

CLOSING THE EXCELLENCE GAP: SUPPORTING OUR NATION'S BRIGHTEST STUDENTS

Today in America there are millions of students who are overcoming challenging socioeconomic circumstances to excel academically. They defy the stereotype that poverty precludes high academic performance and that lower-income and low academic achievement are inextricably linked. They demonstrate that economically disadvantaged children can learn at the highest levels and provide hope to other lower-income students seeking to follow the same path.

Yet, there could be millions more. Sadly, from the time top students who were born into poverty graduate, they lose more educational ground and excel less frequently than their higher-income peers. This *Excellence Gap*—the disparity in the percent of lower-income versus higher-income students who reach advanced levels of academic performance—appears first in elementary school and actually widens as students move through middle school, high school, college, and beyond.

Despite this tremendous loss of talent, the Excellence Gap is hidden from public view and absent from public policy debates. Rather than being recognized for their excellence and encouraged to strengthen their natural intellect, these remarkable young people are left to fend for themselves, and the gap grows. A gifted child from a lower-income family is far less likely to be identified as gifted and, even if the student is identified, he or she will often not have access to gifted programs, accelerated learning, or more advanced curricula.

The sad reality is that despite the American Dream of equal opportunity, access to high-quality education in this country is increasingly stratified by income. While countless federal and state intervention programs have helped raise the number of students reaching proficiency, we have unwittingly ignored our best and brightest students. It is time to stop believing that “smart students will be fine on their own.” Higher income students are afforded more access to programs for the gifted, opportunities for enrichment, and access to information, all of which increase the likelihood that they will continue to achieve at high levels. High ability, lower income students, denied these advantages, cannot be expected to perform at the same level. The accident of birth should not restrict a bright student’s access to a rigorous postsecondary education and the economic and employment outcomes to which it leads.

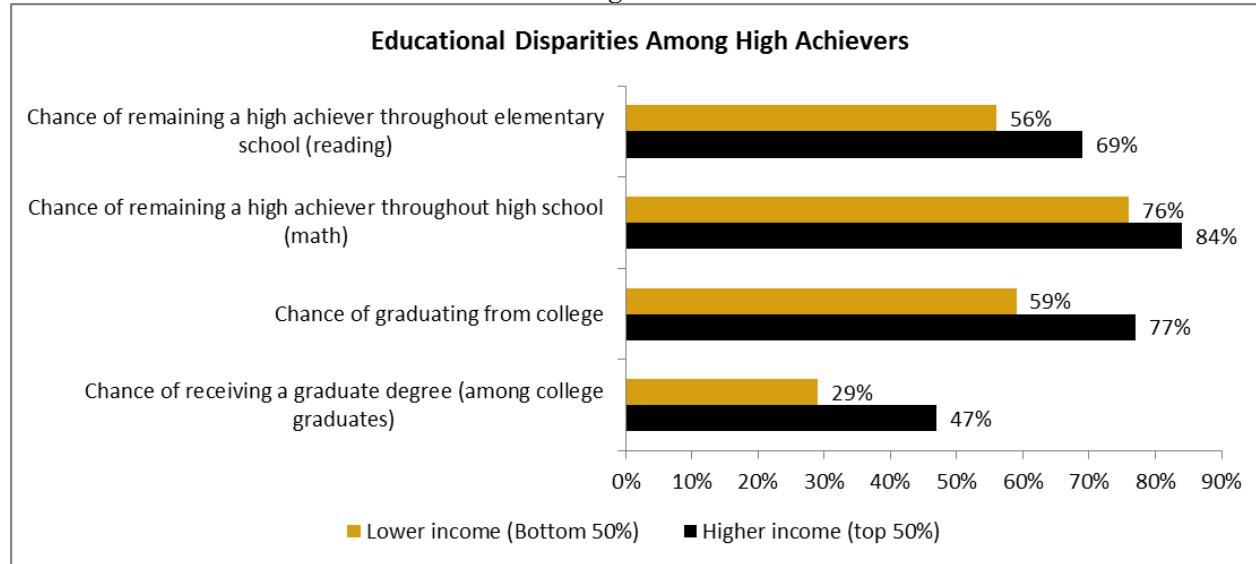
CURRENT STATUS

Low-income students now make up 51% of all students in the United States. Overall, about 3.4 million K-12 children residing in households with incomes below the national median rank in the top quartile academically. More than one million K-12 children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch rank in the top quartile academically. That means there are close to 80,000 very smart, very poor students per grade.

