

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP



Improving Educational Outcomes for African American Children

National Black Caucus of State Legislators
Committee on Elementary & Secondary Education

*Representative James L. Thomas (AL), President
Senator C. J. Prentiss (OH), Chair*

November 2001

Legislators that attended a 2001 NBCSL Education Symposium in Gulfport, Mississippi

March 30 — April 1, 2001

NBCSL members who served on education committees in their respective states, met in Gulfport, Mississippi for a 2001 Symposium on Education. Their focus was to develop a comprehensive position paper on primary and secondary education issues. **Goals of the paper include focusing national attention on how to most effectively reduce the black/white student achievement gap.**

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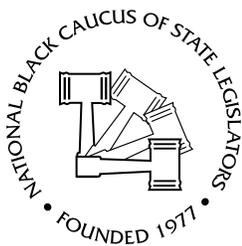
Rep. Barbara Cooper-*ED* (Memphis)

WISCONSIN

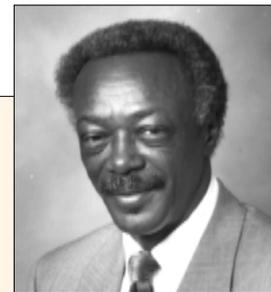
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APP- APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE

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National Black Caucus of State Legislators



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Khalil Abdullah
Executive Director

November 26, 2001

Dear Colleagues and Supporters:

I am delighted to present Closing the Achievement Gap: Improving Educational Outcomes for African American Children as a blueprint on how to address one of America's most persistent inequities. As a high school principal and a state legislator, my professional career has provided me with varying perspectives on the state of education in the United States. Moreover, as a parent, I know the desires of mothers and fathers for their school system to afford the best educational opportunities for their children.

NBCSL has had able leaders on education issues. Sen. Gerald Neal (KY), who served as the former chair of NBCSL's Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education, remains a Committee member and participated in this report. Of the legislators who met in Gulfport, MS, most were veteran legislators. All of those present either served on education or appropriation committees in their respective states.

Since its inception, in 1977, NBCSL has been involved in education policy. This report in many ways reflects that cumulative body of policy resolutions and experience of our members. However, we owe a special debt to our current Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education chair, Sen. C.J. Prentiss. Sen. Prentiss has been relentless in carrying the message that closing the achievement gap is a goal that must remain a priority for our constituents and our country. To all those who assisted in making this report possible, I personally want to extend my thanks. I am humbled by the confidence you have placed in me as NBCSL's president. I encourage all Americans to become advocates for our children's future and to join with us in this campaign.

Sincerely,

James L. Thomas
President, NBCSL
Alabama House of Representatives



The Ohio Legislative Black Caucus Foundation

Established 1967



November 26, 2001

Dear colleagues, parents and education activists,

Our struggle to close the black-white achievement in the 21st Century is part of a much larger struggle. In 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.

While many aspects of the problem of the color-line have changed during the last one-hundred years, for black students in our public schools, the problem of the color-line continues to limit educational opportunities and outcomes for black students.

In issuing this report, NBCSL has set forth its plan to transform public education in the 21st Century for black children. We know what works—our children can learn and perform at a high level with quality teachers who understands our community, with research-proven intervention, including smaller class sizes, with personal attention, and with a focus on high standards. This report is a powerful tool to build political and community support to enact the legislative programs we need to close the black-white achievement gap.

In order for us to successfully close the achievement gap, we are building broad alliances with other civil rights and education organizations at both the national and state level. At the national level we anticipate working closely with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to develop a national strategy to increase public awareness of the black-white achievement gap. At the state level, we anticipate working with local chapters of the NAACP and a broad range of organizations to build the political will necessary to enact into law our policy and funding recommendations.

If you are interested in doing your part and playing a role in closing the black-white achievement gap, please contact me at 614-466-4857 or <Prentiss@maild.sen.state.oh.us>. We need your help to close the achievement gap and look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

State Senator C.J. Prentiss (D-Cleveland, Ohio)
Chair, NBCSL Committee on Primary and Secondary Education
President, Ohio Legislative Black Caucus

Only the educated are free.

Epictetus

INTRODUCTION

The right to a comprehensive, quality education is a civil right. Yet, almost four decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and five decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* declared school segregation to be unconstitutional, quality education is still beyond the reach of too many African American children.

Education in 2001 should prepare students to compete in the global economy, succeed in the complex, technology-based 21st Century, and take their places as full citizens of the United States of America. Instead, the education system is abandoning many children who attend under-resourced urban schools.

Report after report, study after study, shows a stark disparity between the quality of the education we provide for minority children in poor neighborhoods and children in middle and upper-middle income neighborhoods.¹ This inequity, which has been harmful to the future of too many African American students, is unacceptable and it must end. It jeopardizes these students' chances to become productive and successful citizens, and increases their chances of ending up underemployed or incarcerated.

The bottom line is an inferior education's impact on children. Most children who attend high poverty schools in which most students are ethnic minorities are cut off from information, skills, and guidance that will prepare them to pursue their dreams. And the United States, by failing to provide its students with the skills to compete in the 21st Century, is failing to invest in a competitive future for the nation.

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators believes that there never was a time when the nation could afford to keep a whole segment of our citizenry from reaching their full potential, and that time is certainly not now. Public education is a crucial element in the preparation of America's youth to lead productive adult lives.

THE NATIONAL BLACK CAUCUS OF STATE LEGISLATORS BELIEVES THAT THERE NEVER WAS A TIME WHEN THE NATION COULD AFFORD TO KEEP A WHOLE SEGMENT OF OUR CITIZENRY FROM REACHING THEIR FULL POTENTIAL, AND THAT TIME IS CERTAINLY NOT NOW.



Quality pre-K – 12 schooling prepares students to move on to higher education, compete for professional positions, succeed in technical vocations, become informed parents and consumers, community activists and influential leaders. Numerous studies project that more advanced academic skills are required for adults to function well in the complex, technology-based world of the 21st Century. Good paying jobs in most economic sectors will require substantial math and science skills. Solid literacy skills remain basic to acquiring knowledge in these and other academic areas.

As the leading organization for African American state-elected officials, we believe that it is the responsibility of each state to ensure that all black students receive a high quality education, and it is our specific responsibility to hold each state accountable.

In this paper, we will review major proposals for improving education for African American children, and offer legislative recommendations to support African American students at greatest risk of academic failure. Educational outcomes for African American students at risk of academic failure can, and must, improve. Among the strategies that work are increasing literacy; reducing class size; improving training for and quality of teachers and other school staff; developing and funding clear standards aligned with curricula and instruction, promoting parental and community engagement, and ensuring safe and orderly school environments. We will outline ways to get there.

We will also discuss funding. Providing more money to under-performing schools is not the only answer. We know what it takes to improve schools. Money can have a direct and positive impact on a school's ability to acquire computer technology, raise teacher salaries and attract qualified teachers, upgrade laboratory and sports equipment, purchase up-to-date curricula, and maintain structurally safe buildings. We will make a case to close the education divide.

“The soft bigotry of low expectations” is a phrase that is often heard today to advocate high-stakes tests. But this proposal blames children for their inability to transcend an education that lacks even the basic resources available to neighboring suburban districts. It blames the neighborhood school, even while an inequitable funding system that over-relies on the neighborhood tax base, starves it for support.

Unproven reforms such as vouchers promote abandoning public schools and the vast majority of students in them. They ignore the growing body of evidence about a variety of effective reforms that have proven to increase achievement of students in some of our nation's most impoverished schools. Public schools today are the most effective and most equitable means to raise academic achievement levels of African American children, indeed for all children who attend public schools.

In this paper, we will outline the legislative and policy reforms necessary to improve outcomes for African American students in low-income communities without abandoning the public school system. We know what it takes to improve the education of African American children: a real investment in their schools and in their futures. This white paper will explain why that goal is important—not only to millions of students, but to the nation—and how the nation can achieve that goal.

