The Challenge and Opportunity of African American Educational Achievement in the United States

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Examining America’s Commitment to Closing Achievement Gaps
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Introduction

African American educational achievement in the United States is a veridical paradox. On one hand as a population group, African Americans present the greatest stress on the nation’s education system, requiring the most attention while delivering the weakest results. On the other hand, African Americans present the best target of opportunity for the nation to realize the most abundant overall gains in achievement and return on investment. The quandary for the nation is twofold: first, to persuade policy makers and the general public that African American student achievement is vitally important to the nation and merits being given the highest priority, special tolerance and substantial sustained investment of resources; and second, to produce a compelling strategy comprised of the proven and plausible elements that adequately address specific challenges of African Americans that are sufficient to ensure steady and measurable progress.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind) is an initial step toward addressing the first of these dilemmas. The central focus of the Act is making a national imperative of gains for everyone and closing gaps among people of various race/ethnic groups and social classes. The emphasis upon gains and gaps rather than just gaps divulges the nation’s sense of need to improve the overall system of education, as well as the crisis of minority and disadvantaged populations confronting the nation. The largest and seemingly most intractable of the gaps is the vast difference between African American and White students. It may be politically infeasible and even unconstitutional for the national policy to single out any race/ethnic group or class for special treatment. Consequently, the national policy gives attention to addressing gaps,
generally, leaving the tailoring that is required to fit each segment of the population to those who must implement the policy. The result is very slow and modest progress overall, and very modest and even unnoticeable progress for African American students, the population group with the greatest barriers and challenges. As with other groups, closing gaps for African American students may require actions to address their specific challenges.

This paper focuses upon identifying the human, institutional and societal elements of African American underachievement and the gaps between them and their White peers. The exploration is intended as a step toward solving the puzzle of Black-White achievement gaps. The elements of underachievement and gaps that are identified could become the content that shapes both the program strategies and the research required for improvement.

The paper is presented in three parts. Part one is a review of prominent published research that has attempted to explain the relatively low performance and achievement of African American students and the gap between African American and White students on standardized measures of achievement. Part two presents analyses of trend and cross-sectional data on the underachievement of African American students and the gaps. The third part interprets the findings of the analyses and recommends foci for policies and research for contributing to improving African American educational achievement and closing gaps.

Part One: Explanations for African American Student Under-Achievement – Literature Review

The relatively low performance of African American students has been observed and analyzed for many years. With the emergence of No Child Left Behind, the intensity
and veracity of both the measurement and the research to understand these differences are growing. But, while the research has grown in size and intensity, the focus has been over much the same territory that has been traversed repeatedly during the past three decades. The most popular recurring explanations include the following:

- Heritability/Genetics
- Oppositional culture
- Racism
- Socioeconomic status
- Quality of schooling
- Quality of home and school environments
- Level of expectations

This section of the paper examines literature on each of these topic variables for their plausibility as explanations of African American achievement and the gaps between their performance and their White peers.

A. Heritability/Genetics

Scientists and theoreticians have examined most elements of human character, behavior and endeavor to try identifying meaningful correlates and cures for the vast difference in African American and White student achievement. At one extreme are a few psychologists and biologically oriented pseudo-scientists of genetic theories about human intelligence. Among all of the competing explanations, this one produces the greatest polemic. Despite being an idea that is unpopular in public discourse, the genetic and hereditability theory of intelligence always looms at the surface of every debate about achievement gaps, especially pertaining to race. Among the believers, they adhere to the
idea that performance gaps between American blacks and whites exist, with whites as a
group regularly scoring higher than blacks as a group at all social-class levels. This
divergence in performance is due to inherent and unalterable differences in intelligence
between the two races, rather than to the effect of poverty, discrimination and similar
remediable factors (Deutsch, Katz, and Jensen, 1968; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen,
1969, 1972). Believers in this idea contend that the majority of performance is accounted
for by nature or heredity leaving only a minor share to nurture or environmental
circumstances. Several have made estimates that suggest over three quarters can be
attributed to heredity or nature and the paltry balance to environment or nurture (Chipuer,

Scholars on the opposing side of this controversial position argue on grounds
ranging from the frailty of the instruments used to measure intelligence (Gould, 1996) to
research data and methodologies that are too feeble to support social policies that would
lead to denying programs and assistance to Blacks and other minorities (Kamin, 1974;
Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin, 1984). Very early in this nature vs. nurture debate, Light
and Smith (1971) produced a model that showed how even if intelligence was 80 percent
determined by genes, the vast share of the black-white difference in measured
performance could still be accounted for by environmental factors. However, another
interesting perspective may be emerging, which considers the interplay between biology
and culture in a far less dichotomous way than before. Li (2003) conducted a study
showing that nature and nurture actually influence each other in ways such that the
anatomy of an individual’s brain can be altered by the environment he or she is immersed
in (e.g., taxi cab drivers’ brains were enlarged in the region where cognition of maps
would normally take place). This research provides an interesting compromise for the nature-nurture argument, proposing the existence of a reciprocal relationship between what has been understood to be two dichotomous entities.

