

Achievement Gap

The U.S. Department of Education describes the achievement gap as “the difference in academic performance between different ethnic groups.” Though this is a concise and useful definition, the achievement gap is, in fact, a multifaceted problem that requires examination from multiple perspectives.

From the standpoint of federal expectations, the No Child Left Behind Act requires schools, districts, and state educational systems to meet annual targets for improvement in identified academic areas, including mathematics—not only for their student populations as a whole, but for each of several identified subgroups: African American, Hispanic, White, economically disadvantaged, special education, and limited English proficiency (LEP). In other words, schools, districts, and states are ultimately accountable if the achievement rate of any of these subgroups of students falls behind. In light of annually increasing targets, shifting demographics, and the upcoming addition of science targets, more schools and districts are at risk than many people realize. (SEDL, 2010)

Why is it important to close the achievement gap in PWCS?

Closing the achievement gap is important because of its direct impact on not only individual students, but also the community and the nation as a whole. When particular groups of students are not educated fully, it can lead to higher dropout rates, negative impact on the economy, and raise stress in the community in areas of crime, violence, and poverty. Confucius stated, “If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant trees; if in terms of 100 years, teach the people.” Thus, to maintain and improve our society, we must ensure that we have a well educated population.

What Are the Causes of the Achievement Gap?

The causes for the achievement gap are complex. According to research, they fall into two main categories: 1) factors related to students' socioeconomic status, cultural environment, and family background; and 2) factors related to students' schools.

Socio-Cultural Causes

One of the main factors associated with low student achievement is poverty. Students living in persistent poverty are more likely than other students to suffer from many conditions that impede their learning, including:

- poor health care (including inadequate prenatal care for their mothers);
- frequent changes in residence, requiring transferring to new schools repeatedly;
- lack of books and other educational resources in the home;
- parents with lower levels of education; and
- unstable family structure.

Cultural attitudes and racism also play a part in the achievement gap. Research suggests that some minority students perceive that the majority culture sees them as less capable and expects little of them. These students may not try in school, since they believe they won't succeed anyway. Some researchers believe minority students may maintain low levels of achievement purposely to avoid "acting white" and to gain the approval of their peers, while others see the problem as partly consisting of stereotype threat.

School-Related Causes

Unfortunately, students who start out with disadvantages often encounter school conditions that only add to the problem. They are more likely to attend schools with inadequate funding staffed with teachers who are not as qualified to teach their subjects as they could be. In addition, especially in schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students, teachers often have low expectations of these students, leading them to have low expectations for themselves. (National School Public Relations Association)

How is the achievement gap being addressed in PWCS?

The achievement gap is a major focus in PWCS and is being addressed systemically through a number of initiatives. (STRATEGIC PLAN LINK) Increased enrollment in advanced placement courses, gifted programs, and the decrease of economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students from each racial/ethnic category in special education at all levels (ES, MS, and HS) are significant goals for the Division. Providing educators with strategies in cultural competence, as well as the promoting parental involvement, recruiting a highly qualified workforce, and ensuring system alignment, are measures being taken Divisonwide to reduce and eventually eliminate the achievement gap in PWCS.

What does the achievement gap look like?

Graph information-

This graph demonstrates the “gap” in achievement between white students and all others in a school division.

