

## The Historical Context for Understanding the Test Score Gap

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This essay focuses on the “achievement gap” over time and in the context of larger patterns of American academic achievement in national and international arenas. This particular focus on African American academic progress over time (and the achievement patterns of White, Black and Latino students from 1970 to the present) stands in marked contrast to the traditional practice of merely comparing the educational achievement of Black students to the gains of students from the White majority. Whereas Black-White or minority-majority comparisons tell us how far we need to go to achieve parity, a comprehensive understanding of the academic progress of African American students from one generation to the next provides perspective on how Black students have dealt with various achievement gaps over time, and by extension their capacity to overcome contemporary educational and racial barriers. In order for contemporary families and students of color to appreciate and have confidence in their cultural and intellectual competence, it is important for them to understand that the current “test score gap” is neither the first nor last achievement gap standing between them and full equality. Furthermore, the one-sided emphasis on Black-White differences ignore the important and sustained victories and strengths of minority school children and thereby omit or downplay the possibilities for change inherent in minority families and communities. Finally, racialized invidious comparisons also ignore the fundamental inequalities that have and continue to produce the very racial achievement gap that is at the forefront of today’s educators’ and policymakers’ agenda. Indeed, much of the current debate over the “test score gap” places the blame for that gap on attitudes and cultural norms inherent in minority families and communities. Therefore, at a time when simplicities about culture, race and achievement can do so much damage, history provides a sobering context for viewing the “test score gap” with a sense of reduced hysteria and competition.

Before the contemporary debate over the “test score gap” there were debates about the causes and remedies of the “Literacy Gap,” the “Elementary School Attendance Gap,” and the High School Completion Gap.” Beyond the current crisis lies debates over the “College Graduation Gap,” the Graduate and Professional Degrees Gap,” and ultimately the “Income Gap.” We thus begin with the Black-White literacy gap of the Early National era. The Black-White achievement gap began over two hundred years ago and during the better part of the past two centuries the current achievement gap is much closer and less daunting than previous gaps. In vital respects, the history of African American student achievement in America has been like a “110 Meters Hurdles” race, as

soon as you cross one hurdle its time to gear up for the next one that is just as demanding and even more important for reaching the finish line. The history of African American education in the South and the nation is a remarkable record of overcoming one achievement gap after another, each succeeding generation building on the strengths and possibilities created by the previous generation.

### The Literacy Gap

The first achievement gap that African American had to overcome was the “Literacy Gap.” As early as 1800 virtually all Whites in America were literate. Young White women, in a general population in which the median age was about 16, were just as literate in 1800 as White men. Both were approximately 90% literate. In contrast to the high rates of literacy among White Americans, African Americans were highly illiterate. Indeed, the African American illiteracy rate of approximately 90% in 1800 was the exact opposite of the White literacy rate of 90%. Although slavery and racial oppression were responsible for the astronomical gap in the Black-White literacy rate in 1800, it was nonetheless a major achievement gap that African Americans would struggle to overcome within and beyond slavery. Perhaps the first educational reform movement in the region, at least the first to threaten the established social order, began formally with the creation of the first known school for African Americans established at Goose Creek Parish in Charleston, South Carolina in 1695. This small beginning of efforts to make slaves literate expanded during the middle of the eighteenth century. During the 1740s, believing literacy to be a prerequisite for baptism, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel trained slaves in Christian principles and literacy in Virginia, Maryland and South Carolina, colonies that contained about 90% of slaves in British America during the mid-eighteenth century. A school for slaves was opened in South Carolina in 1743 and by 1747 had graduated 40 scholars. By 1755 seventy African American children were enrolled in the South Carolina school. Literate slaves were, to be sure, a small minority of the whole. Slaves, as well as free persons of color who could read and write numbered in the tens or hundreds while the slave populations of Virginia, Maryland and South Carolina numbered in the tens of thousands. Still, historians of slave literacy estimate that by the beginning of the nineteenth century approximately 10 percent of slaves acquired the ability to read and write on a basic level. Even under the severe constraints of slavery Blacks struggled to acquire literacy at a rate that threatened the dominant White society (Anderson 1995).

The South’s great reaction to the spread of literacy during the Early National and Ante-bellum periods cannot be understood apart from efforts by slaves and free persons of color to seize a good deal more education than they were offered under slavery. Dominant White reaction to the spread of literacy among slaves and free persons of color began in the eighteenth century. As early as 1740, South Carolina, responding to literacy movements among free persons of color and slaves that dated back to the late 17th century, enacted a law prohibiting any person from teaching or causing a slave to be taught to read or write. In 1770 the Georgia Colony enacted legislation forbidding the teaching of slaves to read as well as to write. The laws against teaching slaves to read and write grew out of a variety of fears and concerns, the simplest of which concerned the use of literacy as a means to freedom (i.e. the forging of passes by potential runaways). The argument against African American literacy expressed with the greatest

degree of agitation concerned the dangers of incendiary literature. Even in colonial times powerful opposition to slave literacy arose among slaveholders in an attempt to prevent the forging of passes but also to head off insurrection or at least to weaken any prospective insurrectionary leadership (Cornelius 1991).