**B. Oppositional Culture**

Other theories have emerged over the past two decades among anthropologists and other social scientists to try explaining the Black-White achievement gap in more tangible psycho-social terms. Among the most popular albeit not most persuasive has been the oppositional culture theory. This theory when ascribed to African American students has often been focused upon peer pressure and especially the charge by peers that people who are serious students are “acting white.” This phenomenon was initially reported by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) as a plausible explanation of the achievement gap. Their research led them to conclude that when high achieving African American students are faced with the burden of peer pressure resulting from being characterized as ‘acting white,’ they respond by developing oppositional orientations and approaches toward schooling that are counterproductive. This idea, despite being a darling of broadcast media, is at best inconclusive and substantial recent evidence has been produced that suggest that such behaviors and attitudes are not pervasive among African American students nor are they more prevalent among African Americans than among students of other race/ethnic backgrounds (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Carter, 2005; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Some have argued that it is not necessarily a burden of acting white, but rather, a burden of high achievement that students of all race ethnic groups confront (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).
For many students, school is an environment with conflicting expectations and norms. One expectation is for high achievement, as emphasized by teachers, administrators, parents, and often times by students themselves. On the other hand, among peers, academic disengagement, rather than achievement, is encouraged and understood to be “cool” (Ogbu 2003). Accordingly, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) highlight a distinction they feel must be made between associating a universal attitude pushing mediocrity versus an attitude towards academic achievement that is understood to be typical within a specific racial group (e.g., among Black students). Thus, they separate the notion of oppositional culture into three types of oppositionality: general, racialized, and class-based. General oppositionality is the push for academic under-achievement, in response to taunts such as “dork” and “nerd,” a phenomenon which is found across all youth groups, regardless of race, ethnicity, or social class. Racialized oppositionality would be what Fordham and Ogbu have defined as the “burden of acting white,” where Black students respond with academic under-achievement as a result of taunts such as “Oreo” – implying that these students are actively trying to mimic, or become, their White counterparts. Lastly, class-based oppositionality focuses more on social class, making it a universal culture across all racial groups; students are taunted with labels such as “snooty” and other words indicating that they feel that they are better than their peers. The taunts – whether they are socially, racially, or class motivated – are constant reminders of the attitudes and behaviors that are deemed acceptable by one’s peers. Consequently, many children respond to the comments and strive for academic disengagement and underachievement.
C. Racism

After thoroughly examining the research literature, John Diamond (2006) finds little merit in searching further for explanations for achievement differences in oppositional culture. Diamond believes that the focus given to oppositional culture has tended to unduly divert attention from what he believes to be more likely prospects of racial differences in the quality of life. The following quote from Diamond expresses the view that the search for answers and solutions is found in understanding the academic achievement constraints faced by African Americans based on racial stratification of the society:

What is abundantly clear from prior research on race and education is that there is a material and symbolic cost to being Black in the contemporary United States. These disadvantages are embedded in our social fabric and reflected in our social structures, schools, and perceptions of race and intellectual ability. Black students face a racialized educational terrain that creates material and symbolic disadvantages for them. This, I argue, has been overshadowed by our continuing search for oppositional culture.

Diamond further elucidates the distinctive experiences of African American students based on their race and access by attacking the experience from all angles:

- The schools that Black students attend are often less conducive to their educational success (Bryk & Schneider 2003; Diamond & Spillane 2004).
- While the mechanisms are complicated to sort out, school segregation - in particular the concentration of low-income African American students in certain schools leads to lower outcomes for students attending these schools even after controlling for students’ prior achievement (Bankston & Caldas 1996) and schools in the United States have become increasingly (re)segregated in recent years (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).
- African Americans pay higher prices for lower quality housing, the lower appreciation for their homes which are likely to be located in segregated neighborhoods, lower levels of employment and occupational mobility, lower home loan approvals and more negative interactions with the legal system (Bonilla-Silva 2001).
Subsequently, the African American experience is unlike any other experience of a minority group in the United States, and this difference plays a crucial role in their pathways to success.

Unlike Latin or Asian immigrants, who are often times labeled as voluntary immigrants — individuals who made an active decision to come to the United States, whether it be for better job opportunities or to pursue an education - African Americans, in contrast, are seen as involuntary immigrants, forced to enter the United States by someone else’s hand (Oggu, 2003). Thus, their perceptions of the American Dream and American success differ from those shared by other minority groups in the United States. Black Americans are a group that have formed a collective identity that is defined by oppression, resulting in many perceiving and fearing the adoption of “White ways” as a mechanism for breaking the solidarity and identity that has manifested itself throughout the African American population.

Exclusion and collective mistreatment of African Americans by Whites purely on the basis of skin color has further affected these individuals, molding the perceptions they hold of themselves and of those around them. With many dismissing the right of African Americans to have a legitimate place in academia and the work force (with job ceilings and other occupational obstacles), a greater number internalize these White beliefs, especially as efforts to assimilate are rebuffed (Oggu 2003). Two consequences of these experiences are feelings of self-doubt and resignation, as they begin to question their intelligence in comparison to Whites (Oggu, 2003). With the many obstacles Blacks experience due to a racially stratified society, combined with the obstacles they create for
themselves through internalization of White pedagogy, the White-Black achievement gap is unsurprising.

*D. Socio-economic Status*

Diamond also distinguishes the experiences of African American students based on their social class:

- Black children are more likely to live in poor households than white children.
- In addition, because of a history of social policy which limited African American’s access to the major avenues toward wealth accumulation (e.g. purchasing suburban homes), Black families have far fewer assets than their white counterparts who earn the same incomes (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995).

Subsequently social class is a critical issue within the achievement gap debate because it dictates the environments, resources and opportunities children encounter as they grow up. Studies have repeatedly shown that lower socioeconomic status and lower academic performance are linked (Nettles, Millett, & Ready, 2003). Having lower quality teachers is a chief concern of educators, researchers and policy-makers, particularly in regards to students’ achievement levels (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). It is an even greater issue as researchers are finding that high-poverty, high-minority schools have a greater likelihood for having unqualified teachers (Olson, 2003), and have a difficult time not only bringing highly qualified teachers into these poorer schools but also in keeping them at these schools (Sunderman & Kim, 2005). Consequently, social class not only affects the resources students acquire at home, but also, it affects the resources they are able to acquire in schools.

Researchers also have examined the link between social class and parental involvement and the ability to provide the necessary support for their children to succeed academically. There are currently four perspectives regarding the interplay of social
class, parental involvement and academic achievement. One theory proposes that parents from low socio-economic backgrounds place little importance on education, which results in ineffective or very little involvement in their children’s education; these attitudes are imparted on their children, so that they too place little value on education (Lareau, 1989; Sewell & Hauser, 1980; Sewell & Shah, 1968a, 1968b). Another perspective emphasizes the importance of parents’ social networks and affiliations to provide them with the necessary tools to stay involved in their children’s education (Carbonaro, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998; McNeal, 1999). This social capital perspective emphasizes the importance of social class as the key to gaining access to certain types of networks and affiliations that present many educational, occupational and personal opportunities to their members (Carbonaro 1998; Coleman 1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998; McNeal 1999; Wong 1998).

