Freedom Through Education: Bridging the Academic Achievement Gap

Vanessa Ruiz
Senior Seminar
Phil Escamilla
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ABSTRACT

2

## CHAPTER 1

PUBLIC EDUCATION: IMPACT ON LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES 2  
INCOME ACHIEVEMENT GAP: SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS 4  
ECONOMIC IMPACT: FUTURE OF AMERICA’S WORKFORCE 7  
SOCIAL MOBILITY: IS AMERICA THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY? 9  
RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP: FACTORS AFFECTING MINORITY STUDENTS 11

## CHAPTER 2

DEFINING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: CONCERNS WITH GROWING DISPARITIES 13  
INTERNATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP: IS AMERICA FALLING BEHIND? 14  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP: ROOT CAUSES 16  
EVALUATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: MEASURING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP 17

## CHAPTER 3

HISTORY OF EDUCATION REFORM: HOW U.S. HISTORY PERPETUATED THE GAP 19  
WAR ON POVERTY: EDUCATION REFORM IN ACTION 24  
ELIEZER WILLIAMS VS. STATE OF CALIFORNIA: IS REFORM WORKING? 27

## CHAPTER 4

BRIDGING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: POLICY PROPOSALS 29  
EDUCATION VITAL FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY 30  
ACCOUNTABILITY & SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOLS 31  
FUNDING FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS 32  
CONCLUSION 33

## CHAPTER 5

APPENDIX 34  
BIBLIOGRAPHY 37  
ENDNOTES 39
ABSTRACT

History reveals that poverty and racism has negatively impacted the American education system. This paper will focus on the relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement. I will investigate the extent to which the rising income inequality within urban and suburban communities has affected the achievement gap. By studying historical education policy, the correlation between socioeconomic standing and academic achievement can be seen. Evidence shows that living environment greatly influences a child’s ability to learn. I will provide policy proposals aimed at bridging the achievement gap between social classes. These proposals will strive to bring all students to a higher level of learning and improve the public education system.

PUBLIC EDUCATION: IMPACT ON LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

America’s gallant experiment, the public school system, is and has been one of the most dynamic institutions since the foundation of this nation. Throughout our history, the public education system has been respected, reinvented, and reprimanded. The responsibility of the government to educate citizens has hinged on three central questions: What exactly is the purpose of public education? Who should receive educational services? And finally, how is the quality of this public education regulated? These questions set the foundation for education reform. Historical class action education initiatives link socioeconomics with the widening gap between low-income students’ academic accomplishments and students from high-income families. In order to solve this issue of education inequality, society must first address, identify, and evaluate the fundamental rights students have to an education.
The Constitution of the United States does not speak of educational rights; it simply provides a minimal degree of U.S. interconnection. The Constitution grants autonomy to individual states regarding education policy. According to the 10th Amendment, “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.”¹ Because states are attentive to constituents’ needs, the Constitution holds states individually responsible for protecting their students. Over the last century, the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged education as a fundamental right. Furthermore, the Court established parameters to safeguard students through the interpretation of the Civil Rights Act and desegregation cases.

Despite great efforts to combat discrimination, inequality continues to infiltrate the education system. Without equal opportunity to receive a quality education, it is unlikely that a child born into poverty can be expected to gain social mobility. Attaining an education has always been the great equalizer between social classes. While states have taken responsibility to provide educational opportunities to children, public education has not been made equivalently and adequately available for all. Children in low-income communities are often two to three years behind in reading by the time they reach fourth grade.² The Nations Report Card reveals that students who graduate from low-income public schools read at the same level of most eighth graders in affluent high-income areas.³

The achievement gap affects Latino, African American, and Native Americans more severely than Caucasian students. This chasm is due to the reality that minority groups are more likely to experience the challenges of poverty. The official poverty threshold recorded by the Census Bureau takes into account the annual income needed to minimally support a family.⁴ In
2010, the poverty threshold for a family of five was $26,023 and for a single parent household with two children was $17,568. While the poverty rate fluctuates, there are a steadily increasing number of poor families since the 1980’s. The poverty rate for Latinos and African-Americans regularly exceeds the national average. “In 2010, 27.4 percent of African-Americans, and 26.6 percent of Latinos were poor, compared to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 12.1 percent of Asians.” Altogether over 16 million children live in poverty within the U.S. today. Due to the decreasing access of resources within impoverished communities, low-income children are not given a fair opportunity for success.

**INCOME ACHIEVEMENT GAP: SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS**

In order to observe the discrepancies low-income families experience, it is vital to recognize how socioeconomics directly dictates educational experience. Socioeconomic status is measured through the combination of occupation, education, and income. By examining socioeconomic status, a gradient is seen between distributions and allocation of resources. Recurrent studies show a strong association between socioeconomics, education, and life outcomes. Low-socioeconomic status is often associated with low education, decreased parent involvement, and poor health. Observation of socioeconomic status has guided research in the realm of education policy.

In 1946, President Truman established *The National School Lunch Program* (*NSLP*), a federal assisted meal plan for low-income families. *NSLP* recorded, “one in four children in the U.S. live in poverty and 194 million children receive free or reduced price lunch.” In addition, this program provides nutritionally balanced meals, which children might not receive at home. Since *NSLP* was established, 31.6 million children have been able to
benefit from these services." Eligibility for this program has allowed school districts and local officials to measure the socioeconomic status of school populations. The data collected reveals compelling evidence that socioeconomic status affects income stability. Within the past decade, affluent families have seen a five percent continuous income increase. However, middle class and low-income families have experienced a persistent decrease in their income. These growing earning disparities are even more prominent in single parent households. Children who encounter these circumstances are falling behind their higher-income peers do to lack of financial resources.

