The Racial School Climate Gap

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A research summary produced by the Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.

Educational inequity is a persistent reality of American culture. Almost 50 years ago, the Coleman Report put race- and ethnicity-based achievement gaps on the national radar. Since that time, achievement gaps have remained largely unchanged. As early as kindergarten, there are marked differences in academic performance between racial minority students and their peers. These differences are sustained as students progress through school.

Various reasons have been proposed to explain the racial achievement gap. One of the simplest explanations is that race is inextricably connected to socioeconomic status in the United States. Poor students have fewer resources for learning and must overcome greater barriers, and a disproportionate number of poor families are racial minorities. However, even when socioeconomic status is taken into consideration, an achievement gap among racial groups remains. Social psychologists note “stereotype threat” as a possible contributor to the gap, wherein test takers of stigmatized racial groups worry that they may confirm stereotypes about intelligence, and thus perform worse due to this stress. Other explanations are socio-cultural, suggesting that minority peer groups reward disengagement or that certain racial identities are not conducive to valuing academic success. Finally, some scholars point to the disproportionate rate at which African American, Latino, and American Indian students are disciplined and suspended, distracting from learning time and undermining school connectedness. This disproportionateness is presumed to be a function of either objective differences in student behavior or discrimination on the part of school staff in their subjective interpretation of student behavior. A common thread to these explanations is that the divergent social experiences of racial groups contribute to the achievement gap.

One aspect of students’ social experience that may help to understand the gap is school climate. School climate is a broad term used to describe the school environment, and while it has no consensus definition, there are several recurring themes: (a) order, safety, and discipline; (b) teaching and learning supports; (c)
social relationships; and (d) school connectedness. A positive school climate has been associated with higher levels of student achievement. Thus racial differences in students’ experience of school safety and supportiveness may help explain group differences in achievement.

This document, *The Racial School Climate Gap*, summarizes several recent research studies, conducted by WestEd’s Health and Human Development Program staff, which examined the connections between student race, achievement, and school climate. The collective findings support the notion that, just as there is a racial achievement gap, there is a racial school climate gap in California schools.

### What Recent WestEd Research Tells Us About the Racial School Climate Gap

Between 2007 and 2012, WestEd researchers conducted six empirical studies on race, achievement, and school climate using student and staff data from the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (Cal–SCHLS) System. These data were collected biennially in nearly two-thirds of all California public schools from 2004 to 2010 from an average of about 500,000 students and 50,000 staff annually. Survey items gauged respondents’ perceptions of their school environment (e.g., supportiveness, safety) as well as students’ grades, truancy, and risk behaviors. The studies’ findings are organized into three categories below: (1) examination of racial achievement gaps; (2) examination of racial school climate gaps; and (3) examination of the degree to which these gaps are attributable to happenings within a school campus versus differences among schools.

### Finding #1: There Continues to Be a Racial Achievement Gap

#### Student Differences

The studies confirmed the racial achievement gap in California public schools. Based on Cal–SCHLS data from 2006–08, a higher proportion of Asian and White middle and high school students reported good academic achievement compared with African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students, by school level and by racial group, who reported receiving grades of mostly Bs or above. At both levels of schooling, approximately 15 to 20 percent more White students and 25 to 30 percent more Asian students got good grades compared with African American and Hispanic students.

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† WestEd developed the Cal–SCHLS system with funding from the California Department of Education. Cal–SCHLS consists of three comparable surveys: the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) for students; California School Climate Survey (CSCS) for staff; and the California School Parent Survey. The student and staff data used in these analyses were derived from the CHKS and CSCS. During the years that data used in these analyses were collected, the CHKS was administered in approximately 840 school districts to an average of 500,000 students per year in grades 7, 9, and 11. For more information, see http://cal-schls.wested.org.
Similar disparities were found in results from the California Standards Tests of English language arts and mathematics in 2009. African American and Hispanic students scored roughly two-thirds of a standard deviation lower than White students on both tests in middle and high school, while Asian students scored slightly higher.

School Differences

At the school level, there is also a demonstrated association between achievement and race. Using data from 2004–06, it was determined that predominantly Hispanic schools, at all levels, had lower average standardized test scores than predominantly White schools, even after taking student socioeconomic factors into account. Schools serving large numbers of African American and Hispanic students exhibited even larger deficits. For example, after taking socioeconomic factors into account, 49 percent of ninth graders in predominantly White schools were predicted to score at proficient levels in English language arts versus 37 percent of ninth graders in schools serving large numbers of African American and Hispanic students. This evidence suggests that the racial achievement gap is still a conspicuous feature of education in California and is not attributable solely to socioeconomic status.

