher Sean Reardon has developed a series of separate aspects of disparity as a guide for analysis. According to Reardon, there are racial and family resource based disparities and disparities in education policies that interact to influence student learning. The racial and family resource disparities are often beyond the control of educators, but include home disparities like reading at an early age or access to books and neighborhood disparities like socio-economic conditions and access to services such as libraries or other institutions. Educators are much better situated to address

inter-school disparities such as facilities and teacher quality and intra-school disparities like tracking and student expectations.

## **Trusting and Investing in the System**

In the way that is described above and previously, the system works. But it is worth noting the irony. What anyone in education can tell you is that the achievement gap has not been effectively resolved, but there is much that school leaders can do to address the issue at the school or district level. When those individual aspects of disparity are considered the task seems much more surmountable.

### *School Level*

Begin with the issues of disparity with individual schools. Are students held to the same high standards by all instructors, regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic status? Are students of one ethnicity or gender facing disproportionate numbers of disciplinary action?

### *District Level*

At the district or regional level, work to ensure each school is provided with the needed resources. If resources are limited, which they are most of the time, find equitable means to provide access. Although the ability of educators to address the disparities in student's homes and neighborhoods may be limited, there are opportunities to improve the larger community through the school.

This is already happening, collaboration. Be prepared to increase collaboration with area institutions, not just libraries but community centers as well. After school tutoring and mentoring from faculty members or local businesses are powerful tools in the larger community. But they need to be done right. Do not have an after school program and then not have the tutors show up regularly. Then the students will not show up when they need the help. Why because no one is there to tutor them, when they really need it. Schools often say that they have after school tutoring, but they really do not. It is a check box for a grant. That is not how equity is achieved. It is with the follow through, the incessant reading and then reviewing the numbers of those standardized exams and then implementing actual real life action steps. All of this is inherently time consuming. School leaders have to ask themselves if they are invested in the outcome. If not, be honest, then it is time for a career change.

Schools know how to play the game of funding. But this is not the game of life, it is actually a life the school is impacting, rather many lives that they are encroaching upon and having devastating effects on. At the same time, looking out for their own native sons, but not those students that really need the help. The remarkable part is that this is going on in schools all over the US causing this disparity. It is one thing for academicians to rant about the achievement gap, it is another to have school administrators actually do something about it, and not just another box to check for grant funding.

Although open positions may be limited in a school district, an effort should be made to connect people from the community to those vacancies. Making school facilities available for adult education programs, vocational training and job fairs are just a few ways a school can have a demonstrable influence on the socio-economic condition of the local community.

It is a tumultuous time in US education. School leaders find themselves overwhelmed by the internal and external forces that demand their attention. Finding the time and resources to address this persistent issue may prove challenging, but individual principals, administrators and teachers have the power to erode the achievement gap and make it a historic anomaly. That aspiration may take years, decades or centuries to achieve, but if we are to overcome the larger disparities in our society, we must first, overcome the disparities in our schools.

**Comment below:** how have extra services provided to students affected student outcomes in your school or district? What have been the most effective programs in schools that have increased student outcomes that you are aware of?

**Keywords:** Brown Vs. Board of Education, Thurgood Marshall, Educational Disparity, Educational Equity

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