

Policy and Equity: Do Federal Funded Programs Make a Difference On Closing the Achievement Gap?

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Introduction

Several US federal funded programs authorized under the *Elementary and Secondary Act* (ESEA) of 1965 have proposed solutions to “help close the achievement gap” in education. The ESEA was the first and largest comprehensive federal educational reform that provided substantial monetary funds to K-12 with the primary goal of providing targeted resources to help ensure disadvantaged students access to a quality public education. While the government has reauthorized the ESEA every five years since its enactment, the original goal has remained. The gap the ESEA addresses is indicated by measured achievement differences between minority populations such as Hispanics and African-Americans, and their White counterparts.

Proposed solutions under the ESEA try to rectify the perceived inequitable and inefficient educational system by providing funding for additional education services and resources for the poorest schools, or schools having high numbers of low-achieving or high poverty students. Examples of supplemental programs include bilingual programs, opportunities for more rigorous curriculum through funding for Advanced Placement courses, during and after school tutoring and enrichment programs, free and reduced lunch programs, professional development for teachers and computer-technology training opportunities to name just a few.

The extent to which federal programs are achieving the goal of “closing the student achievement gap” may depend on one’s definition of student achievement. Indeed, many researchers (e.g., Bennett, 1991; Coleman, 1961; Eisenhart and Graue, 1990; Gibson, 1987, 1998; Gordon, 1957; Graue, 1994; Ogbu, 1987; Oritz, 1998; Richardson et al, 1989; Rist, 1970, 1973; Rosenfield, 1971; Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Valverde, 1987) argue that student achievement includes such broad areas as continued higher level coursework, graduation from high school, high Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) scores, and future educational and occupations attainment. Present mandates through the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) have shifted the national focus on student achievement to student scholastic achievement (e.g. standardized student test scores), supporting what some reports (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk*, 1983; Biddle, *U.S. National Assessment for Educational Progress* (NAEP), 1997; Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS); Second International Science Study (SISS); Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 2000) indicate –achievement should be determined by scholastic achievement (tests).

The emphasis on studying federally funded supplemental programs is prompted by numerous high profile reports (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century, 1999; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; *The Educational Progress of Hispanic Students*, 1995; *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*, Hirsch, 1996; *Long-Term Trends in Student Mathematics Performance*, 1988; *Findings from The Condition of Education*, 1998; SISS, SIMS, 1983; TIMSS, 2000; National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk*, 1983) which using the definition of achievement as student academic scores, emphasize the academic achievement gap between Whites and minorities. This has lead many, including members

of Congress, to question the effectiveness of some federally funded programs, with some calling them a failure. This study seeks to examine this fundamental question: what are the impacts of federally funded programs on achievement.

Background Review

US Reform Initiatives to Help Close the Achievement Gap

There is significant political debate regarding the best way to improve low-performing schools, and increase student academic achievement. By tracing the policy trends based in the different camps of the political parties and examining the resulting federal programs, one can see that there have been two basic policy efforts in the US educational arena since the mid 1900's: a struggle for access and equity that dominated the period from 1960 to 1980 and a focus on competition and standards that prevailed in the 1980's and 1990's (Orfield, 2000). While current efforts still highlight "access and equity", the dominant theme expands on "competition and standards."

Equality of educational opportunity requires giving everyone the same initial opportunity to receive an education (Spring, 1989). U.S. social reform has been predicated upon providing equal educational opportunity through reforming education efforts (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 266). However, creating equality has proved to be very complex. As early as the 1960's, conventional wisdom argued that inequalities in student performance must be due to inequalities in student resources. This theory was tested, through Section 402 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which authorized the Commissioner of Education to examine "the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public education institutions at all levels in the United States." The result was the Coleman report, or the *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report*. However, the study contradicted what policy makers expected: student achievement was linked more to "cultural deprivation" of poor families, rather than school characteristics. Federal policy makers used this argument to implement programs that would compensate for the home environment and facilitate equality of results rather than access (Baratz and Baratz 1970; Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Several "compensatory education" programs, federally funded through the earlier *War on Poverty* program were initiated. The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) provided additional federal funding to support programs and services beyond the regular school offerings. These programs and services targeted preschool and elementary school children from poor and minority families and were predicated upon the assumption that early intervention would compensate for the disadvantaged resulting from family background. Other programs were used at the middle and high school level, and opportunities for professional development for teachers were designed to "provide a better understanding" of the needs of these students. Various titles of ESEA provided funds for a wide range of programs. For example, instructional programs through Title I funding provided *Head Start* for preschoolers, and remedial programs in both reading and math for school-aged children who were considered to be educationally deprived.

