INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED JOURNALISM STUDIES

EDITION/SUMMER 2009

Editor's Note

The black-white achievement gap in public schools is a decades-long problem in the United States that shows no signs of abating.

Nationally, black students are three times more likely than white students to be placed in special education programs and half as likely to be in gifted ones. Just 14 percent of black 4th-graders are proficient in national reading assessments compared with 43 percent of white students. And by 8th grade, there's a 30-point gap in math scores between black and white students.

For several months, professional reporters and students from The Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies at North Carolina A&T University have interviewed dozens of education proponents, experts and school officials across the United States to try to define the achievement gap and to ferret out solutions to the problem.

We also went to Barbados to try to learn why the tiny island nation graduates 98 percent of it students.

These stories are based on that reporting.

For more information, also see www.ifajs.org.

Excellence In Barbados Starts With Discipline

By Nikole Hannah-Jones
IFAJS Staff

By Nikole Hannah-Jones

Uniforms are a form of discipline at Lester Vaughan secondary school in Barbados. Educators say the modest outfits ease distractions and also erase class differences.

ST. THOMAS PARISH, BARBADOS - Danielle Ifill puts her hand on her hip and poses for her friends as she dons the evergreen mortarboard that signals her upcoming graduation.

In the auditorium of her worn-looking high school, Lester Vaughan secondary school teacher Wilma Wiggins makes sure Ifill's matching gown hangs the proper distance from the floor.

While Wiggins measures, the 16-year-old with mahogany skin and ebony eyes casts a wistful glance at the school yard she'll soon leave.

A few months from now, she'll start the computer engineering program at the local polytechnic university. With a smile, she says she's prepared, but nervous.

“I'm going to miss it,” she says. “But I am ready.”

If this were an American tale, Ifill would likely be cast as an exception. The black girl who made it out, who managed to find a place among the 56 percent of African-American children who graduate from high school — and the 40 percent of those who will go to college.

But here in Barbados, this tiny eastern-most island of the Caribbean, Ifill's story is the rule that defies notions of black educational inferiority and underachievement. Barbados graduates 98 percent of its students; 53 percent go on to college.

This 90 percent-black nation not far from U.S. shores has the second-highest literacy rate in the world. With 99.7 percent of its population literate, it falls one–tenth of a point behind the three nations tied for first in the world:

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NABJ Workshop on Black-White Gap

Nationally, the black-white achievement gap in reading and math scores in public schools threatens to leave behind a whole generation of African Americans, especially young black men. Our panelists, sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies, will look at why it's happening and offer solutions.

TIME: 3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.
PLACE: Tampa Convention Center, Room 7
MODERATOR: Pulitzer Prize winner, Les Payne, blog.lespayne.net;
PANELISTS: The Honorable Dennis M. Walcott, deputy mayor, New York; Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian; James Ray, Ray Consultant Group; Tonyaa Weathersbee, Florida Times-Union; Arto Woodley, Frontline Outreach

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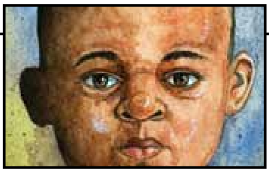

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All students go to school free

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Cuba, Estonia and Poland (the United States is ranked 17th).

That this developing black nation has managed to achieve a world-renowned education system offers a lesson for American schools entrenched in what seems to be an immovable black-white racial achievement gap: Race doesn't have to predict academic success.

The key to Barbadian's success is four-fold: high expectations for all students, strict discipline, substantial education spending and a culture that embraces education as a form of nationalism.

Says Dr. James Carmichael, a former secondary school teacher and computer scientist: "I cannot perceive of meeting someone in my society who can't read. Education is part of the national conscious."

Expectations for achievement are perhaps most illustrated by a nation's willingness to spend on it.

Barbados funnels nearly a fifth of its national budget into education. It spends 6.9 percent of its gross national product on education, according to the CIA World Factbook, making it 24th in the world. The United States ranks 57th.

Students here attend school for free from pre-kindergarten to university. The government also provides free breakfast and lunch to students, something the United States also provides to low-income students.

But Barbados goes further than that in a key area: Health care.