Restrictions against African American literacy grew worse over time. Local ordinances supplemented state laws; in some places it became a crime merely to sell writing materials to slaves. Following reactions to the slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in 1822, the Nat Turner revolt in 1830 completed the reactionary course throughout the Lower South and even influenced the Upper South as well. Georgia in 1829 provided fines, whipping, or imprisonment for anyone teaching slaves to read and write. Louisiana and North Carolina followed with anti-literacy laws in 1830, stating that literacy tended to excite dissatisfaction and produce insurrectionary attitudes in the minds of slaves. In its 1830-31 legislative session, Virginia provided penalties for teaching slaves to read or write. Alabama's harsh legislation grew directly out of the post-insurrectionary panic of 1831-1832. South Carolina, revising its 1740 ban on slave literacy, passed in 1834 the most sweeping law against teaching slaves and free persons of color to read or write. In Arkansas and Tennessee the legislatures resisted the exponents of legal repression, but public opinion against African American literacy had so hardened that the actual opportunities for slaves and free persons of color to learn decreased as much in Arkansas and Tennessee as in states where illiteracy was legally mandated. Kentucky also refused to enact an anti-literacy law, but Missouri, admitted to the union in 1821, caught up with other southern states by enacting a law against slave literacy in the late 1840s (Cornelius 1991).

The passage of restrictive laws against learning to read or write constituted the first massive resistance to learning and self-improvement in slave and free Black communities and resulted in a decline of literacy rates among African Americans during the Ante-bellum era. Carter G. Woodson estimated that Black literacy rates declined by half during the period 1830-1860, but more recent studies, relying on evidence from the Federal Writers Project slave narratives, indicate that more slaves learned to read after 1825 than Woodson could have known about. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that the slaveholders' reaction against the spread of literacy among African Americans not only put the brakes on the literacy campaign but also caused a significant decline in the rate of literacy among African American adults and children. Consequently, African Americans emerged from slavery with an illiteracy rate of approximately 90 percent (Cornelius 1991).

Although the powerful opposition of slaveholders to slave literacy succeeded in keeping the vast majority of African Americans illiterate, it did not prevent the forging of a literate leadership that was extremely important to the campaign for universal public education in the immediate post-emancipation period. Many African American leaders in education, government, ministry, and community during the Reconstruction era were men and women who first became literate under slavery. Their ideas about the value and purpose of literacy and formal schooling took shape during the slave experience and reflected a consciousness of literacy as a means of resistance as well as an understanding of anti-literacy movements as mechanisms of oppression. They tended to view literacy and formal education as means to liberation and freedom and their frames of reference

sparked their drive to achieve universal schooling in the post-Civil War South (Anderson 1988).

The second great educational reform movement by African Americans in the South was the ex-slave led campaign to establish state-supported public education as a right of citizenship in each Southern state. Indeed, the ex-slaves most fundamental challenge to traditional southern conceptions of educational opportunity manifested itself in post-war campaigns for state supported public education. African American leaders and politicians joined with Republicans and southern whites (known as scalawags) in southern constitutional conventions to legalize public education in the constitutions of the former Confederate states. By 1870, every southern state had specific provisions in its constitution to assure a public school system financed by a state fund. Even when White southerners regained control of state governments, they kept the central features of educational governance and finance created by the African American-Republican party-Scalawag coalition. In vital respects, the former slaves led a campaign to revolutionize the South's position regarding the right of ordinary citizens to "free" (tax-supported) universal public education (Anderson 1995).

A convergence of circumstances made the postwar educational reform movement possible, but chief among them was the acquisition of citizenship and the right to vote under the 1866 Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. As long as African-Americans participated as voters and office holders in southern state and local governments their social and educational interests could not be easily ignored. In 1870, African Americans constituted the majority of total populations in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. They were more than 40% of the state populations in Alabama (48%), Florida (49%), Georgia (46%) and Virginia (42%). Backed by the reality and even greater potential of a powerful voting block in southern politics, educational opportunities for Black children fared well from the moment of enfranchisement during Reconstruction to the era of disenfranchisement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The African American sociologist and historian, Horace Mann Bond, was among the first scholars to document the dramatic shift in Black public education from relatively equality during the era of political empowerment to gross inequality following the disenfranchisement campaigns of the late nineteenth century. For example, as late as 1890 African American children, who constituted 44% of the total school-age population in Alabama, received 44% of the school money appropriated in the entire state. Similarly, in North Carolina the per capita expenditure for Black children in 1890 was equal to that for white children in the state. In Alabama and Mississippi, African American children enjoyed relatively equal benefits from the school funds from the Reconstruction era until 1890 (Anderson 1995).