A 2001 Report Card

Education is still separate and unequal in too many urban school districts across the nation. Two-thirds of minority students still attend schools that are predominately minority, most of them located in central cities and funded well below those in neighboring suburban districts.²

There is some indication of improvement in the educational performance of black students over the last few years. For instance, dropout rates have begun declining and studies sponsored by the US Department of Education have reported gains in reading achievement of elementary school students. Improving the reading skills of black students is essential to closing the achievement gap. In addition, more black students than ever are enrolled in advanced placement courses, although there is evidence that this pattern may be reaching a plateau instead of continuing to grow.³

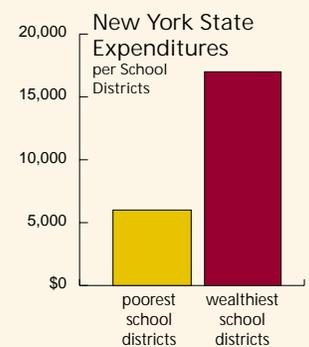
The evidence, however, continues to point to an ongoing performance gap between minority and white children in core academic subjects. This performance gap correlates directly with the poor education found in the nation's poor urban schools, which in turn can be traced to a variety of conditions. These include:

- 1. Limited financial resources.** Our nation's inner cities remain among the country's most economically distressed areas. The wealthiest school districts spend 56 percent more per student than the poorest school districts.⁴

Moreover, the environment in which these children live does not support a first rate education. In addition to higher than average poverty rates, many inner city residents have few employment opportunities, limited access to high quality schools and affordable health care, and too few quality early childhood education and child care programs.⁵

Urban schools must struggle for resources that are readily available to suburban schools. Lack of resources has a direct impact on a school's ability to offer such essentials as competitive teacher salaries, computer technology, science lab and sports equipment, small class size, and

A RECENT LAWSUIT IN NEW YORK STATE REVEALED EXPENDITURES OF \$17,000 PER STUDENT IN THE STATE'S WEALTHIEST SCHOOL DISTRICT, COMPARED TO \$6,000 PER STUDENT IN THE POOREST DISTRICTS.



up-to-date curricula. In addition, school facilities in our nation's urban areas are frequently in such disrepair that they pose health and safety threats to students and staff who work in them.

According to the *Brookings Review*, "...analyses of data prepared for school finance cases in Alabama, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana, and Texas found on every tangible measure—from qualified teachers to curriculum offerings—schools serving greater numbers of students of color had significantly fewer resources than schools serving mostly white students."⁶

Though overall, blacks are only 16.7 percent of elementary and secondary students, they represent more than one-third of students in central cities. A survey by the Council of Great City Schools finds that in 47 large school districts, 36 percent of students are African American; 30 percent are Hispanic; 20 percent are Asian/ Pacific Islander; seven percent are Native Americans, and less than five percent are white.⁷

The cultural and language diversity of families living in our largest cities creates a significant educational challenge. More than one-half of the largest urban American cities have foreign-born populations greater than the national average of 7.9 percent, and some are dramatically higher. Miami, for example, has a foreign-born population of 59.7 percent; Los Angeles, 38.4 percent, and New York City, 28.4 percent. Schools attended by black students are likely to be more diverse: in 1996, 12 percent of Latino students attended schools whose students were predominately black, and ten percent of African American students attended predominately Latino schools.⁸ Their schools were more likely to be under-resourced and under significant pressure to provide additional programs to serve the diverse student population.

For example, there is clearly a need to expand programs such as bilingual education, to help schools deal with their rapidly increasing culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.

Many parents of African American students at risk of academic failure have themselves had a less than rewarding educational experience. This is important because research shows that there continues to be a link between educational experience and attainment of parents and that of their children.⁹ Jonathon Kozol in *Savage Inequalities* calls this "a caste society." He observes that "the immense resources which the nation does in fact possess go not to the child in the greatest need but to the child of the highest bidder—the child of parents who more frequently than not, have also enjoyed the same abundance when they were school children."¹⁰

2. Class size. Historically, African American and Latino students at risk of academic failure have attended some of our nation's most overcrowded schools. Class size in these schools is typically larger than those found in schools attended by middle and upper-income students, and studies have uncovered a strong correlation between large classes, lower levels of literacy and lower performance in math.¹¹

facts you need to know...

In contrast, studies find conclusive evidence linking reduced class size to improved literacy skills and higher student achievement. This is especially evident in gains made by African American, Latino and low-income children. However, conclusive evidence from multiple longitudinal studies has found elementary school students—especially minority and low-income students—in classes of 13 – 17 children, made dramatic gains in reading and math scores. In fact, class size was a better predictor of student achievement than increasing the number of teachers’ aides. Gains from small class size in K – 3 lasted through at least 8th grade.¹²

3. Shortage of Qualified Teachers. A large body of research indicates that teacher quality has a huge effect on how well students fare in school. According to the Education Trust, students who have several effective teachers in a row make dramatic gains in achievement, while those who have even two ineffective teachers in a row lose significant ground.¹³

But recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers is one of the nation’s biggest challenges. The problem is particularly acute in the poorest and lowest-performing schools. Low pay, poor working conditions, and lack of support from both the public and top school administrators have contributed to the problem of attracting and retaining the most qualified teachers in these hard-to-staff schools.

As more lucrative careers open up to women and minorities, many highly qualified candidates who at one time would have gone into teaching are entering other professions. Teacher salaries lag behind other professions that require comparable and sometimes lower levels of training. Beginning teachers earn an average of \$26,000 a year, while entry-level computer programmers earn about \$41,000 annually.¹⁴

The education system also contributes to the attrition rate of the youngest teachers and the system’s newest entrants. Schools where the need for high-quality teachers is often greatest end up with the least experienced and highest percentage of uncertified teachers. Schools where poor or minority children are 75 percent

Of Every 100 White Kindergartners:

- 91** Graduate from High School
 - 62** Complete at Least Some College
 - 30** Obtain at Least a Bachelor’s Degree
- (24 Year-Olds)

Source: US Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Educational Attainment in the United States, March 2000, Detailed Tables No. 2



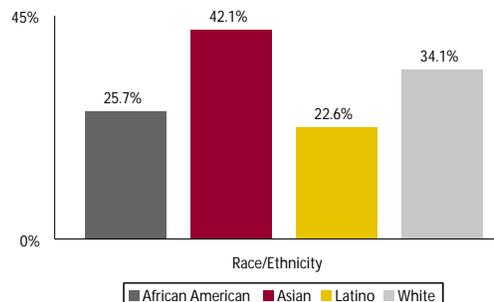
Of Every 100 African American Kindergartners:

- 87** Graduate from High School
 - 54** Complete at Least Some College
 - 16** Obtain at Least a Bachelor’s Degree
- (24 Year-Olds)

Source: US Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Educational Attainment in the United States, March 2000, Detailed Tables No. 2



African American and Latino 10th Graders Less Likely to be Enrolled in a College Preparatory Track



Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988: "First Follow Up Student Study."



facts you need to know...

Too Few 17 Year-Olds Demonstrate Strong Math Skills

	African American	Latino	White
Numerical Operations	89%	94%	99%
Moderately Complex Procedures	27	38	70
Multi-Step Problem Solving	1	3	10

Source: USDOE, NCES, 1999 NAEP Summary Data Tables



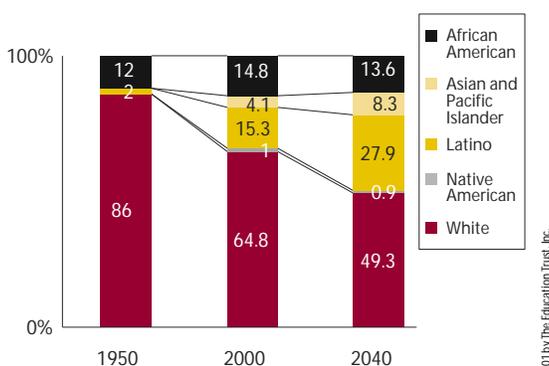
Too Few 17 Year-Olds Demonstrate Strong Reading Skills

	African American	Latino	White
Make Generalizations	95%	97%	98%
Partial Skills	66	68	87
Understand Complicated Information	17	24	46
Learn from Specialized Materials	1	2	8

Source: USDOE, NCES, 1999 NAEP Summary Data Tables



Shifting Composition of America's School Age Population (5-17)



Source: US Census Bureau, Population Projections, In Education Week, September 27, 2000.



of the student population are almost twice as likely to be taught by teachers without a major in their fields of instruction. Inexperienced teachers or teachers with weaker literacy or math skills are more likely to be teaching in schools with high poverty, minority student populations. Experienced teachers with specialized training are more likely to be assigned to Advanced Placement classrooms.¹⁵

When teacher-training institutions send their graduates into classrooms without sufficient preparation, some new teachers find themselves so overwhelmed that they leave teaching for other careers. Many who have taken new jobs report they left teaching because they were simply not as effective as they wanted to be, and there was little assistance to help them improve.¹⁶

Faced with few materials, inadequate opportunities for professional development, over-crowded classrooms, facilities in dire need of repair, and more lucrative career options, many teachers leave the profession.

