



NJDOE News

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Test Scores Set Benchmarks for Addressing Achievement Gap

Commissioner of Education Vito A. Gagliardi, Sr. today issued the following statement on the release of data that for the first time analyzes state assessment results by race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status.

[Detailed charts on the statewide assessment data by race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic factors](#) (PDF)

An achievement gap related to gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status has been one of the most persistent long-term problems in education. It's not just a New Jersey issue or an Abbott issue; it's a national problem.

Research shows that all children can learn. It is the responsibility of the Department of Education and local school districts to intensify our efforts to help children who have difficulty meeting our academic standards. It should not matter where a child goes to school, he or she should have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Our state board adopted standards in which we have defined what we want students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate. The department has implemented an assessment system aligned with our standards so that we can measure how well our students are learning what is expected.

Today, the department is releasing information that, for the first time, documents student performance on last year's fourth and eighth grade assessments based on race/ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. The information provides detailed documentation of various gaps in achievement. The data in large part mirrors national studies and confirms what we have known for a number of years:

- All students, even those who grow up in disadvantaged environments, can learn to high standards and meet our Core Curriculum Content Standards.
- Nevertheless, our fourth and eighth grade assessments show there are serious achievement gaps for African-American and Hispanic students in New Jersey.

While these statistics raise serious concerns that demand our attention, there also are some encouraging signs:

- The achievement gap is significantly smaller among students who took the fourth grade assessment than those who participated in the eighth grade tests. The younger students started school just as a number of significant reforms were being implemented, including the Core Curriculum Content Standards and Whole School Reform. It appears that these initiatives have made a difference in helping to bridge the achievement gap; and
- While there still is an achievement gap between male and female students in language arts literacy that warrants our attention, in math and science there appears to be no significant gender-based gap in achievement.

The 2001 results are a benchmark that will enable the department and local school districts to assess the effects of current and future initiatives that are targeted at narrowing the achievement gap.

To address these identified gaps in achievement, we have taken a number of affirmative steps.

The first step toward addressing the problem is awareness. In advance of the release of this information, the department held a series of workshops for school superintendents on the achievement gap. Nationally recognized experts were brought in to report on national studies related to the issues and to share strategies for closing the gap. In addition, we held principal institutes to assist schools in analyzing their own data. These efforts will continue throughout the school year.

In October, I convened a special Statewide Advisory Committee for Educational Equity to recommend ways to close the achievement gap. The committee brings together well-known experts, civic leaders and school officials. It has been reviewing the current policies governing educational equity and exploring promising practices and proven strategies aimed at closing the achievement gap. Work needs to continue on setting state and local

objectives for narrowing the achievement gap, disseminating information of instructional strategies and practices, and adopting state polices and practices that will support academic achievement for all students.

The whole school reform movement now incorporated into all 434 Abbott schools utilizes several nationally recognized models that have been proven effective in raising achievement in urban school districts. Several of these models focus on early reading achievement. An independent evaluation of Whole School Reform is expected to begin shortly and provide a breakdown of test results by racial/ethnic background, limited English proficiency, gender, and socio-economic status. The findings of this study will enable the department to assess the progress of different groups of students, determine what is working, and propose necessary changes to the Whole School Reform initiative. In the future, we expect the new early childhood programs to have a very positive impact on achievement throughout a child's years in school.

With the current data, we will continue to work collaboratively with school districts on narrowing the achievement gap by designing professional development programs for teachers and administrators on successful instructional strategies to ensure opportunity-to-learn-standards are applied to every school; creating a student database that will allow schools and districts to keep track of individual students and their performance; and developing effective program strategies. While the state has a role to play, local districts are accountable for demonstrating progress in bridging the achievement gap within their schools.

National studies show that achievement gaps can be successfully bridged. New Jersey has taken the first, critical step by identifying the extent of the problem. It's now its up to the department and local school districts to intensify our efforts to find solutions and implement new strategies that are targeted at closing the gap in academic achievement and assuring educational equity and excellence for all our students.

[Detailed charts on the statewide assessment data by race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic factors](#) (PDF)