When they enter elementary school, high-achieving, lower-income students mirror America both demographically and geographically, coming from similar racial and gender groups, and urban versus rural communities, as the average student. Yet lower-income students are underrepresented among top students from the onset; only 28% of high achievers in the first grade come from families with incomes below the national median.

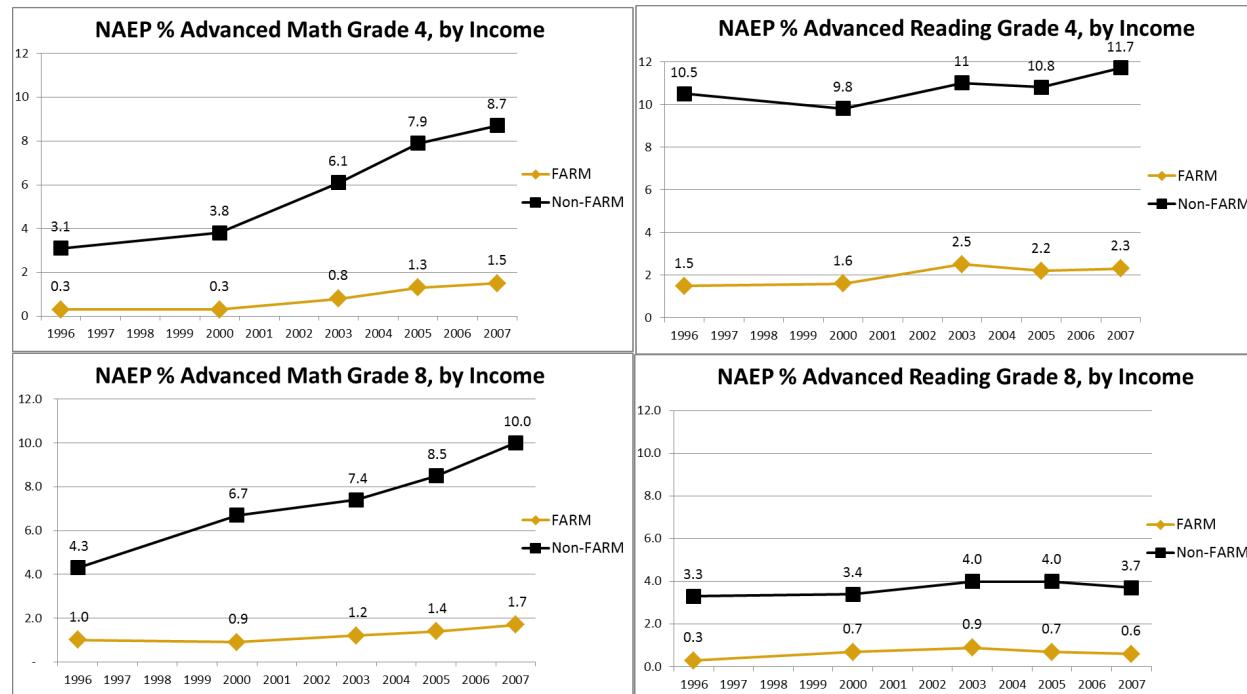
Yet year after year, as they progress through school, lower income students with intellectual capacity nonetheless are less likely than higher-income students to remain a high achiever, graduate from college, or earn a graduate degree. (Figure 1).

Figure 1



What is more, these disparities are growing. Analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) by researchers at the non-partisan Center for Education Policy Analysis indicates that the gap between the percentage of lower- and higher-income (as measured by whether they receive free or reduced-price lunch) 4th and 8th graders who score at the advanced level is large and growing (Figure 2).

Figure 2



WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXCELLENCE GAP?

The Excellence Gap did not develop overnight and its causes are varied. Some however, are clear, including less well-funded schools, more crowded classrooms, less experienced teachers, teacher biases, lack of talent identification, lack of advanced educational learning opportunities, biases in talent identification tests, and the lack of high-quality college advising. In addition, growing up poor is associated with greater environmental stress (neighborhood violence, uncertain housing, family crisis, poor health and nutrition) – all of which hinder students’ ability to learn and thrive academically. All of these factors contribute to high-achieving, lower-income students being less likely to perform at advanced levels or reach higher levels of educational attainment.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite scoring in the top quartile academically, students from the bottom economic quartile were much less likely to have academically enriched experiences in high school than their wealthier peers:

- Less than half (49%) took at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course (compared with 71%).
- Only a third (30%) participated in an academic honor society (versus 51%).