Barbadians of all ages have universal free access to health care. If a child is sick, he or she can go to a neighborhood clinic near school for treatment. The schools have a referral system built in for children who need glasses or dental care.

"Students don't have to stay home if they're sick in Barbados," says Dr. Dan C. Carter, a former official in the education ministry. "This means they can be in the classroom learning."

All of these factors help place Barbados first among developing nations on the United Nations' Human Development Index, an indicator of not just a nation's wealth, but its quality of life.

For instance, the United States has the second highest gross domestic product per capita in the world, but ranks 12th on the human development index. Quality of life indicators for African Americans, such as life expectancy and infant mortality, rival that of some Third World countries.

Tiny Barbados, in contrast, ranks 39th for per capita GDP but 31st among all nations on the quality of life index.

If there is anything that makes education work in Barbados, it is discipline. Diana Wilson, principal of the Lester Vaughn secondary school, calls it the "bedrock" of the school system.

The disciplinary conditioning begins with school uniforms and ends with the distinct threat that if a student does something particularly bad he or she can be flogged with a bamboo cane.

All students wear uniforms color-coded by public school. The skirts fall below the knees, no jewelry can be worn or any shoes other than plain black ones. The state pays for uniforms if parents can't.

"Uniforms are a form of discipline," Mary Ann Redman, the teachers union president says. "They help remove class distinction and are less distracting."

Teachers in Barbados are held in esteem and relationships between teachers and students are nurturing but formal.

Disrespectful behavior isn't tolerated, and teachers use several forms of discipline, including in-school suspension and even taking students to visit detention and drug rehab centers.

But the ultimate tool in the disciplinary arsenal — one that is increasingly controversial worldwide — remains corporal punishment.

Barbadians young and old recount the fear of floggings — a seldom used but effective threat.

Says Rudder, of the education ministry: "I had a caning once in primary school. Never again. It was a deterrent for me."

But other tools, such as uniforms, parent involvement and creating an environment of respect, Carmichael says, can be implemented and successful in American schools where, like Barbados, nearly every seat is occupied by a brown-skinned child.

"My mother preached to us every day, 'You can't get through life without an education,' " Danielle Ifill says back at the graduation practice. "We hear it all the time from everyone."

Nikole Hannah-Jones is a reporter for The Oregonian.

By Nikole Hannah-Jones

Lester Vaughan Principal Diana Wilson looks at a wall of newspaper clippings about notable Lester Vaughan students.

Top of the class

Barbados, with its limited resources when compared with the United States, gets world recognition for its education system. Here are just a few highlights:

- Barbados has the second highest literacy rate in the world. The United States is ranked 17th.
- Barbados spends 6.9 percent of its gross national budget on education, according to the CIA World Factbook, making it 24th in the world. The United States ranks 57th in spending.
- According to the United Nations' Human Development Index, an indicator of a nation's quality of life as well as its wealth, Barbados is first among developing nations. The United States ranks 12th on the index.

IFAJS Special Report: Inside the Black-White Achievement Gap

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Closing the achievement gap: A matter of national survival

By Nikole Hannah-Jones
IFAJS Staff

PORTLAND, ORE. - For 10 years, Portland Public Schools teacher Tony Hopson watched from the front of the classroom as black students were pushed out of the school doors.

He saw a district that funneled the worst teachers into the classrooms where students had the greatest need. Teachers who didn’t think black students could achieve. And counselors who discouraged black kids from taking advanced courses.

“It’s not that we don’t know how to educate black kids,” says Hopson, 55, who now runs the Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI) mentoring program and middle school that he founded in 1981 to help educate African-American children. “The educational system doesn’t think they’re important.”

The numbers bear him out. Just 14 percent of black fourth-graders are proficient in national reading assessments compared with 43 percent of white students. And by 8th-grade there’s a 30-point gap in math scores between black and white students, the 2008 Educational Testing Service reports.

By the time they reach 12th-grade, black students are four years behind their white peers in English, math and science and post an average SAT score 200 points lower than white students, reports The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy group.

And while nearly 80 percent of white students finish high school, only about 56 percent of black students do, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education. If they get to college, black students are half as likely to graduate.

