

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

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Achievement Gap Narrower in Private Schools

One of the most stubborn problems in education is the disparity in achievement scores between minority and majority students. The release last month of the latest reading scores for 4th grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) highlighted the problem.

Summarizing the NAEP performance gap, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige reported that "73 percent of white students performed at or above the basic level, compared with just 42 percent of Hispanic students and only 37 percent of African American students." As Paige put it, there are "deep, persistent, and unacceptable gaps in achievement between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers."

But a breakout of scores by type of school offers some hope for addressing the persistent disparity in performance. The achievement gaps that exist in private schools between minority and majority students are significantly less than the gaps nationwide. For example, while the difference between the performance of black students and white students nationally is 33 points, it is 26 points in

private schools (see chart). Similarly, the Hispanic/white gap nationally is 29 points, but only 22 points in private schools.

By way of context, the national average score for 4th grade reading is 217 on a scale that ranges from 0 to 500. For students in private schools, the average score is 234, a 17 point advantage over the national average. Mean scores for

4th Grade	Private Schools	All Schools
All Students	234	217
White Students	239	226
Black Students	213	193
Hispanic Students	217	197
Lunch Eligible	209	196
Not Lunch Eligible	234	227

both black and Hispanic students in private schools are exactly 20 points higher than the respective national means for each group. U.S. Education Department officials say that an increase of 10 points on the NAEP scale is roughly

equivalent to an increase of one grade level.

Secretary Paige recently compared the NAEP scores of black students in Texas with that of their peers across the nation, saying that if the Texas scores were the national scores, the black/white gap would be reduced dramatically. Well, if 4th grade black students across the nation had the same NAEP reading scores as black students in private schools, the national black/white achievement gap would shrink from 33 points to 13 points, a 60 percent reduc-

tion. Applying the same formula to Hispanic students, the disparity between them and their white peers would move from 29 points to 9, a drop of nearly 70 percent.

NAEP results are also provided for low-income students, identified by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program. Again, the difference between the scale scores of low-income students and their more affluent counterparts is significantly less in private schools than for the nation at large (see chart).

The NAEP report also provides the percentage of students performing at or above three achievement levels: basic (partial mastery of fundamental skills and knowledge), proficient (solid academic performance), and advanced (superior performance). As detailed in the chart on page 2, there are significant across-the-board advantages for private schools in the share of students performing at or above all three levels.

Why the Difference?

The report advises caution in concluding from the results that some types of schools are more effective than others. Because of socioeconomic and other factors that help predict student performance, it is difficult to determine what share of the NAEP performance differ-



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ence is attributable to schools themselves. But a number of researchers examining the superior performance of students in private schools on a variety of measures have suggested, after controlling for non-school background variables, that some of the performance difference is the result of school effects.

One possible explanation is the high standards that private schools set for all students. President Bush has repeatedly denounced what he calls the "soft bigotry of low expectations." His education reform proposal includes the establishment of a fund for school choice demonstration projects to see if they improve the performance of low-income students. Given the fact that the achievement gap is narrower in private schools and the possibility that at least some of the difference can be explained by what goes on within those schools, it seems reasonable to examine more fully the private school performance phenomenon through the kinds of demonstration projects proposed by the president.

% of Students At Or Above Key Levels in NAEP Reading Test

4th Grade	Private Schools	All Schools
Basic	80	63
Proficient	47	32
Advanced	14	8

There seems to be a growing sense that exceptional measures are needed to close the achievement gap. Secretary Paige recently said the country's system of education is failing too many children; it is "broken and repair is needed urgently." The time has come, he continued, "for a bold and fundamental change."

The NAEP reading report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov>.

Hickok Promotes School Reform

In one of his first public appearances since being nominated as U.S. Undersecretary of Education, Eugene Hickok managed to cover a lot of ground. And he did so in simple and direct language. Speaking last month at the Cato Institute, a public policy research foundation in Washington, Hickok, the former secretary of education in Pennsylvania, touched on a chain of topics, including accountability, school choice, teacher training, and education spending.

