

The Achievement Gap in North Carolina

Prepared by the Public Schools of North Carolina

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Dr. June St. Clair Atkinson, State Superintendent

The academic achievement gap between and among groups of students continues to be a persistent problem. Data documenting this problem typically highlight the scores by students tested in K-12 schools and the attending markers that accompany this problem. For example, students who score at proficiency levels and above on standardized tests typically populate general education and accelerated studies classes, while those students who score at the basic or below level of proficiency are often described as struggling students for whom instructional and learning interventions are provided.

Determining the causes for the achievement gap among students is not an easy or definitive task because many factors contribute to the achievement gap. However, socio-economic status and race are often associated with academic achievement as evidenced by the findings and conclusions of many research studies and anecdotal reports about different student populations. Many interventions and strategies have been used and continue to be used to decrease this persistent problem.

Several problems and concerns have impacted efforts to eliminate the achievement gap, however. For example, long-term fiscal crises on the global, national, state, and local levels contribute to an erosion of this country's political and economic commitment to fully funding early childhood education. Paired with inadequate early childhood funding is the research data that questions the sustained long-term benefits of programs such as Head Start. Differences in educational philosophies of state and national legislators and other political leaders further diminish the benefits of early childhood education as a funding priority. Intervention strategies to close the achievement gap, therefore, are

subject to inconsistent and inadequate funding that does not provide a favorable educational environment in which students most in need of early childhood education can be taught before the achievement gap becomes a resistant reality.

In 2010, State Superintendent Atkinson established the Office of Early Learning to focus on the Pre-K to Grade 3 learning continuum and the alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment across the early grades. This move was intended to leverage the extraordinary gains made by children served in the state's pre-kindergarten program by strengthening the educational supports and structures for all children pre-kindergarten through third grade.

The long-term impact of state-funded pre-kindergarten was established in 2010 and reaffirmed in 2011 by two rigorous independent studies.

- In 2010, an evaluation by UNC-Chapel Hill found a significant impact of pre-kindergarten on student achievement at 3rd grade and a narrowing of the achievement gap.

Peisner-Feinberg, E., & Shaaf, J. (2010). Long-term Effects of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program: Children's Reading and Math Skills at Third Grade. Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute.

- In 2011, Duke University found a significant impact of pre-kindergarten on student achievement at 3rd grade and reduction in special education placement.

Ladd, H., Muschkin, C., & Dodge, K. (2012). From Birth to School: Early Childhood Initiatives and Third Grade Outcomes in North Carolina. Durham, NC: Duke Sanford School of Public Policy.

In concert with these interventions and strategies, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is providing an annotated bibliography of some of the many documents—research and

otherwise—written about this academic issue. This bibliography is provided to users as an alphabetical listing of resources for quick referral as well as an annotated source with brief summaries for more selective study. Updates will be provided periodically. Our goal is to provide a substantive body of literature about the achievement gap to inform and to guide current and future efforts to eliminate it. We welcome your suggestions.