



and  
Greater New Haven Citizens' Forum  
on Education

Local Background Paper:  
*Academic Achievement Gap*

**Sponsored by:**



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## Introduction

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Connecticut is one of the highest ranking states in the nation for student achievement, according to fourth grade reading scores, and it has been a leader in testing student achievement for decades. If this is the case, why is the Greater New Haven *By the People* forum talking about an achievement gap? The recent lawsuit filed by the State of Connecticut against the U.S. Department of Education, arguing that testing requirements under No Child Left Behind are not being adequately funded by the federal government, has brought the discussion of the achievement gap to the forefront.

### Is there an achievement gap in Connecticut and/or the Greater New Haven Region?

#### What's the Evidence?

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**Achievement Gap:**

The difference in academic success between groups of students; typically between black or Hispanic students and white students; or low income and higher income students.

Most commonly, we talk about achievement in terms of test scores, especially since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation discussed in the national *By the People* background materials. We have test data that compares students on a state-by-state basis from NAEP (National Assessment and Educational Progress) and on a town-by-town basis from CMTs (Connecticut Mastery Tests) and CAPTs (Connecticut Academic Performance Tests).

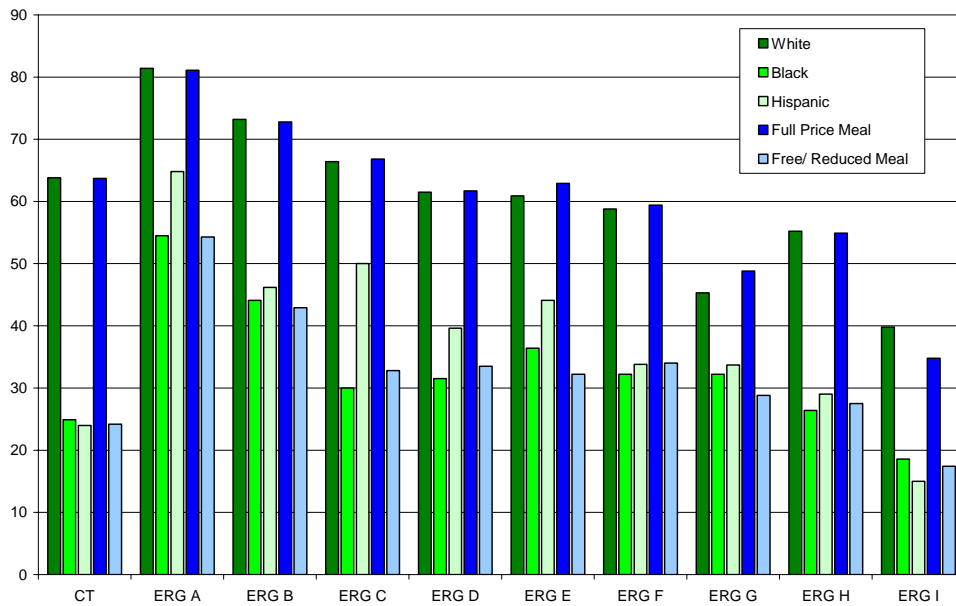
However, some argue that the achievement gap should not be measured solely by test scores, which they believe offer only a narrow snapshot of what is happening in schools. Some of these critics suggest that other measures may also be needed to assess the impact of the differing demographic profiles of schools and the resources afforded to them. Other possible indicators include high school dropout rates, college enrollment figures, and juvenile delinquency rates. While we acknowledge this debate, this paper will offer statistics on test scores in order to start the conversation.

#### How are students achieving overall?

The chart on the next page shows achievement scores across the state and across Educational Reference Groups (ERGs) broken down by race/ethnicity and by eligibility for free/reduced meals. ERGs, developed by the State Board of Education, are identified by a letter which range from the wealthiest (A) to the poorest (I) towns/cities in the state. They help in making comparisons between school districts since towns/cities within ERGs reflect similar student educational needs and economic and demographic data. (For purposes of comparison, note that all the major cities in Connecticut, except for Stamford, are in ERG I.) Under the chart is a list of the ERGs and the towns/cities from the Greater New Haven Region that are part of that ERG.

Despite leading the nation in overall student achievement scores, Connecticut has the third largest gap in student achievement on fourth grade reading scores between black and white students and Hispanic and white students.