These unequal experiences leave students less prepared for college.

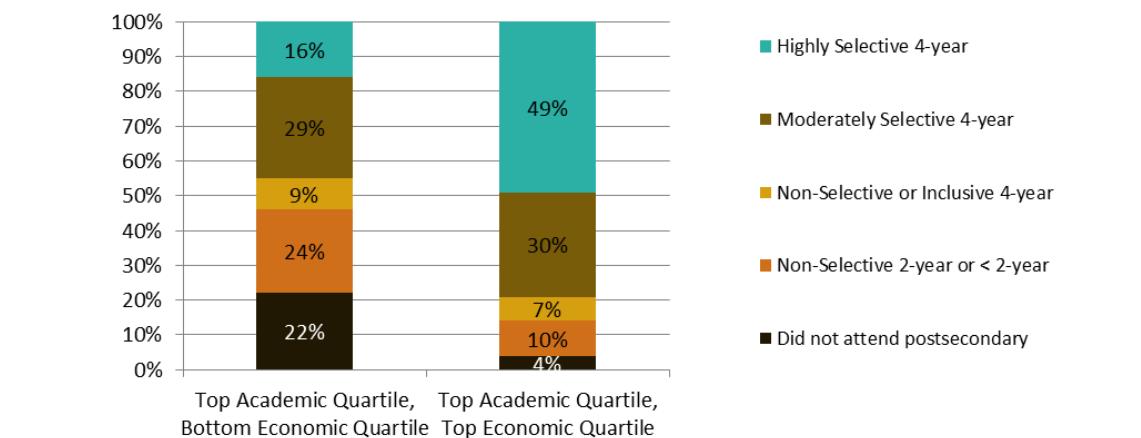
But even when prepared, they are less likely to attend college. A 2014 analysis of data from the Department of Education’s *Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002* reported the following:

- Every year, one in five high school graduates (22%) who scored in the top academic quartile in 10th grade and comes from a family in the bottom economic quartile does not even enroll in college.
- One in four (23%) do not take the SAT or ACT exam.
- Half (56%) do not apply for federal financial aid through the FAFSA.

When one compares the college enrollment of students who placed in the top academic quartile in the nation in 10th grade but who come from the bottom economic quartile, the disparities are stunning. Indigent students attend *far less selective* colleges even though they originally started in the same place academically (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Selectivity of Postsecondary School Entered After High School



One might hypothesize that lower-income students choose less selective institutions because of the higher tuition costs associated with more selective institutions, but it turns out that these students *do not even apply* to more selective colleges, due to a lack of understanding about how these institutions might be affordable.

Researchers at Stanford University and the University of Virginia recently conducted a randomized control trial that demonstrated that sending a simple, low-cost mailing to high achieving lower-income students with information about admission processes and colleges' net prices (i.e., cost after financial aid) statistically substantively raised students' probability of applying to, being admitted at, enrolling in, and progressing through selective colleges. Research also shows that the more selective colleges graduate lower-income students who are equally qualified at higher rates than less selective schools and that graduates from more selective colleges are more likely to continue their education.

WHO IS MAKING IT?

The good news is that coming from an impoverished background alone does not mandate poor college selection; recent research highlights tremendous variability in the ability of schools to facilitate academic progress and growth of high-achieving, lower-income students. And our experience at the Cooke Foundation suggests that some high-achieving, lower-income students do emerge from high school successfully prepared for college. This year (2015), we received nearly 1,500 applications from high-achieving, lower-income students for our college scholarship.* Nearly all of these applicants (97%) reported having an enriched education in some capacity, whether through taking Advanced Placement courses (87%), dual enrollment courses (37%), International Baccalaureate programs (9%), or conducting research or an academic internship (22%). These students demonstrate that lower-income students can reach the highest levels of academic attainment, when given access to rigorous coursework and enrichment opportunities. But 1,500 applicants is a far cry from 80,000. So many more students could thrive and reach advanced learning with just a little more support.

POLICIES TO CLOSE THE EXCELLENCE GAP

Data – The federal government needs to collect better data from the states.

