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CPS fails to close performance gap

Black students still losing academic ground despite reforms, study finds

By [Joel Hood](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

November 14, 2011

Twenty years of reform efforts and programs targeting low-income families in Chicago Public Schools has only widened the performance gap between white and African-American students, a troubling trend at odds with what has occurred nationally.

Across the city, and spanning three eras of CPS leadership, black elementary school students have lost ground to their white, Latino and Asian classmates in testing proficiency in math and reading, according to a recent analysis by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Even for schools so often weighed down by violence, poverty and dysfunction in their neighborhoods, news of this growing deficit was surprising to researchers considering the strides African-American students had made nationally over the same period.

"It has certainly been shocking to us to discover there has been progress in some areas but without equity progress not shared equally among all the students," said Marisa de la Torre, a researcher on a recent report by the consortium that examined two decades of changes within CPS. "You don't really want to leave one group of students behind."

Since the early 1990s, black fourth- and eighth-graders in the U.S. have improved their reading and math scores at a greater rate than whites on the annual National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, a key performance indicator across demographics. Educators and politicians hailed this as an important step toward closing an achievement gap that had confounded them for decades.

This is an important issue in Chicago, where almost half of CPS students are black, the vast majority from low-income households. Yet for all the talk and attention paid to boosting African-American achievement in recent years, there has been no such breakthrough.

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"It's not the students' fault. It's our fault as adults," CPS' new chief, Jean-Claude Brizard, said recently in a speech to the Chicago Urban League. "In order to turn things around, we must make sure that the students and their achievement always comes first. Not adults. Not politics. Not administrators. Not contracts."

Poor test scores are only part of the equation. Only 1 in 2 African-American students in Chicago graduates from high school, a number that has increased over the past decade but not at the rate of other racial and ethnic groups. School suspensions, expulsions and disciplinary cases also affect black students disproportionately.

Drawing on his own experience as a Haitian immigrant in New York's public school system in the 1970s and then as a longtime educator in Brooklyn, Brizard has taken on the issue of black achievement personally.

"I have a child who is half Latino and a child who is half African-American, so this is personal to my family and everything I stand for," Brizard said. "I've seen tremendous disparities between students, and it's why I stayed in this profession."

When Mayor Richard Daley took control of the city's school system in 1995, it triggered a wave of reform efforts specifically aimed at improving student proficiency in the worst-performing schools. Then-schools chief Paul Vallas set minimum achievement standards on tests, held back students who failed to perform and placed schools with large numbers of low-performing students on probation.

In later years, then-school CEO Arne Duncan — now the U.S. education secretary — launched reading initiatives in high-poverty neighborhoods on the South and West sides. He implemented a literacy screening test in the early grades to make sure students were on track. He closed dozens of underperforming schools and oversaw rebuilding efforts at others in predominantly poor black and Latino communities.

Brizard said many of those school closings were misguided, often about saving money instead of improving the learning environment for disadvantaged students.

"I think too much was about efficiency," Brizard said. "If you take a look, it's been the same neighborhoods who did not have quality (schools) and still don't have quality (schools)."

If school closings destabilized certain neighborhoods, other efforts were ineffective — millions of dollars pumped into countless after-school initiatives and tutoring and mentoring programs geared toward African-American students, only to see math and reading scores languish and many students fall further behind.

"Education is the civil rights issue that remains," said Barbara Radner, director of DePaul University's Center for Urban Education. "The right to vote is one thing, but the right to go to a good school in your neighborhood is quite another."

Against these odds, there have been some remarkable, albeit isolated, success stories at CPS schools in predominantly low-income African-American neighborhoods. At Burnham Elementary School in the city's Jeffrey Manor neighborhood on the South Side, for example, 8 out of every 10 students meets or exceeds state testing standards. The school also boasts an early literacy rate of more than 75 percent.

At Mount Vernon Elementary School on the Southwest Side, Principal Dawn Scarlett has steered a school off academic probation for the first time in five years by emphasizing teacher accountability. Since taking over

the school three years ago, Scarlett has provided more teacher feedback and support, but she also ramped up the monitoring of teachers inside the classroom so weakness can be identified and corrected.

"It's all about instruction. It's all about who's in front of those kids," Scarlett said. "I don't really blame anything else. I don't pass the blame to parents. If you have the right instructors in front of children, that is so much of the battle."

For years, the conventional belief inside CPS was that African-American students were closing the gap. State report card data showed the percentage of black students meeting or exceeding benchmarks on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test was growing at a faster rate than the percentage of white students in reading, writing, math and science across almost all grade levels.

But the consortium's exhaustive report debunked that myth, at least when it comes to reading and math, de la Torre said. By compiling National Assessment of Educational Progress scores instead of benchmark achievers on the ISAT, researchers were able to make conclusions others had missed.

"NAEP scores don't just look at a percentage of students that pass a certain cut of points. It talks about the average scores, so it's a much better way to look at trends over time," de la Torre said.

The same report found that Latino performance on NAEP tests since 1990 had improved at a faster rate than whites and blacks.

Unlike New York, Chicago is still a city of segregated neighborhoods — racially and economically. Closing the achievement gap might start in the school, but it must not end there, Brizard said. That's why early efforts have tried to bring families into the conversation about better schools.

CPS recently unveiled a school progress report that is to be handed out to parents on their child's report card pickup day. The report measures the school's performance on things like reading and math proficiency at grade levels, teacher collaboration and overall school culture.

The district is also reinvesting in its principals, offering pay bonuses for performance and new training initiatives, a move to improve school leadership and accountability. Inside the classroom, students, particularly low-achieving students will be better served by the longer school days and the more rigorous curriculum the district will implement over the next two years, Brizard said. Teachers, he said, must be given the proper tools to teach and a supportive leadership structure that is not yet common.

"I'm not just looking for (improved) test scores, I'm looking for a different type of culture," Brizard said. "That's the only way organic change happens."

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