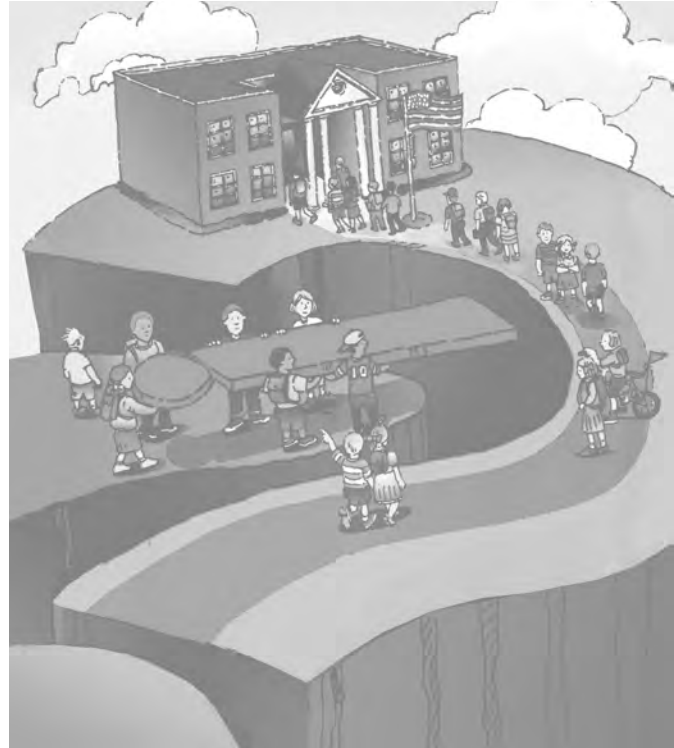


In a nation that prides itself on providing equal opportunity for all, too many low-income and minority children are falling behind their peers in school. In an increasingly competitive global arena, the United States cannot afford to ignore this widening achievement gap. What can be done to close it?



# >> Too Many Children Left Behind

## How Can We Close the Achievement Gap?

**A** QUALITY EDUCATION is often the pathway to the American Dream, but far too many students in U.S. public schools are lagging behind. They leave school unable to make change at the local McDonald's when the computerized cash register fails. Many can't write a readable essay, or sometimes a readable sentence. Nearly 30 percent drop out and never complete high school.

These failures are occurring in every nook and cranny of this country—in urban America, in suburban America, even in rural America. More than 30 percent of the nation's children attend rural schools, many in vulnerable, poverty-plagued communities in states like Mississippi and Alaska where students drop out and perform poorly in school at rates to rival urban areas.

For African American and Hispanic students, particularly those from low-income families, the situation is dire. According to the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan public policy research group, those students have only a 50 percent chance of finishing high school with a diploma. Rural and low-income whites face daunting educational challenges as well.

Experts say the economic consequences of not educating these children is enormous. The United States is already falling behind in global competitiveness, fast losing ground to countries like China and India in preparing students for the best technological jobs. U.S. students continue to do poorly on international tests for mathematics, while Asian countries excel.

Economists say the United States is losing almost \$200 billion a year by failing to do enough to improve the quality of the education system. Many of those poorly educated students will end up on public assistance—or in prison.

As the educational readiness of children in the United States continues to be eclipsed by other nations, thoughtful and systemic educational and political change is badly needed to ensure that our children are educated competitively and to their potential.

Failure to undertake this task is detrimental to the nation's ability to thrive and prosper in the twenty-first century, a time when a higher level of education is not only desirable but essential. The low-wage factory and service jobs of a generation ago are no longer readily

available in this country. Many of these jobs have moved to third-world countries where U.S. businesses can often get the labor cheaper. And technology has replaced others. The U.S. economy now demands more high-skilled labor. The students who don't get it will be left behind.

According to the National Center on Education and the Economy, by the year 2020, the United States will need 14 million more college-trained workers than it will produce. "Nowhere is college participation lower than among African American and Hispanic youth," researchers at the center say. At the same time, they add, "nowhere is the potential to meet our nation's need for college graduates higher."

Addressing the achievement gap more aggressively is gaining momentum nationwide. Educators, parents, policy-makers, and the general public have recognized that work on closing the gap will boost academic performance for all students. It will also increase the global competitiveness of the United States and establish long-term economic viability.