The third perspective holds schools accountable for treating parents of low socioeconomic status differently from those of high socioeconomic status, resulting in parents’ disengagement from their children’s education (Comer, 1980; Connell et al., 1982; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Lareau, 1987). The fourth perspective pulls from Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, stating that a parents’ social class limits the cultural resources he or she has access to, which in turn effects the degree of parental involvement in his or her child’s education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Furthermore, the resources that low-income parents are able to offer tend to be
disregarded or dismissed, in comparison to the resources that wealthier families are able to provide (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

However, though there is much literature supporting the existence of a relationship between social class and academic achievement, there are some who feel that this argument is a weak one. Furstenberg, Jr., Cook, Eccles, Elder, Jr., and Sameroff (1999) found that there is not such a strong link between lower socio-economic status and lower academic performance. They focus their attention towards the family and the role of parenting as one of the key factors in preventing children from falling through the cracks.

E. The Family

The process of learning begins at the home, even before children start to attend school. Subsequently, some researchers have argued that the family is the determining force behind student performance, not schools (Coleman et al., 1966). A child’s first teacher is commonly thought to be his or her parent or guardian. Parenting involves a variety of behaviors and roles including teaching, disciplining, nurturing, setting an example for, and supporting their children (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Ogbu, 2003). Recent literature has shown that parental involvement in children’s academic and social lives plays a crucial role in children’s academic learning and achievement (Epstein, 2001; Steinberg, 1997).

In Ogbu’s study of Shaker Heights families (2003), Ogbu found that even though black parents had high academic expectations for their children, their actions spoke to the contrary. They often were limited in their involvement in their children’s education and extra-curricular activities, and had dismal participation in various school organizations.
and activities organized for parents (e.g., Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), workshops for parents, programs geared specifically towards Black students, etc.) (Ogbu, 2003). Although in theory African American parents wished to push their children to succeed academically, they failed to engage in practices (e.g., supervision of homework, teaching time management, monitoring television time, encouraging their children to work hard in school, teaching children to avoid negative pressures) that could facilitate such success (Ogbu, 2003). They rarely fostered their children’s academic talents, and were not effective in protecting their children from dangerous situations (Furstenberg Jr., Cook, Eccles, Elder Jr., & Sameroff, 1999). The lower rates of helping their children develop self-discipline in their academic work by Black parents is of concern because discipline literature states that consistent enforcement of discipline leads to successful development (Baumrind, 1989, Grolnick and Ryan, 1989; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Many parents hold teachers accountable for their children’s academic performance, and not themselves (Ogbu, 2003). Furthermore, Black parents were often times unaware of the existence of Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the significance of enrolling in such courses during high school (Ogbu, 2003).

F. School

Schools play a significant role in the widening of this gap. Through academic leveling and tracking of students, many schools create pathways of achievement for some and not for others. Students are split up into different levels on the same subject in a given semester or quarter, giving those in the upper level courses an academic advantage in the future. These pathways are of great concern regarding achievement gaps, because they frequently divide students on perceived “ability,” which translates into divisions
across racial lines for Whites are frequently enrolled in upper level courses while Blacks are enrolled in lower level ones (Ogbu, 2003). Furthermore, African American students are disproportionately placed in special education courses through their schooling (Blanchett, 2006), which contributes to reducing access to resources in their schools.

Tracking often occurs as early as elementary school, which poses a problem and in many ways, can explain the widening of the achievement gap as students continue through their secondary education. Tracking at such an early age already designates a specific pathway for students, such that those who are placed in skills or remedial classes in grade 4 may find it increasingly difficult to enter the regular courses, let alone, try and breakthrough to honors and AP classes in high school. It is especially difficult when schools place students on academic tracks based on their previous tracking and performance, as a result, students who begin elementary school in a specific track, will find themselves following this track from middle school through high school, even though they may be better suited for another track. Ogbu found that these mechanisms can have a negative impact on how students perceive their academic abilities: some Black students avoided taking honors and AP courses because they felt the work would be too difficult for them, consequently they never gave themselves a chance to try and succeed. Nonetheless, it was not always academic fears that kept enrollment of Black students low for such courses; they also avoided these classes because of social repercussions associated with taking academically rigorous, majority White classes (Ogbu, 2003).

Diamond presents the following characteristics of the racialized terrain of their classrooms and beyond from the research literature:
Black students are typically taught by less qualified teachers than their white counterparts (e.g. non-certified teachers and teachers with limited experience) (Uhlenberg & Brown 2002).

Black students face a number of educational disadvantages in their schools and classrooms when compared to white students. For example, they are also concentrated in lower educational tracks, which have less qualified teachers, provide students with less challenging course work, and result in less learning (Hallinan 1994; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990).

The teachers of Black students also hold lower expectations for them than for other students.

Teachers and their perceptions of race play a critical role on the academic expectations they place on their students (Carter, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) and the sensitivity to race that they place on instruction can mold the experiences of their students within the classroom (Delpit, 1995; Kinchloe, Steinberg, Chennault, & Rodriguez, 1998; King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paley, 1979). Lowered academic expectations of students from a particular race or socio-economic status can result in diminished academic performance of the student as a form of educational self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Furthermore, perceptions of particular races may not only result in a widening achievement gap, but also a widening discipline gap, with some students more likely to be disciplined or labeled as in need of disciplinary action than others (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Race plays a factor not only in which students are labeled as such and also in the ways in which teachers try to intervene and help their students (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Consequently, teachers and students may experience difficulty in fostering relationships as a result of perceptions of race.

Along with teachers, guidance counselors can also play a critical role in widening or lessening the achievement gap. Counselors are typically the individuals that help students decide what courses they should take for the academic year, and thus, could be
considered the gatekeepers to a student’s academic experiences (Ogbu, 2003). These people are crucial because they are the ones who can help students realize the importance of certain course choices, as well as guiding them to focus on their academic futures – especially, college. In many schools, counselors had little time to help students or encourage them to push themselves to higher level classes, resulting in students giving up (Ogbu, 2003).

With schools as a focal point for addressing the achievement gap, some possible suggestions that have been encouraged by researchers are increasing school choice (e.g., charter and voucher schools), creating culturally sensitive curriculums (e.g., African immersion academies, cultural diversity, etc.), and forging bonds between schools and minority communities (Ogbu, 2003). The complexity of the achievement gap however does not allow for easy solutions, as proven by the vast evidence available indicating not only the existence of an achievement gap, but also, the combination of various factors that result in a widening of the gap.