In order to accurately examine the opportunity gap, that exists between high and low income students, it is important to recognize that at birth the majority of children have similar cognitive abilities regardless of their socioeconomic status. It is also clear that soon after birth, a child’s environment substantially affects intellectual ability. Research shows that children from low-socioeconomic families consistently begin kindergarten with significantly less linguistic knowledge. “Despite similar starting points, by age four, children in the highest income quintile score in the 69th percentile on tests of literacy and mathematics, while children in the lowest income quintile score in the 34th and 32nd percentile, respectively.” Unswerving evidence indicates that home environment and family socioeconomic status, contribute to the lack of opportunities low-income children receive throughout their education. Data collected by the National Report Card disclosed that children from less-advantaged homes score at least 10% lower than the national average on national achievement scores in mathematics and reading. The scores’ variations reveal that the achievement gap is more prominent between social economic statuses than ethnicity. The implications of the achievement gap have been evident, not only in the students’ test scores, but also in school attendance as well. Children who live in
impoverished communities are more likely to be absent throughout their K-12 education experience. The inability to attend school further perpetuates the learning gap and increases the dropout rates between low-income students and their more affluent peers. \(^\text{17}\) “Between 60 and 70 percent of students in low-income school districts fail to graduate from high school.” \(^\text{18}\)

Recently, educators have argued that state-funded public preschools may contribute to narrowing the achievement gap. By providing subsidized public preschools, toddlers from low-income families will be able to receive the linguistic background needed to be successful in K-12\(^\text{th}\) grade. This initiative would ensure a stable environment for young children during the crucial age of development. \(^\text{19}\) Advocates of universal preschools believe that “early schooling of low-income children is an investment that pays off in the long term by reducing the number of children who will perform poorly in school, become teenage parents, commit criminal acts, or depend on welfare.” \(^\text{20}\) The Head Start program, implemented in 1965, provided scholars with insight into the advantages of early education for young children. According to the report, “benefits of early education have a well known impact on how long children stay in school.” \(^\text{21}\) The implementations of state-funded preschools greatly affect low-income communities and may help bridge the achievement gap between socioeconomic classes. Conversely, there are critics who argue against this expansion of the universal preschool because of the inadequacies currently seen in the public schools. Furthermore, critics dispute the costly proposition of implementing a national public preschool program; they argue that taxpayers should not pay for services their children may not use.

Parental education is another contributing factor that affects a child’s ability to learn. “On average, mothers with a college degree spend 4.5 more hours each week engaging with their
children than mothers with only a high school diploma.”

By three years of age, children born to college-educated parents have an extended vocabulary of “50 percent larger than children from working-class families and 100 percent larger than those of children whose families receive welfare.”

Parental investment, both time and money, have drastic consequences on their children’s future success in school. The widening gap among standardized test-scores mirrors the diverging parental investments between low-income and affluent families. The impact socioeconomic statuses play in receiving an education and attaining social mobility will set the foundation for America’s future.

Socioeconomics not only influences parental education, but it impacts the ability for parents to invest in their children outside the classroom. High-income households are able to provide more supplementary materials to aid their children throughout their education. Affluent families have the ability to provide their children with a variety of educational enrichments and expenditures such as SAT preparation sessions, private tutors, computers, and music lessons.

Over the past four decades, families in the top income brackets have increased their spending dramatically in order to ensure their children have the essential skills and experiences needed to attend a good university. Household spending, per pupil, has increased per child from $3,500 to $9,000 per year. In contrast, those in the low-income bracket have increased personal household spending from $850 to about $1,300 since the 1970s. In Figure 1, the chart reveals that parental investment narrows the gap between socioeconomics over time.

ECONOMIC IMPACT: FUTURE OF AMERICAN’S WORKFORCE

Closing the achievement gap is often seen as a civil rights movement; but, the economic implications for narrowing this gap, have generous consequences on the prosperity of the U.S.

Nobel Laureate Keenth Arrow, a group of economists, found a positive correlation between
education and economic prosperity not only for the individual students, but society as a whole.\textsuperscript{26} Understanding the long-term ramifications of the persisting achievement gap is a concern that crosses party lines. The achievement gap perpetuates the underutilization of human potential, which leads to an uneducated working class. Policy makers must look at the pace of education improvement and the relationship between students’ achievement and economic growth. By equipping students with a quality education, the results impact the labor markets and workforce by enhancing the skills of individuals.

Human capital and knowledge infrastructures are at the core of economic innovation.\textsuperscript{27} Benabou a famous economist argues “…equalizing the opportunity for the young generation increases human-capital investment and enhances not only social mobility, but also the growth of aggregate output.”\textsuperscript{28} The relationship that currently exists between academic achievements from low-income students is hurting the American economy. Within the U.S., low-income students make up the working-class. Today, these students represent the least educated segment of the workforce and are the fastest growing population in America. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education concluded “if current educational gaps remain, there will likely be a decline in personal income per capita in the United States.”\textsuperscript{29} It also recognized that if continual efforts to narrow the gap were successful, the U.S. could gain as much as $425 billion in increased income.\textsuperscript{30} The raise in education levels lead to the rise in the human capital; therefore, economists and other experts increasingly see closing the achievement gap as a public good. As a result of not addressing this gap, American workers will have a diminishing ability to develop and master new technological enhancing skills. Efforts to narrow this educational gap have not been very successful and American students continue to fall behind.
Another economic impact of not addressing the achievement gap will result in exacerbated use of social services due to the high dependency low-income families place on government assistance programs. A concentration of low skilled workers results in higher unemployment and increased incarceration rates. One of the most effective means of addressing unemployment and incarceration is earning a college degree. High academic performances in K-12th grades and education counseling courses, guides students not only to be accepted to college but also to graduate. The completion of college is what directly impacts communities by boosting employees’ abilities to contribute to society. Obtaining a college degree also leads to increased civic engagement. “High school graduates are twice as likely to vote as people with primary education or less; and college graduates are 50 percent more likely to vote than high school graduates.” Therefore, education and civic involvement not only helps the achievement of lagging socioeconomic and ethnic groups, but it enhances the richness of America’s civic life as well.