Demographic changes in the United States have made tackling the problem vital. Over the last few years, the Hispanic population has skyrocketed. In the last three years, half of the nation's 9.4 million new residents were Hispanic, a growth rate nearly four times that of the total population.

These changes are mirrored in the nation's public schools. Many are predominantly minority, with African Americans and Hispanics the largest percentage of students. But the public schools are increasingly failing to educate these students.

In fact, the gap in the academic performance between these minorities and whites and Asian Americans is large and daunting. According to Harvard professor Gary Orfield, the gaps are widest and most persistent between African American and white students and between low-income and more affluent students. But as the Hispanic population swells, the gap between Hispanics and whites is rapidly

approaching the size of the gap between blacks and whites.

The United States has fought to overcome its long history of disenfranchisement and inequality and has made inroads. But inequities and problems remain. Many public school systems have resegregated, as communities turn to neighborhood schools. Schools in many of those systems are predominantly black or Hispanic, and mostly poor. The students often attend inferior schools with less-qualified teachers. Instead of preparing students to be leaders of tomorrow, these schools are warehousing children and crushing their dreams. Observers say we are wasting them and their talents.

In a nation committed to upholding justice and equality, many believe the public schools highlight a disconnect between our stated beliefs and our actions. The public schools reflect a decided lack of commitment to providing all children an equal opportunity to the high-quality education they deserve. Structural inequities and inadequate resources persist in the current public school education system.

One recent national report said that:

One of every five children in the United States lives in a family whose income is below—often far below—the poverty level; that rate doubles among blacks and Hispanics. While poverty levels rise and fall, children remain the most impoverished group, and obstacles to their well-being continue to mount. The realities of impoverishment should horrify a wealthy nation but we shut our eyes to the social context of childhood in the inner city.

But shutting our eyes is not an option. These children's failure will be this country's failure.

How do we "fix" a system of public education where too many children—mostly poor and mostly minority—are being left behind? This issue guide provides a framework for that discussion.

### **Kettering Foundation**

The Kettering Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute based in Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, D.C., and New York), was founded in 1927. It has provided books, materials, and moderator training for the National Issues Forums, which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary last year. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org) or contact us at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. Phone: 800-221-3657.

### **The Public and Public Education Research**

This issue guide was prepared by the Kettering Foundation for research into the nature of the relationship between the public and public education. It is similar to ones produced by the foundation for the National Issues Forums (NIF) network, which are used

by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues.

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*Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap?*

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ISBN: 978-0-923993-21-4

African American, Hispanic, and Native American students in many schools have become victims of what President George W. Bush calls “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” If we are to close the achievement gap, we must push for increased academic performance of all students, and make educators accountable for the results.



AP/Wide World Photos

## >> Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability

**R**ONALD HARRILL grew up in rural Shelby, North Carolina. He had worked for years pushing youngsters in his community to achieve. But eight years ago, he recognized a growing problem that required more than one-on-one efforts. The academic performance of students in Cleveland County, where Shelby is located, was poor and getting worse each year. There was a widening gap between the performance of black students and white students. African American boys especially were being left behind.

As a vice president of Wachovia Bank, Harrill saw clearly the future for many of his county’s youngsters. It would be bleak, especially for black youngsters, if the community didn’t do something to improve education. So he and other black professionals got together and did something: they started the Committee to Close the Achievement Gap in Cleveland County.

The results have been dramatic: Since 2000, for example, black males are making as much progress as other students, with at least 74 percent on grade level in elementary grades. White youngsters also continue

to show progress. In the three city school systems (since merged into one), academic performance zoomed as well. In Cleveland County schools, the percentage of black student performance at or above grade level has risen in the last four years from 37 percent to 60.7 percent.

What’s the secret of their success?

The committee began work a few years before passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, but the program has focused on some of the same goals: It is results oriented which is to say building in accountability; it sets high expectations for every student; and it articulates clearly defined student achievement goals. An annual public summit is held to discuss progress and to push increased academic performance for all students regardless of race; students are put in more rigorous courses; colleges and universities provide Saturday school and summer and after-school tutoring; separate discussion groups for black females and black males are held about responsibility and life goals; and an annual awards program is held to celebrate black student achievement.

Cleveland County shows what can happen when communities focus on two important goals: high expectations and accountability. Approach One advocates cultivating both.

