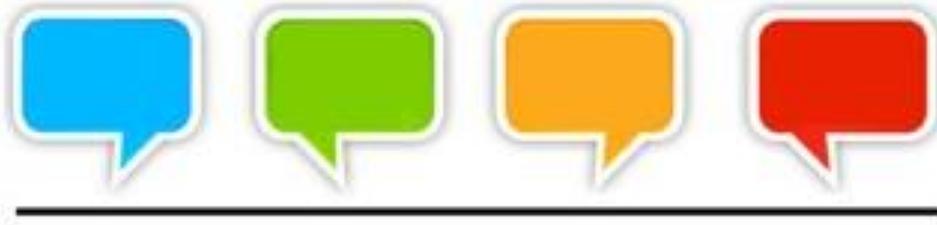


A Colorado Conversation on the Achievement Gap and Education Reform



When the results of Colorado's 2012 assessment of student achievement were announced, Department of Education Official Jo O'Brien admitted that the state still has "persistent and unacceptable" double-digit performance gaps when the scores of African American and Latino students are compared to white students. In a 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress math test, Colorado students did well compared with students in other states, but African American students scored 22 points lower than white students, Latino students scored 30 points lower than white students, and students receiving free and reduced lunch were 27 points behind students who did not participate in the free lunch program.

The latter gap is troubling in light of the rising number of children living in poverty in Colorado. The number of children living in poverty increased 360% between 2000 and 2012. The number of students qualifying for school lunches has jumped 41% since 2010. In many districts that figure is over 50%, with the range reaching from 6% (Aspen) to 89% (Centennial). Poverty is entwined with the issue of race/ethnicity: 39% of African-American children and 31% of Latino children live in poverty, compared to 9% for white and Asian students. The differences between students who are poor and those with more family resources emerge as early as 18 months; by age 3, children whose parents graduated from college have vocabularies two to three times larger than children whose parents did not finish high school.

The level of education among adults—another factor affecting school performance—also varies greatly from district to district; in Adams 14, for example, 40% of adults have not graduated from high school while in Douglas County, more than half of adults have college degrees. And all of this is occurring in a state that ranks high among states in terms of its population's wealth and education.

Another aspect of the problem of inequity in education is the civic opportunity gap. This phrase refers to the fact, documented by educational researchers, that minority students, students who are in tracks identified as non-college-bound, and students in schools with a high number of students living in poverty have fewer opportunities to participate in the engaging civic learning that promotes voting and other forms of civic engagement. Because social studies and civic education are not high priorities in most education reform movements, this gap tends to be ignored. Yet it is in fact critically important for the functioning of our democracy, particularly when one considers that poor people, people of color, and less educated people are already underrepresented in the political arena.

What can be done to address the achievement and civic opportunity gaps? Much of the recent debate about school reform has centered on three practices that have dominated the landscape of school reform for two decades: (1) providing school choice through charter schools, (2) developing measures of teacher effectiveness, particularly measures that use student achievement data, and (3) using high-stakes testing as the basis for a variety of educational decisions. These reforms have been discussed in political campaigns, promoted in federal policy in both the Bush and Obama administrations, supported by funding from prominent foundations, and hotly contested in negotiations between teachers and school districts.

But these are not the only possible responses. Some people argue that a comprehensive and coordinated anti-poverty campaign is necessary to make a difference for poor children. Others suggest that focus should be placed on early childhood and parent education. Still others call for less emphasis on standardized testing and more attention to non-cognitive learning—developing the traits, like grit and perseverance, which lead to success in life.

Education Reform in Colorado

Charter Schools: *CDE data indicate that there were 178 charter schools in Colorado in 2011, with more opening in fall 2012. About 80,000 students, or 10% of the public school population, attend charter schools. Student achievement in Colorado charter schools varies. One advantage of charter schools is their smaller size. Independence gives charters greater flexibility in trying specialized or innovative programs. Critics point out that independence also brings potential problems, such as financial mismanagement and inadequate oversight. Concerns about greater segregation in charter schools have also arisen.*

Measuring Teacher Effectiveness: *In 2010, the legislature passed SB 10-191. This law requires development of a new system for evaluating teacher's performance, tying tenure to, among other factors, student performance. Advocates for this approach point to research that demonstrates that teacher quality is the single most important school-based factor in determining how well students learn. Others say that the emphasis on teacher effectiveness ignores the fact that 60 percent of the variance in student test scores is related to out-of-school factors.*

High-Stakes Testing: *In 2012 and for the next two years, the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program is being used, as districts implement the new state standards developed as a result of legislation passed in 2008. In 2015, a new, expanded assessment system will be rolled out. Advocates for high stakes testing argue that it has highlighted the problem of underserved students. They also argue that high stakes testing will ensure that high school graduates will be able to succeed in higher education or the workplace. Opponents argue that it has narrowed the curriculum and drained it of creativity. They also note that punishing schools whose students do poorly is counterproductive and unfair.*

Two Views on Education Reform

"Poverty is not destiny. Simply, I believe all children can learn. I believe low-income children of color can learn when they have great teachers who believe in them and treat them with the same passion, enthusiasm and intellectual rigor that they would treat their own children. And I believe in the skill and will of teachers, provided they are given the opportunity to teach, learn and lead as true professionals."

— Irwin Scott, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

". . . this idea that good teachers can eliminate the achievement gap, and bad teachers are to blame from much of it—it is just wrong. . . . most research . . . shows that the teacher is only responsible for about 20% of the variance in student performance. The lion's share goes to characteristics the students bring with them—their family's educational background level, neighborhood conditions, health care, and all sorts of issues that are closely related to poverty. . . . If the key difference in student outcomes is due to factors related to poverty and racial and economic isolation, then perhaps we would get better results by focusing there."

—Anthony Cody, former educator in Oakland, CA, and current blogger for *Education Week*

"What we are allowing to happen in this day and age, we are still allowing the color of a child's skin and the Zip code they live in to dictate their educational outcome, and therefore their life outcome. . . . We are robbing them every single day of their futures. And everybody in this country should be infuriated by that."

—Michelle Rhee, Students First

"I do argue against the intense national focus on standardized tests, which measure a fairly narrow range of cognitive skills . . . I . . . suggest that doing a better job of developing non-cognitive skills in students could be a particularly fruitful way to increase college-graduation rates."

—Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed*



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