**Part Two: The Evidence**

The literature reviewed in Part One includes several topics either characterizing or offering explanations for Black-White achievement gaps for which data and research are needed to confirm or understand. For some of the theories like heredity, and oppositional culture, existing data are not available for which secondary analyses would suffice in addressing their effects upon gaps. Both of these theories are important to address, but research that includes data collection for the specific studies would need to be conducted. For other topics such as social class, student effort and school and home quality, data are available for secondary analyses. This section, Part Two, presents data that are available
for describing the extent of achievement gaps, differences in gaps at various levels of schooling, school segregation, other school conditions and attributes, and parent and family characteristics that are correlates of gaps. The principal source of data is the National Center for Education Statistics and includes the National Assessment of Educational progress (NAEP), the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS) and the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS).

A. 4th and 8th Grade Student Performance on NAEP by Percent Black Students Attending the School

Given the prevalence of school segregation in the United States, and the effect of racial composition upon resource allocation, we wanted to examine Black and White students’ performance by the percentage of school population that is Black. NAEP 2005 math, science and reading assessments of 4th and 8th graders have produced some of the latest evidence of achievement gaps, showing the extent to which the gaps appear larger or smaller for students at both 4th grade and 8th grade. A series of scatter-plots is presented below that reveal the extent of achievement gaps and to show the extent to which they are larger or smaller for 4th graders compared to 8th graders (see Figures 1-6). The school level averages for Blacks and Whites are distributed based on the percent of Black students attending the school. The two horizontal lines through the scatter plots represent the overall average scale scores for Blacks and Whites, revealing the overall gap between Blacks and Whites.

In general, by grade 4 the achievement gap between Black and White students has already formed, with national performance averages 26 points apart in math (at 220 and 246, respectively), 33 average points apart in science (at 128 and 161, respectively) and 29 average points apart in reading (at 200 and 229, respectively) (see Figures 1-3).
Appertaining to the effects of school segregation, it is noteworthy that there are Black school averages below the Black mean throughout the school race composition distribution. But there is also clustering of Black and White students’ scores above their respective means in each subject at schools with less than 40% Black student populations. There are also a few Black student averages above the White mean in the distribution of schools up to 60 percent Black. It is interesting to observe that of the Black students performing below the national Black average, those who attended schools with over 70% Black student populations performed better than those in schools with less than 70% Black student populations.

Figure 1: Grade 4 Math Assessment for Black and White Students in Public Schools, by Percent Black in School

Figure 2: Grade 4 Science Assessment for Black and White Students in Public Schools, by Percent Black in School


Figure 3: Grade 4 Reading Assessment for Black and White Students in Public Schools, by Percent Black in School


Given that the NAEP samples of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are different and neither sample is longitudinal, one must interpret with caution the comparisons of the gaps between the two grades and they should not be interpreted as one cohort widening or
narrowing over time in achievement between the two grades, but rather gaps of two
different cohorts. At the same time, however, since they are both nationally
representative samples and are on the same score scale, it is interesting to compare the
two grades. For grade 8, the gap is wider in math and science and slightly narrower in
reading than for 4th graders (see Figures 4-6). White students averaged 288 in comparison
to Black students averaging 254 points on NAEP grade 8 math assessments, 159
compared to 123 in 8th grade science and 269 compared to 242 in 8th grade reading.
Comparing the Black–White gaps between the two grades shows that the 8th grade gap
was 26-points and the 4th grade gap was 34-points different in math; 33 points different in
4th grade science compared to 36 points different at 8th grade; and 29 points in 4th grade
reading compared to 27 points 8th grade.

There are similar trends to the grade 4 subject assessments in grade 8 math,
science, and reading, with an observable achievement gap between Black and White
students regardless of percent Black student population in their schools. Across the
various schools, White and Black students are consistently performing both above and
below their national means. Similar to grade 4, in grade 8 subject assessments, students
with the lowest scores in schools with more than 70% Black student populations are
outperforming the students who perform poorly at schools with less than 70% Black
student populations.
Figure 4: Grade 8 Math Assessment for Black and White Students in Public Schools, by Percent Black in School


Figure 5: Grade 8 Science Assessment for Black and White Students in Public Schools, by Percent Black in School

B. 4th and 8th Grade Student Performance on NAEP – The Trial Urban District Assessments

In addition to state-wide assessments through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), a special project within NAEP, began assessing reading and writing performance in five large urban districts in 2002. By 2003, it had expanded its assessments to include both reading and mathematics across nine urban districts, and by 2005, across 11 urban districts. The analyses run by TUDA not only draw comparisons of the individual district performance results with one another, but also with the student performance levels of students in large central cities and the nationwide student performance levels within public schools. From grade 4 to grade 8 Math, the TUDA analyses show that students across the nation, in large central cities, and within the selected urban districts all improved on their average scale scores on the Math assessments from grade 4 to grade 8. However, the percentage
of students performing below Basic skill level increased within each district and across the nation as well (see Figures 7 and 8). By grade 8, the majority of students in Atlanta, District of Columbia, Cleveland, Los Angeles and Chicago were performing below the Basic level in grade 8 Math. In contrast, assessments of grade 4 and grade 8 reading showed not only an increase in average scale scores among students, but also lower percentages of students below the Basic reading level by grade 8 (see Figures 9 and 10). In grade 4, students in the District of Columbia, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Chicago, Atlanta and large central cities were performing below the Basic level. By grade 8, only students in the District of Columbia, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Cleveland, were more likely to be performing at the Basic level in reading.

Figure 7: Average Mathematics scale scores and percentage of students within each achievement level, grade 4 public schools: By urban district, 2005

Note (1): * = Average scores are significantly different from large central city public schools.
Note (2): ** = Average scores are significantly different from nation (public schools).
Note (3): Significance testing was conducted at the .05 level only.
Figure 8: Average Mathematics scale scores and percentage of students within each achievement level, grade 8 public schools: By urban district, 2005

![Mathematics Achievement Levels](image)

Note (1): * = Average scores are significantly different from large central city public schools.  
Note (2): ** = Average scores are significantly different from nation (public schools).  
Note (3): Significance testing was conducted at the .05 level only.  

