



Acting Commissioner Chris Cerf released the following statement today on the NJEA and the achievement gap

For Immediate Release

Contact: Justin Barra
Allison Kobus
609-292-1126

Date: February 9, 2012

The NJEA over the last several months has indicated again and again that they are not especially troubled with the significant achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers in New Jersey.

In December, the NJEA distributed a press release suggesting that my claim that New Jersey has a “shameful” achievement gap was a “straw man” and based on a “deliberate misuse of data.” Instead, NJEA President Barbara Keshishian argued that while there is an achievement gap in New Jersey between white and African American students, and also high-income and low-income students, we really shouldn’t worry about it because it is not as bad as the gap in some other states.

Earlier this week, when asked about students stuck in failing schools across the state, a leader of the NJEA said, “life’s not always fair, and I’m sorry about that.”

Before we look at the evidence, let’s look at why this matters. The notion of an achievement gap may not be something that matters to the NJEA. But it matters to the nearly 40% of our students who can’t read at grade level in 3rd grade – an indicator closely tied to future success in school. It matters to the thousands of students that drop out of high school or even before high school each year.

And it matters to a high school dropout that faces a radically different future than a college graduate. On average, a college graduate will earn \$1 million more than a high school graduate over a lifetime. Between 1998 and 2008, the job market has drastically shifted in favor of those with a college degree. During that time period, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 10 million jobs were created for those with a college degree, while 600,000 jobs were lost that did not require a high school degree. Lastly, high school dropouts are 47 times more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime than a college graduate.

Because each of those children has a face and a name, it is astonishing that the most well-funded and vocal education group in the state would say that we should be content with any achievement gap at all. The complacency inherent in not wanting to call a system “shameful” in which a child’s zip code largely determines whether he or she will have a fair chance to be successful in life is the exact reason that this problem exists.

The achievement gap in our state is not something to minimize. It is a profoundly disturbing legacy in New Jersey that leaves tens of thousands of students behind each year. We must be honest with ourselves and our communities about the achievement gap, and be impatient and relentless in doing everything we can to close the gap once and for all.

Overview of the data

The NJEA bases their argument on changes in NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores between 1992 and 2011, which they contend proves that the achievement gap is narrowing in New Jersey. However, NAEP researchers consistently reinforce that the testing conditions in 1992 do not allow meaningful comparison to later results because in the early years of testing students were not permitted accommodations in testing procedures. Because of these differences in methodology, direct comparisons between 1992 and 2011 are irresponsible and incomplete.

Using the state’s most recent NAEP scores, however, there are some startling statistics. New Jersey ranks between 2nd and 4th in overall attainment on four tests that NAEP offers – 4th and 8th grade language arts and math. This is unquestionably a remarkable achievement, and one for which we owe a debt of gratitude to our educators across the state.

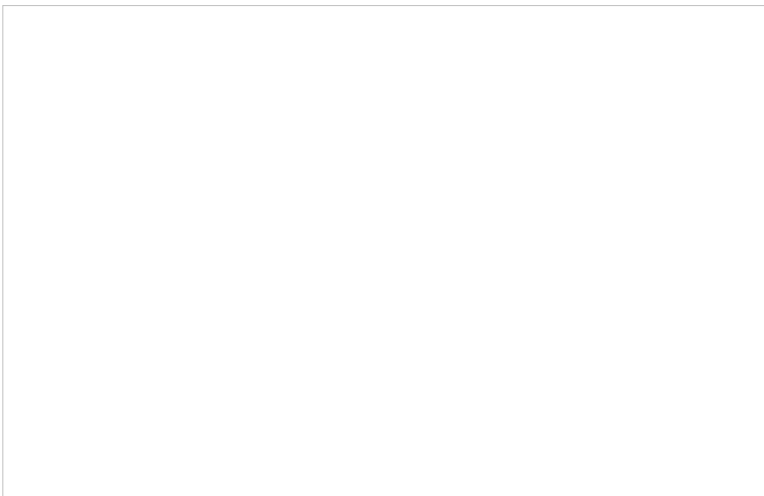
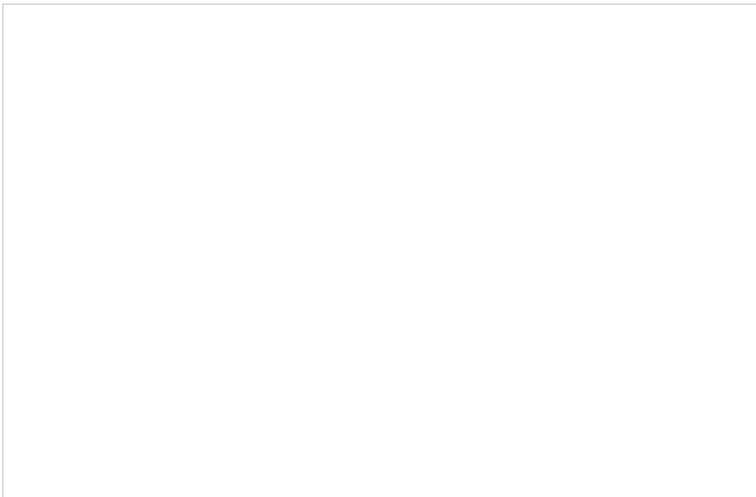
But as the disaggregation of data required by No Child Left Behind demonstrates, high levels of overall achievement do not mean that every subgroup and every student is succeeding equally. In fact, there is only one state that has a higher gap between the proficiency levels of low- and high-income students in 8th grade reading – Alaska.