SOCIAL MOBILITY: IS AMERICA THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY?

In a recent study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, findings revealed two crucial components regarding social mobility. The first key observation concluded that upward income mobility varies substantially within different locations. Locations with greater mobility have five similar characteristics: less segregation, less income inequality, better schools, greater social capital, and more stable families.” The second factor conveyed that, “contrary to popular perception, economic mobility has not changed significantly over time; however, it is consistently lower in the U.S. than in most developed countries.”
As income inequality continues to rise, it becomes more and more difficult for social mobility among low-income families. Figure 2 “The Great Gatsby Curve,” takes data from several countries at a single point in time to show the relationship between inequality and immobility. It clarifies the reality that social mobility is far less attainable for low-income families in the U. S. compared with other nations. In a completely mobile society, all children regardless of socioeconomic status would have the same likelihood of ending up in any part of the income distribution. But this is not the case, children from affluent families are disproportionately expected to stay better off and children of low-income families are likely to remain poor. These outcomes run contrary to the historic vision of the United States as a land of equal opportunity. Figure 3 shows how the future earnings of children correlate with their parents’ income.

Within the last twenty-five years, public and private efforts have sought to help ensure that all children have access to a quality education. Through regional and statewide programs, collective action is being taken to overcome education inequality. The Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) was among the many programs aimed at eliminating racial imbalances. By implementing a busing system, children from Boston were transported to public schools in the surrounding suburban metropolitan communities. METCO was created to offset racial disproportion within urban and suburban communities, which were deemed illegal. School districts that did not comply “were penalized by having state appropriations withdrawn until suitable plans alleviated racial isolation were approved by the State Department of Education.” Determining whether or not it is possible to overcome educational inequality through legalized school desegregation became the inquiry of the 21st century.
In the litigation *Tinsley v. Palo Alto School District*, the issue of metropolitan desegregation was brought forth. This case took into account the social impact of school desegregation in Northern California.\(^{39}\) The court order initiative called for local school districts to allow a small portion of black and white students to transfer voluntarily to neighboring school districts outside of their assigned boundaries.\(^{40}\) The districts believed that by busing students out of poor neighborhoods, they could help create racial balance and improve the opportunity for African-American students to acquire quality education. But despite these transfers, academic achievement between African-Americans and white students, participating in the program, virtually remained unchanged in both settings.\(^{41}\) This case allowed policy makers to see that busing students out of poor neighborhoods was a temporary solution. This quick fix did not address the impact of poverty, which resulted in the poor quality of schools within low-income areas.

**Racial Achievement Gap: Factors Affecting Minority Students**

Over the past four decades, the demographics of students attending public schools in the U.S. has transformed considerably as a result of complex circumstances. Due to the increasing diversity of the U.S., the quality of education is essential to ensure social mobility. The *National Center for Education Statistics* (NCES) has reported a considerable shift in the increase population of Latino and African-American students. This report found that, “at age 13, the proportion of Latino students more than tripled between 1978 and 2012, while the proportion of White students decreased from 80 percent to 56 percent.”\(^{42}\) Despite the increase of Latino and African-American students attending public schools, the academic performance of these ethnic groups lessens. Trends in long-term test scores reveal that Latino and African-American students are underperforming intellectually. In order to accurately assess the achievement gap, it is
necessary to have an understanding of how different ethnic groups are performing. According to the NAEP, standardized test scores between Latino and African-American students in the 4th and 8th grades, show statistically significant differences in achieving performance from their white peers. On average, test results show that Latino and African-American students are approximately two to three years behind in learning. Test scores and graduation rates help expose the underperforming reality between racial groups. “48 percent of African American and 43 percent of Latinos are performing below basic levels, compared to 17 percent of white students.” The NAEP reported that this gap exists in almost every state but the more pronounced racial achievement gap is seen within urban schools.

Urban areas have higher impoverished minority communities. Data found that, “children who live in poverty and read below grade level by 3rd grade are three times as likely to not graduate from high school as students who have never been poor.” Statistics from the Census Bureau reveal that African-American and Latinos are more likely to live in deep poverty compared to whites. “In 2012, 9.7% of non-Hispanic whites (18.9 million) were living in poverty, while over a quarter of Hispanics (13.6 million), and 27.2% of blacks (10.9 million) were living in poverty.” Figure 4 shows African-American students living in poverty have the lowest academic achievement levels. This underscores the income gap correlating with academic achievement. It confirms the inevitable results that environmental factors play on academic achievement.

Due to the lack of opportunities, poor families are unable to provide their children with additional learning resources. The stress of working multiple jobs in order to provide basic necessities often prohibits parents from being able to mentor their children through school.
While, “Federal policy through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965 has long mandated parent involvement in disadvantaged communities through parent advisory councils, barriers continue to exist, particularly for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority and working-class parents.” In order to address the lack of parental involvement in urban schools, administrators must refocus their attention on finding methods that address the language barrier, work schedules and sense of disenfranchisement that generally exist in low-income communities. Charter schools have shown to effectively incorporate unique methods of allowing low-income parents to play a more central role in their children’s education. The growing number of charter schools, within urban communities, has better addressed the needs of minority and low socioeconomic families. By tailoring schools to the specific needs of their student population, charter schools have redefined parental involvement and individualized attention.

