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Achievement gap for Hispanic students hasn't narrowed in 20 years

A first-of-its kind NAEP report finds hints of progress, but mostly a stubborn achievement gap between Hispanic and white students.

By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, Staff writer / June 23, 2011

In 20 years, the national achievement gap between Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic white peers hasn't budged.

But hints of progress can be found with a closer look at low-income Hispanics or those who already know the English language. And some states stand out for gaps considerably lower than the national average.

This first-of-its kind report on the Hispanic-white gap comes as Congress is considering how to rewrite No Child Left Behind, the federal law that has attempted to narrow gaps based on race, income, and other factors. Questions loom about how much of that accountability system will stay in place, and what specific role the federal government will play in pushing for the progress of Hispanic students.

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"I fear people will say ... that these kids are not worth it, [and that they] come with all these problems outside of school that make closing the achievement gap impossible," says Raul González, director of legislative affairs at the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy group based in Washington.

Gaps may not have closed yet, but it's too soon to give up, Mr. González says. Policies are changing – moving toward more accurate assessments for foreign-language speakers, for instance. "We are talking about the academic achievement of poor minority kids.... That conversation is completely different today than it was 10 years ago, and it's because of this focus on raising standards and accountability."

Thursday's report, "Achievement Gaps," is the latest analysis from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which tracks student achievement over time and allows for comparison among states. This analysis focuses on reading and math scores in Grades 4 and 8 between 1990 and 2009.

Since the early 1990s, "there's been overall growth in reading and math for both whites and Hispanics,... but the gap really hasn't closed," says Jack Buckley, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which oversees NAEP.

In 2009, the national gaps between Hispanics and whites ranged from 21 to 26 points on NAEP scales. The gaps are significant, Mr. Buckley says. In practical terms, here's an example of what they mean:

In fourth-grade math in 2009, the average Hispanic score of 227 corresponds with the "basic" skill level, and it indicates that students can make a pictograph of given information, and can determine, in a multiple-choice question, how many given pieces cover a shape.

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The white average score of 248, on the other hand, is just one point shy of reaching the “proficient” skill level, and it indicates that these students can subtract a two-digit number from a three-digit number and solve a word problem involving quarts and cups.

Many communities in the United States have seen rapid growth of their Hispanic population. During the past two decades, the proportion of students in Grades 4 and 8 who are Hispanic grew from about 7 percent to 22 percent.

Among these students, 77 percent are eligible for reduced-price meals at school, a proxy for poverty, which tends to correlate with lower test scores. And large portions of them (37 percent in Grade 4 and 21 percent in Grade 8) are designated as English-language learners (ELLs), who by definition are not fully proficient in reading English.

“With ELLs , there has been a long history of neglect of their education. Folks have had to go to court over and over to get schools to provide these kids with opportunities,” González says.

Other factors that education research points toward are inequitable state funding systems that direct fewer resources to minority students, and the fact that fewer well-qualified teachers work in schools with concentrations of low-income and minority kids.

For Hispanics who already know English, the gaps with whites have narrowed. That gap was 15 points in Grade 8 reading, for instance, while ELL Hispanics scored 39 points lower than non-ELL Hispanics.

Among low-income students, the gaps between Hispanics and whites have narrowed in reading and eighth-grade math since 2003.

Five places stand out for smaller Hispanic-white gaps in both reading and math: Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, Wyoming, and the Department of Defense Education Activity schools.

“It is possible to close these gaps ... if we focus on it, if we use common-sense solutions, if we fund schools equitably,” says Ulrich Boser, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a nonprofit in Washington.