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The Gap, the Trap, and the High Flyers Flaps: A Summary and Analysis of Three Important Studies Focusing on Excellence Gaps in American Education

Jason S. McIntosh

ABSTRACT

America’s educational system has undergone major changes in the last decade. A focus on “proficiency,” high stakes testing, and standards-based curriculum has become the name of the game. As a result, more students are meeting minimum competency every year. Researchers from three different organizations recently examined the effects of these curricular changes on the performance of America’s highest achieving students. This article synthesizes and summarizes the Center for Evaluation and Educational Policy’s 2010 report entitled Mind the Other Gap: The Growing Excellence Gap in K-12 Education, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s 2006 report entitled Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families, and the Fordham Institute’s 2011 report entitled Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude? Performance Trends of Top Students. A description of the methods, findings, and recommendations of each report is included, together with a discussion regarding what it all means to parents, teachers, and educators.

MIND THE OTHER GAP

Plucker, Burroughs, and Song (2010), the researchers responsible for the Mind the Other Gap report, examined the percentage of fourth and eighth grade students performing at the advanced level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the areas of reading and math over time. The NAEP is an assessment created by the United States Department of Education that is given to students across the country every year. The researchers compared the achievement of students by race, socio-economic status, gender, and English proficiency.

The percentage of students from diverse backgrounds and low-income families that moved from the basic level to the proficient level each year increased. However, in most states, the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds and low-income families that moved from basic or proficient to the advanced level remained constant. Considering the fact that the number of white, middle to upper class students performing at the advanced level increased, the achievement gap at the advanced level widened. The authors of this study refer to this gap as the Excellence Gap.

In most states, the excellence gap in grade eight reading remained unchanged, whereas, the excellence gap in math continued to grow. The opposite was true for fourth grade students. The excellence gap in reading continued to grow while the gap in mathematics remained constant. Twenty-one states have gaps that are widening in both grade levels and content areas. In the states that saw decreases in the size of the gaps, the pace of improvement was so slow that it would take an average of 29 years for the gaps to disappear entirely.

Two major problem areas were discovered; the first was that far too few girls performed at advanced levels in math, and the second was that far too few English-as-a-second-language students performed at advanced levels in reading. In addition, researchers found that as the number of African American students and/or students from low-income families performing at the lowest levels of achievement
decreased, the gap for those populations at the advanced level widened when compared to their white middle to upper class peers.

Plucker et al. made several recommendations. The first recommendation was to challenge all educational policy makers (e.g. state legislators, school board members, and principals) to ask themselves two important questions: 1.) How will any proposed curricular changes affect high-achieving students? and 2.) How will any proposed curricular changes assist those who are not currently performing at high-levels to do so? Next they called for publicizing the percentage of students performing at the advanced level from all backgrounds; adopting tests with high ceilings to assist in measuring the extent of the problem; allowing students to progress through school at a faster pace; and creating realistic goals for improvement.

To Learn More: Mind the Other Gap - www.iub.edu/~ceep/Gap/excellence/ExcellenceGapBrief.pdf

THE ACHIEVEMENT TRAP

The authors of The Achievement Trap report, Wyner, Bridgeland, and Diiulio (2006), examined how high-achieving students from low-income families performed over time. Defining “high achieving” as performing in the top 25% on a nationally normed standardized test, and “low-income” as having a family income that fell below the national median, resulted in a total of 3.4 million high achieving, low-income students, nationwide. This is larger than the individual populations of 21 states.

Low-income students comprised only 28% of the total number of students classified as high achieving in first grade. Furthermore, researchers found that 25% of the high achieving, low-income students fell out of the top group in math by high school, compared to only 16% of the higher income students. Of low-income high achieving students, 44% fell out of the top group in reading by fifth grade compared to 31% of higher income students. Most of the lower income high achieving students graduated from high school and 90% went on to college, but only 59% actually completed college, compared to 77% of their higher income peers. Only 29% of low-income high achieving students went on to earn a graduate degree, compared to 47% of higher-income students.

The researchers also discovered a significant correlation between family income and performance at advanced levels. Students from wealthier families were twice as likely to move into the advanced level as students from low-income families. African American children from low-income families had an even smaller chance of moving into the top quartile.

The authors of this report warned parents and teachers to pay attention to the performance of low-income, high achieving students. The fact that they did extremely well one year did not necessarily mean they would continue to excel the following year. Other recommendations included a call for increased teacher expectations for students from low-income families, a broadened focus on student achievement beyond minimum competency, and the creation of incentives for schools to increase the number of students from low-income families who perform at advanced levels.