The State of Education of Black Children

Black-White Achievement Gap. All of these factors combine to produce poor performance on academic tests. A disproportionately high number of students from low-income backgrounds earn lower scores on

facts you need to know...

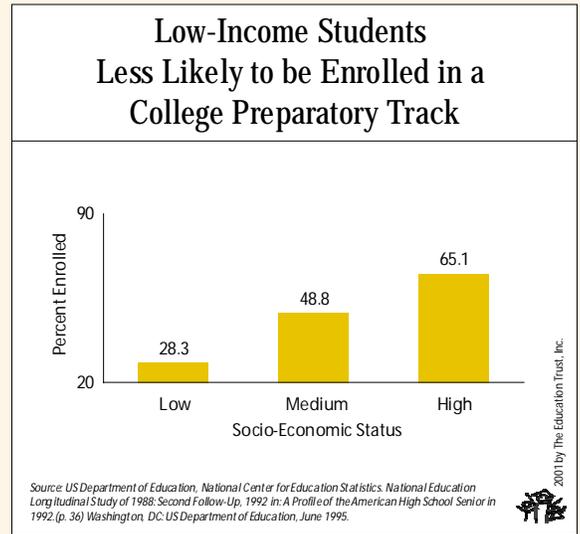
academic tests than students attending schools with a high proportion of affluent families. Tests results from the 1990s give some indication of these disparities.¹⁷

Literacy. Students who cannot read will experience little success in school. Reading is the key to academic achievement in every subject, ranging from math and English to science and history.

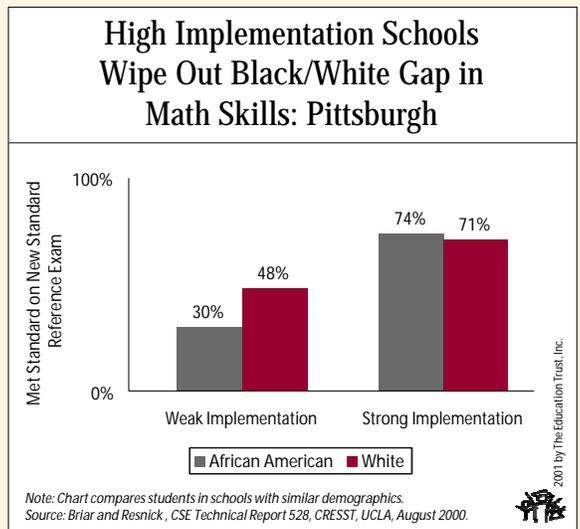
Science. Roughly 82 percent of urban eighth graders from affluent backgrounds had test scores that indicated they had mastered simple scientific principles and could apply them. But only 43 percent of urban eighth graders at risk of academic failure demonstrated this mastery. Black 13-year olds scored at about the same level as nine-year old white students.¹⁸

Math. Approximately 35 percent of the eighth graders from affluent families scored at the “proficient” level, while only three percent of youths at risk of academic failure performed at that level. Studies indicate that minorities’ math skills lag two years behind their white counterparts.¹⁹

The performance gap on tests is reflected in classroom performance. A Department of Education study compared grades earned in mathematics by students in affluent schools (where less than ten percent of students were enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program), and high poverty schools (where over 75 percent of children were enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program). The study found that 57 percent of sixth through eighth graders attending affluent schools received mostly A’s in math. Only 46 percent of sixth through eighth graders in high poverty schools received mostly A’s.²⁰



A GULF EXISTS BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF AP COURSES OFFERED IN WEALTHIER SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOLS AND THOSE OFFERED IN URBAN, UNDERSERVED RURAL AND REMOTE HIGH SCHOOLS.



Advanced Placement. According to the College Board, despite recent efforts to expand access to Advanced Placement courses (AP), a gulf exists between the number of AP courses offered in wealthier suburban high schools and those offered in urban, underserved rural and remote high schools. The number of African American and low-income students enrolled in AP courses is disproportionately low in relation to their white, middle and upper-middle income counterparts. For example, in 2001, of all AP test takers, 68.7 percent were white, 11.6 percent were Asian, 10.8 percent were Latino, and 5.0 percent were African American.²¹

Special Education. Finally, there is an over-representation of African American students—particularly boys—in special education. There is ample evidence that too often, they are inappropriately placed.

“Classes for the emotionally handicapped, neurologically impaired, learning disabled, and educable mentally retarded are disproportionately black...” says Jonathan Kozol²², describing one New York City school. “Few things can injure a child more, or do more damage to the child’s self-esteem, than to be locked into a bottom-level track as early as the first or second grade,” he observes.

Tracking children into special education is also a significant budget issue, since the cost of the variety of specialists and alternative settings required for special education are substantial. Most districts report that the cost of serving special education students is the fastest growing portion of their budgets.

Addressing the needs of diverse students in districts that serve large numbers of African Americans has resulted in cash-strapped school budgets. But serving these students, and serving them better than in the past, is crucial to preparing them to be self-sufficient, contributing adults.

False Promises: Flawed and Diversionary Reforms

Vouchers and African Americans: the Myth of the Silver Bullet

Voucher proponents would have us believe that the public school system is so broken that the only solution for children in low-income neighborhood schools is to abandon it altogether.

There is no evidence that students with vouchers perform at consistently higher levels, and there is ample evidence of fraud and mismanagement.^{23,24,25} But despite the lack of credible evidence that voucher programs are effective in improving the academic performance of African American and low-income children, voucher proponents are making

headway with well-funded public relations and marketing campaigns to press their case. This is of particular concern to NBCSL because in recent years there has been a concerted push to have vouchers adopted in communities with large concentrations of low-income and African American students.

Generally, voucher advocates propose reallocating significant portions of funds designated by states and localities for public education and giving this money to parents to send their children to private and parochial schools.

Voucher proponents claim that private schools provide a better education and operate in a more cost-effective manner than public schools. They also say that vouchers create competition for public schools and this competition will force public schools to improve. Some even say that vouchers will enable low income parents to send their children to the same elite private schools attended by children from wealthy backgrounds.

Far from creating competition, vouchers siphon needed resources from public education, cream the better students, and generally divert attention from efforts to improve public schools. They threaten to create a two-tiered educational system where students who need the most attention and support are trapped in resource-starved neighborhood schools.

Vouchers are not cheaper. But analyses that compare the cost of a voucher against per-pupil costs of a public education do not take into account that while public per-pupil costs accurately reflect the cost of publicly educating each student, private school vouchers based only on tuition do not reflect other costs associated with private schools, such as student fees for uniforms, textbooks, transportation and operating costs that are essential to the function of the school. In the case of parochial schools, teaching clergy and facilities upkeep are also not covered by a private school voucher.²⁶ Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley estimated that a voucher program open to all students would cost taxpayers more than \$15 billion for the five million students *already* in private schools.²⁷

VOUCHERS THREATEN TO
CREATE A TWO-TIERED
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM
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PRIVATE SCHOOLS THAT
ACCEPT PUBLIC VOUCHER
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Finally, private schools that accept public voucher money are not subject to public rules. They are not compelled to accept students with special needs; they are not required to adhere to statewide standards; they do not have to conduct open meetings, hire certified teachers, or even teachers with a college degree.²⁸

So far, when vouchers have been proposed as policy alternatives to public education, African Americans—and the general public—reject them. The District of Columbia has defeated voucher initiatives on numerous occasions. In November 2000, for the second time, California voted down statewide voucher initiatives. In the largely African American city of Detroit, 82 percent of the voters opposed Michigan's voucher plan.



African American leaders cannot sit on the sidelines as money is siphoned from already underfunded public schools where the overwhelming majority of black students will continue to be educated.