Nationally, black students are three times more likely to be placed in special-education programs than whites and half as likely to be in gifted ones, according to the Harvard Civil Rights Project.

Scholars call this the racial achievement gap - a decades-long disparity that is at the heart of the educational inequity in the black and Latino communities. Hopson and other educators warn that as America’s demographics shift from mostly white to mostly brown and black, the achievement gap – left unabated – will have a major impact on the country’s economy and workforce.

A 2007 Children’s Defense Fund report, *America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, says that poor children are most at risk of ending up uneducated and in jail.

The report adds that a black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime. A black girl has a one in 17 chance. A Latino boy born in 2001 has a one in six chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino girl has a one in 45 chance.

“Demography is our destiny,” says former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, now president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization that works to make every child a high school graduate. “The question is, ‘What kind of destiny will it be?’ ”

Fifty years ago, two schools of thought on education existed, Wise says, but didn’t intersect.

One grew out from the civil rights movement and said the nation was morally responsible for ensuring that every child got a good education. The other was an economic imperative that didn’t need every child to finish school – a system that favored white students over blacks and got away with it.

“If we’re going to continue to be productive as a nation,” says Spellman College President Beverly Tatum, author of *Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*, “it’s going to require a paradigm shift. Our success depends on their success.”

By 2050, whites are expected to be less than half of the nation’s population. As older white Americans retire and fewer white children are born, the nation will become more dependent on people of color to drive the economy.

Yet a report by the Alliance for Excellent Education warns that unless black, Latino and Native American students are better served by schools, the percentage of students earning high school diplomas and college degrees in those groups will decline and so will our gross domestic product.

The report goes on to say that if the educational attainment of students of color matched that of whites by 2020, the United States would see more than $310 billion a year in extra earnings and productivity.

Pedro Noguera, a professor New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, says it’s clear the country spends more money to educate white kids than it does to educate poor black and brown children.

Says Noguera: “Older white people should be the main advocates for seeing schools improve and seeing more minority kids go to college because those kids are going to be paying for their Social Security.”

Wise sees the tide turning. President Barack Obama’s stimulus package includes $100 billion for education, something Wise calls unprecedented, and treats education as economic capital.

“I think everybody needs to ask themselves, ‘Is there a school in my community that I won’t send my kids to?’ If there is, there’s work to be done because the kids coming out of that school are going to determine your economic well being,” Wise says.

Nikole Hannah-Jones is a reporter at The Oregonian.

The achievement gap: One man's cautionary tale

By Jaymes Powell Jr.
IFAJS Staff

RALEIGH, N.C. - In this Old South city, the distance between America's promise and America's poverty is only one block.

In a neighborhood just a few feet away from the governor's mansion, black people live in boarded-up homes and rooming houses, while just around the corner, whites live in renovated Victorian homes in a gentrified neighborhood.

Chances are, this contrast was created, at least in part, by a history of racial segregation and inequality in Wake County schools. Before an aggressive new schools reorganization plan that took effect in 1982, the worst schools were in this part of the city.

After years of experiments with magnet schools, and struggles with high dropout rates, these schools are, in many ways, still the worst. More than 50 years after the Supreme Court handed down the Brown decision that declared segregation unconstitutional, black children still lag behind their white counterparts in most national achievement measures.

Among other things, only 14 percent of black children are proficient in reading by the time they reach the fourth-grade, while 43 percent of white children are. Worse, only 56 percent of black students graduate high school.

The reasons for the disparities in these educational outcomes range from poverty, to subtle racism and cultural disconnects between black students and white teachers, experts say. Fifty-nine-year old Donnie Farrow understands this all too well.

On an unusually blustery and icy day, Farrow has ridden his bike to a nearby rooming house. He is rushing inside to file for his weekly unemployment benefits.

How Farrow got to this point in his life - jobless and disheveled, with decaying and missing teeth - began with the educational disadvantages he experienced at an early age that combusted with the bad luck he experienced later in life.

Farrow began school in coastal, southern Jones County, N.C., in 1957 - three years after the Brown decision.

But the year before he entered school, North Carolina was one of 11 Southern states whose lawmakers signed on to the Southern Manifesto - a document in which they vowed to fight racial desegregation in public places.

