



EXCELLENCE Gaps

Any Wisconsin school administrator or school board member is familiar with the concept of achievement gaps — the large achievement disparities between students of various income or racial/ethnic subgroups. According to Stanford’s Center for Education Policy Analysis, Wisconsin has some of the largest black-white achievement gaps in the nation.

Mitigating these gaps is certainly an important endeavor from both equity and economic perspectives. However, an unfortunate side effect

of such a strong focus on differences in minimum-proficiency achievement is that it can cause other levels of performance to go overlooked. After

all, just because there are some African American students who need support to reach grade-level proficiency doesn’t mean there aren’t also high-achieving African Americans who need similar support from their schools.

Nearly every assessment includes a high-performing category, often labeled as “advanced” or “significantly exceeds expectations” to



The Inequality Challenge of the 21st Century

Scott J. Peters, Ph.D. and Jonathan A. Plucker, Ph.D.

signify students who have mastered content above their respective grade level. Whereas the focus of the 20th century was on minimal proficiency gaps, the skill gaps that will be the equity concern of the 21st century will be at these advanced levels of achievement; what we refer to as excellence gaps.

At the recent Wisconsin State Education Convention, I (Scott

Peters) presented some National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data on rates of advanced achievement in 12th grade science (2015), economics (2012) and writing (2011). In the 2015 science assessment only 1 percent of African American students scored advanced compared to 6 percent of Asian students. This leaves a gap of 5 percentage points. It's worth

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noting that the overall rate of advanced achievement in science is only 2 percent, something we continue to find shocking, but what is just as concerning as the low rate of advanced achievement overall is the disparity with which various groups reach this high rate of achievement. Typically, we recommend comparing income groups (those who are vs. are not eligible for free or reduced-price meals) and racial/ethnic groups (white, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American) as a measure of excellence gaps.

■ Why Excellence Gaps?

The reason we argue that excellence gaps will be the inequality focus of the 21st century is because minimal proficiency skills no longer guarantee success in the global workforce. According to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the percentage of jobs requiring routine manual or cognitive skills has been relatively flat for decades,

whereas the percentage of jobs requiring non-routine manual or cognitive tasks has exploded. In 1983 only 30 percent of jobs required non-routine cognitive skills; in 2014 it was closer to 60 percent (Artificial Intelligence, 2016). Similarly, around 2009, foreign applicants surpassed American applicants in receiving United States patents (US Patent and Trademark Office, 2017). Put simply, we as a nation are starting to fall behind in the race for innovation and creative productivity and increasing the rate of minimal proficiency achievement is unlikely

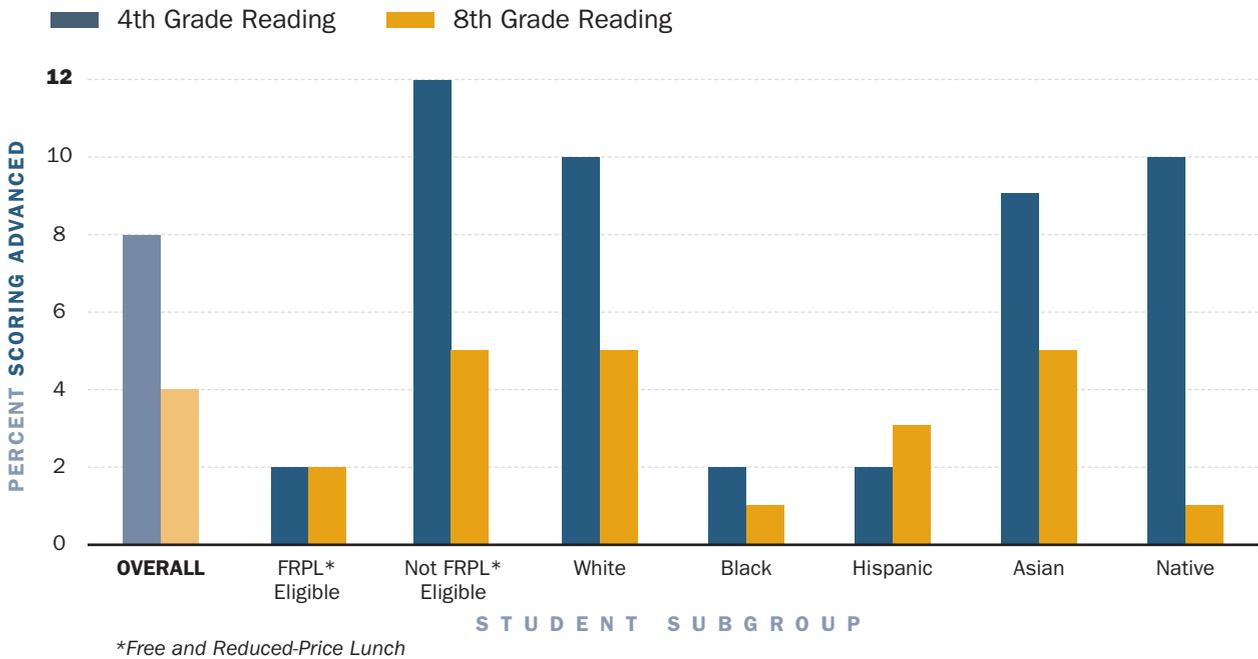
to change this. Greater attention to skills beyond grade level is needed.