Figure 9: Average Reading scale scores and percentage of students within each achievement level, grade 4 public schools: By urban district, 2005

![Reading Achievement Levels](image)

Note (1): * = Average scores are significantly different from large central city public schools.  
Note (2): ** = Average scores are significantly different from nation (public schools).  
Note (3): Significance testing was conducted at the .05 level only.  
Figure 10: Average Reading Scale Scores and Percentage of students within each achievement level, grade 8 public schools: By urban district, 2005

Note (1): * = Average scores are significantly different from large central city public schools.
Note (2): ** = Average scores are significantly different from nation (public schools).
Note (3): Significance testing was conducted at the .05 level only.

C. The Curriculum and Academic Tracking

In light of current research literature emphasizing the importance of a rigorous high school curriculum in preparing students for college, we present analyses examining the types of high school curriculum track in which students enrolled. The Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS):2002 provides another valuable source of data for analyzing achievement gaps. ELS is based on a nationally representative survey of 10th graders in 2002. ELS data reveal some interesting curricula patterns among high school students across racial and socio-economic lines. More than fifty percent of the surveyed students who responded to the question (6,898 of 12,478) indicated that they were enrolled in a college preparatory program, the majority of students being White (4,427 of 6,898) (see Table 2). Considering the possibility that racial background could increase or decrease a
student’s likelihood to take a college preparatory program, significance tests were run but the results were inconclusive. However, tests did significantly show that Black students were more likely than White students to enroll in both General and Vocational high school programs.

To also address the concerns of the role socio-economic status plays on students’ access to education, analyses were run to test if social class could affect a student’s likelihood to enroll in a certain high school program (see Table 1). The tests were significant, such that, students from the highest socio-economic status quartile were more likely to be enrolled in a college preparatory program than students from the lowest quartile, and less likely to be enrolled in a general or vocational high school program than their counterparts from the lowest socio-economic status quartile.

Academic tracking, is a concealed mechanism for racial and class segregation in schools and classrooms, and has become another possible explanation for the widening achievement gap. Analyses of the relationship between students’ racial background and their likelihood of enrolling in a special education program showed that of the students who indicated that they were enrolled in such a program, Whites were less likely than Blacks to be enrolled in special education (8% versus 9%) (see Table 2). After testing for significance, the following conclusion could be made: typically Black students are more likely than White students to enroll in a special education program. Eleven percent of students in the lowest SES quartile were enrolled in special education programs compared to 6% of their counterparts from the highest SES quartile (see Table 1).

Similarly, analyses regarding whether students were ever enrolled in a remedial English class was similar to the results of the special education analyses. Blacks were
more likely to enroll in a remedial English class than Whites (see Table 2), and students from the lowest socio-economic quartile were more likely to enroll in remedial English than students from the highest socio-economic quartile were (see Table 1). These patterns persist regarding the likelihood for student to have ever taken a remedial Math class. Blacks students were more likely to have taken such a class than Whites (see Table 2), and students from the lowest socio-economic quartile were more likely than students from the highest quartile were to have ever enrolled in remedial Math (see Table 1).
Table 1: Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS):2002 Data on High School and Class Enrollments by Socio-economic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Program</th>
<th>Lowest quartile</th>
<th>Second quartile</th>
<th>Third quartile</th>
<th>Highest quartile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>42.768*</td>
<td>42.122</td>
<td>39.43</td>
<td>29.932*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>41.58*</td>
<td>44.763</td>
<td>51.82</td>
<td>64.533*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>15.651*</td>
<td>13.116</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>5.535*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever in Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>88.554</td>
<td>91.626</td>
<td>92.837</td>
<td>94.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.446*</td>
<td>8.374</td>
<td>7.163</td>
<td>5.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever in Remedial English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>89.879</td>
<td>91.523</td>
<td>91.746</td>
<td>92.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10.121*</td>
<td>8.477</td>
<td>8.254</td>
<td>7.195*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever in Remedial Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>88.019</td>
<td>89.921</td>
<td>90.716</td>
<td>91.579</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.981*</td>
<td>10.079</td>
<td>9.284</td>
<td>8.421*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever in an AP Program</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>86.751</td>
<td>85.636</td>
<td>82.103</td>
<td>74.916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13.249*</td>
<td>14.364</td>
<td>17.897</td>
<td>25.084*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Tests were only run for lowest and highest quartile
*p < .05
Table 2: Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS):2002 Data on High School and Class Enrollments by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black or African-American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>30.362</td>
<td>34.053*</td>
<td>44.095</td>
<td>38.561*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>58.566</td>
<td>49.58</td>
<td>43.24</td>
<td>52.531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>11.072</td>
<td>16.367*</td>
<td>12.664</td>
<td>8.907*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ever in Special Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>92.712</td>
<td>91.142</td>
<td>90.229</td>
<td>92.475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.288</td>
<td>8.858*</td>
<td>9.771</td>
<td>7.525*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ever in Remedial English</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>92.017</td>
<td>91.19</td>
<td>89.816</td>
<td>91.955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.983</td>
<td>8.81*</td>
<td>10.184</td>
<td>8.045*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ever in Remedial Math</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>90.159</td>
<td>88.662</td>
<td>88.798</td>
<td>90.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ever in an AP Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>78.898</td>
<td>84.426</td>
<td>82.389</td>
<td>81.94</td>
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<td>21.102</td>
<td>15.574</td>
<td>17.611</td>
<td>18.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Tests were only run for African American and White students
*p < .05

Academic tracking not only involves separating students for specialized teaching that concentrates on establishing stronger foundations, but rather, it also consists of placing some students on an accelerated or honors track. An example of such tracking would be students enrolling into AP courses in high school. Although a statistically
significant connection could not be made between race and the likelihood of a student to have ever participated in an AP program (see Table 2), a connection could be drawn with socio-economic status (see Table 1). Similar to the patterns found for special education, remedial English, and remedial Math, students from the highest socio-economic quartile are typically more likely to enroll in an AP program than students from the lowest quartile.