The national policies that were initiated in the in the 60-70's grew out of educational assumptions that targeting policies to poor and disadvantaged groups in

society would help close the achievement gap. Programs were aimed at providing poor and minority students with the same educational opportunities of the White middle/upper class. The assumption was that if minority students could acquire the same “social, human and cultural capital” as White middle class students, they would have the same opportunities for academic and economic success.

While some programs saw little if any impact, several of these programs showed major progress in high school and college enrollment and completion, and helped lower the achievement gaps between various groups in society. In the 1980’s, a conservative business-dominated coalition (the Reagan administration) took power, and the report *A Nation at Risk*, focused the effort on reaching higher levels of performance in order to improve the “quality” of education and increase the global competitiveness of workers in a postindustrial global economy. This administration emphasized testing and rigorous work at all levels. There was a strong belief that achievement could be increased by insisting on more tests of students and teachers, by requiring more coursework, and by introducing competition through various market/competitive mechanisms (Orfield, 2000. p. 411). Although targeted programs helped provide small gains in science and math scores, the positive progress of the 60’s and 70’s ended and a period of educational stagnation occurred. High school graduation rates dropped and racial gaps in test scores stopped decreasing. In addition, college attendance and the college completion became strongly linked to family economic status.

Some scholars (e.g., Bennett deMarrais, K. & LeCompte, M. D. 1999; Hanusheck 1994; Hauser 1998; Heubert & Hauser 1999; Lewin 1999; Salganik, et. al. 1993; Shepard & Smith 1989; Orfield et. al. 1997; Mortenson 1998) argue that the shifting of funds towards more rigorous testing efforts rather than the original support programs for disadvantaged students has been the cause of achievement gaps. Others (e.g., Grissmer et.al. 1998; Heubert & Hauser 1998, 1999; Newman 1998; Orfield & Arhkinaze 1991; Orfield 1992, 1988), argue testing and reallocating funds for tests are not the problem; the problem is that standardized tests are both culturally and gender biased, and therefore indicate a widening racial and gender gap. Still others (e.g., Citizens Commission on Civil Rights 1998; Knapp and Cooperstein 1986; Lecompte and Dworkin 1988; Clement, Harding and Eisenhart 1979; Fennema, 1990; Hanna 1987; St. John 1975; Schofield 1982; Wilson 1987; Orfield 1993) argue that the reallocation of federal funds to state block grants is the real dilemma. The ESEA was reformulated in 1981 as the *Education and Consolidation and Improvement Act* (ECIA) and again in the 1990’s as *Improving All Schools Act* (IASA). These acts lumped all federal education funds into state-disseminated “block grants”; flowing through the state agencies to local districts, who then were able to control how funds were used—including structuring programs so as to divert funds from those most in need, and thereby weakening the original intended purpose (Hess, 1989). The belief is that giving control over federal funds to state and local authorities, with “block grant programs,” has negatively affected the dispersion of funds and caused the problem to worsen as those with political clout receive the funds, rather than those most in need.

The Clinton administration (1993-2001) worked to reauthorize the ESEA and eliminate the block funding of the 1990’s. The *Education of Handicapped Children* (Title

VI) funding provided free public education to all handicapped students (previously too costly for poor families), and the *Bilingual Education* program (Title VII) financially supported “the special educational needs of the large number of children of limited English speaking ability in the U.S.”

