

'No Child' Law Is Not Closing a Racial Gap

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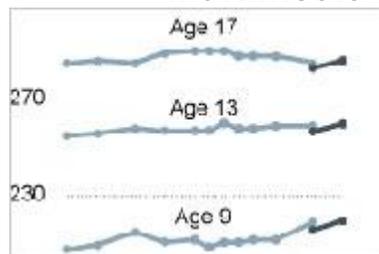
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The achievement gap between white and minority students has not narrowed in recent years, despite the focus of the [No Child Left Behind](#) law on improving the scores of blacks and Hispanics, according to [results](#) of a federal test considered to be the nation's best measure of long-term trends in math and reading proficiency.

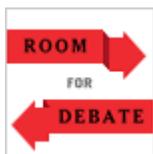
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Between 2004 and last year, scores for young minority students increased, but so did those of white students, leaving the achievement

gap stubbornly wide, despite President [George W. Bush](#)'s frequent assertions that the No Child law was having a dramatic effect.

Although Black and Hispanic elementary, middle and high school students all scored much higher on the federal test than they did three decades ago, most of those gains were not made in recent years, but during the desegregation efforts of the 1970s and 1980s. That was well before the 2001 passage of the No Child law, the [official description](#) of which is "An Act to Close the Achievement Gap."

"There's not much indication that N.C.L.B. is causing the kind of change we were all hoping for," said G. Gage Kingsbury, a testing expert who is a director at the Northwest Evaluation Association in Portland. "Trends after the law took effect mimic trends we were seeing before. But in terms of watershed change, that doesn't seem to be happening."

The results no doubt will stoke debate about how to rewrite the No Child law when the Obama administration brings it up for reauthorization later this year. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) [has said](#) he would like to strengthen national academic standards, tighten requirements that high-quality teachers be distributed equally across schools in affluent and poor neighborhoods, and make other adjustments. "We still have a lot more work to do," Mr. Duncan said of the latest scores. But the long-term assessment results could invigorate those who challenge the law's accountability model itself.

Despite gains that both whites and minorities did make, the overall scores of the United States' 17-year-old students, averaged across all groups, were the same as those of teenagers who took the test in the early 1970s. This was largely due to a [shift in demographics](#); there are now far more lower-scoring minorities in relation to whites. In 1971, the proportion of white 17-year-olds who took the reading test was 87 percent, while minorities were 12 percent. Last year, whites had declined to 59 percent while minorities had increased to 40 percent.

The scores of 9- and 13-year-old students, however, were up modestly in reading, and were considerably higher in math, since 2004, the last time the test was administered. And they were quite a bit higher than those of students of the same age a generation back. Still, the progress of younger students tapered off as they got older.

Some experts said the results proved that the No Child law had failed to make serious headway in lifting academic achievement. “We’re lifting the basic skills of young kids,” said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, “but this policy is not lifting 21st-century skills for the new economy.”

But [Margaret Spellings](#), Mr. Duncan’s predecessor under President Bush, called the results a vindication of the No Child law.

“It’s not an accident that we’re seeing the most improvement where N.C.L.B. has focused most vigorously,” Ms. Spellings said. “The law focuses on math and reading in grades three through eight — it’s not about high schools. So these results are affirming of our accountability-type approach.”

Whether anyone knows how to extend the results achieved with younger students through the turbulent high school years remains an open question.

The math and reading test, known as the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), Long-Term Trends, was given to a nationally representative sample of 26,000 students last year. It was the 12th time since 1971 that the Department of Education administered a comparable test to students ages 9, 13 and 17. The scores, released on Tuesday in Washington, allow for comparisons of student achievement every few years back to the Vietnam and Watergate years.

The results point to the long-term [crisis](#) in many of the nation’s high schools, and could lead to proposals for more federal attention to them in the rewrite of the No Child law, which requires states to administer annual tests in grades three to eight, but only once in high school.

The 2008 score gap between black and white 17-year-olds, 29 points in reading and 26 points in math, could be envisioned as the rough equivalent of between two and three school years' worth of learning, said Peggy Carr, an associate commissioner for assessment at the Department of Education.

Freeman A. Hrabowski III, the president of the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#), who has [written](#) about raising successful black children, said the persistence of the achievement gap should lead policymakers to seek new ways to increase low-performing students' learning time.

“Where we see the gap narrowing, that’s because there’s been an emphasis on supplemental education, on after-school programs that encourage students to read more and do more math problems,” Dr.

Hrabowski said. “Where there are programs that encourage that additional work, students of color do the work and their performance improves and the gap narrows.”

But he said that educators and parents pushing children to higher achievement often find themselves swimming against a tide of popular culture.

“Even middle-class students are unfortunately influenced by the culture that says it’s simply not cool for students to be smart,” he said.

“And that is a factor here in these math and reading scores.”

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents more than 60 metropolitan school systems, said that much of the progress among the nation’s minority students has been the result of hard work by urban educators, not only since the No Child law took effect but for decades before.

“N.C.L.B. did not invent the concept of the achievement gap — much of the desegregation work in the ’70s and ’80s was in fact about giving poor, Hispanic and African-American kids access to better resources and curriculum,” Mr. Casserly said. “You do see from these results that

in that period, the gains were steeper. It wasn't being called an achievement gap, but that was what that was about."