Farrow says he lived with the indignation of substandard education, poverty and racial intimidation.

Farrow spent his childhood in segregated schools. "Not knowing, at the time, I thought the books were all the same," he says.

"But what I found out is that the whites always had better (books) than we did. We got hand-me-downs."

When Farrow was 16, his high school was integrated. But, he says, the educational advantages the white kids brought with them made his senior year look different than any other previous year.

"(African-American students) came to the realization that there was a differential between black and white (experiences and education). It was a lot whole better," Farrow says.

The idea that whites would invariably wind up with an advantage tormented Farrow.

It stuck with him long after a graduation celebration with his friends turned into a racial confrontation with two white men. Farrow was celebrating going to Pace College in New York.

" 'You're niggers, you're dirty and stinky'," Farrow says they told him and his friends. "I feared for my life because they had shotguns to our heads."

Farrow went on to New York, but relationship problems got in the way of him finishing Pace. So he returned to North Carolina.

"I somewhat lost interest (in trying to get a degree). There was so much racial tension. It was such a separation in the races of people," Farrow says.

Farrow eventually learned how to lay bricks, and bought a modest home in Raleigh.

But bad luck caught up to him again last year when he was laid off, and his house burned to the ground.

Jaymes Powell is a freelance journalist in Raleigh, N.C.

PUBLIC SCHOOL SCORES ARE UP, BUT WHITE STUDENTS STILL LEAD

In 2007, national mathematics scores for both black and white public school students in grades four and eight were higher than in any previous assessment, going back to 1990, according to assessments of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This also was true for black and white fourth-graders on the NAEP 2007 Reading Assessment.

For eighth-graders, reading scores for both black and white students were higher in 2007 than in the first reading assessment year, 1992, as well as the most recent previous assessment year, 2005.

White students, however, had higher scores than black students, on average, on all assessments. Here are highlights of the report:

State Black-White Achievement Gaps—Mathematics

- At the state level, gaps in grade-four mathematics existed in 2007 in the 46 states for which results were available. In 15 states, the 2007 gaps were narrower than in 1992, as black students demonstrated a greater gain in average scores than that of white students.
- At grade eight, mathematics gaps existed in 2007 in the 41 states for which results were available. The gaps were narrower in 2007 than in 1990 in four states: Arkansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas. In all four, scores for both black and white students increased, but scores for black students increased more.
- At grade four, five states had mathematics gaps in 2007 that were larger than the national gap of 26 points, while 10 states had gaps that were smaller.
- At grade eight, seven states had mathematics gaps in 2007 that were larger than the national gap of 31 points, while 12 had gaps that were smaller.

State Black-White Achievement Gaps—Reading

- At the state level, gaps in grade-four reading existed in 2007 in the 44 states for which results were available. Gaps narrowed from 1992 to 2007 in Delaware, Florida, and New Jersey, due to larger increases in black students' scores.
- At grade eight, reading gaps existed in 2007 in 41 of the 42 states for which results were available. In Hawaii, the seven-point difference between black and white students' scores in 2007 was not statistically significant, so there was no gap for Hawaii. There was no significant change in the gap in any state from 1998 to 2007.
- At grade four, eight states had reading gaps that were larger than the 2007 national gap of 27 points, while nine had gaps that were smaller.
- At grade eight, one state had a reading gap that was larger than the 2007 national gap of 26 points, while nine had gaps that were smaller.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009

Queen's College: A top school, and a tough leader

By Tonyaa Weathersbee
IFAJS Staff

By Tonyaa Weathersbee

Queen's College student Cherisse Francis, 16, (front) explains the physical education requirements to incoming students. Queen's College is considered the second most prestigious secondary school in Barbados.

HUSBANDS, ST. JAMES, BARBADOS – As far as schools go, Queen's College looks much older than its age.

The newest incarnation of this school – which existed for more than a century before on Constitution Road in St. Michael's – was built in 1990 as a World Bank project. Queen Elizabeth II, in fact, laid the foundation stone.

But already, in part because of the one-two punch wielded by the brutal Caribbean sun and humidity and in part because of governmental scrimping on maintenance, the paint is fading on the walls and peeling on the handrails that guard the breezeways.