Finding #2: There Is Also a Racial School Climate Gap

Student Differences

A more original discovery from this work is the existence of significant racial differences in students’ experiences of school climate. As summarized in Table 1, White and Asian students generally reported higher levels of safety, support, and connectedness compared with African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students. Two reports using data from different years confirmed that there were significant disparities in students’ sense of connectedness to school, with White students having the highest levels of connectedness, followed by Asian students, American Indian and Hispanic students, and lastly African American students. White students were also the most common group to indicate that they had a
caring relationship with an adult at school and that the school had high expectations for students. Hispanic students were least likely to make this observation. In terms of safety, African American and Hispanic students reported feeling less safe at school than other students.

### Table 1. Students’ Perceptions of School Climate, by Race and School Level (% Reporting “High” Levels)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Levels of:</th>
<th>African American M.S. (%)</th>
<th>African American H.S. (%)</th>
<th>American Indian M.S. (%)</th>
<th>American Indian H.S. (%)</th>
<th>Asian M.S. (%)</th>
<th>Asian H.S. (%)</th>
<th>Hispanic M.S. (%)</th>
<th>Hispanic H.S. (%)</th>
<th>White M.S. (%)</th>
<th>White H.S. (%)</th>
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<td>School connectedness</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<td>42</td>
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<td>Caring adult relationships</td>
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<td>High expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect for all students</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50</td>
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</table>

Adapted from Austin et al., 2010, and Austin & Hanson, 2012; M.S. = Middle school (7th grade), H.S. = High school (9th & 11th grades)

A 2012 study—using a supplement to the Cal–SCHLS developed specifically to examine factors associated with the racial achievement gap—found that Asian students were the most likely group to believe that all students were treated with respect. African American and Hispanic students felt less respected by staff than Asian and White students. In high school, African American and Hispanic students were more likely to feel that students were not disciplined fairly.

### School Differences

In addition to individual student differences, schools that serve mostly African American and Hispanic students had lower overall school climate ratings than schools that serve mostly White and Asian students, even when adjusting for student socioeconomic status. In the former schools, ninth grade students were less likely, on average, to report feeling safe, supported, and connected or to report having opportunities for meaningful participation. These differences were confirmed by staff survey results, as well. Teachers and other staff in predominantly White and Asian schools reported more positive school climates than their counterparts in predominantly African American and Hispanic schools.

Related to this finding that staff experience differences in school climate depending on the student racial demographics of their school, there is also evidence that staff experience differences in school climate based on their own race. White and Asian staff were more likely than African American and Hispanic staff to report that their schools provided a positive, supportive, and safe learning environment for students and that the students they serve come to school ready to learn. A caveat to this finding is that staff of different races may work in different types of schools and in different roles within schools, thus affecting their perceptions. Nonetheless, these findings, taken together, imply that there is a meaningful racial gap in school climate for California students and staff.
Finding #3: Racial Gaps Exist Within Individual Schools

One reaction to the findings described above could be, “Yes, of course there are racial gaps in achievement and school climate—that’s because African American and Hispanic students attend lower performing schools in worse neighborhoods than their White and Asian peers.” Schools that have higher levels of achievement, supportiveness, engagement, and safety are attended mostly by White and Asian students. African American and Hispanic students tend to go to schools with lower rates of achievement that are less supportive, engaging, and safe. Does this reality alone explain the gap?

The answer appears to be “no.” Racial gaps in achievement and perceptions of school climate exist within individual schools as well as between schools. Indeed, these gaps within schools contribute more to the overall racial gap in California than the fact that White and Asian students attend different schools than African American and Hispanic students. This finding is both important and novel. Consider the following illustration: Two students attend Middle School X. One student is African American, and one is White. Based on this finding, one would expect that the African American student would have lower test scores and grades and would report lower levels of perceived safety, support, and connectedness, despite access to the same facilities, resources, administration, teachers, and staff.

This general finding occurs across all California schools. Thus, if a school has equal shares of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and White students—25 percent of each—one would expect the African American and Hispanic students in that school to have lower test scores, grades, and perceptions of safety, support, and connectedness. If a school is 90 percent Hispanic and 10 percent White, these findings suggest that the Hispanic students in that school would have lower test scores; grades; and perceptions of safety, support, and connectedness. If a school is 75 percent Asian and 25 percent African American, the finding suggests that the African American students in that school would have lower test scores; grades; and perceptions of safety, support, and connectedness.

Regardless of a school’s racial composition, this study suggests that African American and Hispanic students will have less positive outcomes than their White and Asian peers in the school. Either something is happening within the school to foster this inequality, or students of difference races at the school have different out-of-school experiences (for example, due to residential racial segregation within the school catchment area).