## No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was largely launched on the premises that more should be expected of students and that schools should be accountable for how well their students do. In 2001, when President Bush pushed for passage, he often talked about how the public education system in America fostered “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

What he meant was that in schools nationwide, minority students were not being pushed to perform or take more difficult classes because educators, and indeed many others in the public, didn’t think they could. Expectations for blacks and other minorities were low, and it was a form of prejudice.

The NCLB law requires school systems to report annually on the state test results achieved by all students as well as their school attendance, special education placement, and other factors associated with student performance. Schools that don’t meet their state’s academic requirements two years in a row are identified as failing schools. Students must be given a chance to move out of the school to another public or public charter school in the district. If they don’t meet state standards for three

years, students must be offered free tutoring or other academic services.

## Teachers and Schools

It’s the teachers, stupid. Many parents, politicians, and other citizens think that educators have fallen down on their jobs, and unless that changes the academic achievement will remain wide and yawning.

According to Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, coeditors of the book *The Black-White Test Score Gap*:

Teacher competence shows a stronger association with how students learn than any other widely used measure. Screening teachers for verbal and math competence thus is likely to boost children’s performance. But the teachers who fail competency tests are concentrated in black schools.

Furthermore, they cite research that shows that “teachers do have lower expectations for blacks than for whites.”

This results in a number of harmful discriminatory practices cited by Roslyn Mickelson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research shows that black students are concentrated in lower academic track programs where they are often assigned less-credentialed and less-experienced teachers. As these students go from elementary through high school, they are increasingly more likely to be put in lower track programs and to show lower achievement.

## >> What Critics Say

Accountability and high expectations only go so far, critics say. If schools with high numbers of poor and minority students don’t have good teachers and principals, and their facilities and materials are inadequate, these are meaningless aspirations. The lack of such essentials is exacerbated when students come to school hungry or with other needs because parents can’t or won’t provide the basics. Data show that few schools or school systems with such deficits overcome them.

In fact, critics say the public obsession with testing or “accountability” and the culture surrounding it in schools has created the illusion of achievement without much evidence of progress. The performance gap is widening, not closing, in most public schools.

Many good educators have been driven away from the classroom by a growing emphasis on accountability and testing. As one San Bernardino, California, elementary teacher said: “There is simply no joy in learning anymore. It’s become such a rote process. The goal of everything is to improve test scores.”

Still other critics of Approach One lament the lack of accountability of parents. Indeed educators blame parents for students’ academic problems as much as parents blame educators. These critics say parents should face stiff consequences for failing to meet their responsibilities and obligations to their children, including fines and criminal charges if their children are neglected or consistently get into trouble.

But even that isn’t enough for some parents. They have left and turned to schools other than traditional public schools for help—schools they feel will have high expectations and show better results.

There is plenty of blame to go around, some critics say, but Approach One can only go so far, given the inequities of U.S. school systems where many children attend decaying schools that lack essential equipment and employ the least-qualified teachers. In this view, which we will look at next, we need to level the playing field in order to give all children a chance to succeed.

Schools in low-income, high-minority districts often lack science labs, computers, up-to-date textbooks, and well-qualified teachers who most often choose to work in better-paying, better-equipped suburban school districts. We cannot realistically expect more of poor, minority students until these resource and funding inequities are addressed.



## >> Close the Spending Gap

**T**HE PROBLEM, in this view, is the inequitable distribution of resources.

A September 2006 report from the Education Trust, a nonpartisan education advocacy group, bluntly agrees. In “Telling Truths and Dispelling Myths About Race and Education in America,” researchers found that public schools tend to give poor children and children of color less of everything that makes a difference in high-level student performance. They get lower quality preschool, for example. And where poor and minority children are in the majority, schools and school systems get less state and local money, and their facilities tend to be in poor shape and have insufficient materials. Their teachers, principals, and other administrators tend to be less qualified, less experienced, and more likely to be teaching out of their fields.

Rural school districts face similar deficits in teacher quality, facilities, and other resources. Many are small and isolated and can’t afford to attract more highly qualified teachers. In rural Alaska, many towns and villages have only one school with limited resources for tutoring or after-school programs to help boost performance.

Getting the highest-qualified teachers into low-income, minority schools is no easy task. Many teachers and

principals just don’t want to be there. It’s easy to see why.