**D. The Relationship of Home and Family to Performance on NAEP**

Besides racial and socio-economic status concerns, other contextual factors, particularly family background and home environment, are scrutinized for their possible contribution to the growing achievement gap between White and Black students. Parents’ educational attainment is a characteristic that is typically considered to be a plausible contributor to students’ academic success. Parents’ education is frequently considered to be a component of socioeconomic status, and a proxy for the value that families place on education in the household. Assuming that SES works similarly for students of each race/ethnic group, the relatively low achievement of Black students may be in part due to the result of a higher proportion of their parents being of lower educational attainment than the parents of White students. The 2005 NAEP math scores for White and Black students when their parents have the same educational attainment appear to contradict conventional findings (see Figure 11). Interestingly, Black students whose parents have the highest educational attainment are performing below the level of White students whose parents have the lowest educational attainment. In addition, on average, while the scores of White students increase with each successive increase of their parents’ educational attainment, the scores of Black students do not. The scores of Black student
increase when their parents complete some postsecondary education compared to just completing high school, but their scores do not appear to benefit further by their parents go on to complete college over just attending college.

Figure 11: Students’ Average Scale Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress on Grade 8 Math and Parents’ Highest Level of Education, by Race

Another plausible correlate of student achievement is the availability of various types of resources (e.g., books, computers, etc.) within students’ households. Analyses of NAEP 2005 data that examine the number of books within students’ households shows that in grade 4, 41% of White students reported more than 100 books in their households, compared to 23% of Black students (see Figure 12). In contrast, approximately 21% of White students stated they had 25 or fewer books in their homes, in comparison to 50% of Black students, resulting in the majority of Black students reporting having 25 or fewer books at home. Analyses in grade 8 presented similar trends.Nearly 40% of White students reported having more than 100 books at home, compared to 19% of Black students (see Figure 13). Approximately 23% of White students have 25 or fewer books in their homes, compared to approximately 46% of Black students.

Counter-intuitively, as students progressed from grade 4 to grade 8, both Black and White students reported having fewer books at home. This was interesting to find, for it would seem that as students continue to advance in school, they would acquire more and more books. However, it could possibly be a result of Internet access, and the availability of free online resources. Nevertheless, although the number of books at home does not necessarily translate into time spent reading nor does it indicate the type of books present in the household, these numbers may reflect a collective attitude towards books and reading that parents may emphasize to the entire family – attitudes that can encourage children to work hard at school and to spend time reading rather than playing video games or watching the television.
In continued efforts to explain the achievement gap as a result of contextual factors, parents’ availability to spend time with their children is another possible predictor of children’s academic success. Data from the *Digest of Education Statistics 2005* show that aside from the activity of working with children on arts and crafts, Black and White parents reported that they spent time doing similar activities with their children (3 to 5 years of age) (see Figure 14). It was promising to find that there were no stark race differences in parents spending time on activities with their children. These data are self-reported by parents, which can result in some parents feeling pressure to answer in what they consider to be a socially acceptable way and in such a way as to project the image of being a good parent. In addition, this survey question does not measure the frequency of these activities and the amount of time parents spend on them. The quality of time spent, rather than the frequency of the time spent may have more effect on a child’s development and performance. Furthermore, an activity such as telling a story can vary based on time and the type of story told, and the interaction between parent and child. Without this information, it is difficult to know the true effectiveness of such activities between parent and child. Nonetheless, from this data it is observed that there is an effort put out by White and Black parents to spend time with their children to engage in various activities ranging from telling them a story to working on arts and crafts projects together.
Figure 14: Percentage of children from age 3 through age 5 and not yet in kindergarten whose parents reported participating in home activities with child in the past week, by type of involvement and child and family characteristics: 2005


E. The Relationship of School Characteristics to Performance on NAEP

Many children enter school with basic attitudes and behaviors that are indicative of their family life and home environment. These attitudes and behaviors can then be molded, reinforced, or contradicted as children enter, and proceed, through school. Thus, school plays a significant role in both academic and social growth, and increasingly needs to be evaluated for the role it has in the perpetuation and exacerbation of the achievement gap. Based on existing literature and the ELS:2002 data, which indicate that at the very least there is a correlation between socio-economic status and academic performance, closer examinations of the likelihood of students of different racial backgrounds attending schools of high and low socio-economic status is potentially useful for understanding achievement gaps. In schools where approximately 0-25% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, 42% of the student population is White and 11% is Black (see Figure 15). In contrast, in schools where 76-100% of the student...
population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, Blacks make up 35% of the population while White students make up less than 5% of the student population (4%).

Figure 15: Black and White Student Populations Found in Schools of Varying Socio-Economic Levels in Grade 8 Math

![Bar Chart showing percentage of students in school eligible for free/reduced lunch by socio-economic status and race]


The greater likelihood of Black students attending poorer schools raises concern about this being a factor in the gap of their academic performance on math, science, and reading. Though the differences in scores by both race and socio-economic status could not be found, the NAEP 2005 data do show the average scores of students in math, science, and reading in grades 4 and 8, by eligibility to enter the National School Lunch Program. On average, in grade 4, students who were not eligible for the lunch program scored at least 23 average points higher than their peers who were eligible to participate in the program (see Figure 16). Grade 8 scores were similar to the pattern at grade 4, with students who were ineligible to enroll in the lunch program scoring at least 23 points above their counterparts as well.
Figure 16: Average Scale Scores in Math, Science, and Reading in Grades 4 and 8, by Eligibility for National School Lunch Program


F. Teacher Quality and Teacher Demographics

The lower academic performance of students eligible for free or reduced lunch requires careful examination of the factors related to socio-economic status that could contribute to these score differences. Of the many presented by the current literature, teacher quality is one of the frontrunners for affecting achievement gaps. Two popular indicators of teacher quality are the extent to which they are teaching in their major field and/or with certification. The NCES 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) generated data on the public school students who were being taught by teachers both outside of their major and without certification. Students of relatively low SES and Black students have high rates of both. It is not uncommon to see a positive relationship between the percentage of free or reduced price lunch students and the percentage of teachers who did not major in their subject or who hold certification (see Figure 17).
Figure 17: Percentage of Public School Students in Classes Taught by Teachers with Neither Major or Certification in Field, by Percent Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch: 1999-2000

Note: Middle School includes grade 5-9 and High School includes grades 10-12.