The sweltering classrooms aren't cooled by air-conditioning, but by whatever breezes that might slip through jalousie windows. Four rickety picnic tables edge the concrete-paneled courtyard, and a Grecian column in the center of it all seems oddly out of place.

Yet the parents and students who came to tour the school recently didn't wince at the aesthetics of the building. Rather, they were riveted by the substance of what was inside.

They listened intently as student guides showed them the sights – and rattled off what they could expect from Queen's College, the second-highest ranked secondary school in Barbados.

At this school of 1,051, home economics – a subject that helps students not only learn how to manage their homes but their lives – is mandatory. So is cross-country running, according to one of the guides.

In every classroom and at every turn students, who were biding their final days before summer break, were still working. Some were reading. Others were playing strategy-summoning board games like Monopoly and checkers. And chess.

All those images impressed Michaelin Dulal, whose 11-year-old son, Emmanuel, plans to attend Queen's College this fall.

"I'm very excited about him being here," said Dulal. "I'm looking forward to being a part of the PTA, and my child enjoying himself at the school and doing well."

Emmanuel, however, didn't say anything about enjoyment.

"I'm looking forward to studying," he said.

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It's not surprising that a kid like Emmanuel would look forward to his upcoming years at Queen's College with such intensity – especially since it takes so much intensity to be accepted into it.

No one gets into this school, or Harrison College, the top-rated school, without scoring highly on the Common Entrance Examinations. When students turn 11, the exams, which largely test math and English skills, are used to place them.

Issues such as parental choice also figure in, as well as proximity. High-scoring students who live nearby tend to get priority over high-scoring students who live farther away, said David Browne, who has been the school's principal since 2007.

"The common entrance has worked for us," Browne said, "because we have been able to invest 20 percent of our national budget in education, so that we have a place for every child coming out of the primary level."

Some 90 percent to 95 percent of Queen's College students wind up attending college in the West Indies, Canada, Great Britain and the United States. They also place highly in academic contests in other countries.

And because the school is more than 100 years old – it was established in its present form in 1883 – some parents view it as being more prestigious than the other schools.

Yet Browne said he believes that the ranking system doesn't account for the success of students at Queen's College as much as the enthusiasm of parents such as Dulal.

Praise and structure work in tandem to produce good students at Queens College.

The school still begins the day with morning devotion, Browne said. When students misbehave, he said, he doesn't resort to corporal punishment, but looks to a hierarchy of punishment that generally involves detention or chores, such as cleaning garbage cans.

But, Browne said, he still reserves the right to use corporal punishment – which is becoming controversial in Barbados now.

Queen's College's rules not only apply to uniforms but even to ears; girls cannot wear dangling earrings or earrings in any place other than their earlobes. They can't wear makeup or nail polish.

Boys are forbidden from wearing earrings.

Browne said the dress code is especially important – because he needs the students to focus as they absorb the math, English and critical thinking skills that will not only prepare them for future jobs, but for the responsibilities of citizenship.

"Students must understand the competitive nature of the world, as this (economic) crisis is telling us now, that we can no longer look to the United States for our salvation," he said. "I want our students to see that they can compete with anybody in the world."

Tonyaa Weathersbee is a columnist and editorial writer for the Florida Times-Union.

Concerned father takes aim at Nashville schools

By Janell Ross
IFAJS Staff

the
achievement
GAP

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - Keith Caldwell isn't the kind of parent people expect to drive local school board policy.

Caldwell, the 10th of 11 children, was born to a single mother and raised in a Nashville Housing project. He became a father at 19. He isn't rich. He doesn't hold a public office and he isn't particularly connected to anyone who does.

But Caldwell, and the father of two school-age children, might have single-handedly thrown up the biggest hurdle standing between Metro Nashville Public Schools and its plan next year to stop busing children from some of the city's poorest and mostly black neighborhoods to schools in wealthier and mostly white communities.

In January, Caldwell, 41, filed a complaint against the district with the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. A few months ago, he was told that the agency is launching an investigation.