Recommendations:

The NBSCL strongly opposes vouchers. Therefore, we recommend that any legislation proposing vouchers should be required to demonstrate that:

- ✓ Voucher schools will provide open access for all students, and provide an array of effective programs to serve the needs of all students.
- ✓ Voucher school students are held to the same academic standards and testing assessments as students in public schools. Performance of voucher schools' students must be open to public scrutiny.
- ✓ Voucher schools meet the same standards for accountability as public schools, including fiscal accountability. And,
- ✓ Voucher schools are cost-effective.

NBSCL also calls for data on the impact of vouchers and other privatization initiatives on African American communities, including their impact on wages, job availability, economic development and general quality of life in low-income minority communities.

BLACK CAUCUS OF STATE LEGISLATORS

Charter Schools: Silver Bullet II

As originally conceived, charter schools were the laboratories for educational innovation. The mandate of these schools was to test promising approaches and evaluate them rigorously.

However, the original mandate of charter schools has changed dramatically. Today, many charter schools, like voucher plans, operate as competitors to the public school system. And, like vouchers, they often divert public funds to support unproven fads rather than proven reforms.



As with vouchers, NBCSL believes it is a mistake to permit public funds to be diverted to private, for-profit firms that run charter schools. NBCSL is especially concerned that charter schools must be held to the same standards of fairness and financial accountability as public schools. We urge vigorous opposition to any charter school legislation that does not include the following safeguards:

Well-meaning parents, educators, and community groups committed to children have started some charter schools. However, for-profit companies are running other charter schools whose primary concern is the bottom line, not the welfare of children. Some charter school operators have established unaccountable elite schools with the freedom to practice racial and religious discrimination—policies that are frighteningly reminiscent of the so-called Christian Academies that sprang up following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision desegregating public schools.

There are other notable failings within the charter school movement, including the hiring of uncertified teachers, the frequent financial mismanagement of charter schools, and the exploitation of charter school laws by for-profit organizations. In Washington, D.C., a charter school was put on probation, and another one was closed for mismanagement.²⁹

Too many charter schools are not being held accountable for student outcomes or for their use of public funds. In Michigan, for example, the pass rate on fourth grade reading and math tests at charter schools hovered around 45 percent between 1995 and 2000. Pass rates on these tests for public school students rose from 49 percent to 68 percent during the same period. In Texas, 78 percent of the students in public schools passed the state's graduation test, compared with only 59 percent of students in charter schools. Black and poor students in traditional public schools scored higher than students in charter schools.³⁰

Recommendations:

- ✓ The federal government and states should limit the number of charter schools funded until there is good data on charter school operation and outcomes for students.
- ✓ Charter school students should be held to the same high standards and testing assessments that students in regular public schools are expected to meet. Charter school students should also be required to take the same state assessments administered to other students.
- ✓ Only states and school districts should be permitted to issue charters. By law, these are the entities ultimately accountable to the people for public education. Charter schools should, therefore, get their authority, report to, and be held accountable to these entities, not externally created boards.
- ✓ Local parents should vote in order to convert an existing public school into a charter school.
- ✓ Charter schools must be run by non-profit organizations.
- ✓ Charter schools must demonstrate, prior to receiving public funds, that they use fiscally sound procedures for managing public funds, and will adhere to non-discriminatory management, personnel, and admissions policies, including sound health and safety procedures.

If these safeguards are not included in existing charter schools legislation, that legislation should be amended to include them. New charter schools legislation should include these safeguards or be vigorously opposed.

Decrease the Achievement Gap

Strategies to Improve Educational Outcomes for Black Students

Enormous challenges must be overcome to create greater opportunities for black students to achieve success in school. The primary challenge is developing and implementing a comprehensive agenda for reform. States must play a pivotal leadership role in identifying the problems that local school districts must address in order to overcome the black-white achievement gap. They also must support initiatives such as literacy programs that have the most likelihood for successfully closing this gap.

STATES MUST PLAY A PIVOTAL LEADERSHIP ROLE IN IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEMS THAT LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS MUST ADDRESS IN ORDER TO OVERCOME THE BLACK-WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP.



NCBSL believes four strategies hold the most promise for providing all students with a quality education. We have selected only those programs that we, as black legislators, feel will make the greatest difference for black students. We believe these strategies hold the most promise for dramatic and sustained educational improvement. These strategies are:

1. **Develop and support programs designed to promote high academic standards that all students are expected to meet, and create the instructional environments that will give students the opportunity to meet them.**

Standards must be aligned with assessments, curricula, professional development for staff, and extra help for students at risk of failure. Too often, states are not implementing this kind of comprehensive approach in standards-driven reform, and are unwilling to fund strategies designed to help African American students reach their goals. Absent this kind of comprehensive approach, African American and other minority students will continue to be at risk of academic failure. As students enter public education, they must be assessed, and assessment must continue at appropriate grade levels to measure gains and identify needs.

MONEY CAN HAVE A DIRECT AND POSITIVE IMPACT ON A SCHOOL'S ABILITY TO ACQUIRE COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY, RAISE TEACHER SALARIES AND ATTRACT QUALIFIED TEACHERS, UPGRADE LABORATORY AND SPORTS EQUIPMENT, PURCHASE UP-TO-DATE CURRICULA, AND MAINTAIN STRUCTURALLY SAFE BUILDINGS.

*facts you need to know...***2. Support programs that reduce class size and support prevention-intervention strategies.**

Programs that have proven effective in providing teachers with opportunities to give students more individualized attention deserve our support. Further, we need to adopt initiatives to offer students more concentrated learning time. The kinds of programs that are working for minority students include before and after-school programs, summer learning programs, and weekend academies.

3. Develop sound policies that address the quality of entering teachers and the ongoing training of veteran teachers.

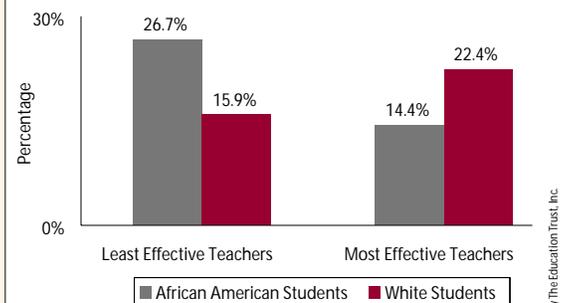
Often the teachers with the least experience and training end up in the most challenging schools. Pre-and in-service training, recruitment, induction, retention, and incentives that will attract highly qualified individuals to work in challenging environments are essential to creating successful schools for black students.

4. Increase funding to implement standards, reduce class size, improve teacher quality, and provide necessary classroom supports.

The wealthiest school districts spend 56 percent more per student than the poorest school districts.³¹ Small wonder, then, that more than seven of ten teachers in low income-schools report lacking necessary materials for their classes, according to the U.S. Department of Education.³²

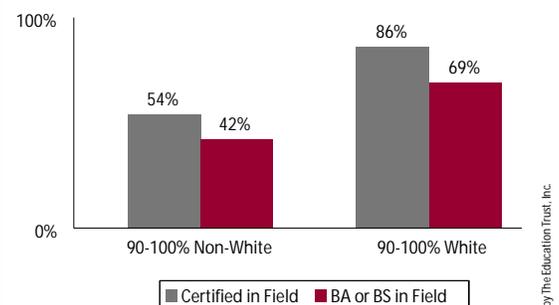
Money can have a direct and positive impact on a school's ability to acquire computer technology, raise teacher salaries and attract qualified teachers, upgrade laboratory and sports equipment, purchase up-to-date curricula, and maintain structurally safe buildings.

A more detailed discussion of our recommendations follows.