Every reliable data point that the state has – across all testing programs, grade levels, and subject areas – demonstrates a consistent and persistent achievement gap where low-income, African American, and Hispanic

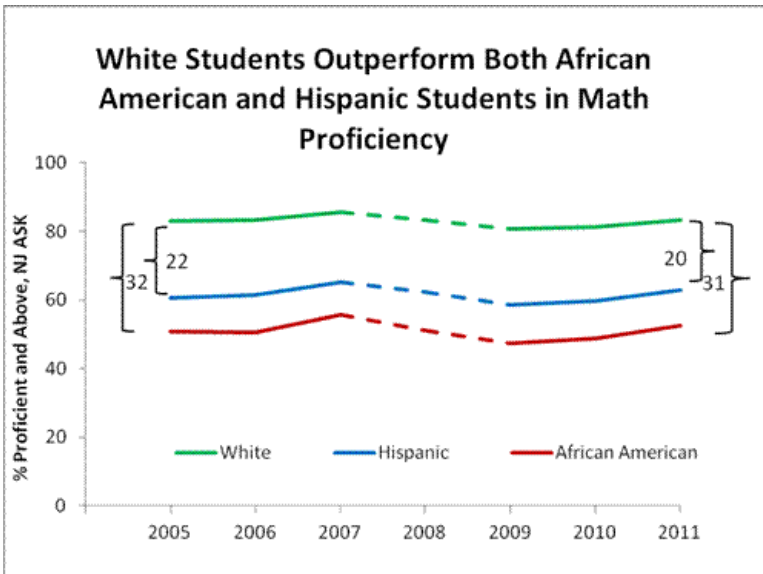
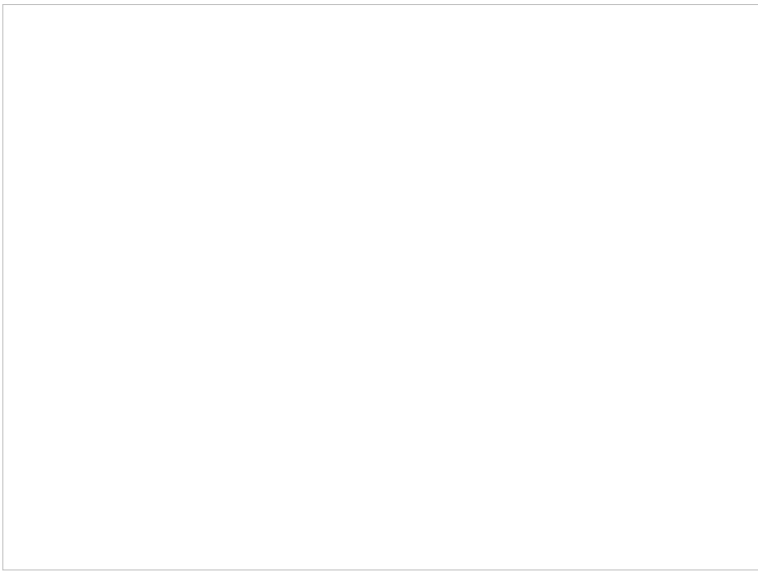
students score at much lower levels than their peers. Even the research conducted by NAEP in 2007 and 2009 specific to the study of achievement gaps shows that New Jersey's gap is large, statistically significant, and, despite our otherwise high performance, not narrowing sufficiently since NAEP began allowing testing accommodations.