Caldwell's complaint is calling attention to a growing trend in school-assignment policy that is putting more students in racially and economically homogenous schools – something experts say is widening the racial achievement gap in public schools.

A January report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA found that white, affluent children are most likely to attend one of the nation's "hypersegregated schools" than any other group.

Test scores for those children tend to hit or exceed national proficiency levels, the report said. But in schools where poor children of color are concentrated, conditions are more likely than not to widen the achievement gap.

"What the school board did, I don't care what they call it, is roll back the clock in Nashville," said Caldwell, a heating and air conditioning technician turned community activist. "You are going to see these schools that are almost totally black and brown, overwhelmingly poor and in these same places schools that aren't truly guaranteed the extra resources to address the needs kids in these kinds of schools have."

Test scores for Nashville students have fallen short of federal progress goals for five years. And this school year, those test scores have landed the district under partial state control.

In the 2007-08 school year, 91.6 percent of white elementary and middle school students in the district scored at the proficient advanced level on standardized math exams, while 79.9 percent of black and 84 percent of Latino students did so. But the district's biggest achievement gaps reveal themselves in other ways.

Just under 81 percent of the district's poor students were deemed proficient or advanced, 74 percent of students with limited English proficiency met the same standards and only 59 percent of those who have disabilities did the same.

Nashville school officials say the move toward neighborhood schools will save millions in transportation costs and make it easier for more parents to get involved at their children's schools. The combination will produce better test scores, they claim.

"This is local innovation, not resegregation," Metro Schools Board president David Fox said.

"We're trying to do what's good for all children."

Beginning in the 1990s, neighborhood school plans began replacing court-ordered and voluntary desegregation school-assignment plans across the country. And, as early as the 1950s, but continuing today, break-away school districts are forming, said Erica Frankenberg, a researcher with UCLA's Civil Rights Project.

The net effect: The nation's public schools are in danger of becoming as segregated today as they were 40 years ago, said Frankenberg.

In Nashville, while the city is 64 percent white, the public schools population is just 34 percent white. From the very first school year that court-ordered integration began in the city in 1971, just over 7,000 white students left the district for private schools and surrounding counties. In many cases, the children never returned.

Thirty-eight years later, Nashville's public schools serve nearly 24,000 fewer students than it did in 1970. Some opponents of the new student-assignment plan say these are the numbers that are driving the change.

Steve Murdock, a Rice University demographer and former Census Bureau director, said that, until now, the nation has been able live with the knowledge that large numbers of poor students are clustered in some of the nation's lowest-performing schools with the least-experienced teachers.

"It is – as the cliché goes – all connected," Murdock said. "We have to wake up to those facts. If we don't, we're dooming the country to a poorer and more unstable future."

Janell Ross is a reporter for The Tennessean in Nashville.

Plethora Of Tests Seem To Make Gap Worse

By Anika Myers Palm
IFAJS Staff

ORLANDO, Fla. - Every Saturday during the school year, about 30 college students, engineers, lawyers and other professionals gather at 8:30 a.m. in a downtown church building here.

By 8:45 a.m., their purpose becomes clear as dozens of elementary school-age children run into the room. The program is called Outreach Love. The adults in the room provide academic support to the students, who all are black or Hispanic.

The students come from Parramore, one of Orlando's toughest and poorest neighborhoods. Some have parents in jail, some live in homeless shelters - and all have been recommended by their teachers as students who need "a little extra push."

Part of the reason Outreach Love exists is to make sure the students have a leg up when it comes to standardized tests such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, which is given to students in grades three to 11 annually to track their performance in mathematics, reading, science and writing.

"It is the first real-world consequence for poor academic habits they experience, but it certainly wouldn't be the last if they don't correct the bad habits," said Don Madden, director of the program.

But even with loads of attention to the test and the work of groups like Outreach Love, educators and policymakers in Florida wrangle over why black and Hispanic students continue to score poorly on the FCAT.

Just 34 percent of black 10th-graders earned passing scores on the FCAT reading exam on the first try this past year, according to data from the Florida Department of Education.

And black boys, particularly in elementary school, actually fail the FCAT more than any other demographic. In some Florida counties, as many as two of three black boys fail the test in third-grade.

Florida isn't the only place where this happens.

