

CLOSING THE EXCELLENCE GAP

Fact Sheet

DEFINING THE EXCELLENCE GAP

Excellence /'eks(ə)ləns/ *noun*:

The quality of being outstanding or extremely good.

Gap /gap/ *noun*:

An unfilled space or interval; a break in continuity.

Every day, American students overcome challenging socioeconomic circumstances and defy the stereotype that poverty precludes high academic performance. **But these children aren't the norm.** For every student that refuses to allow economic disadvantages to stand in the way of achievement, dozens of other bright, talented children are giving up.

THIS IS THE EXCELLENCE GAP

The disparity in the percent of lower-income versus higher-income students who reach advanced levels of academic performance.

Children who fall victim to the Excellence Gap rarely receive the chance to participate in gifted programs, accelerated learning initiatives, or afterschool enrichment activities. Rather than being recognized for their exceptional achievements and encouraged to strengthen their natural intellect, these remarkable young people are left to fend for themselves, and, as a result, the gap widens. Common thought is that these students are fine on their own. Nothing could be further from the truth.

HERE ARE THE FACTS

- Approximately 3.4 million K-12 children residing in households with incomes below the national median, including more than one million K-12 children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, rank in the top 25% academically – meaning there are close to 80,000 very smart, very poor students per grade.
- Despite scoring in the top 25%, low-income students are less likely to have the chance to participate in programs geared toward high-achieving students:
 - Less than half (49%) of these students took at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course (as compared to 71% of their wealthier peers).
 - Only a third (30%) participated in an academic honor society (versus 51% of their wealthier peers).
- The high-achieving, low-income students who do have the chance to participate in advanced academic programs are still less likely to attend college:
 - One in every five high school graduates who scored in the top 25% in 10th grade and comes from a low-income family does not even enroll in college.
 - One in four does not take the SAT or ACT.
 - Half of these students don't apply for federal financial aid through FAFSA.
- The high achieving, low-income students who attend college often choose far less selective institutions. Even though their

academic performance is just as good as their wealthier peers, high-achieving, low-income students often don't even apply to more selective institutions due to lack of high-quality college counseling and a lack of understanding about tuition costs and financial aid opportunities.

IT'S TIME TO CLOSE THE GAP

As we strive to raise the bar on student achievement, we must pay specific attention to closing the Excellence Gap. Failing to uphold and invest in the nation's highest performing students from low-income families will have serious implications on American competitiveness and prosperity.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has identified five pathways to help narrow the Excellence Gap and promote greater success among these promising students:

1. Collect and report better data:

States and the federal government collect minimal data on advanced learners. As a result, practitioners and policymakers don't have the information necessary to improve outcomes for these talented students. To close the Excellence Gap, states and the federal government should take steps to more closely track and report on the progress of advanced learners nationwide.

2. Identify the best and the brightest:

Educators must more frequently employ diverse strategies to identify the most promising students. School districts should repeatedly screen students' abilities using multiple identification methods, and states should require expanded training for pre-service and in-service educators to ensure teachers are equipped to recognize and support advanced learners.

3. Support high-achieving students:

State and local education leaders need new, more flexible opportunities to help high-achieving, low-income students

succeed. School districts need additional flexibility to allow promising children to enter kindergarten early, take advantage of accelerated learning opportunities, graduate high school faster, and obtain credit for outside coursework and enrichment programs, including online education platforms. Additionally, schools should be able to identify and coordinate social wrap-around services for high-achieving, low-income students.

4. Provide quality college counseling:

High-achieving, low-income students need access to high-quality college advising. However, heavy caseloads and ineffective training can prohibit school counselors from providing meaningful guidance. School should embrace innovative approaches to college counseling, including online resources, and work with colleges to develop initiatives that promote success after high school graduation. Additionally, school districts should more actively work to collect and share better information about financial aid, scholarships and the benefits of applying to competitive colleges, along with resources on application and testing fee waivers.

5. Demand more accountability:

States should be held accountable for advancing the education of high-achieving learners. Federal, state and local governments should work together to establish best practices for monitoring and supporting the most promising students. Additionally, states should develop and add indicators of advanced learning to their K-12 accountability systems.

Schools, states, and the federal government must work together to ensure our brightest students from low-income families receive the support necessary to succeed. By reversing the downward trajectory of their educational achievement, we will not only improve the lives of lower-income high-achievers, but also strengthen our nation by unleashing the potential of millions of young Americans.