

Poverty Explains Some of the Achievement Gap, but Not All

By Will Craig

The Twin Cities have one of the worst achievement gaps in the nation. On third-grade reading tests, 70% of White students meet the achievement standards, while only 38% of students of color meet those standards.¹ This article attempts to understand the causes of that gap. It focuses on family income and finds it explains much of the gap. Some schools in the Metro area have been able to close the remaining gap for low-income students of color.

There are three straight-forward ways to account for the racial achievement gap: family income, limited English

English proficiency (23% meet the standard) and those eligible for special education programs (31% meet the standard).

A disproportionate number of people of color are low income. If LEP and special education are controlled, was there a chance that income explains all (or most) of the achievement gap? Exploring that possibility was the major purpose of this report.

Third-grade Reading Scores - Adjusted

I asked the Minnesota Department of Education to produce data on third-grade test scores by race and income

points for American Indians (See Table 1, column a). I use the term “Black” because the Minnesota Department of Education race data combines African American students and the children of African immigrants. Hispanic and Asian student gaps, where limited English proficiency can be a major issue, shrink to 14 and 2 percentage points, respectively, after eliminating LEP students.

The next step is to look at the impact of family income on test scores. Family income level was determined by looking at whether a student was enrolled in the free or reduced program. For a family of four, those earning under

Table 1: Adjusted Twin Cities Area Third-grade Reading Test Results for Public School Students by Race/Ethnicity and Income, 2013–14. (Excludes students with limited English proficiency and those receiving Special Education services.)

Race / Ethnicity	All Students		Lower Income Students (Free and Reduced Lunch)			Higher Income Students (No Lunch Subsidy)		
	Meets or Exceeds Standard (a)	Number Students (b)	Meets or Exceeds Standard (c)	Number Students (d)	Percent of Race, Ethnicity (e)	Meets or Exceeds Standard (f)	Number Students (g)	Percent of Race, Ethnicity (h)
White	75%	18,052	57%	2,835	16%	78%	15,217	84%
Asian	73%	1,877	52%	496	26%	80%	1,381	74%
Hispanic	61%	1,187	53%	607	51%	70%	580	49%
Black	42%	3,708	36%	2,918	79%	62%	790	21%
American Indian	43%	354	38%	263	74%	58%	91	26%
TOTAL	69%	25,178	47%	7,119	28%	77%	18,059	72%

proficiency (LEP), and disability of some kind. We know that lower income students do worse on the Minnesota Comprehensive Achievement Tests (MCA); only 24% of those enrolled in the free or reduced program meet the standard. Similarly, low achievement levels exist for those with limited

for all public schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.² I asked them to remove students who are eligible for LEP services or who are receiving special education services. With those factors removed, the achievement gap continues to exist: 33 percentage points for Black students and 32 percentage

\$44,000 are eligible for this program.³ Figure 1 shows that children from lower income families do worse than those from higher income families, regardless of race.

¹ Statistics in this paragraph and the next are taken from Wilder Research’s Minnesota Compass: <http://www.mncompass.org/>

² I also asked them for eighth-grade math scores and analyzed that data to a lesser degree. Results were similar to what is presented here.

³ Children in families earning less than 130% of the federal poverty line are eligible for free lunch; families earning less than 185% of the federal poverty line are eligible for a reduced price lunch. For a family of four, these thresholds amount to roughly \$31,000 and \$44,000, respectively, per year.

Table 1 documents the impact of family income on third-grade reading test results in more detail. Overall, more than three quarters (77%) of the higher income students succeed while less than half (47%) of the lower income students do. That drop in performance for low-income students holds for every race and ethnic group (compare columns c and f). Asian student performance continues to match that of Whites at both income levels. The Hispanic achievement gap shrinks farther when controlling for family income—from 14 percentage points overall to four percentage points for low-income students and 8 percentage points for higher income students.