To date, federal education reporting largely ignores advanced learners. As a result, practitioners and policymakers lack adequate data to improve outcomes for advanced learners. While the current provisions of NCLB require that states report to the federal government student performance at the proficient and advanced levels, the reporting structures in place focus primarily on basic and proficient performance, often ignoring advanced performance or lumping advanced learners in with proficiency.

- The federal government should require and enforce state tracking of student achievement at the advanced levels on NAEP, possibly tying incentives to this goal.
- State education agencies (SEA) should require local education agencies (LEA) to track and report on the progress of advanced learners in their districts.

Talent identification – Frequent and varied methods of talent identification need to be employed while more educators need strategies to identify talent.

Despite the many education reforms occurring across the United States, there are too many one-size-fits-all policies at the state and local level that harm the potential of high-ability, low- and lower-income students.

* To be eligible for the Cooke Scholarship, students must be high achieving (earning a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or higher on a 4.0 scale) and lower-income (with an adjusted gross income of \$95,000 or less). The average AGI of selected Scholars is \$34,000.

- LEAs should screen for students' talent using multiple identification methods and offering identification more than one time. The typical practice is a "one-shot" test into a gifted and talented program with a single entry point in the student's academic career. These practices are barriers to bright, lower-income students.
- Most states do not require educators to know how to identify giftedness. States should require expanded training for pre-service and in-service educators on identifying high-ability students.

Student Service and Support – Flexibility and new strategies for serving and supporting high-ability learners need to be developed; barriers need to be removed for students to advance.

- SEAs should require LEAs to be more flexible for advanced learners by requiring LEAs to allow high-ability students to enter kindergarten early, graduate from high school early, accelerate in subjects or grades, and gain school credit for outside-of-school courses.
- LEAs should be required to provide advanced educational opportunities for high-ability learners and to provide a pathway for high-performing students where they can obtain challenging instruction that is commensurate with their demonstrated abilities.
 - This may mean partnering with online programs (such as college level online courses and MOOCs) for both after school and during school.
 - Providing individualized, digitized learning programs (such as School of One) and selective classes or, where there is a critical mass of qualified students, selective public schools (such as Bronx Science, Boston Latin, etc.).
- LEAs should provide out-of-school learning opportunities for high-ability learners (such as afterschool advanced classes, weekend courses and advanced summer school courses).
- LEAs should identify and coordinate social wrap-around services to support high-ability students with financial need so that they can focus on academic success than on the other challenges that inhibit their success.

College Counseling and Access – High-performing students with financial need should have access to high-quality college advising.

The average public school counselor in the U.S. has a caseload of 476 students. Lower-income students are more likely to rely on guidance from school counselors, but the caseloads and sometimes training prohibit meaningful advising. We need to provide pathways to success for our brightest students with financial need.

- LEAs should provide a pathway to success for students whether it is through a school-based, district/network-based, and/or CBO-based partnership with a college access network. Pathways do not need to be traditional. We should look to use innovative approaches such as online resources.
- SEAs should provide LEAs with high-quality information to share with students about applying for financial aid and scholarships, about the benefits to applying to highly competitive colleges and universities, college application fee waivers, standardized testing fee waivers, and the like.
- LEAs should advocate for high-performing, low-income students by identifying students to college admissions for recruitment.
- LEAs and postsecondary institutions should provide access to a "high school to college transition program" to prepare students of success on the college campus.

Accountability – The federal government should hold states accountable for advancing the education of gifted learners.

- The federal government should establish best practice accountability measures for states.
- State education agencies should establish advanced learning accountability measures in their accountability systems.

CONCLUSION

As we strive to close the achievement gaps, we must also close the Excellence Gap. We will not succeed if our highest performing students from lower-income families continue to slip through the cracks. Our failure to help them fulfill their demonstrated potential has significant implications for the social mobility of America's lower-income families and the strength of our economy and society as a whole. The consequences are especially severe in a society in which the gap between rich and poor is growing and in an economy that increasingly rewards highly-skilled and highly-educated workers. By reversing the downward trajectory of their educational achievement, we will not only improve the lives of lower-income high-achievers, but also strengthen our nation by unleashing the potential of literally millions of young people who could be making great contributions to commerce and to our country.

The federal government could play a vital role in ensuring that our brightest students from low-income backgrounds receive the support they need to succeed. We welcome the opportunity to share best practices and research to advance efforts to support high achievers with financial need.

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