The relative equality achieved primarily through the combination of grassroots school campaigns and the use of newly acquired political power to accrue educational benefits, paid handsome dividends between 1870 and 1900. It enabled African Americans in the South to narrow the literacy gap, the largest achievement gap in their history. By 1900 slightly more than half of southern Blacks claimed to be literate, a remarkable achievement in light of conditions a generation earlier when the ex-slave population was more than 90% illiterate. The post-bellum decline in rates of illiteracy was larger among Blacks than Whites. Even this portrayal does not tell the full story of the significant and rapid decline of illiteracy among African Americans in the South. The

overall rate remained high because older African Americans (virtually all of whom had been enslaved at birth) were highly illiterate during the immediate post-bellum period and remained high as these cohorts aged. The literacy rate in 1900 for Black males aged 10 to 14 was 64 percent and for Black females aged 10 to 14 the rate was 71 percent. Hence, whereas the high rates of illiteracy imposed by slavery continued to remain so among adults (in 1900, 64 percent of Black men aged 45 to 54 were illiterate), African American children were becoming literate at a very fast pace. The spread of literacy among Black southerners was a consequence of the acquisition of literacy by the young through school attendance. Because high rates of adult Black illiteracy persisted into the twentieth century, it is apparent that the majority of African American children did not learn to read and write at home. Rather, illiteracy rates declined rapidly among the young as school attendance rates rose over time. In 1900, about 65 percent of African American children aged 10-14 attended schools (Anderson 1988).

### The Elementary School Attendance Gap

The “Literacy Gap” might have declined faster if public schools were available to all Black children. However, as Whites regained control of southern state and local governments in the late nineteenth century they halted the spread of public schools among Black children. Indeed, the post-emancipation educational reform movement, extending from 1863 to 1890, bred a counter reform movement that produced the greatest racial inequalities in education in southern history. During the first half of the twentieth century the dominant White South used state power to repress the development of Black public education, a process of repression so severe that it continued to affect the shape and character of educational opportunities for African American students throughout the twentieth century (Harlan 1958).

The trend down from equality began in particular states in the late 1880s. Mississippi was the first state to bring about this condition of inequality. In 1886, Mississippi's legislature passed a law governing certificates that enabled local boards to grant salaries on the basis of the certificate held by the teacher. This law was so framed that a school board could give an African American teacher the minimum monthly pay of \$25 and a white teacher of the same level the maximum monthly pay of \$55. Similarly, South Carolina in its Constitution of 1895 gave the local school boards the power to discriminate in allocating the school funds between the races. Alabama changed its law in 1890, and substituted for the old system of relative equality one that allowed common school funds to be spent by local school boards as they saw fit. By 1930, African American children in Alabama, then 40% of the school-age population, received 11% of the school funds, a major downward slide from 1890 when they received 44% of the school funds. The pattern was the same in other southern states. For example, in Mississippi the African American proportion (60%) of the total school-age population received about 20% of the annual state school appropriation in 1910. The Black-to-White ratio of per pupil expenditures declined in every southern state between 1890 and 1910. In some states (Florida, Mississippi, Virginia, Louisiana), expenditures per Black pupil actually fell in constant dollars. In other states, expenditures per Black pupil grew at a much slower rate than spending per White pupil. Once Black voters had been effectively excluded from the body politic, White southerners were free to wage a counter-reform movement against the educational aspirations of African American parents and students,

without having to worry about the votes of Black citizens. The nature and structure of that counter-reform reveal much about the South that was coming to maturity during the first half of the twentieth century (Anderson 1995).

The heightened resistance to the educational progress of African Americans practically eliminated the concept of public education from southern state governments. Since the northern common school crusades of the 1830s and the post-Emancipation campaigns in the South, public education meant that each state should pledge itself to the education of all children. To achieve these goals, public schools were to be made free to rich and poor alike. The free school system was to be financed by a tax on property and all property owners, irrespective of whether they had children attending the public schools, were to be taxed in support of public education because everyone derived political, civil, social, and economic benefits from the existence of tax-supported public schools. The counter-reform movement in the early twentieth-century South inverted this democratic theory of public education and inserted in its place the theory that the state should pledge itself to the education of White children, even if this meant diverting to White schools that portion of the school funds paid by African American citizens. The obvious corollary of this theory was that Black southerners, despite being taxed for public education, would have to find other means to provide universal schooling for their children, or as many White southerners preferred, have virtually no schooling at all (Anderson 1995).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, discriminatory funding meant not only that public taxes were diverted mainly to support schools for White children, but that Black schools were largely dependent on private philanthropy and what African Americans called "double taxation," the practice of paying for their schools through voluntary contributions of land, labor, and money. In 1915, for example, of the more than 1,000 schoolhouses for African American children in Alabama's "Black Belt," approximately 60 percent were privately owned. This condition did not improve over the next two decades. Of more than 2,400 school buildings for African American children in Alabama in 1938, 70 percent were privately owned. The vast majority of schools for African American children were held in churches or in buildings that were privately owned. Other southern states followed a similar pattern of not funding public education for Black children and relegating it to the private domain of voluntary contributions. In 1940, roughly half of all Black common schools in Mississippi still met in tenant cabins, lodges, churches, and stores--privately owned structures that under state law could not be improved with public funds. There were in 1940 some ninety black high schools in Mississippi, most of them either privately owned by African Americans or built through grants from northern foundations. Sunflower County, Mississippi, a Delta county with a sizable Black majority, maintained no publicly owned school buildings for African American children in 1940 (Anderson 1995).

