



What Research-supported Interventions Help Address Excellence Gaps?

Fortunately, the existence and growth of excellence gaps are fixable problems. Educators need to take several bold steps to shrink excellence gaps – and to do so by raising the achievement levels of underachieving groups, not by allowing already high-performing groups to slip.

According to Plucker and Peters (2016), research-supported strategies that may help reduce excellence gaps include the following.

- **Enhancing opportunities:** Opportunities for advanced learning should be made available to all students in all communities. Educators should be aware that emerging research suggests that communicating about the opportunities may not be enough to get low-income students involved; persuasive, persistent communication with the students' caregivers may be necessary to convince them that the opportunity is worth pursuing.
- **Universal screening:** When identifying talented students, every student in the targeted grade level should be screened. Nominations should come after formal screening, rather than teacher or parent nomination, to help identify students any tests may have missed.
- **Local norms:** Students should be identified using local norms rather than national norms. In some high poverty schools, using national norms may result in the identification of few or no high ability students, yet talent exists in every zip code. Using local norms helps find these students and sends the implicit message that every school in every neighborhood has talented children.

- **Ability grouping:** Flexible ability grouping is associated with both higher advanced achievement and the closing of excellence gaps.
- **Frontloading:** Efforts should be made to ensure that students are prepared to be successful in new programs. For example, encouraging low-income students to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses will only be successful if the students have been exposed to rigorous coursework in advance of the AP opportunity.
- **Teacher training:** Preservice and inservice educators – principals, teachers, counselors – should have training on the needs of high ability students and strategies for promoting high achievement among all students.

The Excellence Gap

Before any policy is passed, ask policy makers and educators the two questions:

- How will this policy impact advanced students?
- How will this policy help more students perform at advanced levels?

Created through the federal Jacob K. Javits grant Project Reaching Academic Potential (RAP) awarded to the Kentucky Department of Education who partnered with Jefferson County Public Schools, University of Louisville, and Western Kentucky University.

A special thank you goes to Dr. Jonathan Plucker who provided much of the text.

RESOURCES

- Harris, B., & Plucker, J. A. (2014). Achieving equity and excellence: The role of school mental health providers in shrinking excellence gaps. *Gifted Child Today*, 37(2), 110-116.
- Plucker, J. A., Giancola, J., Healey, G., Arndt, D., & Wang, C. (2015). *Equal talents, unequal opportunities: A report card on state support for academically talented low-income students*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.excellencegap.org>.
- Plucker, J. A., Hardesty, J., & Burroughs, N. (2013). *Talent on the sidelines: Excellence gaps and America's persistent talent underclass*. Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, Center for Education Policy Analysis. Retrieved from <http://cepa.uconn.edu/mindthegap>.
- Plucker, J. A., & Peters, S. J. (2016). *Excellence gaps in education: Expanding opportunities for talented youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

EXCELLENCE GAPS IN KENTUCKY



What are Excellence Gaps?
What do they look like?
Why are they important?
What can be done about them?

*These answers have the potential
to change Kentucky's future.*

What Are Excellence Gaps?

Many communities have populations of students who severely underperform relative to other demographic groups and fail to reveal their own potential. These achievement gaps have been a focus in American K-12 education efforts for many years and are probably best exemplified in the federal No Child Left Behind Act which guided education from 2001–2015. These gaps, although important to address, focus on gaps at basic levels of academic proficiency. But such gaps also exist among the highest levels of achievement, a problem labeled *excellence gaps*.

Excellence gaps are differences in scores at the advanced level among subgroups of students.

Excellence gaps, although an often unrecognized problem, continue to grow in schools and districts across the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the nation. Recent studies provide evidence the gaps are due – at least in part – to debilitating contextual factors, such as poverty, negative peer pressure, and bias and discrimination.



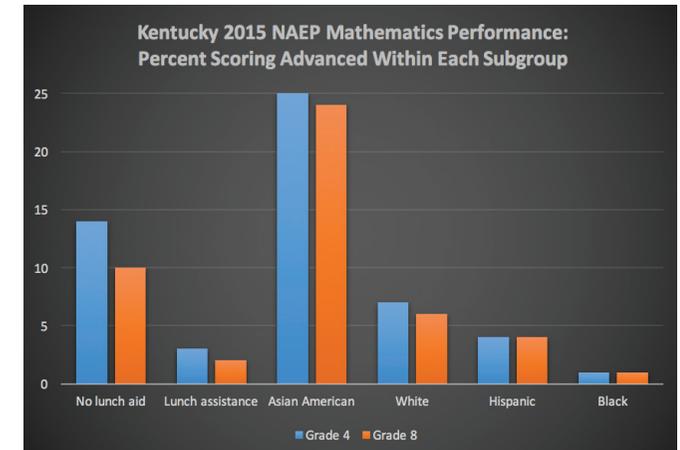
Why Should Educators Be Concerned About Them?

First, closing excellence gaps is a matter of educational equity and social justice. If a Latina student from a lower socio-economic background or a Black/African American third grader has mathematical talent, declaring victory when she begins to perform at grade level is premature – grade level performance should be viewed as a mile marker on a longer journey, not the destination. Helping that student reach the limits of her potential will change that child's life, in addition to the lives of her family and people in her community. And the entire culture of her school may change, as more students perform at advanced levels and a culture of achievement takes root in each classroom.

Second, the elimination of excellence gaps is an economic and cultural imperative. As the United States' K-12 student population continues to become more diverse, our talent continues to emerge primarily from higher income White and Asian American students. For example, only 53% of public school students are White or Asian American, a number expected to decrease to 51% by 2025. And over 50% of students qualify for lunch assistance via the National School Lunch Program, a number that continues to increase each year. For long-term economic and cultural vibrancy, we need talent to emerge from all of our student subgroups.

What Do Kentucky's Excellence Gaps Look Like?

Like all other states, Kentucky's excellence gaps are large and growing. For example, during the 2015 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 14% of Kentucky Grade 4 students who do not qualify for lunch assistance scored at the advanced level, compared to 3% who qualify. Similar excellence gaps (by family income, race, and gender) are found for all NAEP results, regardless of content or grade level being tested. The following figure provides an example of Kentucky's excellence gaps. (Although significantly higher than other subgroups, 25% of Asian American students score advanced.)



Similar results in Kentucky's own achievement measure, K-PREP, stress the critical need to address the excellence gap in our Commonwealth.