Defending the Bush administration's proposal to hold schools accountable by having states publish annual assessment results, Hickok said parents and the public need information about how schools are doing. "You can't make smart decisions, he said, "if you don't have adequate knowledge." Hickok put that philosophy into practice during his tenure in Pennsylvania. An online database provides extensive information about any public school in the state, including curriculum offerings, library holdings, technology levels, student-teacher ratio, SAT scores, state assessment results, graduation rates, and dropout rates.

School Choice

Talking about school choice, Hickok described himself as a "strong supporter." In Pennsylvania he pushed for vouchers, charter schools, and education tax credits. In an ideal world, society would be more serious about how to change the nature of education and would move away "from a monopoly model," he said.

Turning to teacher training, Hickok said there needs to be a change in the way teachers are educated. "I am a big fan of arguing that teachers, as they are being prepared for what I consider the

most important task in democracy, get to know the subjects that they are supposed to teach." It's not that pedagogy



Eugene W. Hickok fields questions from reporters at the Cato Institute. Next to Hickok is Darcy Ann Olsen, Cato's director of education.

doesn't matter, but content matters too, "and it matters a lot," he said.

Another item on Hickok's agenda was education spending, or as he put it, "this fixation, this fascination, this obsession" we have that money alone will solve our education problems. Money matters, he said, but it is not sufficient. "If you look at how much we have spent in this nation, and you look at performance levels — on any indicator — the investment is not returning much." There are local exceptions, he said. In some places, modest investments are providing tremendous returns. But in others, "a lot of money is not buying very much."

Hickok concluded his remarks by saying that accountability and testing are part of a response to an education problem in this country. No single solution is the "silver bullet," he said. But we need to ask fundamental questions about results, "and then have the guts to deal with the answers that we get to those questions."



Bill Bennett Touts Internet-Based Education

Instructional technology is getting a bad rap these days. Once seen as the antidote to a host of education ills, its promise seems to have burst faster than the dot-com bubble.

Anticipated as a great educational equalizer, technology has instead established a new benchmark of inequality called the digital divide. Heralded as a way to improve student performance, the evidence connecting technology to achievement remains thin. And although computers were supposed to help students explore bright new vistas of knowledge, for too many youngsters they are the doors to discovering the dark and violent world of video games.

But out of technology's chorus of critics a convert has emerged. Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, once a skeptic about the value of classroom computers, has announced the establishment of K12, an Internet-based school that will offer, in Bennett's words, an education "as good as that received in the best public and private schools in the country."

Speaking last month at a conference on technology sponsored by the Education Leaders Council, an organization of reform-minded state education officials, Bennett, the chairman of K12,

said curriculum will be the core of the company. Traditional academic content will include phonics-based reading, math, language arts, science, history, fine arts, and the great books. "If a child passes through the curriculum, he or she will be well educated," he said.

For Bennett, technology is a tool, a means for helping youngsters master the curriculum. It does not change the aims of education, he said, "but it can help us achieve them." The help will be in the form of lessons designed by master teachers – 700 lessons in first grade alone. Each lesson will provide step-by-step instructions for parents or classroom teachers to guide students through the subject matter.

Students who use the program will not stay glued to the computer all day, Bennett said. Indeed, for much of the time youngsters will work off-line, engaged with real books, practice sheets, and other hands-on materials. But the

computer will provide high-tech enhancement. For example, after completing a lesson about a particular country

in social studies, students might embark on an online tour of the country.

The computer will also serve as a powerful assessment tool. In fact, it will provide "the most frequent of assessments," according to Bennett: daily, weekly, and monthly. Every lesson will conclude with a series of questions to gauge student mastery

of the subject matter. If performance is substandard, the system will recommend a backup lesson until mastery is attained. Feedback will also alert lesson designers when too many students aren't getting a critical skill or concept, allowing for lesson plan refinement and improvement.