Federal statistics indicate that black and Latino students, irrespective of income, score lower on standardized tests than white and Asian students. By kindergarten, black students nationally already perform at lower rates than their white counterparts.

The achievement gap can be measured in a number of ways: grades, scores on standardized tests, ability tracking and high school- and college-completion rates.

Most often, though, it is quantified in terms of how students score on standardized tests, which, perhaps, is part of the problem. Because each state has its own version of tests, it's often difficult to make comparisons.

"If you want to know so you can direct resources to assist or alleviate discrepancies, that's one thing," said Kathy Williams, a retired Wisconsin teacher and editor of the book, *Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Phase Won't Fix Schools*. "But if you want to know so you can sort students or group them, that gets more complicated."

Education consultant James E. Ray, a former Michigan school district superintendent, agreed.

"No 'one' assessment tool can provide us with all we need to know about a child's performance or ability to learn," he said.

Still, many jurisdictions continue to shape their own versions of the scholastic tests. States and school districts, for instance, contract with companies such as Harcourt Assessment to design the tests according to the buyers' specifications. Committees of teachers, educational consultants and government officials review the tests to determine if the material is grade- and age-appropriate, according to the Department of Education.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests show that black 17-year-olds read only as well as white 13-year-olds. In math, just 13 percent of black fourth-graders were proficient at NAEP math tests, compared with 47 percent of their white counterparts.

Federal Department of Education figures show that the "achievement gap" did not shrink during the 1990s. The problem has grown so glaring that federal officials are advancing their own techniques and proposals for measuring and reducing the gap, even though their plans must be implemented at state and local levels.

Officials and educators alike, in an attempt to find ways to improve minority students' scores, have indeed turned to questioning the tests themselves.

Through the late 1960s, researchers were unable to come to a conclusion about whether standardized and intelligence tests were biased against minority students. The opposition to those tests then turned social. By 1969, the Association of Black Psychologists said it supported parents who declined to allow their children to submit to the tests.

That resistance to testing and labeling would continue to grow. In 1998, a Journal of Higher Education article frequently referenced by researchers summarized decades of research to conclude that standardized tests are poor indicators of black students' academic performance.

Governmental officials still didn't buy it.

In 2001, as President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program - his own solution to the achievement gap and other perceived problems in American education – he lamented what he called the "soft bigotry of low expectations," suggesting that holding all students to high standards would lift test scores.

Four years later, in the same county where the president gave his speech, Florida Department of Education figures showed that just 21 percent of 11th-grade minority students met or exceeded grade-level expectations in science, 61 percent of 10th-graders met or exceeded expectations in math and 29 percent of 10th-graders met or exceeded in reading.

In comparison, the numbers for non-minority students were 40 percent, 81 percent and 51 percent, respectively.

Anika Myers Palm is a reporter for The Orlando Sentinel.

HOW THE FALL SCHOOL SCENE IS SHAPING UP

The nation's schools and colleges will welcome back record numbers of students this fall as population increases and high enrollment rates boost enrollments. Some fast facts:

- In fall 2008, a record 49.8 million students will attend public elementary and secondary schools. Of these, 34.9 million will be in pre-kindergarten through 8th- grade and 14.9 million in grades nine through 12. An additional 6.2 million students are expected to attend private schools this fall.

- Public school systems will employ about 3.3 million teachers this fall, resulting in a pupil/teacher ratio of 15.3, which is lower than in 2000, when the ratio was 16.0. An additional 0.5 million teachers will be working in private schools this fall, where the pupil/teacher ratio is estimated at 13.0.

- Current expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools will be about $519 billion for the 2008-09 school year. The national average current expenditure per student is around $10,418, up from $9,154 in 2005-06.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The achievement gap: Confronting the problem that continues to confound

By Sherrel Wheeler Stewart
IFAJS Staff

Paint Branch High School in Montgomery County, Md., leads the nation when it comes to the number of blacks taking and passing advanced placement tests.

In the class of 2008, black students made up nearly 30 percent of the 147 students at Paint Branch who passed the AP exam.

In addition, Paint Branch, where blacks comprise 47 percent of the school's 1,800 students, boasts one of the highest enrollments of blacks in AP classes. Seventy-four percent of black students there are taking AP courses.

