Achievement gaps between white students and their black and Hispanic peers remain an intractable problem in American education. Although black-white gaps closed dramatically between 1950 and 1980, the rate of gap closure has decreased in recent decades (Reardon, 2011). In this paper we chart black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gap magnitudes and trends over the last two decades, focusing on both average trends and variation in these trends among states. We use test results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and from state accountability tests. These state accountability test data, which capture the achievement of virtually all students in grades 3-8 in each year after state testing began, enable us to draw attention to between-state variation in achievement gap magnitudes and trends more precisely than possible with NAEP data alone (because NAEP tests only in grades 4 and 8, only every other year, and only tests a sample of students in each state). Though state data typically come in the form of discrete “proficiency”-type categories, we use new methods specifically designed for this form of data (Ho & Reardon, 2012) to estimate achievement gaps in standard deviation units, making them comparable across states and time.

Our findings demonstrate that racial achievement gaps are closing slowly at the national level. White-black and white-Hispanic gaps are closing by about 0.09 and 0.07 standard deviations per decade, respectively. Second, we find little evidence that gaps change substantially as children progress through school. From state assessment data, for which we have data available for grades 2-8, we detect no change; for NAEP data, for which we have data available only for grades 4 and 8, we detect a modest gap closure of 0.009 standard deviations per grade. Third, we find substantial variation across states in both gap magnitudes and trends across cohorts and grades. Fourth, we find an inverse relationship across states between initial gap magnitude and rate of change: the larger the gap is to begin with, the more quickly it closes. Finally, we control for a number of state-level demographic factors—such as segregation, black- or Hispanic-white poverty differences, the percent of the population that is minority—and find that these covariates explain about 50% of the variation across states in gap magnitudes, but none of the variation across states in cohort trends. This five-piece story is very similar for both black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gaps.