African American Students More Likely To Have Ineffective Teachers: Tennessee

Source: Sanders, William L. and Rivers, June C. "Cumulative And Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement," 1996

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Math and Science Classes of Mostly Minority Students Are More Often Taught by Underqualified Teachers

Source: Jeannie Oakes. *Multiplying Inequalities: The Effects of Race, Social Class, and Tracking on Opportunities to Learn Mathematics and Science* (Rand: 1990)

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Funding and Implementing High Standards and Assessments

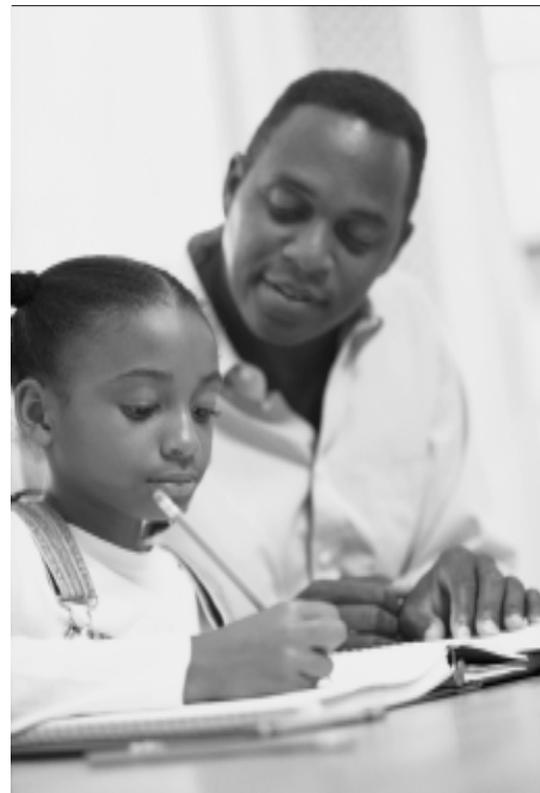
States have been developing and implementing high standards for student achievement at every grade level, independent of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. A common set of high standards sends the message that schools should expect the same level of high achievement from African Americans as from other students. However, in order to work, standards must be clearly articulated to educators and the general public, and they must be measurable.

The academic standards movement enjoys support from the general public and even greater support from African Americans. A recent study by Public Agenda illustrates this point. When asked if standards in their local schools were too low, 61 percent of the general public sampled said yes, while 70 percent of African American parents said yes. The same study reported that when asked if they supported setting clear guidelines in every subject on what students should learn and teachers should teach, 92 percent of African American parents supported this idea compared to 82 percent of the general public. Teachers and principals also show strong support for raising standards as a way to improve student achievement.³³

Standards: Ideal

A comprehensive standards-driven movement should benefit African American students in several ways. Given clear information about knowledge and skills for which they will be held accountable, many African American students will be more motivated to learn. Ideally, clearly measurable standards should motivate educators to align assessments, curricula, professional development and offer effective intervention, where needed.

A common set of standards, aligned with rich curricula, should enable teachers to provide content-specific, coordinated instruction that builds on students' learning from prior years. Teachers should be able to offer instruction that is sensitive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. For instance, common standards can support better instruction for students who transfer from school to school or across districts. One-fifth of the country's students change schools each year;



transfer rates are much higher in low-income neighborhoods. A common set of standards helps teachers assess children's present knowledge and skills and those they must acquire, and plan instruction accordingly.

Standards: Reality

NBCSL cautions, however, that actual implementation of standards-driven reform has not reached these ideals. Appropriate funding has not always accompanied the implementation of standards. It is not enough to call for high academic standards without also demanding that an investment be made in the curriculum, programs and other initiatives designed to foster student success.

Parents, educators and leaders are raising many concerns about how certain standard-driven reforms are being implemented:

- ✓ The vagueness of some standards;
- ✓ Plans to use a single high-stakes test to deny students promotions and diplomas;
- ✓ The failure to align these tests with standards and curricula;
- ✓ The belief that pressure to have students do well on tests is causing teachers to spend too much classroom time “teaching to the test” instead of offering a richer curriculum; and
- ✓ The policy of linking poor test performance to punitive sanctions against educators and schools.

NBCSL believes that a comprehensive approach to standards-driven reform can help create a level playing field for black students. However, too many states have not taken a comprehensive approach to implementing standards and other essential reforms.

NBCSL is particularly concerned about the current use of high-stakes testing. Some states are using a single test to deny students promotions. Often these tests have not been aligned with what students have been taught. Using tests in this way is an educationally bankrupt policy. As the failure rate of these high-stakes tests increases, it threatens to discourage, not motivate students. More of them will give up on schools and the result will be a continuing undereducated black population with diminished opportunities for success. The cycle of poverty, alienation from society, and disenfranchisement will continue. This is a scenario that the nation cannot afford for one of its fastest growing population groups.

SOME REFORM PROPOSALS
BLAME CHILDREN FOR THEIR
INABILITY TO TRANSCEND AN
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BLAME THE NEIGHBORHOOD
SCHOOL, EVEN WHILE AN
INEQUITABLE FUNDING SYSTEM
THAT OVER-RELIES ON THE
NEIGHBORHOOD TAX BASE,
STARVES IT FOR SUPPORT.



The implementation of standards can and must be strengthened with policies that offer African Americans and all students fair opportunities to succeed.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Any test used for high-stakes decisions must first be aligned with the standards, and employed after students have been provided with appropriately aligned curricula and instruction. Many states, after developing new standards, continue to use the traditional “off-the-shelf” tests that have not been aligned with their standards. Further, little work has been done to assure that teaching staff has received appropriately aligned curricula, instructional techniques, professional development and materials. One result seems to be an increase in “teaching to the test,” rather than teaching the underlying skills and knowledge embodied in the standards.
- ✓ No single test should be the sole determinant of student advancement or retention in pre-K through grade 12. No single test currently exists that is a valid indication of students’ achievement of newly developed standards. Absent valid instruments, the practice of using a single high-stakes test should be abandoned.
- ✓ High-stakes decisions, such as promotion or graduation, should be supported by other corroborating information. Additional test data, grades, teacher recommendations, and other evidence of academic performance should be used for making decisions.
- ✓ Teachers should continuously monitor individual students and diagnose problems early. Schools should provide support for early instructional intervention and services to help students in need of them.
- ✓ Students who perform poorly on standards-based assessments should be given remediation that focuses on acquiring relevant knowledge and skills.

BLACK CAUCUS OF STATE LEGISLATORS

Reduce Class Size and Fund Prevention-Intervention Programs

We must fund programs that have proven effective in providing teachers with an opportunity to give students more individualized attention. We need to provide funding for prevention-intervention initiatives that give students more concentrated time for learning and studying, including before and after-school programs, summer learning programs and weekend academies. As

NBSCL has assessed the various programs available to help improve the education of African American students, we have reached the conclusion that reducing class size and focusing on reading makes the biggest difference for African American students. Other options are more fully discussed below in the “Let’s Fund It” section.

Historically, African American and students at risk of academic failure have attended some of our nation’s most overcrowded schools. Class size in these schools is typically larger than those found in schools attended by middle and upper-income students. *Studies find conclusive evidence linking reduced class size to improved literacy skills and higher student achievement. This is especially evident in gains made by African American, Latino and low-income children.* These studies indicate in smaller class settings students receive more individual attention, there are fewer discipline problems, and teachers are more enthusiastic about their work. There are also indications that smaller classes lead to greater and perhaps deeper coverage of academic content. Many teachers with smaller classes completed grade level curriculum before the end of the school year. These positive signs make clear the need to support—with adequate and targeted funding—school districts’ efforts to reduce class size.

The Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR), project provides the most definitive findings on the effects of reducing class size on student achievement. In 1985, the STAR project began a longitudinal study that followed K – 3 students, who were placed in small classes of between 13 to 17 students, and students in regular-sized classes. The study

monitored both groups’ reading and math achievement each year. Students who had been assigned to the smaller classes scored significantly higher on reading and math tests. A follow-up study found that when the STAR students reached eighth grade, those who had been in smaller classes until third grade continued to outperform the control group. Minority students achieved the greatest gains.³⁴

A later follow-up study of STAR students found, by high school graduation, children originally in smaller classes showed superior educational outcomes than peers in larger classes. Throughout STAR students’ school careers they continued to have higher levels of achievement, better grade-point averages, and higher rates of on-time graduation. Students in smaller classes were also more likely to graduate in the top 25 percent of the class, less likely to drop out, and more likely to go on to college.³⁵

The effect of class size reduction was also studied in Milwaukee’s Student Achievement Guarantee in Education Program (SAGE.) SAGE reported achievement gains similar to those in STAR. SAGE reported the largest academic gains for African American males in smaller classes. Another similar study of 200 school districts found smaller class size raised math achievement by six months, and low-income students living in urban areas made the largest gains.³⁶

UNPROVEN REFORMS SUCH AS VOUCHERS IGNORE THE GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE ABOUT A VARIETY OF EFFECTIVE REFORMS THAT HAVE PROVEN TO INCREASE ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN SOME OF OUR NATION’S MOST IMPOVERISHED SCHOOLS.