Bennett said some officials at K12 think the program might revive the "little red schoolhouse." A multi-age classroom could be established every few blocks in a neighborhood, with children simultaneously and independently pursuing, at their own pace, very different subjects under the guidance of a single teacher. Computers in such classrooms would play an important role: providing sequenced activities, assessing progress, and recording results. But they wouldn't be the program's totality. For Bennett, technology is important, but not everything. Curriculum is what counts most.

K12 plans to market its services to all kinds of schools: public, private, and home. A full program for grades K-2 is expected by fall, with clusters of grades to be added in subsequent years.

For more information about K12, visit www.k12.com.



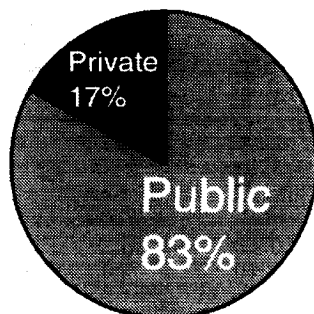
William Bennett, Chairman of K12

Where Do Wealthy Children Go to School?

The U.S. Census Bureau just released a report on the social and economic characteristics of students enrolled in the nation's schools in 1999. It turns out that of the 49.5 million youngsters in grades K-12, 9.3 million (19 percent) came from families with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more. Of the 9.3 million, 7.7 million children, or 83 percent, attended public schools, and 1.6 million, or 17 percent, attended private schools.

For more information on the report, go to www.census.gov. In the "Subjects A-Z" area, click on "S," and then on "Enrollment (including college)."

Attendance by Type of School for K-12 Students From Families With Annual Incomes of \$75,000 or More



Source: U.S. Census Bureau





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• A new study out of New York University's Program on Education and Civil Society compares the performance of Catholic school students and public school students in New York City on state language arts and math tests in grades 4 and 8. Two key findings:

- Average scores are higher in Catholic schools.
- The student achievement gaps by race and family income are narrower in Catholic schools.

On the public policy front, the report boldly asserts: "There can be no doubt that some public school students who are now trapped in failing public schools would benefit from a publicly subsidized transfer to the local Catholic school.... Those who wish to hold the line against tuition vouchers or tax credits need to own up to the very real human cost of that opposition."

As for the poor and minority families whose children are already enrolled in the city's Catholic schools, the study says "a reasonable case" can be made for taxpayer assistance to those families. Citing the public benefit the schools

provide, the report concludes, "The City of New York and its poor and working class families cannot afford to lose these Catholic schools."

Catholic Schools in New York City is available at <http://www.nyu.edu/wagner/education/pecs/>.

• Dan VanderArk, CAPE board member and executive director of Christian Schools International, suggests five simple rules for the U.S. Secretary of Education to follow. Among them: "All parents should have a choice in the education of their children." VanderArk's advice was published in the April 28 edition of *World Magazine*, a special edition on education that includes pieces by William Bennett, Marvin Olasky, and Florida's Lieutenant Governor Frank Brogan. The Web site for *World* is www.worldmag.com.

• CAPE continues to grow. Our two newest national members are the Jewish Community Day School Network and the National Christian School Association. Our newest state affiliate is the Hawaii Council of Private Schools. That brings the number of national members of CAPE to 17 and the number of state

affiliates to 31. CAPE's member organizations currently represent 80 percent of the nation's elementary and secondary private school enrollment.

• The National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute, issued a study last month saying school choice programs improve student performance. As the report puts it: "Evidence is mounting that allowing parents to choose a child's school improves the child's test scores. Evidence is also mounting that when public schools are challenged by the prospect of losing students because of the availability of school choice, the academic performance of both the students who leave and those who remain in the public schools improves."

A copy of the NCPA report is available at www.capenet.org/new.html.

Legislative Update

As *Outlook* goes to press, Congress is considering President Bush's school reform proposals. You can keep up with developments and help influence the outcome by visiting CAPE's Legislative Action Center: www.capenet.org/new.html