**DEFINING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: CONCERNS WITH GROWING DISPARITIES**

In order to achieve education equality, the achievement gap between socioeconomic classes and ethnicities must be closed. Achievement gap refers to the difference in academic performance between white economically advantaged students and their African-American, Latino, Native American, Southeast Asian, and socioeconomically disadvantaged peers. The achievement gap combines both the learning gap and opportunity gap that exists between different groups of students. In general, the achievement gap refers to the unequal distribution of educational benefits and outcomes, which include the inequitable allocation of resources and opportunities. Evidence shows a strong correlation between the lack of resources and opportunities with the learning gap between these students. The learning gap denotes the inconsistencies between what students actually learn and what they are expected to learn at a particular grade level or age. While the achievement gap varies in severity from one location or
group to another, the gap is quantified based on its perpetual existence. Therefore, the gap is not simply an isolated passing event but rather a quantitative predictable trend.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) the, “achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (that is, larger than the margin of error).” While media draws attention to the “achievement gap” specifically between white and minority students, the gap accounts for more than just this difference. The achievement gap affects students across a wide range of performances; and, in order to narrow this gap, it will require a deliberate concern for all students, not just the low performers.

INTERNATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP: IS AMERICA FALLING BEHIND?

The United States has been a global leader, radically shifting the international environment through education, technology, and health advancement. While the U.S. was a pioneer in instituting a public education system, it is significantly lagging behind today. Students are underperforming academically compared to other industrialized nations. The achievement gap between advanced nations is not merely the result of low-income students’ academic performance; but rather, it affects the majority of American students regardless of race and socioeconomics.

By observing the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking, data reveals that the U.S. is behind when it comes to measuring students’ ability to problem solve and incorporate applicable real-world learning skills. PISA is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students’ reading, mathematics, and science literacy. This data is collected through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It measures
cross-curricular competencies such as problem solving. The purpose of this program is to evaluate and emphasize functional skills that students have acquired as they complete the end of compulsory schooling. The most recent PISA assessment was conducted in 2012 and the results reveal that eighteen nations scored higher, in all three subjects, than the U.S. These eighteen education systems include: “Australia, Canada, Chinese Taipei, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong-China, Ireland, Japan, Liechtenstein, Macao-China, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Republic of Korea, Shanghai-China, Singapore, and Switzerland.”

Fifty years ago, the U.S. was at the forefront of education advancement. After reviewing average mathematics, science, and reading literacy scores of American students in 2012, there is no measurably difference from average scores in previous PISA assessment years. Today, the U.S. ranks 18th out of 24 industrialized nations.

McKinsey & Company conducted a study that demonstrated the academic performance of American students continued to worsen the longer each student was in school. On standardized tests taken by 4th and 8th graders, results showed a progressive decline in tests scores. On average, American students at the age of 15 scored at the bottom of the international achievement bracket. This academic decline is occurring at a pinnacle point in the students’ lives; just as they are preparing to enter the work force or higher education, they are underperforming academically. Another concerning observation is that the U.S. has the smallest proportion of 15 year-olds performing at the highest levels of proficiency in mathematics. This goes to show that American students are globally underperforming. By not achieving high proficiency levels specifically in mathematics, American students are not prepared to enter the competitive fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These careers not only drive the global economy but also contribute to industrialization and technological
advancements that shape a nation’s future and prosperity. In addition to the lack of educational readiness, the U.S. has a far more pronounced discrepancy between high and low-income students. There are many advanced nations in which socioeconomics is not a determining factor of measuring students’ academic achievement. The inconsistency between academic achievement and socioeconomics is the lead indicator of equal opportunity and economic impact.

**ACHIEVEMENT GAP: ROOT CAUSES**

The causes of these gaps are overlapping and complex. School funding is one of the initial causes of this achievement gap. While all states do not fund education equally, generally public schools are funded by local property taxes; therefore, affluent communities with higher property taxes will have better funded schools. Higher property revenues will result in an increased amount of resources for elementary and secondary schools. States with increased poor communities coordinate with the Department of Education to offset the gap from property tax differences between low and high-income communities. Low-income neighborhoods naturally have fewer resources for their schools.

In 1973, the Supreme Court ruling on *Antonio Independent School District v. Rodrigues* raised the issue regarding the ability for states to reduce geographic inequalities for education funding. In this case, the court ruled that since education is not a constitutional right, states are only required to provide the “basic minimal skills necessary for the enjoyment of the right of speech and full participation in the political process.” The ruling of this case allowed for poor school districts to receive inferior educational compensations. As a result, inner city schools with lower property tax revenue had to work with the limited resources available to them. The lack of funding perpetuated the achievement gap and created the stereotype that inner city education
system is unsuccessful. The fallacy of this ruling is seen through the ambiguity of what it means to provide “basic minimal skills.” While the redistribution of tax money may narrow the funding gap between urban and suburban schools, it will not effectively address the discrepancy throughout urban education. This case revealed that the courts are simply concerned with providing a basic education for low-income schools. A basic education will not result in quality, high caliber students.

Family support, healthcare, and good nutrition all play a vital role in a child’s ability to effectively learn. Achieving this balanced lifestyle is extremely difficult for those in poverty due to the lack of financial resources. Institutionalized predispositions of poverty result in poor academic achievement within low-income communities. Many urban school districts lower academic expectations for their minority students and enroll them in less rigorous courses. By lowering academic and behavior standards, the stereotypes placed on poor and minority students soon become harsh realities. As expectations diminish, so does the quality of schools, teachers, and facilities. Economically disadvantaged schools and communities now receive inferior educational resources because their students underperform. Due to the lack of motivation among students and educators, policy makers are led to believe that additional resources are not required for urban schools. By not providing adequate resources, the achievement gap is perpetuated.

EVALUATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: MEASURING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Student achievement is measured according to standards created by the National Assessment Governing Board. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) continually assesses American students on what they know and can do in various subject areas. These subject areas include reading, writing, mathematics, science, economics, geography, U.S. geography, U.S.
history, technology, and engineering literacy.\textsuperscript{68} The NAEP developed a framework of assessing the skills and specific knowledge for each subject area. In addition, they determined the method of assessment through standardized tests that were created to challenge the students’ knowledge and skills through multiple choice and constructed response questions. \textsuperscript{69}

The \textit{National Report Card} was established in 1990 and provides the most current NAEP data. This report contains national trends in Latino-white gaps, and black-white gaps.\textsuperscript{70} The NAEP report gives a comprehensive picture of changes over time for all jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{71} The report also presents updated analysis of the achievement gap broken down by gender. In addition, the report recorded \textit{National School Lunch Program} (NSLP) eligibility, and the \textit{English Language Learners} (ELL) status for both grades 4th and 8th.\textsuperscript{72} In order to accurately record the achievement of various demographic groups, students are required to select their “race/ethnicity, gender, and eligibility for the National School Lunch Program.”\textsuperscript{73} Under the National Assessment of Education Progress, student achievement is not recorded according to individual students or schools; but rather, reports are grouped by demographics and by selected large urban districts.\textsuperscript{74}

Although this system provides a general idea of how students compare with one another according to demographic results, standardized tests have not provided accurate representation and have many inaccuracies. Unfortunately, many policy makers create legislation based off the generalizations of standardized test scores. In doings so, they fail to account for the biases that exist. The question that arises is whether or not these scores accurately represent students’ knowledge and growth throughout their education experience. Depending on each student’s educational experience, the manner they approach these standardized tests will vary.
Socioeconomic statues and language greatly influence student performance due to the method in which these standardized tests are written.

One of the criticisms of standardized testing is that it undermines a student’s progress by simply evaluating them at a single point in time and with a narrow spectrum. Ultimately, standardized tests cannot fully gauge the achievement accurately. Assessing the achievement gap requires more than just considerations of students’ standardized tests results. While there are many factors that go into accurately evaluating the achievement gap, oral communication is an affective method of evaluating a student’s ability to think critically. While there is no nationalized method of analyzing the verbal and cognitive abilities of students, oral evaluation through impromptu dialogs would effectively combine students’ ability to retain information and clearly articulate their thought process through grade level vocabulary. Evidence shows that a universal approach to education does not provide universal proficiency.

**HISTORY OF EDUCATION REFORM: HOW U.S. HISTORY PERPETUATED THE GAP?**

The persisting achievement gap is seen throughout history, leading all the way back to slavery in America. Education has since evolved from its initial designated use. In its formative years, the United States public education system was simply a means by which this new immigrant nation could help establish an American identity. Public schools were the vehicles by which American culture was passed on to the next generation. Today, the public education system continues to fulfill this same purpose for immigrant children. In order to bridge the achievement gap, fundamental rights to an education must move beyond American assimilation and focus on providing quality education that promotes upward social and economic mobility.
The localized nature of the public education system gave rise to racial segregation in schools. For instance, government officials and school board administrators in Southern States specifically designated black students to attend inferior schools in comparison to their white counterparts. The intentional segregation of black and white students was an active effort to ensure that African-American children would not be able to assimilate into mainstream American culture. Therefore, black children remained uneducated and lacked opportunity to be successful. Slavery in America prohibited all African-Americans from attaining an education. This lack of opportunity contributed to an uneducated working class and constricted social mobility. Politicians justified the achievement gap by suggesting that time will allow immigrants to gradually assimilate into the American culture and integrate economically. Although the Declaration of Independence states that, “All men are created equal”, slavery and discrimination reveal that there was no law supporting and enforcing this statement. These same measures that gave freedom to some, institutionalized slavery for others.

The ratification of the thirteenth amendment formally eradicated slavery in the United States by prohibiting involuntary servitude. Nonetheless, the United States’ Supreme Court continued to uphold segregation laws impacting education reform. For sixty-two years, these formal segregation laws shaped society and normalized discrimination. The history of education is filled with predispositions, segregation, and inequalities for the poor as well as minority groups. Constitutionally granted freedom was not a reality until the ratification of the fourteenth amendment in 1865. Under this amendment, former slaves finally received, “equal protection under the law.” While minority groups were still viewed as inferior to their white counterparts, the 15th amendment granted blacks the ability to participate in the election process. Despite initiatives towards racial equality, many Southern States continued to find loopholes, which
legally mandated segregation. While the majority of American society was aware of these discriminations, they chose to do nothing, which perpetuated the achievement gap.

It was not until the 1890’s that Homer Plessy first challenged segregation laws in court when he refused to give up his first class train seat to a white man.\textsuperscript{77} The Supreme Court’s ruling on \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}, gave the states a standing to enact constitutional legislation requiring people of different races to use “separate but equal” segregated facilities.\textsuperscript{78} Sadly, the ruling on this case led to the upholding of Jim Crow laws. The Plessy decision set precedence for a number of laws pertaining to racial discrimination. In 1899, in \textit{Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education}, the Court refused to issue a restriction preventing school boards from spending tax money on extra supplies for a white high school, when at the same time, this board voted to shut down a black high school due to lack of financial resources.\textsuperscript{79} Similarly, in the case \textit{Going Lum v. Rice}, the Court upheld schools’ assessment to deny students of Chinese descent from attending a white school.\textsuperscript{80} These cases perpetuated the need to address the opportunity gap. As courts continued to uphold discrimination, within educational intuitions, the achievement gap continued to grow. After the ruling on \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}, African-American were obligated to attend inferior schools that lacked resources for teachers to teach effectively and for students to excel academically.\textsuperscript{81}

Although the court continued to uphold these controversial laws, this did not stop advocates of racial equality from continually pressing for theabolishment of Jim Crow laws.\textsuperscript{82} Many of these cases questioned whether or not ethnic minorities had a right to quality education. In 1936, the case \textit{Murray v. Maryland}, Marshall challenged the racial acceptance policy of the University of Maryland School of Law.\textsuperscript{83} The university was rejecting applicants based on
race. Not only did Murray contest the discriminatory application process and acceptance policies of the university, he also stated that the admissions board was violating the principle of “separate but equal”. The “black” law schools lacked the same academic caliber and rigor seen in the University of Maryland School of Law. Murray’s argument was based on the finding that these two higher educational facilities were not providing equal educational opportunities. The court finally decided to rule in favor of Murray and required that the Maryland School of Law admit him. The ruling on Murray v. Maryland was a step forward in the long and treacherous battle for educational equality.