Because reducing class size benefits all students and has a dramatic effect on the academic performance of African-American and low-income students, NBCSL strongly urges states and districts to establish class size reduction initiatives.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Districts should establish a policy that limits class size to 15 students for each teacher in schools that serve students at risk of academic failure. This policy will:
 - ✗ Phase in class size reductions, starting with K-1 in the first year, grade two in the second year and grade three in the third year.
 - ✗ Use reductions in class size to provide students with more individualized attention, with a focus on improving the all-important reading skills of children.
 - ✗ Use the phase-in time to plan for facilities, personnel, and program adjustments.
 - ✗ Intensify programs for recruiting and hiring teachers and staff, and provide additional training for teachers assigned to small classes. Train teachers and other school staff in the latest research on classroom management and other skills designed to improve their effectiveness in the classroom. Develop a system for disseminating “best practices” in small classroom instruction.
 - ✗ Once developed, implement these class size reduction initiatives in grades four through eight.

BLACK CAUCUS OF STATE LEGISLATORS

Improving Teacher Quality

More than 220,000 new teachers must be hired nationwide each year for the foreseeable future.³⁷ As teacher shortages grow, districts are developing new recruitment strategies, such as signing bonuses and programs that permit individuals to become certified without first obtaining a four-year degree in education.

At a time when all students depend on teachers to enable them to perform well on standards-driven tests, these policies put students already at risk of academic failure at an even greater disadvantage. States and districts must abandon policies that put non-certified, unqualified teachers in schools.

High quality in-service training contributes to good teaching. However, teachers report that most professional development programs are not relevant to their day-to-day responsibilities, and offer little assistance in improving instruction. Even when training inspires teachers, too often they do not receive the necessary support to implement these changes in the classroom.

Good teachers are fundamental to raising student performance. States and school districts must act aggressively to improve pre and in-service training programs, and establish strong recruitment, induction, and retention policies. NBCSL urges states and school districts to address:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Professional development.
 - ✗ States and districts must commit to providing improved and ongoing professional development for teachers as well as educational support personnel. Most often teachers report that district professional development programs have little relevance to solving their classroom needs. Professional development programs should be planned and implemented in collaboration with teachers. Programs should have a strong focus on teaching reading and on developing the academic skills children will need to meet high standards and include effective remediation training.
- ✓ Recruitment, induction, and retention.
 - ✗ States and districts should increase teacher compensation in order to align teacher salaries with those of other professions that require similar education and skills. Raising teacher salaries is critical if we expect to recruit highly qualified individuals into the profession. Here again, an investment is needed in order to set teacher pay at a level that will lure top people.
 - ✗ State policies on alternative routes to teacher certification must assure that highly qualified individuals are placed in schools. Candidates for certification must demonstrate both excellent subject matter mastery and strong pedagogical skills before being assigned to schools.
 - ✗ Districts should develop induction and retention programs for new teachers. For instance, each new teacher should be assigned a master teacher to mentor him or her, peer assistance, and a professional practice review team. Mentors and peer assistance programs give novices support through demonstrations, modeling and coaching as they develop their teaching skills. Master teachers and peer assistance providers should receive additional compensation for these new responsibilities.

- ✘ During the induction period for new teachers districts should reduce their workload (e.g., smaller class size, fewer administrative duties). Fewer initial assignments permit new teachers to spend more time developing their teaching skills.
- ✘ Teacher education institutions should develop programs that encourage and prepare talented high-school students to enter the teaching profession. These “pipeline” programs should make special efforts to assist minority youth entering teaching.
- ✓ Incentives.
 - ✘ States should develop incentives to recruit males, people of color and others into teaching—especially those who are skilled in content areas that are experiencing shortages. Incentives should place high priority on placing these individuals in low-income and low-performing schools, where shortages of qualified teachers are greatest. Forgiveness of student loans in return for a commitment to teach in these schools is one incentive that is promising.
 - ✘ Districts should consult with teachers and teacher representatives to develop incentives that will attract qualified veteran teachers to take assignments in troubled schools. Tax breaks, and loan forgiveness programs are examples of incentive programs currently undergoing experimentation, but what will work best depends on how local teachers themselves see the costs and benefits of taking on tough assignments.
 - ✘ Districts should establish or create incentives to encourage highly qualified retired teachers to re-enter the profession as coaches and mentors and in other instructional capacities.
- ✓ Teacher training.
 - ✘ Teacher training institutions should assure that their programs use the best research on classroom practice for training teachers. Their graduates must be able to demonstrate that they are well grounded in the subject matter they will teach, and have acquired effective pedagogical methods. Prospective teachers should receive training that exposes them to the nuances of African American life and culture. This type of training is essential to their efforts to educate and relate to black students and families.
 - ✘ Teacher training faculty should be encouraged to spend time in pre-K – 12 schools, particularly those in urban and rural areas, to keep abreast of the practical issues confronting educators. For instance, sabbaticals and internships could be spent identifying instructional problems educators face, working on solutions to those problems, and using this information to train prospective teachers.

We Know What Works— Let's Fund It!

Across the nation, reform efforts are underway in schools with a pattern of low student achievement. Urban schools have become a particular focus of these efforts. There is now substantial evidence that low-performing schools are being improved, producing accelerated and sometimes dramatic student achievement gains. Successful reforms are generally comprehensive in nature, and are based on solid research that shows their effectiveness in different settings.



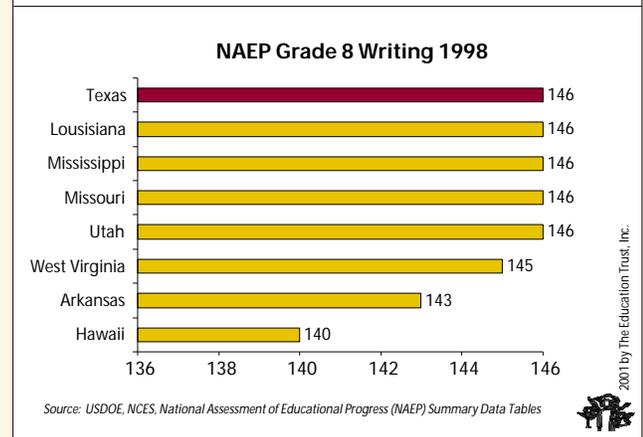
Though many school districts continue to face serious challenges to improving student achievement, over the last few years a number of cities, including Los Angeles, CA; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Boston, MA; Washington, DC; Hartford, CT, and New York, NY have seen impressive improvements in schools that have implemented comprehensive education reform.

Below are examples of success stories in several of these cities.

✓ ***In Cleveland*** the school system has been providing reading assistance to students in its lowest performing schools. Working with teachers, the district has implemented Success For All, a research-based early literacy program, and a community-based culturally-driven reading program called Read Baby Read. The district has also improved professional development, improved discipline, provided families with reading materials, and instituted a summer school program.

facts you need to know...

African Americans in Texas Write as Well or Better Than Whites in 7 States





We know enough about reform programs that work to begin making a difference in the lives of most students at risk of academic failure. NBCSL calls upon all states and districts to take immediate steps to address the needs of students in low performing schools and to fund programs that research has identified as effective in decreasing the achievement gap.

Since 1998, Cleveland's fourth-grade reading scores have increased 44 percent.³⁸

✓ ***New York City*** has instituted a variety of reforms credited with raising the performance in over 60 schools since 1996. In 12 of the most troubled schools, the district upgraded facilities, adopted the Success For All program, lowered class size, instituted pre-kindergarten and after-school programs for students who required extra help, supported teachers in improving instruction, and worked to improve parent involvement. Today, none of the 12 schools that instituted these reforms are low performing schools.³⁹

✓ ***Chicago***, another district that has turned low performing schools into high priority schools, offered the largest number of after-school and summer school programs in the nation. Dropout rates fell, graduation rates increased, and between 1995 and 1999 district-wide test scores rose by 10 percent.⁴⁰

Funding Strategies that Work

Those states whose students have shown remarkable gains report higher pupil expenditures, lower pupil-teacher ratios in the lower grades, higher participation in public preschool programs and higher levels of teachers who report they have adequate resources. According to the Center on Education Policy, "extra resources can have a significant impact on achievement when properly targeted."

