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Minority Test-Score Gap

White students in Utah place up to twice as high on standardized exams

BY HEATHER MAY

Utah students post high marks on the national Stanford Achievement Test, providing bragging rights for politicians and educators alike.

But closer scrutiny of the results reveals an alarming achievement gap between white and minority students. According to numbers provided by the state Office of Education this week, minority students' scores are half those of white students and are far below satisfactory.

Only Asian-American students get marks on par with their white classmates, scoring just a couple of points below them in most categories of the SAT (see graphic). Asian-Americans do better than their peers on math tests.

But Latino, Pacific Islander, American Indian and African-American students' results are dismal, though not surprising to educators and minority leaders.

Antonio Gonzalez says the results are simply more proof of Utah's struggle to meet the needs of minority students, which is also reflected in other measures of academic success. Such measures include test scores, dropout rates, students taking college-level classes and students entering college, which may suggest white students are getting a better education than minorities.

Gonzalez, a former educator in the Granite School District and a current member of the League of United Latin American Citizens and Coalition La Raza, blames educators, in part, for having low expectations for minority students. But he also says students' parents are coming up short.

"They are assuming the schools are going to do something," he said. "They are taking a big, big chance turning their kids over to the schools, whistling 'Dixie,' hoping for the best.

"We are in effect contributing to the problem because we don't go over there and raise Cain with the principals," he said.

The state Office of Education completed the report on ethnic groups' SAT scores this week. Students in third, fifth, eighth and 11th grades took the SAT in the fall and their overall results were released this past winter.

The SAT assesses students' reading, math, language, science, social science and thinking skills. Scores range from 1 to 99 and are reported in national percentile ranks, so a score of 59 means Utah students scored better than 59 percent of the nation. A score of 60 is excellent; 40 and below signifies a serious problem.

Scores of Latino students, Utah's largest minority group, were half those of white students on every measure in nearly every grade, and far below the 40th percentile. For example, third-graders ranked in the 34th percentile on reading; white students ranked 63rd.

Only in 11th grade do Latino students come close to their classmates on one test — math — scoring in the 50th percentile, to white students' 68th percentile.

Many educators, such as Jennifer Johnston, don't place much stock in the SAT. Johnston, a third-grade teacher at Copperview Elementary School in Midvale, where one-third of the students are Latino, says it isn't fair to expect a child who just moved to the United States and knows little English to do work on a third-grade level in a foreign language.

She says tests created by the state or her school are a better gauge of what students have learned. Still, she acknowledges that even those tests reveal an achievement gap between white and minority students and between students of different family backgrounds.

"My Caucasian kids in a stable family are going to read better than my kids who are growing up in a single-parent family, have abusive parents at home, or are bilingual or monolingual. Of course they're going to do better," she said.

"Some of the students just need time to catch up. It takes a few years to become completely fluent in a language, and once they do, then start looking at their test scores," Johnston suggested.

There are some Utah schools that are successfully bridging the achievement gap by spending lots of money on teacher training and taking time to give students individual attention.

For instance, the children at Washington Elementary School in Salt Lake City score higher on the SAT and state end-of-level tests than their demographics would suggest.

The school is 60 percent minority and 63 percent low income, but the students are doing better in some cases than students from mostly white, middle- to upper-income schools in the city. Washington first-graders, for example, had the third-highest score in the district on language arts tests, behind the district's two gifted and talented elementary programs.

Principal Nancy McCormick said the trick has been adopting a schoolwide literacy program, called California Early Learning Literacy.

The school spent \$100,000 to train teachers in the program, which integrates reading and writing in all classes.

“Every child is taught on their own instructional level each day,” McCormick said. Conversely, “If instruction is classwide, the bottom kids don’t pick it up.”

Washington second-grade teacher Thomas Brown said he doesn’t look at his students and their test scores by race. But he does see that 14 of his 18 students scored in the top “mastery” level on a state reading test this week.

“I read with every student every day or every other day,” Brown said. “I continually assess their strengths and weaknesses.”