The severe racial inequality in schooling that existed at the dawn of the twentieth century appeared to be an insurmountable hurdle for overcoming the second major achievement gap in facing African American communities, the difference between Blacks and Whites in elementary school attendance. Yet, in the face of such powerful and pervasive denial of educational opportunities, African American communities across the South built an alternative system of universal education that was funded in significant part by voluntary contributions from ordinary citizens and private philanthropy. This

movement to close the attendance gap at the elementary school level was the first major reform movement by African Americans in the twentieth century South. Between 1914 and 1932, ordinary African American citizens, despite living and working in cash-poor economies, raised over \$4,725,000 to help construct nearly 5000 Rosenwald Schools, primarily for the education of Black children of elementary school-age. The total amount of cash raised in African American communities throughout South does not include the additional value of their voluntary contributions in the forms of land, labor and building materials. Moreover, in addition to the initial contributions to construct school buildings, African Americans raised thousands of dollars annually to pay for the maintenance and improvement of grounds and buildings. Such behavior stretched back to the immediate post-emancipation period and extended well into the twentieth century. Although states refused to adequately fund public schools for Black children in the early twentieth-century South, African American adults banded together and paid for schooling out of their own pockets, even though they had already paid taxes for public schools (Anderson, 1988).

When the Rosenwald School building program began in 1914, southern states had yet to accept public responsibility for the most basic level of education for African American children, the elementary school. This resulted in a wide gap between Blacks and Whites in elementary school attendance, especially true in the rural South. When the program ended in the early 1930s, Black southerners, still facing difficult challenges ahead, had radically transformed the structure of Black elementary schools in the rural South. Rosenwald schools were built in 66% of the 1327 southern counties. They were located in 95% of the counties in South Carolina, 90% in Alabama, 86% in Louisiana, Maryland and North Carolina, and 75% in Virginia. Rosenwald Schools were spread throughout the South and particularly in counties with large African American populations. In 1935, enough elementary schools had been constructed to accommodate the vast majority of young African Americans. In 1900, 36% of Black children of elementary school age (5-14) attended school in the South, compared to 55% for White children. The early twentieth-century campaign to improve educational opportunities for the youngest of African American school children resulted in the closing of the elementary school attendance gap. By the time the Rosenwald school campaigns ended in the early 1930s, 90% of Blacks aged 5-14 were attending school compared to 91% of White children of the same age. In one generation the elementary school attendance of young Black children increased from 36% to 90% and this remarkable transformation rested squarely on the economic and cultural capital of ordinary African American men and women (Anderson 1988).

### The High School Completion Gap

Having closed the “elementary school attendance gap” by the early 1930s, African American then turned their attention to the “high school completion gap.” The campaign to improve educational opportunities at the secondary level was longer and more difficult. Even many Whites who tolerated or supported elementary schools for Black children viewed secondary schools as too much education for disenfranchised unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. Throughout first half of the twentieth century African American youth in the South were largely excluded from public secondary education. For instance, the number of four-year public high schools for White students

in Georgia increased from 4 in 1904 to 122 in 1916. At that time Georgia had no four-year public high schools for its African American students, who constituted 46 percent of the state's secondary school-age population. This was not merely an isolated condition of inequality but a complex system of racial subordination extending throughout the South. Similarly, in 1916, Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, and North Carolina had no four-year public high schools for African American children. African American children constituted 57 percent of Mississippi's secondary school population, 57 percent of South Carolina's, 44 percent of Louisiana's, and 33 percent of the high school age population in North Carolina. The states of Florida, Maryland and Delaware each had only one public high school for African American students in 1916. Needless to say, access was extremely limited, depending on location and public means of transportation, something that was seldom provided for African American children prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Anderson 1988).

This pattern continued into mid-century. On the eve of World War II, 77% of the high school age Black population in the South was not even enrolled in public secondary schools and even fewer attended on a regular basis. The system of subordination was even more dramatic in states with the largest proportion of high school-aged African American students. In Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Louisiana, more than 80 percent of the Black high school populations were not enrolled in public secondary schools in 1940. More than 90 percent of Mississippi's Black high school age population was not enrolled in public secondary schools at the onset of World War II. The War naturally made the situation worse. From 1940 to 1946 the enrollment of African American students in public secondary schools in the South decreased by over 30 percent. By 1948 enrollment trends were again increasing, but more than two-thirds of African American high school age students in the 1950s were not enrolled in public high schools. As late as 1957, Sunflower County, Mississippi had no public high schools for Black students (Anderson 1995).

