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ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN CONNECTICUT AND SURROUNDING STATES

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You asked (1) how the academic achievement gap is defined in Connecticut and the surrounding states and (2) for the history of Connecticut's achievement gap.

SUMMARY

Of the four states we looked at, Connecticut and Rhode Island measure the achievement gap as the difference between one student group's performance compared to another student group, such as black students compared to white students. Two other states, New York and Massachusetts, measure the gap as the difference between one group's performance and the state's established benchmark for proficiency in the particular subject area.

The achievement gap has been identified in Connecticut and other states in one form or another for more than 20 years. This identification parallels the increased use of standardized tests as a measure of student achievement over the same time period. As such tests were given more often, in more grades, and required of more states, there grew a larger and more reliable body of student achievement data. The evolution of this data enabled educators and policymakers to more clearly identify and specify the achievement gap.

Since Connecticut was ahead of many states in giving standardized tests, we were able to identify the achievement gap here more quickly than some other states.

DEFINING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Overview

Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires all states to provide standardized testing data at several different levels. Therefore, all four

states included in this report must provide testing data broken down into the following demographic and educational status categories:

1. gender (male and female);
2. race (Hispanic, black, white, Asian, Native of Hawaii or Pacific Islander, or American Indian, or two or more races);
3. low income (as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-priced meals) and non-low income;
4. special education and non-special education; and
5. English language learners (ELL) and non-ELL.

Connecticut

In 2011, the Connecticut legislature enacted PA 11-85, An Act Concerning Closing the Academic Achievement Gap, which includes the first statutory definition of the achievement gap or gaps as “the existence of a significant disparity in the academic performance of students among and between (1) racial groups, (2) ethnic groups, (3) socioeconomic groups, (4) genders, and (5) English language learners and students whose primary language is English. ”

In Connecticut, student performance is most often measured by student scores on the Connecticut mastery tests and other standardized assessments. Connecticut has frequently been identified as having one of the largest achievement gaps between white students and minority students of any state.

When comparing performance, the State Department of Education (SDE) does not just look at how, for example, one racial group does statewide when compared to another group's statewide performance. It also breaks down the performance data by school district, school level, and grade.

For an example of one measure of the gap in Connecticut, see Table 1 below. The difference between the percentage of whites performing at the proficient level and blacks performing at the proficient level is the achievement gap for blacks regarding this particular measure. The same would apply for Hispanic students as compared to white students.

Table 1: 2010 Connecticut Mastery Test Data

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Statewide Math Scores-All Grades	
Student Group	% of Students Scoring at or Above Proficient
Black	63. 7
Hispanic	64. 4
White	90. 7
<i>Source: Connecticut SDE, State Report Card</i>	

Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New York

In addition to requiring all states to establish tests to measure student performance, the NCLB law also requires all states to define proficiency in certain subjects, and report test results to the U. S. Department of Education.

Rhode Island and Connecticut measure the achievement gap as the difference between one student group's performance compared to another student group, such as black students compared to white students. But in New York and Massachusetts, education officials compare the same demographic and educational status groups to the proficiency benchmark each state has developed.

In Massachusetts, education officials use the term “proficiency gap” rather than “achievement gap” in part because the proficiency benchmark is a fixed target for schools and districts performing below that level to strive for. Kerry Conway, director of planning and research for the Massachusetts Department of Education, said this avoids the problem of there being a fluctuation in the gap because of changes in the performance of the high performing group. For example, when you compare one student group against another, the gap would appear to shrink if the high performing group received lower scores on a standardized assessment than the same group had in immediate previous assessments.

HISTORY OF CONNECTICUT'S ACHIEVEMENT GAP

For decades educators in Connecticut and around the country have been concerned about the academic performance of students in urban school districts as compared to those in suburban districts. References to the “achievement gap” in Connecticut go back to at least the early 1990's and parallel the increased use of standardized tests as a measure of student achievement over the same time period. Since Connecticut was ahead of many states in giving standardized tests, we were able to

identify the achievement gap here more quickly than in some other states.