■ Excellence Gaps in Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, we evaluated excellence gaps using the 2015 NAEP data on reading, math, and science. Figure 1 presents data on reading/English language arts, Figure 2 on math, and Figure 3 on science. In all of these figures, the size of excellence gaps is best viewed by comparing same-color bars from left to right.

It is easy to review the data presented in Figures 1 through 3 and become disheartened. We find the science data in Figure 3 especially upsetting, given that the percentage of Wisconsin African American students who score advanced in science rounds to zero. The same is true with Native American students. Does this mean there are no talented Native or African American students in Wisconsin? No! But it does mean they are not receiving sufficient opportunities to develop the advanced potential they might have. The income group comparisons are

Figure 1. Rates of advanced achievement | 2015 NAEP Wisconsin READING



Computing Excellence Gaps

Anyone with Internet access can compute excellence gaps for any Wisconsin school or district. Start from the Wisconsin Information System for Education Data Dashboard (WISEdash) at wisedash.dpi.wi.gov.

1. **Choose data** from the Badger Exam, Forward Exam, or old WKCE from the dropdown menu.
2. **Select a school district** of interest as well as subject area. The page will automatically update to show the school or district profile as far as achievement in this content area.
3. **Select “economic status” or “race/ethnicity”** under the “group by” option to investigate minimal proficiency or excellence gaps. This will then present the rates at which the student groups have achieved at both grade level proficiency and advanced achievement.

especially informative in this regard. In nearly every case, students who are from higher income families score at advanced levels about three times as often as do students from low-income families. In the United States, income simply allows you greater educational opportunities

both in and out of school. If services to develop advanced abilities are not provided as part of the public school system, then families who can afford to will seek them out elsewhere. This can exacerbate excellence gaps.

The analysis is not complicated, nor is it especially revolutionary.

What is different about excellence gaps is that they force districts to consider what they are doing to close opportunity gaps at the highest levels of achievement and not just at minimal levels. School and district leaders need to ask themselves some important questions:

Figure 2. Rates of advanced achievement | 2015 NAEP Wisconsin MATH

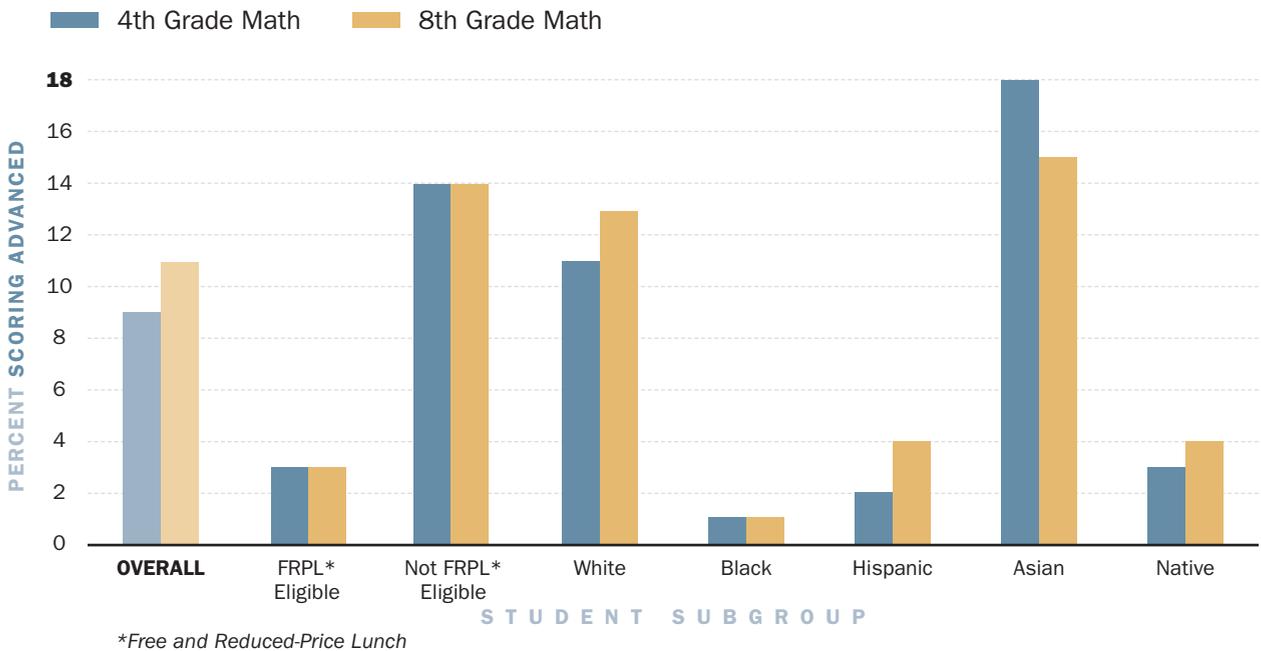
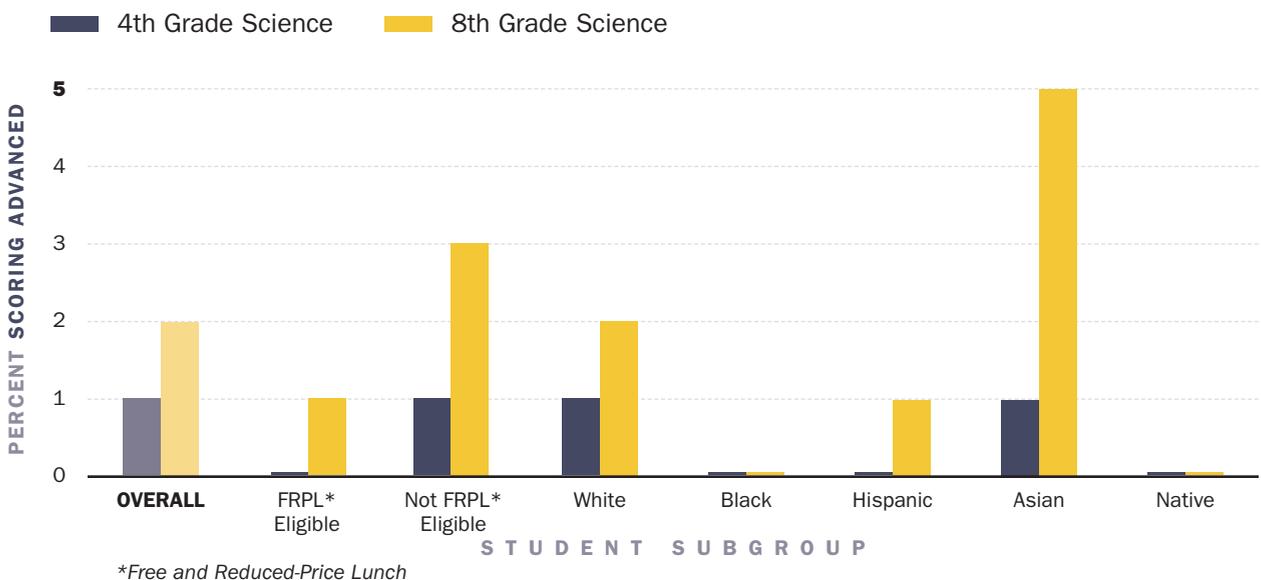
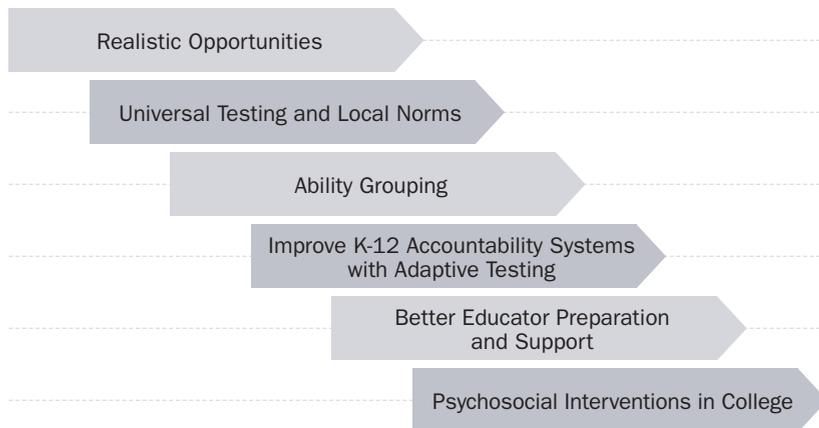