Another noteworthy observation was that more often, in middle schools, a higher percentage of students had less qualified teachers than they did in high school. In middle school math, within schools with 50-74% of the population eligible to be enrolled in the National School Lunch Program, more than one third of the students have less qualified teachers. This is interesting because of the growing achievement gap in Math from grade 4 to grade 8, as shown earlier by Figures 1 and 4. Middle school math has the highest percentages of students being taught by less qualified teachers regardless of percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (see Figure 17). Nearly one-third of students in schools with 25-49% and 50-74% of the student population eligible for free or reduced lunch are in classrooms with teachers who have neither teacher certification nor majored within the field of math. The highest percentages of students being taught by such teachers are within schools with the majority of the population qualifying for free or reduced lunch (see Figure 17). Though teacher quality may not be the sole contributing factor to lowered academic performance among low income students, it is notable that
schools with higher populations of low income students also have higher percentages of students being taught by unqualified teachers.

Another proxy for teacher quality is the amount of experience as a teacher. The NAEP 2005 assessment produced data on the likelihood of students having teachers with various numbers of years of teaching experience. In grade 8 math, White students were more likely to have a teacher with over 20 years teaching experience (29%) than Black students were (23%) (see Figure 18). In grade 8 math, White students were also less likely to have a teacher with 9 or fewer years of experience (42%) in comparison to Black students (51%). Generally speaking, White students were more likely than Black students to have teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience, and were less likely to have teachers with less than 4 years of experience. At the same time Black students were more likely to have teachers with 4 or fewer years of teaching experience (28% compared to 20%) , and less often had teachers with over 20 years or more of teaching experience (23% compared to 29%).

Figure 18: In Grade 8 Math, Teachers’ Years of Experience for White and Black students


Typically, schools in which minority students comprise the majority population of the school, have the highest percentages of students being taught by unqualified teachers.
Aside from middle school science, schools with a 25-49% minority population had the highest percentage of students with teachers teaching both outside of their major and without teacher certification (see Figure 19). Perhaps most problematic was middle school math, with nearly 40% of the students attending schools with a 75% or greater minority population in classrooms with unqualified teachers. Similarly, in middle school English nearly one third of students in schools with 50-74% minority populations were being taught by unqualified teachers.

Figure 19: Percentage of Public School Students in Classes Taught by Teachers with Neither Major or Certification in Field, by Percent Minority in School: 1999-2000

Note: Middle School includes grade 5-9 and High School includes grades 10-12.

The data presented on middle school math (see Figure 19) is especially interesting in combination with the NAEP 2005 grade 4 and grade 8 math assessment scores. The NAEP data indicate a widening of the White-Black achievement gap in math from grade 4 to grade 8. Perhaps one possible factor for this phenomenon could be the larger percent of teachers without a major in the field or teacher certification. Even in schools with less than 10% minority populations, nearly one-quarter of the student population is being
taught by unqualified teachers (see Figure 19). Regardless of the type of public school students attend, middle school math has the highest percentage of students being taught by teachers teaching outside of their major and or without certification.

Teaching is a complex process that involves not only disseminating academic information but also, forming relationships with students. Subsequently, teachers take on increasingly difficult and multifaceted roles as they also become in many ways a counselor, a disciplinary figure, and even a friend. Current literature has acknowledged the important and involved role of teachers in students’ lives and has begun to closely examine the relationships of awareness and understanding that form between teacher and student. Concerns have arisen about the ability of White teachers to relate to Black students, and for these same students to be able relate to White teachers. Differences in race and socio-economic status may result in communication lost and barriers created, preventing a teacher and student from forging a closer, supportive bond, which in turn may help the student persevere and succeed in his or her education. If having teachers of similar ethnicity and/or race is the only way to bridge gaps of difference between a teacher and student, then there may be some cause to worry based on NAEP 2005 data. Across the nation, the majority of Black students have White teachers at 61% (see Figure 20). In the South, fifty-eight percent of the Black student population is being taught by White teachers (see Figure 21). This statistic is especially telling because of the high concentration of African Americans in the South. Subsequently, the majority of African American students have White teachers.

The sparseness of diversity among teachers within schools is troublesome at all tiers of education, and needs to be further examined. Such homogeneity within the
teaching staff may result in a decreased cultural awareness or diversity in schools, feelings of isolation for some minority students within schools, and fewer roles models for minority students to look up to and to try and imitate in their own academic endeavors. Nevertheless, regardless of region or teachers’ ethnicity, African American students scored at least 27 points lower than their White counterparts on NAEP 2005 grade 8 Math assessments (see Figures 22 and 23). These average scores are indicative of a much more complex problem than just teacher’s ethnicity or race and teacher quality.

Figure 20: Ethnicity and Race of Teachers for White and Black Students in Grade 8 Math


Figure 21: Race of Teachers for White and Black Students in Grade 8 Math in the South

Figure 22: Race of Teachers by Grade 8 Math Performance for White and Black Students


Figure 23: Race of Teachers by Grade 8 Math Performance for White and Black Students in the South


G. The Students

Looking to the family, schools and teachers for explaining the persistence of the achievement gap is crucial but they are not the only individuals and institutions that should be held accountable for the gap; consideration must also be given to the students
themselves. Some literature has tried to link student involvement both inside and outside of school as a good indicator for academic success within school. The types of activities in which students choose to engage can reinforce behaviors that are conducive to learning and academic success, and place students among peers who are pursuing similar goals. In contrast, other extra-curricular activities can perpetuate behaviors that are less conducive to the behaviors necessary for academic achievement. The *Digest of Education Statistics 2005* provides data that differentiated between some of the popular activities high school sophomores participated in inside and outside of school, distinguishing the students by race (see Figures 24 and 25).