In fact the gap actually narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s when minority students participated in Head Start, Title I and other federal programs in large numbers. "The court finds that the city's at risk children are capable of seizing the opportunity for a sound basic education if they are given sufficient resources," said a New York trial court recently.

The citations for this report are available upon written request.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Make improving the literacy skills of students a top priority. Students who cannot read will experience little success in school. Reading is the key to academic achievement in every subject, ranging from math and English to science and history. We must put “reading first” by funding initiatives and programs designed to strengthen the reading skills of students, particularly low-performing students.
- ✗ Expanding access to high quality preschool programs.
- ✗ Investing in teacher professional development.
- ✗ Lowering class size in minority schools.
- ✗ Increasing participation of minority students in challenging academic courses and rigorous instruction.
- ✗ Providing extended learning time and more intensive programs for students who are having difficulty, including before and after-school programs, weekend academies, and summer school programs.
 - ✗ Providing well-qualified teachers to high-minority and high poverty schools.
 - ✗ Expanding access to Advanced Placement courses in high-minority schools.
 - ✗ Equalizing disparities in facilities between high-minority and low minority schools.
- ✓ Fund programs identified in research that are effective in raising achievement of African American students and decreasing the achievement gap between urban and suburban students as follows:
- ✓ Work to get parents, school staff, community leaders, and the general public fully informed and involved to sustain commitment to the reforms being implemented.
- ✓ Clearly define the characteristics of schools designated as low performing and then provide solid evidence for that designation. Internal and external assessments should be done to identify problems and to arrive at a clear plan for improvement. Staff who work in high priority schools must collaborate in the assessment, adoption and planning of reforms that address the problems identified.
- ✓ Re-designate low performing schools as high priority schools. Commit the necessary work, time and resources to transforming these schools. This includes using state as well as federal funding and sources of information for planning and operational costs.
- ✓ Identify, adopt, and faithfully implement reforms that have a proven track record. In selecting these reforms, schools should consider areas such as resource allocation, collaboration, leadership and professional development.
- ✓ Bilingual education programs which address the special student achievement needs of cultural and language diverse student bodies should be continued and expanded. In addition, efforts should be made to help bridge the cultural and language differences between African American and Latino students and their families.

Putting these reasonable reforms in place would offer significant numbers of minority students across the nation opportunities to succeed. Failing to put them in place could ensure that black students continue to achieve below their white counterparts, and continue to lack access to a high quality education.



CONCLUSION

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators strongly supports public schools.

THERE IS A DANGEROUS ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN WEALTHY, WHITE, SUBURBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THEIR URBAN, BLACK, UNDER-FUNDED COUNTERPARTS...A GAP THAT THREATENS TO UNDERMINE THE FUTURE OF THE NATION.

Public schools educate 98 percent of African American children. Public schools admit all children, they are subject to public scrutiny and accountability, and, with resources and support, public schools have the potential to provide American children with an education that will enable them to maintain the United States as the world's leading democracy and economic power.

However, only some of the nation's public schools are living up to that potential. There is a dangerous achievement gap between wealthy, white, suburban public schools and their urban, black, under-funded counterparts...a gap that threatens to undermine the future of the nation.

The goal of this white paper is to open that potential to all students who attend public schools: urban as well as suburban, in poor neighborhoods as well as wealthy, for majority and minority populations. We aim to put an end to the separate and unequal public education that stubbornly persists in 2001.

Frederick Douglass, the first crusader for universal literacy, freed himself from bondage but understood he was not truly free until he taught himself to read. He then realized he was still not free until the nation ended slavery and all freed people knew how to read.

Today, African Americans no longer are slaves but many remain under-educated. Too many people lack the literacy skills to actively participate in the economy or become engaged citizens. Almost all states have raised academic standards but refuse to commit the funds necessary to make sure all students reach these standards. Therefore, the achievement gap persists between African American students and white students.

The rhetoric of leaving no child behind has been adopted by the mainstream. But rhetoric without funding is meaningless. NBCSL believes that the future of education for African American students is at a crossroads. We believe that the educational disparities and lack of educational opportunities that result in life-long inequality are laying the foundation for another civil rights movement. The right to equal educational opportunity was at the core of the civil rights struggle of the 60s, and it has yet to be realized.

Despite this reality, education can and must be different for African American children. We know many of the steps we need to take to improve it. What is needed now are leaders with the will to see all students succeed and the commitment to implement reforms that have proven successful in helping all children to realize their full potential.

It is our challenge as state lawmakers to advance this white paper, to promote community action, and to work with majority lawmakers to enact this agenda. This agenda will shrink the achievement gap and ensure a high quality education for all students. We no longer can ask what will make a difference. We know what works...research points the way.

Our students need small classes with qualified teachers, knowledgeable about the communities in which students live. Teachers need time for ongoing communication with colleagues and to stay current on research. African American children need quality after-school and summer programs to be most successful.

Our fellow lawmakers must understand: if assessments are tied to high standards, then the nation must make an investment to achieve results. Small classes, quality teachers, time for after school programs, summer support, and professional development all require real investment.

In an increasingly competitive labor market, high quality teachers will not automatically rush to our schools. They have other options. State budgets must make attracting, recruiting, inducting, retaining, and developing high quality teachers in the most challenging schools a priority. It is our task to help our colleagues understand that the rhetoric of results means little without public investment. Testing, measuring, and verbally demanding accountability cannot solve years of educational neglect.

As African American political and community leaders, we cannot be diverted by seductive appeals for private school solutions. The gap between African American and white achievement is too wide to be solved by ideologically driven solutions based on the private marketplace. We need to keep our eyes on the prize of improving and transforming public schools—the institution of choice for our community of students, parents and educators.

NBCSL will provide the leadership to address the crisis that exists in many urban schools. This document provides a blueprint for action by state legislatures that we believe will have a real impact on this crisis. As African American leaders, we must assure that our communities are engaged in reform efforts that work. Outreach and involvement of parents, community-based organizations, and leaders at every level will be required to build and sustain the commitment necessary to implement effective reform.

Again, let us look to the example of Frederick Douglass. Douglass, in his brilliance, charted our legislative mandate. He concluded with these words:

It may be a moral struggle or it may be a political struggle, but power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.

This white paper contains our demand. We as the National Black Caucus of State Legislators will continue to take up the struggle.



About NBCSL

The primary mission of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators is to develop, conduct and promote educational, research and training programs designed to enhance the effectiveness of its members, as they consider legislation and issues of public policy which impact, either directly or indirectly upon the “general welfare” of African American constituents within their respective jurisdictions.

Our Objectives

In support of its mission, NBCSL has adopted the following fundamental objectives:

1. To serve as a national network and clearinghouse for the discussion, dissemination and exchange of ideas and information among African American state legislators and their staffs.
2. To provide research, training and educational services to African American state legislators and their staffs.
3. To improve the effectiveness and quality of African American state legislators.
4. To serve as a strong, united and effective advocate for African American state legislators and their constituents at the federal level.

Check www.nbcsl.com for the latest information on committee activities.

A Blueprint for State Legislative Action

Enormous challenges must be overcome to create greater opportunities for school success. The primary challenge is developing and implementing a comprehensive agenda for reform. States must play a pivotal leadership role in helping local school districts identify problems and overcome the black-white achievement gap. They also must support initiatives that have the most likelihood for successfully closing this gap.

NBCSL believes four strategies hold the most promise for providing all students with a quality education. We have selected only those programs that we, as black legislators, feel will make the greatest difference for black students. We believe these strategies hold the most promise for dramatic and sustained educational improvement.

Strategies:

1. Develop and support programs designed to promote high academic standards that all students are expected to meet, and create the instructional environments that will give students the opportunity to meet them.

Tactics:

- ✓ Any test used for high-stakes decisions must first be aligned with standards, and required after students have been provided with appropriately aligned curricula and instruction. Many states, after developing new standards, continue to use the traditional “off-the-shelf” tests that have not been aligned with their standards.
- ✓ No single test should be the sole determinant of student advancement or retention in pre-K through grade 12. No single test currently exists that is a valid indication of students’ achievement of newly developed standards. Absent valid instruments, the practice of using a single high-stakes test should be abandoned.
- ✓ High-stakes decisions, such as promotion or graduation, should be supported by other corroborating information. Additional test data, grades, teacher recommendations, and other evidence of academic performance, instead, should be used for making decisions.