By mid-twentieth century, the mounting importance of a high school education made this system of inequality increasingly more oppressive with respect to the economic futures of African American youth. In the larger society public secondary schooling in 1950 was a central part of American life and culture and perceived by parents as vital to their children's future. The transformation of the public secondary education during the first third of the twentieth century symbolized the extent to which schooling had become a strategic part of the national experience in 1950. From about 1890 to 1935 the American high school was transformed from an elite, private institution into a public one attended by White children en masse. By 1950's the public high school was an arena of expanding educational opportunities in which publicly and privately supported schemes to locate the talented burgeoned, and scholarship and loan programs for high school graduates were provided with equal enthusiasm. African Americans knew they were being cheated of access to the new educational opportunities. As the public high school, only marginally a factor in American life at the dawn of the twentieth century, became the "people's college" by mid-twentieth century, such exclusion reflected the larger system of racial subordination that dated back to the White supremacy movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In certain respects, by 1950 the racial inequality in high school completion rates had deepened since 1900, when very few Americans of any race or gender attended high

schools, and high school completion was only marginally a factor in national economic and social life. In 1940, for example, only 12% of African Americans aged 25 to 29 were high school graduates, compared to 41% for Whites in the same age category. As African Americans recognized a growing gap in educational opportunities at the secondary level, campaigns to provide better educational opportunities for their children became a critical social issue and a central plank in the larger platform for civil and political equality. Lacking access, for the most part, to voting power, political offices, finance and the higher reaches of industry, parents, ordinary citizens and community leaders focused on the right to equal educational opportunity as the centerpiece of the larger crusade for justice and equality. The focus on public secondary education as a means to equality and social justice caught hold in the family, community and public lives of African American groups across the South. Ultimately, attaining equal opportunity at the secondary level compelled ordinary citizens to challenge Jim Crow and other legal and customary forms of racial subordination (Anderson 2001).

The major victory came with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. This decision not only represented the symbolic end of Jim Crow schooling, it also sparked a new and more invigorated grassroots campaign for educational equality at all levels. The crusades for equal educational opportunity that began in such places as Clarendon, South Carolina, Topeka, Kansas, Farmville, Virginia, and later in Little Rock, Arkansas, spread across the nation, aiding various struggles for learning and self-improvement. The long-standing struggle for equal educational opportunity escalated in the years immediately following the *Brown* decision. African American parents and their children began to petition and file lawsuits across the South, requesting admission to hitherto White schools. After years of resistance, desegregation came suddenly to the South in the late 1960s. For example, in 1965, seven of Mae Bertha and Matthew Carter's children lined up to wait for the school bus that would take them to desegregate the all-White public schools in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Soon after their successful attempts to desegregate Drew High School the Carter's home was riddled with bullets in the middle of the night. The owner of the plantation on which they lived canceled their credit at his store and threw them off of his land. At school the Carter children were tormented by white students and by some of the teachers. The Carters understood the physical and psychological punishment that their children would endure in the hostile racial climate of their new school. Still, they felt that changing schools was the big chance to get their children out of the cotton fields. Eight Carter children graduated from Drew High School and seven went on to college at the University of Mississippi (Curry 1995).

The White south in general reacted strongly to the post-Brown reform movements. Even before the *Brown* decision was handed down, two contrasting strategies of counter-reform were emerging in the South: "moderation" and "massive resistance." Both were equally committed in principle to a defense of segregation, but they employed different strategies. The more liberal segment of the White South considered the tactic of moderation or self-reformation, at once conservative in its scheme to preserve the Jim Crow social order and moderate in its flexible response to the new demands created by the Brown decision. The tactic of moderation, through token compliance and school equalization programs, sought to avoid or at least delay sweeping federal interventions and Black demands for ultimate justice and equality. The "massive

resistance" strategy, constructed by reactionaries who insisted that any change would set in motion the forces of dissolution, trumpeted defiance. In 1949, Alabama, for example, adopted the moderation plan of its "Governor's Committee on Higher Education for Negroes," a plan to provide for the Black youth parallel educational opportunities which would be fully comparable to those opportunities provided in the state institutions for White students. However, the bond issue to finance the recommendations was not approved. In South Carolina, Whites opposed to segregation, maneuvered within the law, first to postpone implementation of *Brown*, and then to determine the minimum amount of desegregation that blacks would accept. South Carolina's main tactic of delay was to offer African Americans money to equalize school facilities, hoping to hold on to the racially separate side of *Plessy* by making good on the long-standing promise to equalize public school facilities. To secure Black support for its efforts to avoid racially desegregated schools, South Carolina allocated between 1951 and 1954 about \$120 million, of which 61 percent was spent on school construction for Black children who were just under 44 percent of the state's total school enrollment. Mississippi practiced massive resistance. In 1962, the riot at Oxford in opposition to James H. Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi left two dead and almost two hundred and fifty injured. Violence ended only after President John F. Kennedy ordered the deployment of more than twenty thousand regular army troops. When in June 1963, Governor George C. Wallace publicly opposed the court-ordered admission of Vivian Juanita Malone and James Hood to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa; he was successfully constrained after President Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard. Finally, in the late 1960's Federal District courts began mandating the end of racially dual school systems throughout the South (Synnott 1989).