For both Black and White students, the majority of students reported that they used a personal computer at home. Excluding this activity, in general the data showed that White students tend to be less involved in the listed extra-curricular activities, aside from those activities related to sports. Black students, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in a variety of activities, from community service to taking a music, art, or language class. However, to the same effect, Black students also are more likely to spend 3 or more hours per weekday playing video or computer games and watching 6 or more hours of television on a weekday.
Part Three: The Conclusion and Recommendations

The foregoing data and analyses present evidence of Black-White achievement gaps, at the pre-collegiate level that are enormous. Even more problematic is that the gaps between African Americans and Whites are showing very few signs of closing. In 2006, there continues to be a widening achievement gap between African American and White students. The gap not only is growing, but it is also beginning at a very young age. By grade 4, achievement gaps are evident in Math, Science and Reading; by grade 8, the
gaps, especially in math, have become exacerbated. The performance gaps between students remain present not only through grade 8, but through high school and beyond. Consequently these gaps persist in higher education. African American students’ SAT scores, for example, have been well below the scores of their White peers and of the national average as reported annually by the College Board. In 2006, African American students scored 434 on the Verbal section, 429 on the Math, and 428 on the Writing, compared to Whites who scored 527 on the Verbal, 536 on the Math, and 519 on the Writing sections of the SAT. Black students’ scores were also below the national average: 69 points below the national Verbal average score (503), 89 points below the national Math average score (518), and 69 points below the national Writing average score (428). This gap even exists after they have completed a baccalaureate degree, at the graduate school level with score gaps on the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) General Tests as well. In 2002-03, African Americans scored a 396 on the Verbal section, 425 on the Quantitative, and 3.7 on the Analytical Writing section, in comparison to Whites who scored a 496 on the Verbal, 568 on the Quantitative, and 4.4 on the Analytical Writing sections. Black students are also scoring below the national GRE averages as well: 87 points below the Verbal average (483), 128 points below the Quantitative average (553), and 0.7 average points below the Analytical Writing section (4.4).

These enormous and persistent gaps will require many years of targeted and sustained investment to close. Despite two decades of national efforts led by the federal government to reform the U.S. education system, only since 2001 has the policy been explicit about closing gaps across race and social class lines. No Child Left Behind is a
start. But for African American students much more action is required to close gaps. Their unique characteristics and challenges need to be taken into account, and policies directed toward their measurable progress. At the same time, it is important to recognize the challenge of the politics of persuading the public that it is in the national interest to invest in raising the achievement of each race/ethnic group and social class. The key to the former is appropriate action, while the key to the latter is appropriate data and research to support imaginative and effective public policy.

For African Americans, the climb to the highest levels of achievement is the steepest. The review of research and the analyses presented in this paper suggests that the keys to addressing African American achievement gaps involve a combination of research, measurement, policies and actions to improve their educational performance. But much more needs to be learned through research and measurement about the specific educational conditions and needs of African American students. To the extent possible, policies and actions should be based upon research and measurement findings and aim to produce gains in African American student achievement. Recommendations for research and policy include the following:

A. Heritability/Genetics
- Research on heritability suffers severe inadequacy in quality of data. A high quality study of inter-generational change in achievement is needed in order to demonstrate to the general public that intelligence and achievement do change over time and account for the student, family, school and environmental conditions that contribute to the changes in achievement scores;

B. Oppositional Culture
- Regarding “oppositional culture” there is little evidence to support the prevalence and effect of African American students being ridiculed as outcasts by peers of their own race. The general sense among researchers is that this phenomenon merits a reduction in attention. Another form of oppositional culture, the idea that when people of any race experience a lack of acceptance and support in their
institution for people of their culture, adopt behaviors and attitudes that are counter to the dominant culture. Understanding this form of oppositional culture, its prevalence and the extent to which it affects student achievement could bring the need for institutional change to the attention of policymakers;

C. Racism

- With only three percent of White students having African American teachers, and over 61% of African American students having White teachers, eliminating the undersupply of African American teachers by attracting more African Americans to become teachers;
- Increasing the access, participation and achievement of African American students in more rigorous curricula in schools where they are in the minority;
- Strengthening segregated schools, which more than half of African American students attend, by means such as requiring the certification of teachers and ensuring that they are degree-holders of the subjects they teach;

D. Socio-economic Status

- Given that 64% of African American students attend schools where the majority of students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch compared to just 20% of White students, polices aimed at African Americans need to go beyond free and reduced price lunch to address problems of poverty that impede learning and development. Such other aspects of poverty as access to books and computers and other resources to compensate for having parents with relatively low levels of educational attainment need to be examined;

E. The Family

- While there is ample evidence that family involvement is vitally important in student achievement, too little is known about the involvement of the families of African American students and the constraints and capacity for them to contribute substantially to improving their children’s educational achievement and for closing gaps;

F. School

- Strengthening the effectiveness of the teachers of African American students toward higher student preparation and achievement and assessment performance in mathematics, science and reading;
- Student assessments need to be examined for information that could be helpful to students and teachers in improving student performance;
- The national policy presently makes a large investment into assessing and testing student performance and progress. More information about how schools and school districts use the assessment results to try improving student outcomes is needed in order to develop plans for improvement;
• Given the relatively low performance of African American urban schools and students compared to their counterparts in the rest of the nation, and the limitation of finances, national policies that are aimed at the particular problems of urbanicity are needed;

G. Measuring and Communicating About The Gaps:
• The relationship between the content and structure of NAEP and each of the 50 state assessments are not aligned. Alignment analyses are not presently a part of public policy, so the congruence between the two assessments (NAEP and state tests in general) is uncertain as is the alignment among the fifty state tests. Aligning these various assessments would help to communicate to students the amount of gap that needs to be closed;

• Given that the best source of data about the condition of education in the nation, states, and schools is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and because NAEP does not reveal the identities of individual schools, no one can intervene to address the problems of the schools that are found to be failing in NAEP. A database that is comparable to NAEP is needed for identifying schools that are in need of assistance;

If adopted, the recommendations above would be a new direction in research and policy. While students are attending school, achievement gaps are certainly noticeable and present enormous challenges for schools and school districts. But the long term effect upon the workforce and quality of life for African Americans is even more problematic, and prevents both individuals and the nation from achieving their potential. As the nation grows into a global market workforce and economy, income and occupational status are becoming dependent on one’s academic achievement; therefore gaps in achievement eventually surface as gaps in income earned and types of occupational opportunities garnered. The gap in income mirrors the gaps in educational achievement, and a higher percentage of African Americans than Whites live in poverty and hold relatively low status occupations. The causes for these SES outcomes may be broader than educational achievement, but until the educational achievement gaps are narrowed, it will be impossible to isolate the other factors.
References


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