Differences between schools are still important. There is evidence that African American and Hispanic students systematically attend schools that are lower performing and less safe, supportive, and connected than the schools attended by their White and Asian peers. The fact that students of different races attend schools of different qualities is part of the problem, but this research suggests that things that happen to students in the same school are a bigger part.

What Are the Implications of These Findings for Educators?

First and foremost, WestEd’s recent findings show that the racial achievement gap continues to be a pressing public policy issue. By almost any measure of academic achievement, African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students perform significantly worse than their Asian and White peers. After decades of initiatives designed to redress this inequity, what are educators to do?
These recent studies show that school climate may be an area where schools can focus attention in their efforts to reduce the racial achievement gap. To make this assertion requires three logical conclusions:

1) Students’ experiences of school climate vary by race, creating a racial climate gap.

2) School climate is associated with academic achievement.

3) Reducing racial disparities in students’ experience of school climate will result in reduced racial disparities in achievement.

The studies reviewed here provide empirical support for the first and second points. To prove the third point necessitates further research. Absent this empirical evidence, however, there is still a clear conceptual argument that improving school climate for African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students may help reduce the achievement gap.

Where should school climate interventions be targeted to reduce inequity? These findings suggest that much—if not most—of the work needs to happen in individual schools or their surrounding areas. Within the same building, disadvantaged minority students are not having the same school experience as their peers. It is not exactly clear why this happens, but the implication is that school administrators and staff can remedy this gap through their building-level policies and practices.

Among the more commonly employed strategies for improving climate at the school level are schoolwide approaches that involve all staff in establishing a positive behavior management system and student social and emotional learning approaches that rely on classroom social–skills instruction. For example, some schools have implemented restorative justice programs as alternatives to traditional, punitive discipline codes that focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of misbehavior and members of the school community, including potential victims and their families. Another example is transformative classroom management that leverages students’ motivation and engagement to increase adherence to classroom behavioral norms. Resilience research indicates that developmentally supportive schools that emphasize caring student–adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation can help mitigate the effects of the multiple risk factors experienced by poor students of color and promote positive academic, social–emotional, and health outcomes. Finally, to provide compensatory supports for low-income students, some researchers have recommended that schools establish after-school programs and health clinics and hire mental health counselors. More privileged students often have access to a wide array of out-of-school supports that prepare them for learning. To the degree that schools can fill in these gaps in supports, they may help redress income inequality.

The California Department of Education’s Safe and Supportive Schools program (Cal–S3), in collaboration with WestEd, recently published a series of “What Works Briefs” to assist schools in their development of school climate–related initiatives, including schoolwide programs, targeted supports, and low–cost strategies that staff can implement immediately. The Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd offers services to support schools that are interested in using school climate improvement as a means of reducing inequity.

There is also work to be done to address the academic and environmental disparities between schools. This district–, state–, and federal–level issue requires special attention to schools that are most in need. The U.S. Department of Education’s S3 program is an example of an initiative targeted specifically at low–per-
forming schools with relatively poor school climates in an effort to get them on an equal level with their counterparts.

Addressing both within– and between–school inequality requires attention to the social and economic forces that cause students from traditionally marginalized neighborhoods to start off on an unequal playing field. Districts and schools can focus efforts on parent engagement, after–school programming, service learning, and partnerships with community–based organizations to help improve their students’ out–of–school experiences. One example of this type of place–based, collaborative effort is The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities initiative. Schools in several neighborhoods around the state work with public agencies, nonprofits, and community members to identify local barriers to positive youth development and develop common action plans to address them.

Another implication of these findings is that it is important for schools to regularly assess and monitor the school climate that different racial/ethnic groups experience. Schools can use tools such as the Cal–SCHLS system (available nationally as the Healthy Kids School Climate Surveys). Schools need such data to identify needs and guide efforts to address them. Otherwise, efforts to close the achievement gap will fall short.

The racial achievement gap continues to confound educational researchers and practitioners. However, WestEd’s recent research findings suggest that addressing school climate issues and the racial gaps may be an important and complementary strategy for effectively reducing achievement gaps. African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students report that their school experiences are very different from their Asian and White peers. Nurturing school environments that are safer and more supportive, and that make all students feel part of a larger community is an important step for educational equity and a promising step in the direction of closing the racial achievement gap.
Endnotes


22 For more information, visit http://californias3.wested.org.

23 For more information, visit http://www.calendow.org/healthycommunities.

The Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd is one of ten Equity Assistance Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance and training in civil rights, equity, and school reform. Our primary goal is to help ensure that all children have access to equitable education opportunities. The current network of Equity Assistance Centers will operate through 2014.

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