

By the People

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What is an "achievement gap?"

The "achievement gap" refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. It is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between many African-American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the scale, and their Anglo peers. It is also used to describe a similar academic disparity between students from low-income and well-off families. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, dropout rates, and college-completion rates. It has become a focal point of education reform efforts.

ISSUE:

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN NEW MEXICO

New Mexico proudly boasts of a rich and unique cultural diversity, yet the educational "**achievement gap**" between these groups is dramatic. For example, 71 percent of New Mexican Anglo students tested proficient in reading last year compared to 46 percent of Hispanics and 36 percent of American Indians. The results of testing performed under the No Child Left Behind Act also clearly illustrate an achievement gap within New Mexico's population. 132 New Mexican schools were labeled as troubled due to this testing, and the majority of those schools have high minority student populations.

An educational system that does not provide equally for all of its students is not a just system. New Mexico will continue to lag behind in economic development if the state cannot attract industries with a highly skilled, educated workforce.

How to close this achievement gap will be the focus of your discussion group.

HOW DO WE CLOSE OUR ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

As part of today's Deliberation Day, we are interested in learning more about what you—the parents and the community—think are the biggest factors that contribute to this achievement gap, and how you think they should be addressed.

In New Mexico, state lawmakers, leaders, and decision-makers have recently focused public attention on several different approaches to closing the achievement gap.

- 1) "Making Schools Work" Initiative
- 2) Early Childhood Development
- 3) Teacher Development

1 “MAKING SCHOOLS WORK” INITIATIVE

Supporters of this approach say that poor student performance isn't just about the quality of academics, but is equally about health, poverty, and the larger community environment. They say that traditional schools ignore significant factors that contribute to the achievement gap including:

- poor nutrition
- obesity
- lack of access to health and social services
- poor parental involvement

This group favors using public tax dollars to turn traditional underperforming schools into “community schools.” With this idea, money would be spent on:

- improving physical education
- providing breakfast in schools
- school based health clinics
- social services for the entire family

This school model forces greater cooperation between the community and the schools. Supporters also say that this increased expenditure will ultimately save the state money they usually lose to obesity and other health related problems of its students.

Opponents say that education money should be spent on improving teaching and standards in the schools and those social services are not the responsibility of an already overburdened school system. Instead, opponents suggest soliciting greater community involvement for addressing these needs and placing schools and learning at the center of educational efforts. This group favors having a shared, cooperative relationship where the school and community each value one another's unique responsibilities.

2 PRE-KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Supporters of early childhood education say it is the most valuable approach to closing the achievement gap. This group maintains that the first five years of life are the most critical to later success in school and college. Early exposure to high-quality education can:

- make an educational impact for children with certain socio-economic and health risks.
- engage kids in active learning sooner, therefore stimulating children's innate curiosity.
- instill positive behavioral management skills early so that students don't “act out” in later classrooms.

Opponents warn against too much formal, highly structured education for very young children. They also have reservations about such pre-K programs being conducted in schools normally serving elementary-age children, because they may adopt teaching methods considered inappropriate for children under six years old. Head Start, the federal school readiness program for very young children, was implemented in the 1960s and has done little to close the achievement gap that persists today. Opponents point to the lack of affordable daycare outlets as the real issue for children in this age group.

3 TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Supporters say that the first priority for closing the achievement gap lies with the teachers. This group is in favor of more teacher training and formal testing in core content knowledge and instructional skills. Such tests should be refined to capture teacher effects on student learning skills. Likewise, this group is concerned about teacher salary differences within the state and how that relates to the achievement gap. Teacher salaries matter because teachers may be disproportionately drawn to resource-rich school districts, leaving poor and minority students without the benefit of well-prepared teachers. They are in favor of increasing teacher salaries in distressed areas.

Opponents say that it is nearly impossible to establish a formal set of criteria and testing to measure a "good" teacher. A variety of teaching approaches succeed because students, neighborhoods, and towns are different. Testing could not measure important features like a teacher's temperament, patience, or commitment to the students -- things considered equally important as content knowledge. They argue that money towards increasing salaries would be better spent improving teacher training and recruiting additional teachers who are more reflective of students' races and cultures.

In Review

3 Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in New Mexico

1. The "Making Schools Work" initiative would use public money to put social services and health care services directly in schools to help underprivileged children perform better in school.
2. The Pre-Kindergarten School Readiness Programs begin educating 3 and 4 year old children earlier to lay a formal groundwork for increased learning and better classroom behavior.
3. An emphasis on teacher development would concentrate on devising formal standardized testing for all teachers and providing greater pay for teaching positions in distressed areas.