NJASK

On the NJASK (New Jersey Assessment of Knowledge and Skills), the state test administered to students in grades 3-8 in math and language arts literacy (LAL), there is a significant proficiency gap between economically disadvantaged students - students eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) - and students not eligible for free and reduced price lunch (non-FRPL). In both subjects, this percentage point gap has remained relatively constant or has widened since 2005. Note that changes in assessments in grades 3 and 4 in 2008-09 and changes in assessments for grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 in 2007-08 mean that longitudinal comparisons in those grades cannot accurately be compared over time. As seen in the charts below, these changes account for the slight overall dip in NJASK scores in these two years as represented by the dotted line.



When we look at racial and ethnic groups, this trend persists. As demonstrated in the charts below, a persistent gap of more than 20 percentage points in pass rates exists between white and both African American and Hispanic students on the NJASK.

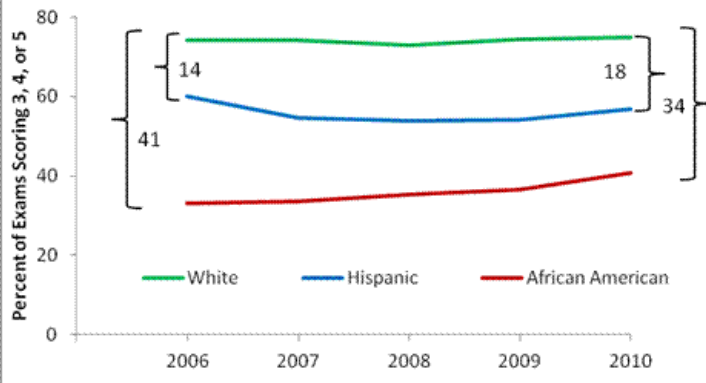


This achievement gap does not exist only on the NJASK. It persists even in high school on measures correlated with college and career readiness.

AP exams

On AP (Advanced Placement) exams, large gaps in passing rates have persisted over time, with a slight increase in the size of the gap for Hispanic students, and a slight decrease in the gap for African American students.

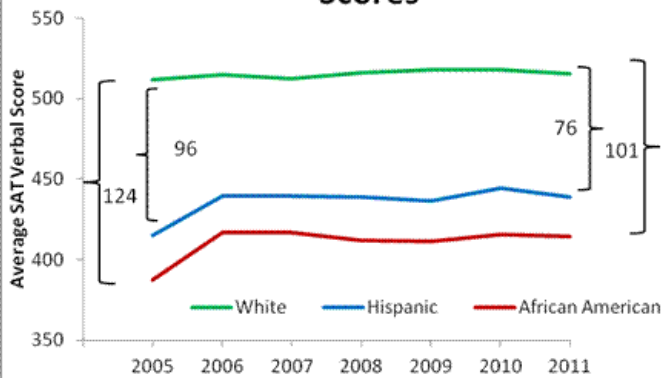
Large Gaps in AP Passing Rates Over Time



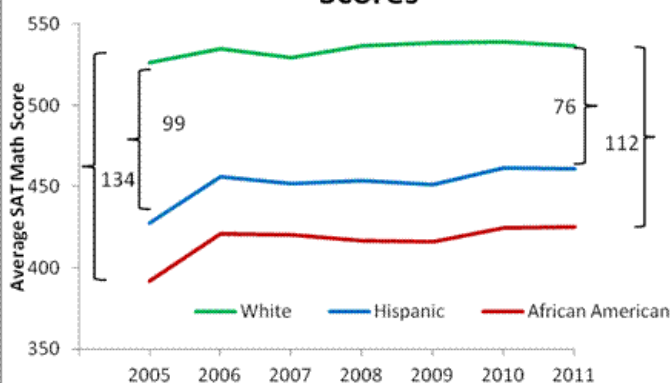
SAT exams

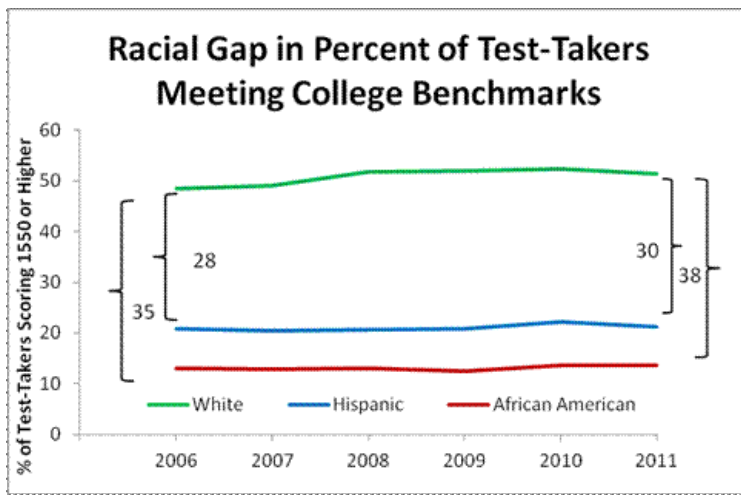
Lastly, on the SAT, African American and Hispanic students are far behind their white peers in both achievement and the percentage of students meeting college ready benchmarks, which are defined directly by the College Board - the group that administers the SAT. Though the gap in overall scores has decreased since 2005, the gap in the number of students meeting SAT college ready benchmarks has increased.