After winning the Murray v. Maryland case, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became members of the Legal Defense and Education Fund, which argued on behalf of the Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada. The Supreme Court affirmed that the state of Missouri must provide legal educational incentives for black and white students according to the “equal protection clause.” The NAACP became well recognized for the civil rights work it was accomplishing within higher educational institutions. After the ruling in favor of Gaines, the NACCP began to take on more cases that challenged discrimination legislation in higher education.

Among these cases was Sweatt v. Painter. Similarly to the Gaines case, Heman Marion Sweatt, an African-American civil rights activist, applied for acceptance to the University of Texas School of Law because there were no “black” law schools in the state. The judge ruled that the state of Texas had six months to build a law school for African-American students. By not allowing African-American students to have the option of attending law school, public officials were ensuring that these black students would have no voice in legal litigations. When
the case reached the Supreme Court in 1950, the justices unanimously agreed in favor of Sweatt, stating that the inequalities between the standards of the “white” and “black” law school were not equal. The NAACP revealed the vast inequalities that existed under the “separate but equal” doctrine. Through these cases, the Supreme Court became aware of the widespread education inequalities that adversely affected African-American students attaining a quality education.

By supporting cases that challenged discrimination and Jim Crow laws, the NAACP helped set a foundation for *Brown v. Board of Education* which was the first national affirmation that students had a right to an education. This historical case affirmed that segregation within public education institutions was depriving minority students with access to equal educational opportunities. In a unanimous decision, the court ruled that racial discrimination was unconstitutional. The aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* put into question whether or not education reform can lead to equality in the public system. Following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the American public naturally segregated itself once again. The formation of marginalized communities resulted in a mass migration of white families relocating to the suburban neighborhoods. An example of this middle-class migration was seen heavily in Detroit and Cleveland in the 1950’s and 1960’s. This migration led to a large poor minority population in urban districts. These historical cases prompted a nationwide discussion of education inequality. The ruling on these cases allowed the court to address the needs for educational improvements for impoverished communities. However, despite recognizing that residential segregation is a multidimensional, complex, and natural phenomenon, addressing these discrepancies is not an easy task.
In 1964, President Johnson declared a war on poverty, which included some far-reaching and noteworthy education milestones. It was the Civil Rights Act that authorized the government to sue and withhold federal funds from school districts and education institutions that continued to practice segregation. Along with the Civil Rights Act, President Johnson enacted the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*. This initiative was designed to help disadvantaged students improve their academic achievement. When Congress adopted ESEA, it was the first general aid to education institutions. ESEA served over 17 million students and was responsible for realigning primary and secondary education, while explicitly ensuring that a national curriculum is not forced on states. This act also emphasized high standards and accountability at all levels of education reform, in order to guide the nation towards equal access to education. Through federal mandates within ESEA, the Department of Education authorized the creation of professional development for teachers, quality instructional material, and resources to promote parental involvement.

Within this initiative was the launch of the *Early Head Start (EHS)* program that sought to help low income families create a healthy and balanced lifestyle. This program was designed to “link families with needed services—medical, mental health, nutrition, and education.” In addition, EHS provided a place for children to experience consistent, nurturing relationships and stable, ongoing routines through afterschool programs. This program addressed the complex issue surrounding a child’s ability to learn. It acknowledged that cognitive skills required more than just good classroom instruction, but children need a balanced healthy lifestyle as well. Along with promoting healthy lifestyles, the federal government funded Upward Bound, a program designed to help students from low-income families pursue higher education. This
program stressed the importance of reading and writing along with extracurricular activities in order to help low-income students have a better chance of attending college.

By placing a higher degree of emphasis on leveling the playing field for all students, education reform showed a gradual improvement, but did not fully address the issue at hand. As a result, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was a reauthorization of the ESEA. NCLB aimed to explicitly create goals and a timeline intended to aid all students in reaching predefined proficiency levels.  

The purpose of authorizing NCLB was a result of persisting problems seen in ESEA. NCLB was a commitment, “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” NCLB sought to establish accountability within schools based on annual student assessments from standardized tests. NCLB dramatically expanded the federal government’s influence over public schools by compelling states to conduct standard assessments to determine if schools were achieving “adequate yearly progress.” Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a series of annual academic performance goals established for each school. While each state was able to create their own standards, they were required to comply with federal expectations recorded by AYP. Each state would have to submit their education standards to be reviewed by the Department of Education.

Despite these efforts, NCLB has not demonstrated the desired results of narrowing the achievement gap. Not only did NCLB perpetuate the federal government’s inability to provide an accurate account for school finances, it used student performances on standardized tests to dictate funding. Many policy analysts believe that the standards for measuring success
constructed by NCLB are ineffective. Because funding was directly tied to students’ performance, teachers began spending more time teaching to the demands of the tests rather than equipping students with a well-rounded education. After this standardized method of recording students’ progress was created, schools placed an intensified focus on mathematics and reading proficiency and devoted far less time to other subjects such as art, social science, physical education, and science. This led to a widespread fear that if students did not perform at a certain level, teachers will be terminated. In addition, the academic standards dictated by the state did not account for the varying ability levels of students.

