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Focus: *Closing the student achievement gap*

This edition of the WSSDA Research Blast covers the student achievement gap. The overview below looks at several recent findings by universities, research centers, and government commissions. Five articles that address the student achievement gap follow the summary. These cover the issue in Washington State, nationally, and in light of international student testing.

The gap in student achievement

Serious efforts to address gaps in student achievement have been underway in the United States for over 30 years. Many gains have been made during this time, and student achievement as a whole is on the rise for most groups of students. But according to Stanford sociologist Sean Reardon and others, the relative gap between the most advantaged students and the most disadvantaged students is also increasing. Gaps in achievement increasingly reflect inequality of resources and opportunity. Although the idea of systemic inequality runs counter to popular American ideals, it is still a distinctly American phenomenon.

One of the most common ways to gauge the knowledge and skills of U.S. students has been to compare the test results of 15-year-olds and 8th-graders with those in other developed nations. These tests, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), have become important standards for making such comparisons. After results from the 2009 PISA were released, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said that they “show that American students are poorly prepared to compete in today’s knowledge economy. ... Americans need to wake up to this educational reality—instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for economic leadership.”

However, a study by the Economic Policy Institute suggests that U.S. students may be doing better than recent test results suggest. Because economic inequality is so pervasive in the U.S., students here compare much better when adjustments are made for social class. According to the EPI study, “with these adjustments, U.S. scores would rank higher among OECD countries than commonly reported in reading—sixth best instead of 14th—and in mathematics—13th best instead of 25th.”

While relative U.S. test performance may be better internationally than previously thought, closing the gap will remain a challenging issue for decades to come. But the news isn't all bad. For one, addressing the gap is gaining more traction at the federal level. The Equity and Excellence Commission, a federal advisory committee chartered by Congress, recently published a national strategy. Likewise, the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) released a state-specific set of recommendations for closing Washington's opportunity gap.

Overall, the following research suggests that reducing poverty is just as important as the evaluation of educators.

In the spirit of this discussion, we have gathered five recent pieces of research on the U.S. student achievement gap.

- The first item is "No Rich Child Left Behind," a New York Times Opinion piece written by Stanford professor of education and sociology Sean Reardon. The commentary discusses results from several recent studies and outlines how the gap in student achievement is growing between our nation's most and least-advantaged students.
- The second piece of research is "Closing Opportunity Gaps in Washington's Public Education System," an annual report from the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee. The 2013 report outlines six approaches to closing Washington's student achievement gap.
- The third research brief is "Effective and Promising Practices for Closing Achievement Gaps." This multi-state review offers options for districts and schools when taking steps to address the achievement gaps between different groups of students.
- The fourth item is a 2013 report by the Equity and Excellence Commission. Assembled for U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the report provides a framework of interrelated recommendations to increase education equity and excellence.
- The fifth article, "What do International Tests Really Show about U.S. Student Performance?" was written as a joint partnership between the Stanford Graduate School of Education and the Economic Policy Institute. The article's authors review the most recently released international testing results. They suggest the apparently low achievement ranking of U.S. students among similar nations is oversimplified and misleading.

No rich child left behind

The New York Times Opionator, By Sean F. Reardon

Stanford education and sociology professor Sean Reardon takes a look at how the children of the rich are performing better in school, on average, than children from middle-class or poor families. While past efforts to raise U.S. student achievement have largely focused on the gap between poor and middle class students, Reardon discusses how the rich now outperform the middle class by as much as the middle class outperforms the poor.

Reardon argues that the gap in academic achievement is not caused by a decline in the nation's schools, sinking test scores of poor students, or widening racial achievement levels. Instead, he suggests that "the academic gap is widening because rich students are increasingly entering kindergarten much better prepared to succeed in school than middle-class students," and that "this difference in preparation persists through elementary and high school."

To read more about Reardon's take on the causes and solutions to this problem, check out the whole story at:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/no-rich-child-left-behind/>

Closing the opportunity gaps in Washington's Public Education System

Washington State Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee

Earlier this year the EOGOAC released its annual report. The committee identified six areas to address the opportunity gap in Washington's public education system. Each area has a brief background summary, followed by the committee's detailed recommendations. The six areas include:

1. Decrease the disproportionate representation of students of color in disciplinary actions in schools.
2. Enhance the cultural competence of current and future educators.
3. Provide English language learner and second language acquisition endorsement for all educators
4. Create new English language learner accountability benchmarks.
5. Provide tools for deeper data analysis and disaggregation of student demographic data to inform instructional strategies to close the opportunity gap.
6. Invest in the recruitment and retention of educators of color.

http://www.capaa.wa.gov/documents/EOGOAC_Final_Report2013.pdf

Effective and promising practices for closing achievement gaps

Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center at Edvantia

This issue brief offers examples of specific efforts to close achievement gaps from Kentucky, Louisiana, Illinois, and Washington. The second half of the brief looks more deeply at practices for ELL students, students with disabilities, students of different racial minorities, and economically disadvantaged students.

http://sites.edvantia.org/pdta/pdf/tdoe_effective_practices_achievement_gaps080812.pdf

For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education and Equity Excellence

The Equity and Excellence Commission

In its February 27, 2013 edition, *Education Week* covered a report by the Equity and Excellence Commission. The report provides an up-to-date overview of the U.S. student achievement gap, breaking down the issues and suggesting solutions at the federal, state and local levels. According to the *Education Week* article by Michele McNeil, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the report “thoughtful, provocative, challenging,” and said that “this report compels us to act.”

The report concludes that, “facing enormous demographic change and international competition, the urgent task is to remake our education system to meet the demands of justice and the tests of competition.” The commission provides a five-part framework of recommendations to guide policymaking that includes:

- Equitable School Finance
- Teachers, Principals and Curricula
- Early Childhood Education
- Mitigating Poverty’s Effects; and
- Accountability and Governance

A link to the summary article by Michele McNeil is provided below, along with the official report, “For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence.”

http://www.foreachandeverychild.org/The_Reading_Room.html

Partial public availability of summary article at Education Week –

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/27/22equity.h32.html>

What do International Tests Really Show about U.S. Student Performance?

By Martin Carnoy, Stanford Graduate School of Education and EPI, and Richard Rothstein, EPI

Policy makers and school reformers in the U.S. frequently denounce the quality of the nation’s education system because of the poor performance of U.S. students on international tests. According to authors Martin Carnoy and Richard Rothstein, these rash generalizations about “failings” in our education system are far too glib. Their report compares international student test score data from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The report’s authors suggest that:

- U.S. performance on international tests improves considerably when adjusted for U.S. social class composition and for disadvantaged students in particular.
- Although disadvantaged children in countries like Finland still score considerably higher than disadvantaged students in the U.S., the scores of disadvantaged students in the U.S. have been rising, while those in Finland have been declining.
- The reading and mathematics achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the U.S. is smaller than the gap in three similar post-industrial countries that were used in the study (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom).

An affiliate of PISA wrote a response to this report. Following the main report below, there is a link to a short counter-response written by Carnoy and Rothstein that addresses the PISA criticism, and outlines the conclusions of their research more clearly.

<http://www.epi.org/publication/us-student-performance-testing/>

Response to report comments and critique from OECD/PISA –

<http://www.epi.org/files/2013/EPI-Carnoy-Rothstein-Resp-to-Schleicher.pdf>

This edition of the WSSDA Research Blast covers Dropout Rates. Below is a summary of what several school districts around the state have done to successfully raise graduation rates, followed by five articles dealing with dropout and graduation rates both in Washington, and nationally.