

ADDRESSING EXCELLENCE GAPS IN K-12 EDUCATION

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, a major objective of federal and state education policy has been to narrow K-12 achievement gaps. In most of this work, the principal focus has been on minimum competency: closing achievement gaps by bringing a larger proportion of students in underperforming groups (which are defined by variables such as race, disability, or socioeconomic status) to a basic level of educational achievement. However, there are many students in these demographic groups who have the potential to achieve much more than minimum competency. Therefore, NAGC calls on policymakers and educators to set a goal of closing achievement gaps at every level of achievement.

The available data suggest that the singular focus on the most struggling learners has resulted in meaningful progress in closing minimum-competency achievement gaps (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). However, at the same time, schools have not addressed gaps between groups of students at advanced levels of achievement, commonly referred to as *excellence gaps*. These excellence gaps are found in every state and on national assessments of math and reading, yet in spite of the implications for the nation, they have received almost no attention.

Research on excellence gaps provides evidence that they are large and either shrinking at exceptionally slow rates (such as race-based gaps) or growing (such as gaps based on family income) (McMurrer & Kober, 2011; Plucker, Hardesty, & Burroughs, 2013; Rutkowski, Rutkowski, & Plucker, 2012). For example, 2% of children eligible for free and reduced lunch scored at the advanced level on the 2013 grade 4 NAEP math exam, compared to 13% of non-eligible students scoring at that level. The 2013 excellence gap of 11% increased from 9% in 2011. Efforts to close achievement gaps at minimum levels of proficiency have no effect on reducing excellence gaps, raising doubts about the effectiveness of current education policies and practices in providing greater and more equitable educational opportunities that develop the talents of all students. As the proportion of minority and low-income students continues to rise in the U.S. school population, these data make evident the need for policymakers to direct efforts toward narrowing both achievement and excellence gaps. Given the modern economy's need for creative talent (Florida, 2014), drawing on the advanced skills of only a fraction of the population is not a viable, long-term strategy for sustainable economic growth.

A number of potential causes have been suggested for the existence and persistence of large excellence gaps. These include attitudes about high achievement potential, under-resourced schools that serve predominantly lower income and disadvantaged minority communities, disparities in parents' awareness of and advocacy for access to advanced and gifted education services, the pervasive effects of poverty, systemic bias in the design and implementation of programs for advanced students, inadequate training for educators who work with underperforming subgroups of students, and lack of attention to issues surrounding educational excellence in schools. All of these challenges can be addressed and overcome with greater awareness of excellence gaps, training in gifted education practices for all educators, and a continued national and state-level focus on both equity and excellence in educational opportunity.

Closing excellence gaps is both a social-equity issue and a workforce development issue that carries national competitiveness and security implications. Shrinking the low-income fourth grade math excellence gap by roughly half – from 11% to 6% - would result in an additional 80,000 4th graders performing at advanced levels in math every year. Extrapolate these numbers to every grade, and the increased numbers of students realizing their full potential would put the nation back on the path to global leadership.

In summary, reducing and eventually eliminating excellence gaps is an issue of equity and social justice, community development, economic advancement, and national security. The National Association for Gifted Children strongly recommends that:

- Data on excellence gaps be reported by the U.S. Department of Education and state and local education agencies when they release annual achievement test results to raise awareness of excellence gaps among policymakers, educators, and the general public.
- State accountability systems require reporting disaggregated student achievement at each achievement level and extend incentives and rewards for closing all achievement gaps.
- Policymakers and educators address policies and practices that unintentionally inhibit advanced student performance, such as anti-acceleration policies, credit-based high school graduation requirements that discourage early entrance to college, and overly rigid kindergarten entrance criteria.
- Policymakers and educators ensure that all teachers receive education on identifying and supporting emergent talent in every classroom.
- The federal government fund research on the causes of excellence gaps and support promising interventions to reduce them.

References

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Approved March 21, 2015



The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at www.nagc.org.