

Identifying Progress Toward Ethnoracial Achievement Equity across U.S. School Districts: A New Approach

Allison Atteberry, Kendra Bischoff, Ann Owens

How do we identify districts where ethnoracial achievement disparities have shrunk since 2009?

We draw on district-level test score data to describe an approach for measuring ethnoracial achievement gaps and assessing trends toward achievement equity from 2009 to 2016. We assess the national landscape to examine if (and to what extent) school districts' achievement gaps have shrunk or widened since 2009.

Why ask this question?

The measurement and analysis of differences in achievement among ethnoracial groups is an imperfect means to understand and appreciate the depth of racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S. education system. However, unequal academic outcomes, while lacking nuance, can shine a light on unequal opportunities. Instead of framing educational disparities through a deficit lens, one can frame educational inequality as the result of opportunity gaps, resulting from disparate social and educational opportunities available to students of different ethnoracial groups. Moreover, because achievement outcomes predict long-term educational attainment, employment, and earnings, these school-age educational inequalities may portend future ethnoracial economic disparities. Therefore, understanding ethnoracial achievement gaps is imperative for documenting and addressing current and future inequalities.

What's new about our approach?

Our approach draws attention to the fact that, at the district level, achievement disparities can change in two ways. The first is “within-district shrinkage”, which considers whether a district's Black or Hispanic students' achievement is both increasing and approaching that of White students *in their district*. The second is “national shrinkage”, which considers whether a district's Black or Hispanic students' achievement is approaching that of White students *nationally*. We compare gaps in the same grade, year after year, to

identify districts that are advancing equity. We apply this approach to newly released [SEDA](#) data to provide a comprehensive analysis of achievement gap trends across grades (3-8) and subjects (math and ELA).

What do we find?

First, our findings reinforce that systemic inequality in the educational outcomes of historically-disenfranchised Black and Hispanic student subgroups remains both persistent and pervasive. Among the approximately 9,500 district-and-grade combinations we examined nationwide in 2009, White students had higher average test scores than Black and Hispanic students in the same district in 98 – 100% of cases. There are virtually no exceptions to this pattern of ethnoracial disparity. This reinforces the fact that the U.S. remains very far from “leveling the playing field” for Black and Hispanic students.

Some districts, however, may be making progress toward equity. White-Black within-district gaps shrank in 37% and 30% of district-grades in ELA and math, respectively. White-Hispanic within-district ELA gaps shrank in 57% of district-grades, while math gaps shrank in 36% of district-grades. The evidence points to more progress in national gap shrinkage—in more than half of districts, Black and Hispanic students made gains relative to the national mean for White students. That said, even when gaps shrank, the change was modest in size. For example, three-quarters of districts experienced within-district White-Black gap shrinkage of less than 0.10 standard deviations. We also find that less than 10% of districts with any gap shrinkage (in any grade) exhibited gap shrinkage in *all six* grade levels. The notable variability (across subjects and grades) among gap trends in the same district complicates explanations for why and how districts and their local communities might help reduce academic inequality.

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