Gaps continue to be significant for African Americans and American Indians even when controlling for income. For Blacks, the gap was 33 percentage points overall. It shrinks, but not significantly, to 21 percentage points for low-income students and to 16 percentage points for higher income students. Higher income Blacks do better than lower income Whites, but they remain significantly behind Whites at the higher income level. The same pattern holds for American Indians.

The real problem for Blacks and American Indian students is multifaceted. Their achievement gaps for lower income students are the largest of any group. And three quarters or more of their students come from low-income

families. Therefore, I will focus the rest of this paper on low-income students. For simplicity, and because they are a much larger group, I will restrict my analysis to Blacks.

Lower Income Black Children

Test results for low-income Black children are even more discouraging than they appear in Table 1. A significant portion of Black students are at the lowest levels of reading proficiency. Department of Education test results are originally presented in four categories, two below the standard and two above the standard. The lowest of those categories is *Does Not Meet the Standard*, while the next higher sub-standard measure is *Partially Meets the Standard*.

Figure 2 shows the test results for low-income Blacks and Whites. Some 43% of Blacks fell into the lowest category—*Does Not Meet the Standard*. This is the largest single block of Black students; only 24 percent of lower income Whites were this deficient. On the next step of the ladder, Blacks and Whites have a nearly equal number of students who *Partially Meet* the standard. The big difference between the two groups is the huge percentage of Black students who have not begun to meet the standard.

Some schools are succeeding with lower income Black students. Table 2 lists the top 10 schools or districts that have been successful with low income Black students; all got over 50% of their

low-income Black students to meet or exceed the standard, well over the 36% average for all such students. There is no clear pattern describing these successful schools. They are a mix of traditional and charter schools, central city and suburban schools, schools with high and low concentrations of Black students, and schools with high and low concentrations of students on free or reduced price lunch.

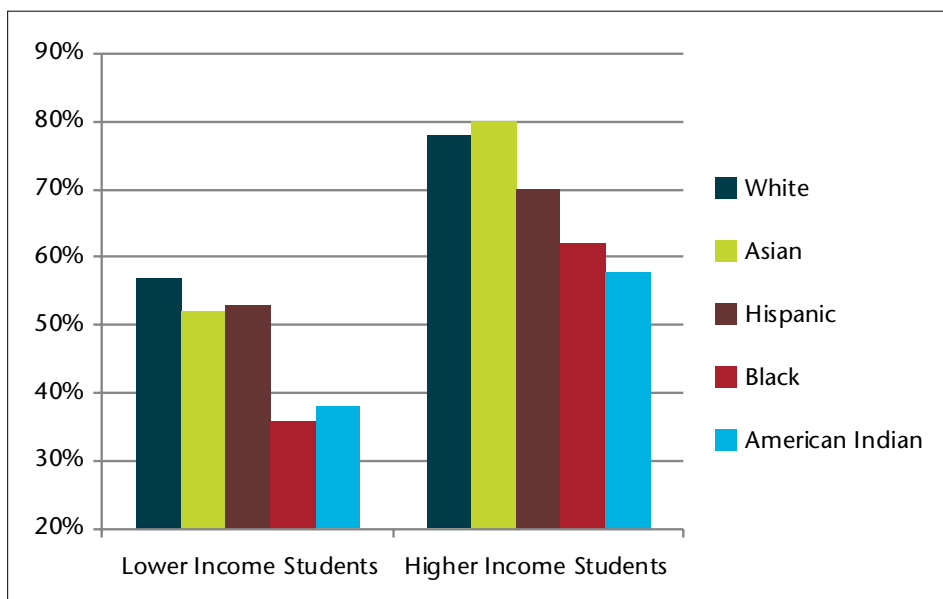
Table 2 does not show individual schools within the traditional districts. My special data request was made at the district level because I wanted to avoid disclosure rules that would drop results when numbers got small. Some individual schools might have made this list. For example, the Department of Education public website shows relatively high Black test scores for several individual St. Paul schools, though that data has not been differentiated by participation in the free or reduced lunch program.⁴

Parental awareness may be the one unifying factor describing these successful schools. Parents are paying attention to their options and have made a decision to enroll their child in a charter school or a suburban school district where their child might have a better chance to succeed. Making such choices can be tricky, because not all charter or suburban schools are as successful as those listed in Table 2. Overall, charter schools and traditional schools have the same low 36% success rate.