In 1990, the legislature enacted PA 90-324 which expanded the mastery test program in Connecticut and required all school districts to prepare strategic profiles measuring, among other things, student needs and performance. The strategic profiles were one step in making information readily available about each district.

Also in 1990, Connecticut began participating in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is part of the U. S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics and 1990 was the first year it was conducting a national assessment.

In 1992, NAEP issued a report that focused on reading in Connecticut and identified a significant achievement gap. At about the same time the legislature created the Commission on Educational Excellence for Connecticut, which used the NAEP data as part of their final report in 1994:

Even more disturbing to the state's future economic and social vitality is the gap in achievement between poor and/or minority students and the more advantaged students. The gap is alarming and growing worse. According to the most recent NAEP reading results, one-third or fewer minority fourth graders in Connecticut came up to the basic level, while more than three-fourths of the white students achieved that level. Connecticut was among the states with the largest number of high achievers in reading. Its minority students, however, performed the lowest of all those states (CEEC report, page 5).

The governor and legislature formed the Commission on Educational Excellence in response to the pending *Sheff v. O'Neill* lawsuit that argued that the extreme racial isolation in Hartford public schools violated the school children's right to the equal educational opportunity guaranteed by the state constitution.

After 18 months of hearings, meetings, and deliberations, the commission issued a detailed report in January 1994 that included numerous recommendations for improving education in Connecticut. The report, as quoted above, is one of the earliest Connecticut reports to identify an achievement gap.

The 1996 *Sheff v. O'Neill* state Supreme Court decision sided with the plaintiffs who accused the state of failing the students of Hartford. The decision focused on racial isolation of Hartford students as the cause of their lack of an equal educational opportunity. The legislature responded

with a number of initiatives including a statewide interdistrict school choice program and the state takeover of the Hartford school district. These efforts, and several others, were aimed at improving the educational opportunities and achievement of Hartford students in particular and urban students in general.

In 2001, the NCLB required all states to establish standardized testing as a key component of its accountability framework. The goal was to highlight the achievement gap by providing thorough testing data on various subjects at various grade levels.

Test results provided the basis for measuring state, school district, and school progress toward ensuring that students meet challenging state knowledge and skill standards. Under NCLB, test results are used to measure the performance of all students as a group and of each of four subgroups (major racial and ethnic minorities, students with limited English, disabled students eligible for special education, and students from poor families). Results are also used to compare school and school district performance and identify low-performing schools subject to special intervention measures.

While the NCLB law meant considerable changes for many states, Connecticut's testing standards and programs already met most of the new law's requirements. Connecticut had to administer some of its tests more frequently, add science testing in two grades, and expand its annual English proficiency testing. But much of the existing testing, including the mastery tests and the 10th grade Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) did not need any significant changes to satisfy the federal law.

The new test data that would be generated under NCLB is a culmination of years of stepping up testing requirements in Connecticut and nationwide.

Since NCLB, and later the federal Race to the Top program, increasing emphasis has been placed on identifying the achievement gap and focusing on ways to reduce it. Recently, Connecticut has had two different entities studying the achievement gap and making recommendations on how to address it.

The Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement, appointed by then-Governor M. Jodi Rell, completed a report with recommendations last year. The group has reorganized as the CT Council for Education Reform to push for implementation of its recommendations. For more information go to: [www. ctedreform. org](http://www.ctedreform.org).

In 2010 the legislature also created an Achievement Gap Task Force which released a report with recommendations on January 1, 2011. (See OLR report 2011-R-0050, link: www.cga.ct.gov/2011/rpt/2011-R-0050.htm).

This group's work will continue as the task force was reformed and given additional charges related to the achievement gap in PA 11-85.

Related OLR reports:

1. New Federal Testing Requirements Under NCLB, 2002-R-0081, link: www.cga.ct.gov/2002/rpt/2002-R-0081.htm.
2. Selected Major Education Laws from 1980 to the Present, 2005-R-0020, link: www.cga.ct.gov/2005/rpt/2005-R-0020.htm.