Ultimately, neither moderation nor massive resistance precluded demands for desegregation and full equality. The grassroots school reform movements of the 1960s spilled into the 1970s and paid dividends in terms of increased educational attainment at the secondary level, progress that was impossible under the pre-1960s systems of racial subordination in which high schools were frequently unavailable to African American students. In 1960, the eighth grade was the terminal grade for the vast majority of the South's African American school children. Mississippi, with over 80 percent of its Black population having completed fewer than 9 years of school, ranked first in the nation in the denial of educational opportunities to African American children. South Carolina and Georgia, with 79 and 75 percent, respectively, followed. By 1970, however, 31 percent of African Americans 25 years old and over had graduated from high school, and among younger persons (20 to 24 years old) 62 percent were high school graduates. By 1997, eighty-sixth percent of African Americans ages 25 to 29 were high school graduates, continuing an upward trend in the educational attainment of African Americans that began in the post-*Brown* era. Indeed, between 1987 and 1997, the gap in high-school completion between African Americans and Whites in the 25 to 29 year-old age group narrowed to the point where there was no significant statistical difference in 1997. Given the widespread denial of public high schools to Black students from 1920 to 1960, the progress made between 1960 and 1997 represented substantial achievement. In the 25 to 29 year old category, the high school completion rate for African Americans more than quadrupled from 1960 to 1997, from 21% to 86%. Therefore, the huge high school completion gap that existed at mid-twentieth century was virtually closed by the end of

the century, and debates over the so-called racial gap in academic achievement shifted from a focus on attainment to preoccupation with “quality” as measured by scores on standardized achievement tests.

### The Test Score Gap

Consequently, we enter the twenty-first century focused squarely on the Black-White or minority-majority “test score gap.” To be sure, the gaps between the performance of minority and White students on standardized test are substantial, but no more substantial than the literacy, elementary school attendance, and high school completion gaps that faced previous generations. In fact, it is due to the closing of the other achievement gaps that we can now focus so exclusively on the test score gap. It made no sense, for example, to focus on test score gaps during the periods when African American students were denied basic access to elementary and secondary schools. Now that African Americans, through centuries of struggle for full equality, have finally gained more educational opportunities than ever before, a host of scholars and pundits seemed puzzled and dismayed that Black students did not eliminate the test score gap. Although students of the Black-White test score gap believe that reducing the gap would do much to achieve racial equality, they really do not know what is happening to test scores over the past decade. Test score gaps along ethnic and racial lines seem mystifyingly intractable as of the new millennium. Thus it is even more important to remember that in 1800 the “Literacy Gap” seemed intractable, in 1900 the “Elementary School Attendance Gap” seemed impossible to close, and as late as 1960 the “High School Completion Gap” looked as though it could not be closed by the end of the twentieth century. The history of past victories over other critical achievement gaps provides the only record of the strengths and possibilities for engaging what may be the last frontier in a series of achievement gaps dating back to the Early National era.

What should we make of the national debate over the latest achievement gap, the test score gap? First, we must not lose sight of the fact that families and students of color have faced and been successful in closing major achievement gaps in the past. Second, we should analyze the current “race gap” in test score performance as part of a national phenomenon and not become too preoccupied with test score gaps between White and minority students. Indeed, the minority-majority test score gap is part and parcel of a long-standing incapacity of American schools to raise the test scores of any segment of its population (i.e. Blacks, Latinos, and Whites) over the past three decades. As is well known by now, scores on national reading and math tests for Blacks and Latinos rose steadily between 1970 and 1988, and gaps in scores that separated minority students and Whites narrowed. These results, although heartening, received virtually no national publicity. Then the test score gap widened again in the 1990’s when scores for Whites remained flat while scores for Blacks declined in reading and mathematics and Latino scores decreased in reading while increasing in mathematics. Consequently, educators and policymakers began to redefine America’s achievement gap as “the difference in the academic performance between different ethnic groups.” This framing of the achievement gap distorted a national phenomenon that has been intractable since 1970 and remains so in the new century. In point of fact, the achievement gap is far more complex than the difference between the test scores of students from minority groups and the White majority. It is also about the failure of White American students to meet

standards set by federal and state governments, especially since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* twenty years ago.