Consistently Large Gap in SAT Verbal Scores



Consistently Large Gap in SAT Math Scores





Other measures of the achievement gap

This is a problem that is plaguing entire communities. Of the 70 lowest performing schools in the state, for example, 23 are in Camden. That's 88 percent of the public schools in Camden. Nobody could look at achievement in Camden and say that children in Camden are being given an equal shot at life.

This is not just a problem in urban districts as the NJEA would have you believe. Across the state, there are approximately 40,000 3rd graders that do not read at grade level. That's 40 percent of all of our eight to nine year old students not able to read at the level that will put them on track for success in future grades. Of that 40 percent, roughly half of those students are from schools that have a higher poverty rate than the statewide school-level poverty average. So anyone who says that our achievement gap exists only because of community-wide poverty is simply not telling the truth.

Even where our children are succeeding in the K-12 system, they are not truly ready for college and career. More than 90 percent of students that enter Bergen and Essex County Community Colleges need remediation before they can even take a college course. Because of that remediation, statistics show a large number of those students will drop out of college before getting a degree. We can do better.

Arcelio Aponte, President of the New Jersey State Board of Education, echoed these thoughts. "Closing the achievement gap so that all students succeed should be the highest priority for everyone involved in education in New Jersey. As part of State Board of Education committee structure, I convened a Task Force last year to specifically look at the causes of the achievement gap that leave tens of thousands of our low-income and minority students in failing schools. While students from New Jersey may be outperforming their counterparts across America, these students are still performing far worse than their counterparts in the state of New Jersey. I hope that the NJEA is not simply satisfied with the meager progress made and doesn't truly believe that this achievement gap is acceptable. I would like to see the NJEA support the Commissioner's efforts to help all students succeed."

The NJEA's position, quite explicitly, is that our African American children are doing better than many other states' African American children. I take great offense at this perspective. The NJEA believes the right question is whether poor children or children of color are performing better than children within the same demographic group elsewhere. I believe that the right question is whether we are giving every child an equal opportunity in education regardless of birth circumstances - that is, not in comparison to their demographic peers, but to all children.

What the NJEA willfully refuses to admit is that being honest about where we can do better is not an attack on our teachers. We have some of the best, hardest working teachers in the country. But I have yet to meet a teacher who tells me that it is OK to allow tens of thousands of our children to fail each year. And I have yet to meet a teacher who tells me that they're as good as they'll ever be and have no room for improvement.

In our NCLB waiver application that we submitted to the US Department of Education in November, we identified concrete steps that we will take to turn around our lowest performing schools. We must be impatient and we must not accept failure in any school that is not giving children a fair chance at life.

Incremental progress might be fine inside the NJEA offices. But it is not good enough for the student that is assigned to a failing school without any choice available to them for a better option. The NJEA would be satisfied to tell that student not to worry about the achievement gap that has determined their destiny - it is just a "straw man" after all. But that student doesn't care about the incremental progress we've made in the last two decades. Not when they are the one that is still left behind.

However, the reforms that we have proposed across the state are not just for our low performing schools. They will help all teachers and all schools constantly improve for every child in the state. A meaningful teacher evaluation system tied to professional development will help all teachers, regardless of whether they are in their 3rd or 30th year, improve their effectiveness. The proposal to allow districts to differentiate pay will allow all districts to retain their best teachers, and ensure that those teachers are serving their neediest students.

Education reform is not a zero sum game. We can all improve to make sure every child is truly ready for the demands of the 21st century.

It's time to be honest with ourselves about both our successes and our failures. As Commissioner of Education, my sole responsibility is to make sure that all students get the education they deserve. I will never say that failing tens of thousands of students is "good enough." The NJEA should join me in calling our achievement gap "shameful" rather than arguing that we should be content with the status quo.