It is unfair to totally blame schools for the failure of their students. Many inner-city students come from homes that are much poorer than the free-lunch income threshold used here. Their lives may include homelessness and other stress factors. They may have not benefited from two-parent or early-childhood development programs. All those factors limit a child's readiness to learn.

But schools certainly get some of the blame. School policy lets an experienced teacher opt out of his or her current school and apply to another school in the same district. This policy leaves tough schools with

Figure 1. Third-grade Reading Proficiency of Lower and Higher Income Students, by Race. Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, 2013–14. (Excludes students with limited English proficiency and those receiving Special Education services. Base of graph begins at 20%.)



⁴ See <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Data/>. St. Paul had four individual schools that might have made the list in Table 2: Capitol Hill Magnet/Rondo, Jackson Preparatory, Linwood Monroe Arts Plus Lower, and St. Anthony Park. The overall third-grade Black test results were 58% or above for each. Participation in the subsidized lunch program ranged from 26% to 92% in these schools. No Minneapolis school had a success rate above 50%.

Table 2: Schools Producing Best Third-grade Test Results in Reading for Low-income Black Students, 2013-2014. (Excludes students with limited English proficiency and those receiving Special Education services.)

District or School	Percent Low-income Black Third Graders Meeting or Exceeding Reading Standard (excludes LEP and Special Ed students)	Location	Traditional or Charter	2015 District/School-Level Demographics ¹ (all grades, all students)	
				Percent Black Students	Percent Free or Reduced Lunch
Global Academy	89%	Columbia Heights	Charter	73%	91%
West Metro Education Program ²	74%	Downtown Minneapolis	Traditional	49%	52%
West St. Paul - Mendota Hts. - Eagan District	64%	Mendota Heights	Traditional	11%	41%
Eastern Carver County Public School District	64%	Chaska	Traditional	4%	20%
Friendship Academy of Fine Arts	64%	South Minneapolis	Charter	91%	93%
Shakopee Public School District	61%	Shakopee	Traditional	9%	33%
Life Prep	58%	East St. Paul	Charter	42%	77%
Harvest Preparatory School	56%	North Minneapolis	Charter	97%	93%
North St. Paul - Maplewood - Oakdale District	53%	Maplewood	Traditional	19%	52%
Eden Prairie Public School District	53%	Eden Prairie	Traditional	14%	21%

1 Data from Department of Education's Minnesota Report Card website - <http://rc.education.state.mn.us/>

2 West Metro is a voluntary integration district involving Minneapolis and 10 Hennepin County suburban districts.

new inexperienced teachers every year, teachers who would struggle with any group of students and are not prepared for the challenging ones. Furthermore, teacher salaries are set by contract based on their own education credits and years of experience; little reward is given for success with students⁵ and no extra pay is available to those who succeed with at-risk children. Individual schools in larger districts often have limited freedom to innovate. In an ideal world, teachers, principals, administrators, and school board members would be held accountable for the success of their children and rewarded when they do well.

Will Craig is CURA's Associate Director Emeritus.

⁵ Minnesota's Quality Compensation (Q Comp) program provides an option for performance pay. See "Reforming Teacher Contracts: A Look at the Impact of Q Comp on Student Achievement in Minnesota" by Elton Mykerezi, Aaron Sojourner, and Kristine West in the Spring/Summer 2015 issue of the *CURA Reporter*.

Figure 2. 2013-14 Metro Area Reading Test Results for Low-income Black and White Third Graders. (Excludes students with limited English proficiency and those receiving Special Education services.)