Nationally, 7.8 percent of the students taking AP courses are black.

"Students who take AP courses are better prepared. They hone their study skills early, they do better on college- entrance tests and they are ready to take on college work," says Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland at Baltimore County and author of two books on black student achievement.

But while the Burtonsville, Md., school enjoys celebrated success, there still is a gap in achievement.

In almost every category, the scores of white and Asian students – who make up another 40 percent of Paint Branch's students – are higher than those of blacks, even in the same setting with access to the same school resources.

And this time, one of the main culprits for the black-white achievement gap – poverty – doesn't apply. According to U.S. Census figures, the median income for blacks in Montgomery County is $72,697 – slightly higher than the $72,338 that whites earn.

COMING IN SEPTEMBER

A report on how Cuba achieved the world's best literacy rate. A team of IFAJS editors, reporters and videographers will travel to Cuba to assess the success that country is having in educating its people.

We will post stories and video on the institute's website (www.ifajs.org). This content will be available, free of charge, to media outlets everywhere.

Nationally, the black-white achievement gap continues to confound.

John Diamond, a Harvard University professor who is part of that institution's Achievement Gap Initiative, said that income inequality continues to fuel the gap – a problem that can't be explained simply by dollars and cents.

"When you compare black and white middle class, you don't just look at income. You look at wealth and accumulated advantages," Diamond said.

The wealth influences family decisions like where they will live, what schools the children will attend and what supplemental education experiences the children will have – like tutoring or academic camps, he said.

For blacks, who may not have the resources for lots of academic extras, there has to be a more realistic solution, says Hrabowski, author of *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males* and *Overcoming the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Females.*

"Parents and the community have to say achievement is important. Success in school is as important as anything else you do – music, dance, sports," he said.

But it's not just the wealth or resources impacting students. Other issues like tracking, continued segregation and the overall perception of achievement have a huge impact on the success of black students in school, says Amanda E. Lewis, associate professor of sociology at Emory University in Atlanta.

"Ten years before the desegregation of public schools, this gap would not have been surprising. But the segregation levels are still going up and the quality of schools for most blacks and Latinos is not improving," Lewis said.

By Nikita Hamilton

In Champaign, Ill., teacher Bruce Brown (left) tells a student how she can better format her note cards and enhance her presentation.

While income might allow some blacks and whites to live in similar neighborhoods, a lack of diversity can negatively impact achievement for black students, said Lewis, author of *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities*.

And in many schools where blacks are in the majority, "tracking" or ability grouping is still practiced, further widening the gap in achievement, said Lewis and Christy Lleras, an assistant professor in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana.

In a study published in April, Lleras said her research has shown that in reading, tracking not only impeded the literacy of lower-grouped minority students, but does not substantially improve the reading ability of higher- grouped minority students.

There is no one-size fits all solution for closing the achievement gap, but several schools and some noted educators say some strategies look promising.

In Champaign, Ill., a select group of minority students have spent much of their summer getting ready for the advanced-placement courses they will take this fall.

And they are getting paid to do it.

"When students take AP courses, they embrace a scholarly identity," says educator D'Andre Weaver, 25, who is coordinating the summer program. The program includes research, problem solving and writing skills that will be useful in the AP courses, he said.

Dennis K. Orthner, a professor at the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, also is trying to make a difference.

Four years ago, he helped launch a program in some of that state's schools that ties students' academic subjects to career opportunities.

Studies have shown that the program has made progress toward its initial goal of helping students stay in school. But there also have been residual successes – the achievement gap has narrowed and test scores are up among some of the schools in the CareerStart program.

CareerStart serves about 15,000 students in public school systems across North Carolina. It focuses on math, language arts, science and social studies classes for students in grades 6 -8. There are 10 lessons each year.

Hrabowski, the university president, said the bottom line in narrowing the gap is resources and support.

"We've invested money in education, but we have not invested enough in offering more rigorous courses for black students and providing supplemental services for those who don't have the academic support they need in the home," Hrabowski said.

Sherrel Stewart is a reporter for The Birmingham (Ala.) News.