It was only twenty years ago when America's "achievement gap" was defined primarily as the difference in the test score performance between American students and students from other industrialized democracies. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered a shocking report called *A Nation at Risk*, which awakened Americans in general to the national problem of underachievement in primary and secondary education. "Our Nation is at risk," the report stated. "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." According to the report, test scores were falling, schools were asking less and less of their students, and American students increasingly were failing to stack up against their overseas counterparts. Consequently, the Commission on Excellence argued that America's future economic prosperity was endangered by declines in student achievement on national and international achievement tests. In the Industrial era, according to the Commission on Excellence, an educated elite was sufficient, but in the emerging age of information technology, skilled intelligence in core academic subjects, particularly math and science, was necessary for America to keep pace with its European and Asian counterparts. To demonstrate its claims of declining student achievement, the Commission reviewed test score data from the SAT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the International Mathematics and Science Study. The Commission on Excellence prescribed remedies aimed at students whose basic preparation for school was sound and for school systems that had the capacity to respond to the demand for excellence by offering more rigorous courses. Put another way, the remedies prescribed were not aimed at poor and minority students in inner-city schools, but at White students in the better suburban and rural schools. Indeed, the Commission on Excellence's prescriptions for reform ignored the problems of poor and minority students in big cities. When the nation's leaders promised that American students would be number one in the world in mathematics and science by 2000, clearly they had in mind the White majority. Therefore, a review of what happened to the achievement patterns of White students over the past three decades might offer some perspective on the nation's current capacity to raise the test scores of students with less educational resources.

Since 1970 few demonstrable achievement gains on standardized tests have been realized for any American students in elementary and secondary schools. Indeed, a careful assessment of American students' performance on the SAT, National Assessment of Educational Progress and the International Mathematics and Science Study tells us that nothing much has altered for more than a third of a century. The percentage of high school seniors taking the SAT hovered around 33 percent in 1970 and reached 46 percent in 2000. American seniors' combined math and verbal score on the SAT in 2000 was well below its standing in 1970. The NAEP, known as the nation's report card, surveys a representative sample of all students in school, not just those planning to go to college. NAEP math, science, and reading tests have been regularly administered to a representative sample of students since the early 1970's. Examining the pattern of NAEP test scores of those aged seventeen, most in their last year of high school, we find that math and reading scores rose slightly between 1970 and 2000 while science scores

declined. Thus, taken as whole, the NAEP results for seventeen-year-olds, like the SAT scores, reveal no demonstrable positive change in the last three decades.

It is important to note that the scores of African American and Latino students do not depress this pattern of test performance on NAEP tests for the nation as a whole. Taking the performance on NAEP mathematics, reading and science areas together, the test scores of White seventeen-year-olds remained flat from 1970 to 2000. Hence, one cannot attribute the nation's lack of progress to the scores of Black and Latino students. A third assessment of academic achievement comes from the tests administered by the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The IEA tests students only in math and science because the designers believe that language differences might invalidate international comparisons of verbal ability. The standing of the United States' place in the world is at its lowest among students in the last year of high school. Among seventeen-year-olds, the U.S. ranks at the bottom of all participating countries except for Lithuania, Cyprus and South Africa. Despite some fluctuation over time, the average scores of American twelfth-graders on international achievement tests in mathematics and science are almost exactly the same today as they were in the early seventies, near the bottom among industrialized democracies. In addition to U.S. underachievement in global comparisons, SAT scores in 2000 remained below their 1970 levels and scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remained flat from 1970-2000 (Peterson 2003).

The pattern of achievement for White students over the past three decades offer a sobering perspective on what happened to African American and Latino students. First, it underscores the fact that African American and Latino patterns of achievement are part and parcel of the national trends in the sense that no American students have made substantial progress on standardized test scores since 1970. Being African American and Latino doubles the probability of being educated in urban and high poverty schools. White students are disproportionately educated in suburban and rural areas and are far more likely to be enrolled in schools with a superior breadth and depth of educational resources. Therefore, given the attention focused on raising academic standards following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, and that White students are educated under the most favorable conditions, the fact that their scores on standardized achievement tests have not improved over the past three decades should serve to remind everyone just how complex and vast the problem is for students who end up receiving the least and worst of what is available.

Against this backdrop, African American and Latino students, despite setbacks between 1988 and 1998, have reasons to be encouraged given their improvements from 1970 to 2000. With respect to White, African American and Latino students, students of color made the most significant gains in academic performance on standardized tests over the past 30 years. To be sure, there remains a significant gap between the academic achievement of students of color (i.e. Black and Latino) and the White majority. Nonetheless, African American and Latino students made the most important gains over the past 30 years.