Figure 3. Rates of advanced achievement | 2015 NAEP Wisconsin SCIENCE



The Model for Shrinking Excellence Gaps



- What are we doing to close excellence gaps?
- How will the adoption of a particular new program or curriculum influence those students who are already proficient?
- What could be done to help more students from low-income, African American, Latino/a, or Native American families score at advanced levels?
- How could we include the mitigation of excellence gaps in strategic plans or SMART Goals?

- How much are excellence gaps hurting the district's report card score for "closing gaps"?

In our book, "Excellence Gaps in Education: Expanding Opportunities for Talented Students," we presented a model as a path toward closing excellence gaps.

Some of these interventions, such as changing teacher education programs to include attention to how all students will grow, are beyond what a single district can do. But an individual school district can change how it identifies talent from national

test norms to local norms. Similarly, it can also make sure that all students have access to advanced classes and programs and that there are services earlier on in their careers to help prepare them to benefit from these programs. The Advanced Placement® SpringBoard® program is a good example. The interventions themselves are not especially revolutionary, but they would require proactive attention and the allocation of resources.

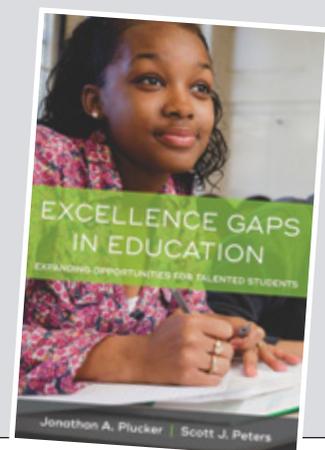
In nearly every state in the nation, excellence gaps are large and growing (for state specifics, see Plucker, Hardesty, and Burroughs, 2012). Every year that the nation and the state of Wisconsin fail to stem this growing form of inequality, both fall farther behind in the race for economic competitiveness, creativity, and the development of individual talent. ■

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For More Information

In November 2016, Scott Peters and Jonathan Plucker published their book "Excellence Gaps in Education: Expanding Opportunities for Talented Students." Check out this book for more in-depth coverage of excellence gaps in education. The book is available from Harvard Education Press at hepg.org.



NSBA Center for Public Education Study Finds Diversity Benefits Students

More than six decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, far too many schoolchildren still attend segregated schools. A new report from the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) Center for Public Education (CPE), "School Segregation Then & Now," finds that integrated schools hold greater potential for helping all students succeed both academically and socially.

According to CPE's study, the composition of our school communities matter for improving outcomes for students, their communities, and the long-term stability and prosperity of our nation. The positive effects of diversity shouldn't be overlooked, rather, education policymakers can and should advance their efforts to purposefully increase diversity.

In its examination of school segregation across the nation, CPE found:

- Shifting demographics have changed how often students of different races attend the same schools.
- Despite progress, many students are still racially isolated. About 15 percent of black and Latino students attend schools that are less than one percent white.
- Low-income black and Latino students are far more likely to attend schools of concentrated poverty than low-income white students.

- Due to demographic patterns and legal precedents, efforts to integrate schools are often limited within district boundaries.

Although efforts to diversify schools confront significant obstacles, tools school leaders have at their disposal include:

- Creative school choice;
- Carefully drawn school attendance boundaries; and
- Inter-district partnerships on students' school assignments.

Serious efforts to address this issue must include community input, the study emphasizes. Any policy that addresses students' school assignments is controversial, as the school busing plans of the 1970s and 1980s made clear. Providing families with some level of choice may also aid in the success of new school assignment plans.

"Our message is that local, state, and federal policymakers, as well as local community members, cannot accept that segregated schools are inevitable or the norm," says NSBA Executive Director and CEO Gentzel. □

You can view the complete study at the Center for Public Education's website, centerforpubliceducation.org.



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