Gaps in performance between ethnic groups persist in spite of the educational reforms and funding methods directed to alleviate them. Eliminating this gap and raising the performance of all students is the goal of the recent *No Child Left Behind Act*¹, which asks America's schools to describe their successes in terms of what each student accomplishes. The act contains the President's four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. The emphasis on school and student achievement being measured by student scholastic achievement through state block funding allocations is a current topic and hotly debated. Yet, the definition of student academic achievement (e.g. state standardized assessment scores) has caused several federal funded supplementary programs to be sent to the “chopping block.” Current research does not link these programs directly with improving student academic achievement, and therefore they do not fit the current funding environment. The study presented here seeks to examine these heretofore-unexplored linkages.

Impacts on Student Academic Achievement

Scholars (e.g., Baker, Keller-Wolff, & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Battle & Bennett, 1997; Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Doran & Weffer, 1992; Kane, 1998; Marin & Marin, 1991; Yzaguirre, 2001), have explored the impact of race, gender and socioeconomic status (SES) on academic achievement. Numerous theories argued by researchers are used to explain the variations found in academic achievement. These include cultural deprivation (Lewis, 1996; Valencia, 1997), cultural differences (Bruner, 1996; Hartman & Everson, 1996, 1996; Jeynes, 1999; Kane, 1998; Lubienski, 2000; Marin & Marin, 1991; Smith Maddox, 1998; Timm, 1999; Yzaguirre, 2001); gender differences and gender bias (Feldman & Rafferty, 1993), first versus second language acquisition (Cummins, 1998; Genesee & Gandara, 1999), genetic differences (Hurn, 1993); first or second generation immigrant status and process acculturation (Alva & de los Reyes, 1999; Fuligni, 1997; Ogbu, 1983, 1987, 1993; Rong & Grant, 1996), finance and family socioeconomics (Garibaldi, 1997; Kozol, 1991, 2000; Newman 1998; Orfield & Arshkinaze 1991; Orfield 1992; 1998, 2000; Padilla, 1996; Roscigno, 2000), curriculum content and teaching practices (Cooper & Moore, 1995; Curtis, 1998; Ginwright, 2000; Olson & Haynes, 1993; Rhodes & McNown Johnson, 2000; Rodd, 1996; Schmoker, 1999), tracking (Agne, 1999; Ansalone, 2000; Hubbard & Mehan, 1999; Loveless, 1999; Page, 1987), and technology access and knowledge (Attewell & Battle, 1999; Conyers, Kappel, & Rooney, 1999; Maxwell & Jackson, 2000; Tumposky, 2001).

¹ See <http://nochildleftbehind.gov/>

Family structure and parental involvement have also been discussed as critical factors affecting academic achievement. Some studies have indicated that children raised in single-parent households have lower levels of academic achievement (Bankston & Caldas, 1998; Battle, 1999; Battle & Scott, 2000; Pong, 1997; Sun, 2001). Other studies have concluded that parental or guardian arrangements do not affect academic achievement (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Chen & Kaplan, 1999; Entwisle & Alexander, 1995, 1996; Ford & Wright, 1998). Prior to, and in the early 1990's, mass media emphasized the importance of two parent households over single parent households. The 1993 *Newsweek* article, *A World Without Fathers*, argued that children of two parent households statistically do better economically, socially and educationally than do children of single parent households (Ingrassia, 1993). In 2001, another *Newsweek* magazine report, *Unmarried, with Children*, argued that less than a quarter of all US households are represented by two parent status – contradicting earlier findings (Kantorwitz, Winger, Scelfo, Springen, Figueroa, Brant, & Abrahms, 2001). Entwisle and Alexander's (1996) random sample study of Baltimore students in the first and second grade, explored the influence of family configuration (single verses dual parent household) on changes in reading and math performance, measured through the California Achievement Test. Findings from this study revealed that family type did not affect academic achievement. However, Entwisle and Alexander (1996) did find that children whose families possessed more economic resources and whose parents were more involved in their children's academic activities, did outscore the other students consistently in both reading and math (Entwisle & Alexander, 1996). Significant differences by SES were also found in a study conducted by Biblarz and Gottainer (2000). This research examined children's attainment and well being across different types of single mother households. Using *General Social Surveys (GSS)* between 1972 and 1996 (N= 35,284), the findings indicated that measuring for attainment and well being, children from widowed homes significantly outperformed children from divorced homes, and were equivalent to those of two parent households. This supports Alwin's (1991) study that concluded that family configuration had little to no effect on verbal scores and that the largest differences in vocabulary knowledge were explained by SES related variables. Another detailed analysis of test scores in Michigan found that about 60 percent of the variance in test scores could be explained by family social and economic status (Newman 1998). Studies of schools in both Chicago and Los Angeles showed a correlation of 0.8 to 0.9 between the percentage of poor students in a school and the school's test scores and a similar correlation with the percentage of minority students (Orfield and Ashkinaze 1991; Orfield 1992, 1988, 2000). The recognition of the family's SES or income on student academic achievement cannot be overlooked. As Battle (1999) suggests, far too many studies considering the effects of one parent households either lack comprehensive controls for SES or choose not to consider it.