Within the last eight years, President Obama has placed a focus on education reform, through the passage of Raise to the Top (RTTT). RTTT was created in order to restructure the ESEA, better known in its current form as NCLB. Although the ESEA was signed into law in 1965, it has undergone a number of re-authorizations. Through the implementation of RTTT, President Obama aims to distance education reform from President George W. Bush’s proposal, within NCLB. Rather than focusing heavily on standardized testing and admonishing struggling schools that fail to meet the proposed benchmarks, through RTTT President Obama aims to place a higher emphasis on rewarding schools that improve student performance. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “RTTT is a $4.35 billion dollar program.” The majority of the funds allocated by RTTT are dedicated to statewide reform. In addition, these funds go towards allowing states to improve the quality of assessments nationwide. In order to address education inequalities, RTTT aims to, “development rigorous standards, better assessments methods, improved data systems to provide schools with information about student progress, support for teachers and school leaders to become more effective and place an increased
emphasis and resources for the rigorous interventions needed to turn around the lowest-performing schools.”

Many in the education community are highly skeptical of RTTT simply because it is extremely similar to NCLB, which has proven to be an ineffective method of addressing the achievement gap. By placing an emphasis on standardized testing and grade-level achievement, these initiatives are not recognizing the human element of education inequality. The academic achievement gap is not solely academically driven. While President Obama claims that his plan will be more flexible, it will not magically close the achievement gap. By looking at court cases, one can see that even after education reform, there are still discrepancies within the education system.

**ELIEZER WILLIAMS VS. STATE OF CALIFORNIA: IS REFORM WORKING?**

The class action lawsuit, *Eliezer Williams vs. State of California*, highlighted the manner by which the state of California was complying with its constitutional obligation to safeguard access to basic educational tools for all children. Under the state constitution, California guarantees equal education for all, including predominantly low-income students and students of color. In this case, Williams presented compelling evidence that revealed the failure of the defendants to provide students across the state with basic educational opportunities such as instructional materials, competent teachers, and adequate facilities. The plaintiffs supported their argument by revealing the lack of educational resources such as basic textbooks for all students; without textbooks, it is impossible for the students to do homework and build their skills. Without qualified teachers, students are unable access basic education; without adequate school facilities, the future of students will be in danger. While the plaintiff brought
evidence against San Francisco School District, research disclosed these terrible school conditions were seen in many California public schools, which targeted predominantly low-income communities. In order to address these inequalities, the State of California had to recognize that they were responsible for these discrepancies.

In August 2004, the details of the settlement sought to provide adequate reading, learning materials, and safe clean school facilities for struggling schools. In addition, the state began to take steps towards ensuring that qualified teachers were in the classroom and students had access to educational resources needed to be successful in school. This settlement required that schools have more authority regarding management and finances. By allocating the distribution of school funds to a local level, schools will be able to maximize their resources in order to enhance the specific needs of their students. The settlement provided approximately one billion dollars in additional funding to low-income schools. In order to implement and enforce this settlement, five supplementary statutes were created, SB 550, AB2727, AB1550, AB 3001, SB6. These bills affect many public schools in the state of California. With regards to instructional materials and teacher qualifications, the school districts were required to take a more active role in training and developing teachers’ skills and complying with the federal guidelines laid out in NCLB.

By observing the ever-growing education inequality within public schools, it is clear that the requirements under the NCLB did not sufficiently address the settlement’s proposed solutions. Finally, the state would take a more active approach in improving districts where students consistently fail to meet academic growth. While the proposed settlement of Eliezer Williams v. State of California resulted in beneficial education reform, many children particular
from low-income minority backgrounds are still left without access to adequate education. The failure to address the issue of education inequality is resulting in a continual growth in the academic achievement gap. This gap is leaving the most disadvantaged children in our nation without the skills needed to excel in the twenty-first century. Evidence reveals that the shortcomings, in the academic performance among disadvantaged children, would in turn create long-term economic and social complications that have national and global impact. In an economy that demands critical thinking skills, there is an immediate necessity to narrow the academic achievement gap.

**BRIDGING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: POLICY PROPOSALS**

In order to promote social mobility, policy makers must re-examine the wide range of economic and social implications caused by the achievement gap. In this era of low social mobility and widespread inequalities, access to quality education is the only thing that gives low-income students the possibility of leaving a lifestyle of poverty. Evidence shows that a college degree, not only boosts an individual’s income, but it drastically affects the future of the low-income families. Students from low-income communities, who graduate from college, often help support their aging parents and motivate their siblings to seek high education in addition to giving back to their community. “Without a college degree, a child born to a family in the lowest quintile has a forty-five percent chance of remaining in that quintile as an adult and only a five percent chance of moving into the highest quintile.” Earning an education is the key to social mobility.
In order to promote social mobility and enable low-income and middle class students to finish college, it is my recommendation that public schools place a higher emphasis on college preparation. By formulating methods, which provide alternative approaches to public education opportunities such as charter schools, policy makers can have a supportive role in providing students with individualized attention. Thus, making it easier for schools to provide their students with extra curricular opportunities, SAT preparation sessions, and college counseling.\textsuperscript{117} Together, education administrators and policy makers can transform and give hope to these struggling communities. An example that can provide an outline for college preparation in urban settings is evident in the work of the Knowledge is Power Program Foundation (KIPP). KIPP schools have been innovative in creating “a respectful, influential, and national network of public charter schools that are successful in helping students from educationally underserved communities develop the knowledge, skills, character, and habits needed to succeed in college and in the competitive world beyond.”\textsuperscript{118}

The KIPP foundation has been redefining urban education. KIPP schools are not alone in this effort. Recently, urban communities have seen an increased number of charter schools that strive to narrow the achievement gap. The impacts of charter schools have wide-ranging results across the nation. The National Center for Education Evaluation has found evidence that show that charter schools better serve low-income and low achieving students. For example, math test scores show significant positive improvement among student attending urban charter schools. In contrast, charter schools that serve more advantaged students, those with higher income and prior achievements, have significantly negative effects on math test scores.”\textsuperscript{119} The variations in
academic performance of students attending charter schools reveal that addressing education issues requires an individual approach.