**% Meeting State Goal on CMT 4th Grade Reading  
by Student Groups (2004)**



**Greater New Haven towns/cities by ERG:**

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| ERG A: Woodbridge  | ERG E: None                       |
| ERG B: Cheshire, Guilford, Madison, Orange                       | ERG F: Milford, Wallingford       |
| ERG C: Bethany, Oxford   | ERG G: East Haven                 |
| ERG D: Branford, Hamden, North Branford,<br>North Haven, Shelton | ERG H: Ansonia, Derby, West Haven |
|  | ERG I: New Haven                  |

**Voices**

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Below are some of the themes that emerge when people talk about achievement gaps. This is not intended to be a complete list of all perspectives, but simply a range of views. The issues are not ranked in any particular order.

**Social Issues Determine School Achievement**

- *Children who do not perform well in school come from families with little parental involvement or other family problems.*
- *We're never going to close the gap so long as we have concentrations of poor and minority students in some schools.*

There is substantial evidence that children perform better in school if they come from families with greater family resources, fewer family problems and high parental involvement, or if they go to schools with a lower percentage of stressed families. The ERGs attempt to measure these differences. Because the schools have children for a limited number of hours per day, they can only control so much of what happens in children's learning and development. The higher the

concentrations of these children in any particular school, the more difficulty students and teachers have in overcoming these learning disadvantages.

Those who dispute these views note that in Connecticut we have concrete examples of public schools that set high expectations and succeed with all children regardless of their family circumstances or other external social issues. Middle schools like Amistad Academy (in New Haven) and Highville Academy (in Hamden) serve predominantly low-income minority students. Students at these schools perform as well as students from Connecticut's most affluent communities. Though the performance of public charter schools remains mixed across the country, their performance in Connecticut is relatively strong. Those who question the applicability of these examples to the public school system as a whole note that these schools operate independently of the local school district as public charter schools accountable directly to the State Board of Education, and have greater flexibility than other public schools.

### **Preschool's Impact on Achievement**

- *It's too late to address the problem once children get to school. If we could close the gap by ensuring that all children get a quality preschool experience, the problem would be solved.*

National studies show that students perform better when they enter elementary school with preschool experience. Many states and districts have taken steps to increase access to preschool experience. Performance in elementary and middle school appears to be better for those with preschool experience, and this appears to help narrow the achievement gap.

While few will argue against the benefits of preschool experience, there are those who assert that preschool experience alone will not sufficiently address the achievement gap. Currently, there are varying levels of quality preschool programs and access to those programs depending on where you live. There are more quality programs in towns with higher performing schools than in towns with lower performing schools, and even fewer affordable quality programs.

Though preschool experience appears to narrow the achievement gap initially, the effects of this experience appear to diminish as the student ages. In addition, while the gap may narrow for disadvantaged children receiving preschool, the gap still persists. Others point to the fact that the state or districts will need to find substantial funds to expand quality preschool programs and to strengthen teaching and learning within the entire K-12 system. This would help sustain and further increase preschool learning gains as the child continues through school.

### **Impact of Funding on Achievement**

- *Increase school spending to solve the achievement gap problem.*

As is discussed in the national backgrounder, many people point to funding and resource allocation issues as a large contributor to the achievement gap. Increased spending by low-performing schools could help to hire more quality teachers, reduce class size, and improve facilities, and the research points to the positive impact of all these factors on the achievement gap. Although approximately 60% of education funding in Connecticut comes from local

property taxes, the state's education funding formula provides significant funding to assist the least-wealthy and most stressed communities with school costs. For example, 63% of New Haven's education revenues come from the state versus 4% in Madison. (Note that poorer districts are often the ones with the highest need students, yet the most limited tax base to provide for those needs. Therefore, they tend to receive larger amounts of state aid.) Some insist that funding provided to high-need communities is still not adequate to produce acceptable achievement, and it is the constitutional responsibility of the state, not towns and cities, to ensure this.

Others point out that the amount of funding per pupil does not necessarily equate with higher achievement scores for students. There are some districts with relatively low spending and high results (mainly some high-wealth communities) and others with relatively high spending and poor results (particularly the urban districts, which have more students with special needs and from stressed families).

### **More Choice among Schools**

- *If we gave parents more choice among schools, it would force public schools to shape up.*

Supporters of school choice tend to believe that our educational system should operate along the same lines as our economic structure – the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the consumer drives the system's performance. This is discussed in the national *By The People* background materials. If parents choose to put their children (and funding) into better performing schools, it will pressure low-performing schools to improve their services if they wish to continue business. School vouchers allow parents to move their children from low-performing public schools to private schools, whereby the funding provided to the public school for that child is given to the private school. Charter and magnet schools, especially those that are inter-district, are other options that have given parents more choice. However, others feel that by moving children and associated funding to other schools, low-performing schools will be left without the resources they need to make improvements.