These predominantly minority, low-income schools are often old, in disrepair, and don’t have the infrastructure to handle new technology, such as computers. A North Carolina schools task force underscored what the result of inadequate funding has meant in many inner-city schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the state’s largest school system. Said John Kramer, who cochaired the task force:

When we entered elementary school bathrooms with no paper supplies or witnessed discolored water in drinking fountains we knew that this community was not paying the price to care for its children which it would be willing to pay if everyone had experienced this.

We got a chance to see the extent of the damage, the extent of the problems. It’s like a lottery. If you’re lucky, you’d get in a school without these problems.

If you were lucky, and if you were not in Charlotte’s inner city. A 1999 report from the National Commission on Education Statistics said that public schools, on average, were built 40 years ago. The oldest and those in need of the most repair and renovation are in inner-city,

minority communities. The cost to fix these schools nationwide was a whopping \$127 billion. In many states, the buildings languish as new schools are built in the suburbs because inner-city neighborhoods don't have powerful residents lobbying for them as many suburban residents do.

State and local governments are aware of these inequities, often the result of inadequate funding for public schools in general and an uneven distribution of tax dollars that leaves high-poverty schools especially deficient. A few states, such as Kentucky, are focusing on the problem. Kentucky gives high-poverty schools extra funds every year to enhance instruction before school, after school, and in the summer. North Carolina has begun providing additional money to low-performing, low-income districts through a state-mandated Disadvantaged Students Fund.

The State of Maryland stands out as a shining example. In 1999, as the result of a lawsuit brought by the City of Baltimore school system, lawmakers created a commission to examine its education policies and funding. The panel was instructed to make recommendations for changes to bring all Maryland school systems in compliance with the prime directive: providing a "thorough" and "adequate" education for all students.

In 2003, that effort was culminated when lawmakers voted to double state education spending over the next six years, a spending increase of \$1.3 billion. With that money, the state said it would provide resources to ensure that all schools meet Maryland's stated performance goals: attendance over 94 percent, a dropout rate no higher than 3.75 percent, and a 70 percent passing rate for elementary and middle-school students on state tests.

Schools in Maryland got the additional money within weeks. The Baltimore City school system planned to use the funds for changes already proven successful in boosting achievement: reducing class sizes, recruiting and retaining quality teachers, and hiring content coaches to focus on reading and math.

Approach Two proponents point to what happened in Maryland as a key strategy in tackling the achievement gap. They say the public must commit more resources to address this issue. They must pay to get more teachers and better teachers in struggling schools. The public must pay for better buildings and sufficient equipment and other resources. Those who need help the most should not be the ones who get the least.

## >> What Critics Say

Critics of this approach point out that the public has been pouring more money and other resources into the public schools for years with negligible results. It's time to stop.

Money won't solve the problem, Harvard professors Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom point out in their book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. They cite 21 high-achieving, high-poverty schools nationwide that are showing how it can be done. Those schools are not spending a lot of money to get those results, they say. They are focusing on student and family habits and attitudes, and home and school environment.

Some critics point out that one unintended consequence of greatly increased spending on inner-city schools would be to ensure that these school districts remain segregated.

Charter schools and voucher programs need to be boosted more, some say. These alternatives are pushing regular public schools to improve through competition and show what really works in improving academic achievement.

In 2006, there were more than 3600 charter schools serving more than one million children in 40 states.

And polls show that most Americans, 74 percent, favor expanding them and want state legislatures to lift caps which restrict the numbers of charters.

Many Americans also favor providing vouchers so public money can be used to send students to private schools. Washington, D.C., has the nation's first federal voucher program, and about 1,700 low-income, mostly minority students in Washington attend 58 private and parochial schools through the program, now in its second year.

While studies have found that neither private school nor charter students perform better than those in public schools, supporters say that these schools provide a badly needed choice for children failing in traditional public schools.

Still other critics maintain that the problem lies not in the school system but in the larger society. Poverty, poor housing, and inadequate health care are obstacles to learning that many children can't overcome. The public must look at the underlying causes of students' failure to learn. And that trail leads back to family, home, and community.

Problems that show up as poor academic performance begin long before low-income minority children come to school. And they cannot be remedied unless we address underlying causes, such as unresolved health problems, poor nutrition, stressful living conditions, and lack of parental support, which are the source of these deficits.