NAEP has been reporting its results by race since the program began three decades ago. For African American and Latino students, it shows a pattern of substantial change that was immensely encouraging from about 1971 to 1988, somewhat discouraging from 1988 to 1999, and now more encouraging from 2000 to 2002. Among

17-year-olds, for example, the Black-White gap in average reading scale scores was cut by more than half, from 52 points when the assessment was first administered in 1971 to 21 points in 1988. In math for 17-year-olds, the gap was reduced from 40 points in 1973 to 20 points in 1990. In more recent years, though, the gaps have widened again (due mainly to declines in scores by Blacks)—back to 31 points in reading and 32 points in math in 1999. The Latino-White reading gap followed a similar pattern, decreasing from a 41-point gap in 1975 to a 24-point gap in 1998, and the reading gap held steady from 1988 to 1999. In mathematics the Latino-White gap decreased from 33 points in 1973 to 15 point in 1990 and then increased to a 22-point gap in 1999. The basic story is fairly straightforward. While White 17-year-olds made no demonstrable gains in performance on NAEP reading and math tests between the early 1970s and 1999, Black and Latino students made significant gains. The bad news is that the average scores for 17-year-old African American and Latino students in reading and math are about the same as the average for 13-year-old White students. While these differences are not as large as they were in the early 1970s, they underscore the difficult path toward equality. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that over the past thirty years African American and Latino students were successful in shrinking the gaps in NAEP reading and math scores and made gains more significant than their White counterparts.

According to The Education Trust, results of the NAEP reading assessment released in June 2003 reveal that African American and Latino students continue to raise their scores on reading and math tests and narrow the gaps between minority students and White students in the early grades. Achievement for African American fourth graders rose in almost every state, their average scale scores increasing in 27 of 31 states. Latino fourth graders increased in 19 of 21 states. Furthermore, the Black-White gap for fourth graders narrowed in 25 of 33 states, and in every instance but one, narrowing occurred while scores increased for both African American and White students. This departs from the pattern of the past three decades when narrowing occurred because African American made gains while achievement patterns for Whites remained flat. Similarly, the Latino-White gap narrowed in 17 of 23 states, and in every instance but one, narrowing occurred while scores increased for both Latino and White students. It remains to be seen whether teachers can maintain this increase in achievement through the twelfth grade. The record over the past 30 years is not encouraging. Moreover, for twelfth graders, the reading scores for African American, Latino, and White students dropped between 1998 and 2002. However, that does not detract from the effort put forth by African American and Latino fourth graders in 2003. Their achievement in the worst school buildings, with the least amount of resources, and the most inexperienced teachers, indicates what could happen if raised expectations were followed by increased investments in the education of poor and minority children (U.S. Department of Education 2000).

They also remind us that we should respect and have confidence in their intellect, as oppose to pity and contempt. This brings me to my final point on the achievement gap. Certain images harmfully present oversimplified, negative, and frequently racist depictions of groups of color. The media-promulgated stereotypes created and ingrained in the popular image about African American and Latino school children may not only injure their self-image, but could hamper their capacity to overcome the achievement gap. The list of stereotypes is endless and always injurious. They are good at sports, they are gang members, they look at rappers and entertainers as role models, they view school

success as “acting White,” and they are fundamentally anti-intellectual. These and other stereotypes are perpetuated by messages in print journalism, television, motion pictures, and social science writings. On the one hand, such stereotypes do not help us to understand how African American and Latino students have overcome various achievement gaps throughout history, or why forth graders in 2003 raised their achievements scores against overwhelming odds. On the other hand, such persistent, pervasive, unabated assumptions of mental incompetence make it even more difficult for African American and Latino students to overcome the contemporary test score gap.

There is evidence to support the idea that stereotypes and low expectations have harmful effects on students of color. For example, in a series of studies conducted with students at Stanford University, psychologist Claude Steele found that the negative stereotypes about African Americans' intellectual abilities impede Blacks' performance on standardized tests—a condition he called “stereotype threat.” Steele developed the theory that “a stereotype threat” - the threat of being perceived as a negative stereotype or the fear of poor performance confirming that stereotype - can be powerful enough to shape the intellectual performance and academic identities of entire groups of people. According to Steele, everyone experiences “stereotype threat” because we are all members of some group about which negative stereotypes exist. When capable black college students fail to perform as well as their white counterparts, the explanation often has less to do with preparation or ability than with the threat of stereotypes about their capacity to succeed (Steele 1995 and 2003).

In some of the studies, Steele told one group of students that the tests were measures of their abilities; he told another group that the tests were laboratory experiments to see how students solved problems. In each case, African American students did much worse when they were told that the tests measured their abilities, and much better -- and at the same level as whites -- when they were told the tests were laboratory studies. Steele concluded that the identification of a test as a measure of their abilities activates a racial stereotype and provokes self-doubt among the test takers. Similarly, Steele found that African American students performed much worse when asked to identify their race in a preliminary questionnaire. When not asked to do so, African Americans outperformed whites. The question about race, Steele concluded, promoted stereotype threat and thus hampered the capacity of Blacks to succeed (Steele 1997 and 1998).

Consequently, a major step toward eliminating the test score gap begins with recognition of the various achievement gaps that minority students have overcome or closed significantly in past decades and an appreciation for their capacity to also overcome on the test score gap. Probably the most important lesson throughout the history of minority student achievement is that the opportunity to learn and real investments in the education of minority students are the keys to closing various achievement gaps. A second important historical lesson is that all successful reforms to date have tapped into and relied heavily on the strengths inherent in minority communities, families, students and teachers. This capacity should be developed and relied on, not ignored or dismissed as pathological.

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