

# Addressing Excellence Gaps in K-12 Education

## Introduction

A major objective of federal and state education policy is to address achievement gaps by reducing the number of students performing below grade level. The principal focus has been on minimum competency (i.e., bringing a larger proportion of students from underperforming groups, which are defined by variables such as race, disability, or socioeconomic status, to a basic level of educational achievement). Although the aim of closing achievement gaps by bringing larger proportions of students to basic levels is important, a focus on minimum competency obscures the importance of acknowledging that there are many students in various demographic groups who have the potential to achieve much more than minimum competency.

Traditionally, schools have not addressed gaps between groups of students at advanced levels of achievement, commonly referred to as excellence gaps. These excellence gaps are found in every state and on national assessments, yet despite the immediate and long-term implications for the nation, they have received almost no attention. Therefore, NAGC calls on policymakers and educators to set a goal of closing achievement differences at every level of achievement between different groups of students.

## Research Overview

Research on excellence gaps provides evidence that they are large and stable (Coffey & Tyner, 2023). For example, 3% of children eligible for free and reduced lunch scored at the advanced level on the 2024 grade 4 NAEP math exam, compared to 15% of noneligible students scoring at that level. The 2024 excellence gap of 12% is essentially unchanged from the 11% gap in 2013.

Efforts to close achievement gaps at minimum levels of proficiency have little effect on reducing excellence gaps (Plucker & Peters, 2016), raising doubts about the effectiveness of current education policies and practices in providing greater and more equitable educational opportunities that develop the talents of all students. As the proportion of minoritized and low-income students continues to rise in the U.S. school population, these data make evident the need for policymakers to direct efforts toward narrowing both achievement and excellence gaps. Given modern economy's need for talent, drawing

on the advanced skills of only a fraction of the population is not a viable, long-term strategy for sustainable economic growth.

Several potential causes have been suggested for the existence and persistence of large excellence gaps. These include the systemic barriers and challenges faced by underrepresented groups including educator attitudes about advanced learners, underresourced schools that serve predominantly lower income and minority communities, disparities in parents' awareness of and advocacy for access to advanced education services, the pervasive effects of poverty, systemic bias in the design and implementation of programs for advanced students, inadequate training for educators who work with underperforming subgroups of students, and lack of attention to issues surrounding educational excellence in schools (Floyd, 2021; Plucker & Peters, 2016; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2023). All these challenges can be addressed and overcome with greater awareness of the existence of excellence gaps, training in advanced education practices for all educators, and a consistent national and state-level focus on both equity and excellence in educational opportunity.

## Research-Based Best Practices

Reducing and eventually eliminating excellence gaps is an issue of economic advancement, national security, community development, and educational equity. NAGC strongly recommends that:

- The U.S. Department of Education and state and local education agencies report data on excellence gaps when they release annual achievement test results to raise awareness of excellence gaps among policymakers, educators, and the general public.
- State accountability systems require reporting disaggregated student achievement at each achievement level and extend incentives and rewards for closing all achievement gaps.
- Educators implement research-based strategies for closing excellence gaps and increasing the proportion of students performing at advanced levels using research-based practices regarding identification such as local norms and universal screening and program interventions such as providing advanced enrichment in the early grades (Meyer et al., 2024; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2024; Wells, 2019; Tyre, 2024).

- Policymakers and educators address policies and practices that unintentionally inhibit advanced student performance through various forms of anti-acceleration policies and practices such as credit-based high school graduation requirements that discourage early entrance to college and overly rigid kindergarten entrance criteria.
- Policymakers and district leaders adopt automatic enrollment policies that require students performing at certain high levels in a subject to be automatically placed in advanced courses to ensure that high-achieving students continue to experience challenging coursework.
- Policymakers and educators ensure that all teachers engage in professional preparation on identifying and supporting emergent talent in every classroom.
- The federal government fund research on the causes of excellence gaps and support promising interventions to reduce them.
- Policymakers consider the impact of legislation on advanced learners to help avoid unintended consequences that may impede educational excellence.

## Conclusion

Closing excellence gaps is both a social-equity issue and a workforce development issue that carries national competitiveness and security implications. Shrinking the low-income fourth-grade math excellence gap by roughly half—from 12% to 6%—would result in an additional 80,000 fourth graders performing at advanced levels in math every year. Extrapolate these numbers to every grade, and the increased numbers of students realizing their full potential would put the nation back on the path to global leadership, especially in the STEM disciplines that appear likely to drive future economic growth. NAGC calls on policymakers and educators to set a goal of closing achievement differences at every level of achievement between different groups of students.

## References/Resources

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## Note

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