AP/Wide World Photos

## >> Address the Root Causes

**A**PPROACH THREE PROPONENTS say that investing more in schools, having high expectations for all students, and making sure the system is accountable won't move the needle on shrinking the achievement gap and boosting academic performance if no one tackles the root causes of this problem.

That's no easy task, because educators don't have a good understanding of what those root causes are. Still, a considerable body of data underscores the view that schools and educators alone aren't the solution.

Writer Richard Rothstein is straightforward in his assessment of the problem in his book *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with a student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding—raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform.

Many people agree. And though the problem appears overwhelming, educators, public officials, parents, business leaders, and other citizens in numerous communities are already doing things to tackle it:

- Churches are conducting preschool health screenings for children and education sessions for parents;
- Some communities have set up weekend free health clinics;
- School systems and religious groups are providing high-quality preschool classes that are subsidized by donors or public agencies;
- Parents and business people are volunteering in schools to provide tutoring, mentoring, and a variety of other help; and
- Community centers and churches are offering after-school learning activities for students and lessons on health care and nutrition to parents.

Researchers have drawn the link between poverty and learning for decades. It was an acknowledged factor in the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision against separate but equal schools for black and white school children. More than 50 years later, poor minority children are still at a disadvantage.

Three national studies confirm that African American, Hispanic, and Native American children start kindergarten or first grade with lower levels of readiness than do white and Asian American children. "The first five years of life are a period of extraordinary cognitive and behavioral development," researcher George Farkas says, "and it is

not surprising that family structure and parental education, occupation, and income should affect this process.”

## Ready for School

Experts say making sure poor kids are ready for school requires work on several fronts. More parents need to read to their children at a young age to accustom them to language that correlates to reading comprehension. Studies show that early reading comprehension is related to general success in school.

But Black and Hispanic children are read to considerably less than white children. Children in poverty are read to less than children who are not impoverished.

Data also shows pre-kindergarten programs have helped close the academic gap in the early school years. In one North Carolina district, the pre-kindergarten program has helped hundreds of poor African American youngsters match the grade-level proficiency of whites.

Parental involvement in schools is also a factor. When parents are involved in their children’s schools, the students tend to have fewer behavioral problems and better academic performance. Advocates say schools must develop innovative partnerships to get parents involved with their child’s school.

## It Takes a Village

One strategy that’s working in some places is community schools. According to the Coalition for Community Schools:

A community school is a place as well as a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community, open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends. By sharing expertise and resources, schools and communities act in concert to educate children; schools are not left alone to do the work.

In other communities, schools have been located next to facilities that parents and other adults need. For instance in Medina, Ohio, the Medina High School was located on the site of a community recreation center.

In Saint Paul, Minnesota, a state-of-the-art community elementary school was located next to a new YMCA that serves both students and the public. Already test scores have gone up for all groups of students.

Advocates of this approach recognize that it is costly but insist that it can reap enormous benefits. They see achievement rising and the achievement gap closing only if society as a whole embraces schooling, and a support system is put in place for parents and students that will foster learning. Community partners and service agencies, they say, should provide a rich mix of support for children in need, helping to solve the social problems that prevent all children from learning.

## >> What Critics Say

Critics of this approach point to two big problems: First, requiring public funds to address daunting issues, such as health and housing needs, is a very costly strategy and, practically speaking, out of reach for the communities that need it most. Second, there is no guarantee that tackling these problems will do anything to improve performance or close the achievement gap. As Professor John Ogbu has noted, middle-class students can perform poorly as well. These students have the means to meet these needs on their own. Why are they still struggling?

Furthermore, Temple University sociology professor Annette Lareau told *Time* magazine in 2005 that low-income parents face some cultural obstacles in helping their children academically. “Working class and poor families don’t have college educations,” she said. They look up to teachers and are inclined to leave the education of their children to the professionals.

Some opponents of this approach say that it embodies unnecessary government intervention. Parents should be encouraged to provide for their children through programs that help put them to work and get access to better jobs. The government should provide a leg-up, not hand-outs.

Finally, some critics maintain that this approach does not go far enough. Only simultaneous interventions by families, schools, and the larger society will lead to sustained academic improvement for low-income and minority children.



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