

School Race Gap Targeted

St. Paul meeting to zero in on black kids' achievement

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The St. Paul school board meets tonight to discuss African-American student achievement. It may be the board's most important meeting this year, or it may end up simply revisiting a set of maddening statistics familiar here, in Minneapolis and across the country.

Fifteen years of district test data show few signs that the gap between white and black students has closed. Strategies and blue-ribbon commissions have come and gone along with superintendents, school boards and students. Yet achievement patterns remain frustratingly consistent.

Consider:

In the spring MAT7 exams, half the district's black students fell into the lowest performance category, which indicates students who are one or more grades behind. Only 17 percent of whites scored in that category (44 percent for Asian-Americans; 41 percent for American Indians and Latinos). The national average was 23 percent.

Those numbers have barely changed in the seven years since MAT7 testing began. In 1993, 56 percent of black children and 23 percent of white children were in the lowest category.

In the decade before the state exams, St. Paul used its own high-stakes reading and math tests. Slightly more than half the district's black ninth-graders passed the reading competency test in 1987, compared with more than 80 percent of whites. Nine years later, the gap hadn't budged.

Different tests, different eras, different kids. Yet the achievement gap from 1987 — about a 30-percentage-point difference in the passing rates between black and white — is nearly identical to February's state basic skills exams, which showed 76 percent of white St. Paul eighth-graders passed the Minnesota basic skills reading exam vs. 40 percent of African-American eighth-graders.

There is no one answer to the black-white gap. There isn't even a consensus on why there is a gap.

Is it because many black students come from homes where parents struggle to maintain stable housing and have to move their kids from school to school? Do parents have the time, interest or ability to focus on their children's education and instill discipline?

Is it because white teachers don't know how to connect with black children and end up sending them through the discipline process instead? Is there a culture of low expectations in city schools for students of color? These have been used to explain all or part of the gap.

A blue-ribbon panel in 1994 cited racism as a primary factor in the low achievement of St. Paul's students of color. That triggered angry responses from teachers who said the report maligned them as racists.

Still, some people want to see a renewed focus on whether black students are being challenged and treated the same as whites.

"You must find a way where students, especially students of color, especially African-American boys, feel as if they're being dealt with fairly," says James Patterson, a parent at J.J. Hill Montessori Magnet School. "If (African-American kids) are given the same support, treated the same way, then they will excel."

Patterson says he's been dismayed to walk through schools and see African-American boys lined up at the principal's office. He worries that many teachers may have a lower threshold for sending a disruptive black kid to the principal than for a disruptive white kid.

He believes those kinds of referrals need to be tracked in the same way the police are starting to track the race of drivers who are randomly stopped.

"We have too many teachers in St. Paul schools who are disconnected from our populations of color," says Zelma Wiley, a former teacher at Dayton's Bluff Elementary School who works now with a University of St. Thomas program to bring people of color into teaching.

"While there are many great teachers in this district, there are many who don't adhere to the belief that our children can do as well as their European counterparts," Wiley said. "There needs to be a good mix of dynamite teachers in every building."

University of Minnesota researcher Ernest Davenport has studied course-taking of black and white high school students nationally and found that blacks take as many, sometimes more, math courses than whites, but that whites take more challenging math classes that better prepare them for college-level work. While he doesn't have data to show it, Davenport believes black students sometimes get bad advice — that a white student having trouble in geometry, for example, might get more encouragement

from adults and friends to tough it out, whereas a black student might be advised to try something else.

He also believes students limit themselves. "If a student wants to be an astronaut and go to college and hasn't the prerequisite science courses necessary to do that, what they might do is get discouraged and do something else in their lives," he says.

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