New CEP Report Finds Student Achievement Gaps by Race, Ethnicity, Income, and Gender Remain Large on State Tests

Progress in Narrowing Reading and Math Gaps Is Slow and Uneven;
Gaps Shrinking Faster for Latinos, Slower for Native Americans and Boys

WASHINGTON, D.C. . (Dec. 14, 2010) . New research by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) finds that while student performance has risen overall on state exams, the test score gaps between student groups remain large and will take many years to close at current rates· even in the states making the most progress.

State Test Score Trends through 2008-09, Part 2: Slow and Uneven Progress in Narrowing Gaps provides a detailed look at student performance on state tests and examines whether state-level results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirm the trends found on state tests. The report tracks data for all states and the District of Columbia in math and reading for grades 4, 8, and high school by student race, ethnicity, income, and gender from as early as 2002 through 2009, where three or more years of comparable data are available.

%This report shows that states can raise student achievement and can narrow achievement gaps,+said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of CEP. %But it also makes clear that we need to do more. Gaps arenq narrowing fast enough. This is not fair for the students who are behind, and itq not good for the country.+

African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, and white students, as well as low-income students, boys and girls, made gains on state reading and math tests in two-thirds or more of the states with sufficient data. When analyzed using both the percentages of students scoring proficient and average scores on state tests, more states posted gains than declines or flat trends for each student subgroup in reading and math at grades 4, 8, and high school. For most subgroups, achievement gaps on state tests have also narrowed since 2002 in the majority of the states studied.

The reportq comparison of the direction of trends on NAEP and state tests between 2005 and 2009 at grades 4 and 8 presents a mixed picture. In a majority of the states studied, NAEP results confirm gains in reading and math for most subgroups. But trends in achievement gaps on NAEP differ often enough from gap trends on state tests to raise caution about how consistently gaps are narrowing, the report finds.

Despite progress in raising achievement and narrowing gaps, achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and income remain large and persistent. In many states, the percentage

of African American students scoring proficient on state tests was 20 to 30 points lower in 2009 than for white students. Similarly large gaps in percentages proficient were evident between Native American and white students and between students from low-income families and more advantaged students, the report finds.

In some grades and subjects, Native American-white gaps have widened or stayed the same as often as they have narrowed. Moreover, the gaps between Native American and white students have narrowed at a slower pace than gaps for other groups. "These results for Native American students are distressing," Mr. Jennings said. "Little progress is being made, and there is even some backsliding in narrowing the achievement gap."

The report also highlights the gaps between boys and girls in reading. In 2009, girls outperformed boys in reading in every state and D.C., with gaps in percentages proficient exceeding 10 points in some states. Gender gaps are closing more slowly than other gaps, the report warns. "We should encourage girls to achieve at high levels, but we must pay more attention to why boys don't do better," Mr. Jennings said.

One point of optimism in the report is that gaps on state tests between Latino and white students in percentages proficient have narrowed at a greater rate than gaps for other groups. In grade 8 reading, for example, the gap in percentages proficient between Latino and white students narrowed at a median rate of 1.4 percentage point per year across all the states with sufficient data. Overall, Latino-white gaps often amounted to 15 to 20 percentage points. "These gaps are still too large, but the faster rate of change in the Latino-white gap shows that progress can be made," Mr. Jennings said.

Although gaps have narrowed more rapidly for some groups than for others, at the current rates of progress it would take many years· often one or two decades or more· to close most gaps. For purposes of illustration, closing a gap of 15 percentage points between Latino and white students in high school math would take 12.5 years *if* the median rate of progress remained the same. Gaps for most other subgroups are shrinking at a slower pace and would take much longer to close.

"The achievement gap has been a matter of national attention for at least 10 years. And while state test scores are going up, they are going up for all students. That's why gaps are not closing and remain a major national challenge," said Mr. Jennings. "We have to do more to speed up the progress, especially for Native American students, poor students, and boys in reading."

The report includes tables with performance trends by state as well as more detailed overviews of the findings. It is available for free online at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.