To Learn More: The Achievement Trap - www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/jkc.pdf
DO HIGH FLYERS MAINTAIN THEIR ALTITUDE?

Researchers at the Fordham Institute designed the *Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude?* study to track the performance of students who performed at the 90th percentile on the North West Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) assessment known as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). The same students were tracked from 3rd-8th grade and from 6th-10th grade. The North West Evaluation Association is a non-profit organization that partners with participating schools to measure student achievement.

Xiang, Dahlin, Cronin, Theaker, and Durant (2011) found that a majority of the “high flyers” continued to perform at that level year after year. However, 30% to 50% of these students performed worse over time. The authors refer to this group of students as the “descenders.” Most descenders did not fall far, staying around the 70th percentile. The percent of minority high-flying students remained about the same over time, but the number of high flyers from low-income families decreased. High achieving boys were most likely to become descenders.

The researchers also noticed a surprising trend. The number of students in the top group grew over time. These “new to the top” students were labeled “late-bloomers.” On closer inspection, they found that a majority of the late bloomers were near the top group already and only a few, if any, students actually moved from performing at low levels of achievement to high levels of achievement.

The pace of growth was also examined. Researchers found that middle and low performing students grew at the same rate as high flyers in math, but the low and middle flyers grew twice as fast as the high flyers in reading. When income was entered into the equation, the researchers found that high achieving students from schools in low-income neighborhoods grew at about the same rate as high achieving students from schools wealthier areas.

The authors of this report made two major recommendations. First, they recommended using a growth model rather than the current approach to accountability that focuses on making everyone proficient. A growth model would require students from all performance levels to show adequate growth each year. The second recommendation, based on the belief that each descender represents a loss of human capital, stressed the importance of creating a new strategy for encouraging high achievers to continue to soar.

**To Learn More:** Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude?

http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110920_HighFlyers/Do_High_Flyers_Maintain_Their_Altitude_FINAL.pdf

**DISCUSSION**

The number one message echoed in all three reports was praise for the improvement in the number of low achieving students moving into the ranks of proficiency, and puzzlement over why schools seem content with stopping at “proficient.” Why not find ways to support and encourage students to move
beyond proficiency into excellence? The economic impact on the nation for not doing this is, and will continue to be, profound.

Current legislation, policies, and practices need to be scrutinized closely to determine their effect on advanced learners, and new policies need to be adopted to encourage high levels of student performance. Measures used to close the achievement gap at the lower end of achievement are not an effective way to close the excellence gap. A new approach needs to be developed to deal with this separate issue. No state has provided a clear model for what this approach might look like. All three reports mention the need for more research on talent development and students performing at advanced levels. Knowledge is power, and there is simply not enough of it right now to truly understand the full scope of the issues involved.

There were also several important messages specifically for parents and teachers. Probably the most concrete step teachers can take to help close the excellence gap in their classrooms is to renew their personal commitment to explore and practice differentiated instruction. Take a class, read a book, or observe a colleague in order to gain new ideas on how to better meet the needs of all students—including low achieving students, proficient students, and advanced students. Principals need to encourage these practices by providing the time and resources teachers need to engage in effective curricular and instructional differentiation. Principals should make differentiation mandatory and follow up with their teachers to ensure it is taking place.

More specifically, teachers of reading need to closely monitor high achieving students, as their growth is half that of their lower achieving peers. There could be multiple reasons for this, including the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Special attention must also be placed on supporting and scaffolding English-as-a-second-language students in reading to help more of these students perform at advanced levels. Teachers of math need to encourage more girls to enroll in upper level math courses and look for ways to better help them master the concepts. African American students must be encouraged and supported in both reading and math to do their best and reach for the highest levels of achievement.

Parents and teachers of low-income, high achieving students as well as all high achieving boys need to carefully monitor their performance. Good communication between parents and teachers is essential. As these students move through high school, both parents and teachers need to actively seek out information on college scholarships and encourage low income, high achieving students to apply for the most selective colleges.

Working together, parents and teachers can advocate more effectively for high achieving students of all backgrounds. School boards, state departments of education, and congressional representatives all need to hear the concerns and be exposed to the research on current educational practices. Future progress in closing excellence gaps lies in the hands of passionate and dedicated parents and teachers willing to voice their opinions and do whatever it takes to make sure the talents of all students are nourished.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason McIntosh is a doctoral student in Gifted, Talented, and Creative Studies at Purdue University. Prior to his doctoral studies he was the Collaborative Peer Teacher for the Gifted in Avondale, Arizona for four years. He is Nationally Board Certified in the area of "Middle Childhood Generalist" and has earned two Master’s Degrees. Jason attended Miami University of Ohio where he earned a Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education.