NBCSL Taking Action

- ✓ Schools should provide support for early instructional intervention and services to help students in need of them. Teachers should continuously monitor how well individual students are progressing and diagnose problems early.
- ✓ Remediation that focuses on acquiring relevant knowledge and skills should be provided to students who perform poorly on standards-based assessments.

2. Support programs that reduce class size and support prevention-intervention approaches.

Tactics:

- ✓ Districts should establish a policy that limits class size to 15 students for each teacher in schools that serve African-American students at risk of academic failure. This policy will:
 - ✗ Phase in class size reductions, starting with K-1 in the first year, grade two in the second year and grade three in the third year.
 - ✗ Use reductions in class size to provide students with more individualized attention, with a focus on improving the all-important reading skills of children.
 - ✗ Use the phase-in time to plan for facilities, personnel, and program adjustments.
 - ✗ Intensify programs for recruiting and hiring teachers and staff, and provide additional training for teachers assigned to small classes. Train teachers and other school staff in the latest research on classroom management and other skills designed to improve their effectiveness in the classroom. Develop a system for disseminating “best practices” in small classroom instruction.
 - ✗ Once developed, implement these class size reduction initiatives in grades four through eight.

3. Develop sound policies that address the quality of entering teachers and the ongoing training of veteran teachers and educational support personnel.

Tactics:

- ✓ **Professional Development.** States and districts must commit to providing improved and ongoing professional development for teachers. Most often teachers report that district professional development programs have little relevance to solving their classroom needs. Professional development programs should be planned and implemented in collaboration with teachers. Programs should have a strong focus on developing the academic skills children will need to meet high standards and include effective remediation training.
- ✓ **Recruitment, Induction, and Retention.** States and districts should increase teacher compensation in order to align teacher salaries with those of other professions requiring similar education and skills. Raising teacher salaries is critical if we expect to recruit highly qualified individuals into the profession. Here again, an investment is needed in order to set teacher pay at a level that will lure top people.
- ✓ State policies on alternative routes to teacher certification must assure that highly qualified individuals are placed in schools. Candidates for certification must demonstrate both excellent subject matter mastery and strong pedagogical skills before being assigned to schools.

- ✓ Districts should develop induction and retention programs for new teachers. For instance, each new teacher should be assigned a master teacher to mentor him or her, peer assistance, and a professional practice review team. Mentors and peer assistance programs give novices support through demonstration, modeling and coaching as they develop their teaching skills. Master teachers and peer assistance providers should receive additional compensation for these new responsibilities.
- ✓ During the induction period districts should reduce new teachers' workload, for example by assigning smaller class size and fewer administrative duties. Fewer initial assignments permit new teachers to spend more time developing their teaching skills.
- ✓ Teacher education institutions should develop programs that encourage and prepare talented high-school students to enter the teaching profession. These “pipeline” programs should make special efforts to assist minority youth entering teaching.
- ✓ **Incentives.** States should develop incentives to recruit males, people of color and others into teaching—especially those skilled in content areas experiencing shortages. Incentives should place high priority on placing these individuals in low-income and low-performing schools, where shortages of qualified teachers are greatest. Forgiveness of student loans in return for a commitment to teach in these schools is one promising incentive.
- ✓ Districts should consult with teachers and teacher representatives to develop incentives that will attract qualified veteran teachers to take assignments in troubled schools. Tax breaks and loan forgiveness programs are examples of incentive programs currently undergoing experimentation, but what will work best depends on how local teachers themselves see the costs and benefits of taking on tough assignments.
- ✓ Districts should establish or create incentives to encourage highly qualified retired teachers to re-enter the profession as coaches and mentors and in other instructional capacities.
- ✓ **Teacher Training.** Teacher training institutions should ensure that programs use the best research on classroom practice for teacher training. Graduates must be able to demonstrate that they are well grounded in the subject matter they will teach, and have acquired effective pedagogical methods. Prospective teachers should receive training that exposes them to the nuances of African-American life and culture. This type of training is essential to educate and relate to black students and families.
- ✓ Teacher training faculty should be encouraged to spend time in pre-K – 12 schools, particularly those in urban and rural areas, to keep abreast of the practical issues confronting educators. For instance, sabbaticals and internships could be spent identifying instructional problems educators face, working on solutions to those problems, and using this information to train prospective teachers.

Strategy:

4. Increase funding.

Tactics:

- ✓ Fund programs identified in research that are effective in raising achievement of African-American students and decreasing the achievement gap between urban and suburban students as follows:

- ✗ Expanding access to high quality preschool programs.
- ✗ Investing in teacher professional development.
- ✗ Lowering class size in schools with high minority populations.
- ✗ Increasing participation of minority students in challenging academic courses and rigorous instruction.
- ✗ Providing extended learning time and more intensive programs for students who are having difficulty achieving, including before and after-school programs, weekend academies, and summer school programs.
- ✗ Providing well-qualified teachers to high-minority and high poverty schools.
- ✗ Expanding access to Advanced Placement courses in schools with high minority populations.
- ✗ Equalizing disparities in facilities between high-minority and low minority schools.
- ✓ Make improving the literacy skills of students a top priority. Students who cannot read will experience little success in school. Reading is the key to academic achievement in every subject, ranging from math and English to science and history. We must put “reading first” by funding initiatives and programs designed to strengthen the reading skills of students, particularly low-performing students.
- ✓ Work to get parents, school staff, community leaders, and the general public fully informed and involved, in order to sustain commitment to the reforms being implemented.
- ✓ Clearly define the characteristics of schools designated as low performing and then provide solid evidence for that designation. Internal and external assessments should be done to identify problems and to arrive at a clear plan for improvement. Staff who work in high priority schools must collaborate in the assessment, adoption and planning of reforms that address the problems identified.
- ✓ Re-designate low performing schools as high priority schools. Commit the necessary work, time and resources to transforming these schools. This includes using state as well as federal funding and sources of information for planning and operational costs.
- ✓ Identify, adopt, and faithfully implement reforms that have a proven track record. In selecting these reforms, schools should consider areas such as resource allocation, collaboration, leadership and professional development.
- ✓ Bilingual education programs which address the special student achievement needs of cultural and language diverse student bodies should be continued and expanded. In addition, efforts should be made to help bridge the cultural and language differences between African-American and Latino students and their families within the same schools.

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

action plan



We can improve educational outcomes for African American students most at risk of academic failure.

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators calls on legislatures and school districts throughout the United States to take immediate action on the following reforms to address the needs of students in low performing schools...to make rhetoric reality and truly leave no child behind.

1. *Mount a nationwide education and advocacy campaign that reaches both leaders and the general public to drive home the urgency of investing in public schools.*
2. *Assert the political will, in concert with elected leaders and concerned citizens, to free resources to implement reform in every school attended by African-American students at risk of failure.*
3. *Act at the state level to fund education programs with proven track records, based on solid research conducted in schools similar to those that need help most. These programs include:*
 - ✓ Implementing literacy intervention to ensure all children read at grade level;
 - ✓ Reducing class size;
 - ✓ Improving the quality and training of teachers and other school staff;
 - ✓ Developing and funding clear standards aligned with curricula and instruction;
 - ✓ Promoting parental and community engagement; and,
 - ✓ Ensuring safe and orderly school environments.
4. *Act to dispel the idea that vouchers improve public education.*

*Our
mission
is very
clear.*

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Closing the Achievement Gap

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There is a major difference between equity and equality. In the education arena, blacks and whites are not on a level playing field. Let me illustrate what I mean. In basic mathematics, if you add equal amounts to both sides of an unequal equation, it will remain unequal. Put differently, the only way to achieve what is appropriate if two glasses are unequally filled with water is not to pour equal amounts into each glass, but to pour equitable amounts into each glass. That might mean pouring 50 percent into one glass and 25 percent into the other, but you do what you have to until you have achieved equity. This is the critical public policy issue we confront today—how to achieve equity in educational opportunity.

Norman Francis, Chair
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