Parental involvement effects on academic achievement have been studied for both minority and White groups. Studies for parental involvement for minorities (Desimore, 1999; Keith & Lichtman, 1994; McWhirter, Hackett, & Bandalos, 1998) support Coleman's (1966) classic report that concluded that tests scores were strongly associated with both family background (SES and social capital) and parental involvement. Various scholars (Bloom, 1977; Rutter, Maughan, Ouston, & Smith, 1982; Zusovsky & Atkin, 1991) have also emphasized the importance of examining student's prior achievement in

research examining student academic achievement (Kalay & Chen, 2002). Rutter et al. argue that a major flaw in the examination of a school program's influence on student achievement is that researchers often lack information on the student's scholastic academic condition on entering the school. Bloom (1977) notes that prior knowledge may explain up to half of the variance in relevant scholastic achievement tests, because the correlation between this variable and academic achievement is high.

The emphasis of some past federal funded programs to increase academic scores by indirectly decreasing other barriers related to school violence, tardiness and attendance, drugs and alcohol have been well received by parents. A 1998 survey shows parents far more worried about school violence, safety, drugs, teen pregnancy and alcoholism than about academic standards (Rose & Gallop 1998). Yet, the political agenda still pushes for the focus to remain on increasing academic achievement through more rigorous standards, content and testing. It has been said that by eliminating other concerns, i.e. drugs, violence, poverty, students will be better able to concentrate on studies, and thereby increase their performance.

Selected Federal Funded Programs

Past and current conservative policy about schools in the US argues that schools can make a large difference through accountability and high standards, not through funded resources. The US Supreme Court actually cited research that concluded that "no amount of money spent on schools can improve outcomes," in its 1973 decision against ordering equal funding of public schools (*Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District* 1973). Later counter-theories have cited and supported the early intervention in educational development argument. It is through this central argument that *Head Start* and *Title I* funding have continued to be supported. *Title I* under ESEA, the largest federal education program, concentrates supplemental funds on additional basic skills instruction, nutrition and health resources, professional development for teachers, before and after tutorial programs, and parental programs to name just a few. Unfortunately, the educational evidence for individualized student academic achievement has never been strong. Consequently, the *Prospects* (1993) report to Congress, *Title I*'s first longitudinal evaluation, found little evidence of any academic or permanent "cognitive impacts." Furthermore, the report concluded that students attending concentrated poverty schools receiving extra funding performed less well than similar students receiving no programs but attending less isolated schools. *Title I* funds for free and reduced lunch for the economically disadvantaged still remain, however, funding for before and after school informal programs and tutoring has been redirected to support smaller class sizes, and transportation cost to allow students attending isolated poor performing schools to be bused to better schools.