

## **The Imperative of Achievement Gap Closure in Kentucky**

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Kentucky's public school system is fundamentally different from the system of the 1980s. Kentucky has been noted for reforms leading to greater equity in school funding, increased performance accountability, and higher academic standards. Today, by most accounts, Kentucky now sits ahead of 15 or more states in academic performance.

While overall student performance has increased significantly in recent decades, significant challenges remain. Significant work remains to be done in the following areas:

- Improving the academic, social and emotional readiness of early learners for kindergarten;
- Expanding enrollment and increasing completion of career and technical education pathways including earning industry recognized credentials; and
- Increasing student achievement in mathematics and reading.

However, the most notable of the education challenges we continue to face are socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps. Even with the progress we have made in recent decades with increases in achievement overall, we have made very little progress with closing such gaps. In fact, in some school districts in recent years, socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps have widened. Kentucky's most recent performance data show that gaps are both significant and pervasive.

For example, in Wildcat Independent School District (*pseudonym*), only 41% of economically disadvantaged elementary school students scored proficient or higher in reading, compared to 69% of their non-economically disadvantaged peers who scored at the proficient level or higher. The gaps in reading remain constant at the middle and high school levels. In math, only 36% of economically disadvantaged elementary school students scored proficient or higher compared to 66% of their non-economically disadvantaged peers. The mathematics gaps widen at the middle and high school levels.

The racial achievement gaps in Wildcat Independent are just as significant as the socioeconomic gaps, but the scores of African American students as a group are most troubling. First, because the scores are so low, but also because smaller percentages of African American students score at the proficient level or higher as students move up. Only 34% of Wildcat African American elementary students score at the proficient level or higher in mathematics as compared to 56% of their White peers, but at the middle school level percentages for African American students falls to 24%, and 23% at the high school level. In comparison, the percentages of White students scoring proficient or higher in mathematics remains relatively constant across the elementary, middle, and high school levels; and the percentage of Hispanic students scoring proficient or higher, while low, increases slightly across the school levels.

Wildcat Independent is only one school district, but its gaps are representative of socioeconomic and racial gaps across the state. Some Kentucky schools and districts have made more progress with addressing gaps, but others have gaps that are significantly greater. And while students color typically make up smaller percentages of students in Kentucky school districts, the majority of students enrolled in Kentucky public schools come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We must acknowledge our challenges and address them head on.

There is no doubt that socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps are a function of home, community, and school factors, and the elimination of gaps will require that challenges in each of these areas are addressed. It is also true, however, that for many children who face significant challenges at home, public schools are their best hope for academic achievement and professional success. Research shows that even when no variable is changed except teacher behavior and quality of instruction, academic and behavioral outcomes for students can change. Specifically, Gage et al. (2018) found a relationship between teachers' implementation of evidence-based classroom management practices and students' time engaged in instruction and rate of disruptions. With research in high poverty elementary schools, Hirn, Hollo, and Scott (2018) found that teachers in high performing schools delivered higher rates of opportunities for students to respond and lower rates of negative feedback to students. And in research that is guiding much of our work in teaching and learning at the Kentucky Department of Education, TNTP (2018) found when students who started the academic year behind grade level had access to stronger instruction, they closed gaps with their peers by six months. Effective instruction matters. Exposure to grade level content matters. High expectations for all students regardless of their background matters. Leadership committed to addressing gaps, not minimizing or ignoring them matters.

A critical step forward is Kentucky's inclusion of ambitious goals around achievement gap closure in the state's new school accountability system. Those goals are intended to place greater urgency than ever before around gap closure in Kentucky schools. In the new system being implemented this academic year, elementary and middle schools will receive star ratings ranging from 1 star to 5 stars based on proficiency in reading, math, science, social studies, and writing; and student growth in reading and mathematics. High schools will be rated based on proficiency in reading, math, science, and social studies; student growth in reading and math; transition (postsecondary) readiness; and graduation rate. But for all schools, significant performance gaps between the performance of student groups will result in limits on schools' star ratings. Such a policy move is intended to make clear that even with strong academic performance overall, a school cannot be rated as one of Kentucky's best if it has not addressed significant gaps between the performance of groups of students. Such an accountability and value statement is bold and ambitious, but absolutely necessary if Kentucky is to make the progress with achievement gap closure necessary for the success of our children and our commonwealth.

## References

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