Education reform should incorporate initiatives that protect the creation of charter school in urban areas. Charter schools can serve the local population while upholding academic standards and unique personalized education experience for students. Often, charter schools in urban areas are able to address various issues more effectively. Charter schools in low-income communities tend to have high parental involvement and increased ability to encourage the students through the college process. While some argue that urban schools should place a higher emphasis on vocation rather than college preparatory, this is simply diminishing students’ ability to pursue careers that require college degrees. Ultimately, this is placing a glass ceiling over children from low-income communities. One of the misconceptions of vocational based education and trade schools steams from the notion that jobs are guaranteed. “Although trade school graduates learn practical skills, students are on their own when it comes time to find a job.”

ACCOUNTABILITY & SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

Without accountability, college and career readiness will simply remain a lofty aspiration. Ensuring accountability will require school systems to have clear expectations of everyone in order to foster high achievement for all students. By reinforcing regular reports and continual feedback, policy makers can ensure everyone is meeting expectations, and that the community is working to create more meaningful educational experience for all students. Accountability from federal policymakers will require that they work together to fix what NCLB got wrong. Policy makers must continue to reclaim a focus on improving achievement and closing gaps for all groups of students. An example of this accountability can be seen in the
"Getting It Right: Crafting Federal Accountability for Higher Student Performance and a Stronger America."

In this act, the Education Trust places higher levels of federal accountability on education reform. Education policies must clearly state that schools cannot be prosperous unless they successfully educate all students regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or background. Education reform must emphasize disapproval for allowing students to remain in stagnant schools that are not showing improvement.

**FUNDING FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Despite the financial investment in education, there has not been a significant improvement in the overall student achievement. Throwing money at the education system is not benefiting students nor is it addressing the achievement gap. While it is true that underprivileged schools need more help in order to provide resources to low-income and minority students, I believe that charter schools can more effectively address the academic achievement gap in urban communities. By reallocating funds to charter schools, educators can better maximize the use of the resources to more effectively address the needs of students.

Unfortunately, in many states, school districts that serve the highest concentration of low-income and minority students, receive less in state and local funding per pupil than districts serving affluent and white students. "Nationally, the districts that serve the largest concentration of ethnic students receive an average of $1,100 less per student in state and local funds than the districts that do not serve predominately minority students." Despondently, in some states the allocation of federal funds may not actually get to impoverished schools within the district because of variances in teachers pay. Often, the highest paid teachers are not teaching in the schools where they are most needed. Closing these funding gaps is a critical component
of increasing the national ideal of providing all children with equal opportunity to receive a
quality education.

CONCLUSION

Over fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged Americans to take a radical
stand towards a dream of equality. But as we know, equality is not simply a transformation of
social structures, but it demands a change of heart and mind from the entire society. While this
dream of equality has yet to be realized; today, it is not that far from reach. I believe that one day
all children in the United States will have access to quality education. In order to see this dream
through, I will take active steps towards fighting education inequality, beginning in the
classroom. It is my aspiration to help children dream beyond all perceived limits, to help
them rise to every challenge, and do the impossible. As a future educator and a concerned
citizen, I will do my part to bridge the achievement gap and provide students with the
opportunity to receive quality education. So what will you do?
Figure 1

**Enrichment Expenditures on Children**

High-income families spend about seven times more on their children than low-income families.

Source: Duncan and Munnell (2011).

Note: For a full description of enrichment expenditures, see the technical appendix.

Figure 2

**The Relationship between Income Inequality and Social Mobility**

Around the world, high income inequality is associated with low social mobility.

Source: Corak (2013); World Bank (2013).

Note: Reproduction of figure 2 from Corak (2013). Data points for Italy and the United Kingdom overlap. The y-axis shows Gini coefficients as reported by the World Bank. The x-axis is a measure of social mobility and is equal to 1 minus the intergenerational earnings elasticity for each country.
**Figure 3**

**Probability of Children's Income Level, Given Parents' Income Level**

Children born into low-income families are likely to remain at the low end of the income distribution as adults.

![Bar chart showing percentage of adult children at each income level](chart1)

- **Parents' income level:** Less than $15,600, $23,400 to $36,206, Greater than $39,800
- **Children's adult income:** less than $26,900, greater than $81,700


Note: Income estimates are in constant 2008 dollars and are adjusted for inflation using CPI-U-RS. Income categories along the x-axis correspond to the lowest, middle, and highest income quintiles in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) as of 1983. Income categories in the legend correspond to the lowest and highest quintiles in the PSID as of 2008.

**Figure 4**

**Average Difference in Reading Standardized Test Scores between 90th and 10th Income Percentile Families**

The achievement gap between high- and low-income students is at an all-time high.

![Line graph showing average difference in test scores](chart2)

- **Since 1970, the achievement gap has increased by almost 40%**

Source: Reardon (2011).

Note: The figure shows best-fit estimates from the twelve available nationally representative studies that include family income and standardized test scores.
**Figure 5**

**Income Quintile of Adults Born into Lowest-Quintile Families, by College Attainment**

Without a college degree, a child born into a poor family has little chance of breaking into the upper end of the income distribution.


Note: Calculations are based on the PSID, which compares children's adult income at roughly age forty with that of their parents at about the same age.