Those who argue against expanding school choice say that there should be one common school system that is controlled by boards accountable to the public as a whole and responsible for ensuring equal educational opportunity. Others say that schools will be more accountable to parents and more attuned to their values and priorities if they have to compete for students.

### **Current School Dynamics Affect Achievement**

- *The problem in many of our underperforming schools is that school administrators and teachers unions are stuck in a dysfunctional dynamic that is more about fighting with each other over collective bargaining contracts and other "adult" concerns than it is about ensuring the success of every child.*

The frustration in this voice stems from the belief that solid research and proven examples suggest that we could fix the achievement gap by restructuring schools —what's lacking is the will to do it. Disputes over who covers lunch duty assignments in schools where most kids are

reading below grade level suggest that refocusing of resources and more contractual flexibility for how teachers are deployed are required. Others argue that we cannot expect teachers to be able to concentrate fully on their students unless teachers' working conditions are improved. They also argue that both groups are making a good-faith effort: for example, the New Haven school system recently reached an agreement with the teachers union to extend the school day in exchange for salary increases.

## **Possible Strategies**

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The alternatives presented here do not cover every possible approach. Instead, they attempt to show the broad range of realistic options. Preferring one does not necessarily mean rejecting the others. The best approach may be to combine aspects of several approaches.

**STRATEGY #1 – *Establish new public schools:*** Reorganize the lowest performing schools as public charter and magnet schools that follow proven models.

### **In Support**

- The old system is not working, and more examples of highly successful urban schools are needed to inspire systemic reform.
- Neighboring states like New York have adopted this strategy and have offered high performing schools like Amistad Academy the resources to replicate their success.

### **In Opposition**

- Not all charter or magnet schools outperform traditional public schools.
- Even if new public schools do outperform traditional ones, this strategy does not directly and immediately benefit the kids who are left behind in the traditional system.

**Funding Implication:** The funds currently allocated for failing schools may be sufficient to reorganize it, given that charter schools typically operate for several thousand dollars less per pupil than traditional urban public schools, though magnet schools may spend somewhat more. Any additional funding required would probably have to come from an increase in either the local property tax or state income or sales tax.

**STRATEGY #2 – *Offer school choice:*** Allow parents of children in failing schools to transfer their children to public or private schools of their choice, with the public funding "following the child" in the form of a tuition voucher or tax credit.

### **In Support**

- Parents and students are given more power in deciding their children's education.
- Competition from private schools may force public schools to improve practices.

### **In Opposition**

- Vouchers may not cover the full expense of private schools, so those truly in need still cannot afford to attend.
- This continues to drain much needed dollars from public schools so they can't make the changes they need to.

**Funding Implication:** Determining a fair and equitable amount to "follow the child" would require a restructuring of current funding formulas. If the choice is exercised across district lines, some communities will lose money and some will gain.

**STRATEGY #3 – *Increase funding for higher-need/lower-resource districts:*** *Alter the present system of financing public schools to align funding even more directly with need.*

**In Support**

- Funding for education has never been adequate, especially in higher need cities and bordering towns. Realignment of dollars to communities with lower local resources will ensure they are getting the money they need to address the additional challenges they face.

**In Opposition**

- Taxpayers already pay to support a funding system in which our urban schools spend thousands of dollars more per child than the state average. More research needs to be done on high performing schools to understand what is being done to produce these results before throwing more money at the problem.

**Funding Implications:** Supporting this strategy would probably require raising the state income tax or finding other sources of revenue or both, and/or changing the way funds are allocated across districts.

**STRATEGY #4 – *District-based reform:*** *Provide technical assistance to work with leadership of low performing school districts in reallocating their existing resources to implement proven strategies for raising student achievement.*

**In Support**

- Applying the lessons of successful schools may produce long-lasting improvements and does not necessarily require increasing spending.
- If we want to reach all the kids suffering from the achievement gap, there is no alternative but to focus on immediate improvements to the schools where most of these children already go.

**In Opposition**

- There is not enough money to be reallocated. High-need schools are underfunded and need more than just technical assistance. Money needs to be invested to recruit quality teachers, reduce class sizes, improve the facilities and make other changes in teaching and learning.
- We've known what works in education for years, but traditional school districts have been unable to turn themselves around without the pressure of external competition from charter, magnet or private schools.

**Funding Implications:** To the extent that philanthropic monies would fund this strategy, there would be little need for additional funding. If there are recommendations that flow from the technical assistance provided, there may be a budgetary impact at the time of implementation.