

POLICY BRIEF

State Level Strategies and Policies for Closing the Achievement Gap

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Introduction

California's struggle to close the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic achievement gaps among its groups of students mirrors that of every other state. But compared with other states, the challenge in California is by every measure more daunting. Gaps between white students on the one hand and African American and Latino students on the other are among the widest in the nation. Similarly, the state has the largest achievement gaps between students from low income families and those from more affluent homes.

Even more alarming is the scope of the imbalance. While in some states relatively small percentages of students are at the low end of the gap, fully 70 percent of California's students are among those falling behind—a reality that underscores and galvanizes policy urgency.

This is not to say that California's schools and students have not made progress. In

spite of massive growth in enrollment and diversity over the last 15 years and a level of resources and support markedly lower than that provided in most states, achievement for all students has improved or at least held steady—a tribute to California's educators. The problem is that even as all do better, the gaps between groups persist.

At the national level, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2002, has made closing the gap a U.S.-wide priority. Spurred by NCLB's accountability pressures, states have launched numerous policy initiatives aimed at reducing achievement disparities. This brief summarizes what's being learned from state initiatives, especially in states similar to California; addresses key obstacles that may be limiting the effectiveness of California's policy approach; and discusses options for California policymakers.

Major Conclusions

No state has had a consistent record of narrowing the gap, in all its aspects, over a

significant period of time. Over the past five years, however, the three states most similar

to California in size and demographics— Texas, Florida, and New York—have made greater progress than California in narrowing some aspects of the gap (see Table 1). Each has enacted multiple policies simultaneously (see Table 2), making it difficult to draw causal inferences about how given interventions affect particular measures of the gap. There is substantial

research evidence, however, that some intervention do improve student outcomes, and a strategy that aims toward the development of a coherent and comprehensive policy framework and targets resources to the neediest schools and students may offer broad-scale promise for closing California’s achievement gaps.

Table 1

Percent change in gaps from 2003- 2007 on NAEP assessments by jurisdiction

		Black-White	Hispanic-White	FRPL
4 th Grade Mathematics	California	-3.33	7.41	-4.00
	Florida	-10.71	9.09	-21.74
	New York	-3.70	-16.00	-13.64
	Texas	4.55	-5.56	-5.56
	National	-3.70	-4.55	0.00
4 th Grade Reading	California	-12.90	-3.03	-3.23
	Florida	-22.58	-22.22	-19.23
	New York	-18.75	3.70	-6.67
	Texas	0.00	-9.09	9.52
	National	-10.00	-7.14	-3.57
8 th Grade Mathematics	California	-8.11	-6.06	-13.33
	Florida	-18.92	-13.64	-21.43
	New York	-15.79	-10.34	-22.58
	Texas	-3.33	-16.13	-8.33
	National	-11.43	0.00	-10.34
8 th Grade Reading	California	11.54	-3.57	-7.41
	Florida	-17.24	-29.41	-13.64
	New York	-9.68	3.70	-13.79
	Texas	4.00	-4.00	4.35
	National	0.00	-7.69	-4.00

*FRPL = Free and Reduced Price Lunch

Table 2

Policy interventions in Texas, Florida, and New York

	High standards & aligned curriculum & instruction	Effective teaching	Early childhood intervention	Early intervention for college
TX	TX boasts of a rigorous curriculum. College prep has been the “default” in high schools since 2001. But relative to other states, TX standards are low & undemanding.	<i>Targeting:</i> Teacher distribution is only now being addressed. In (2008?), Governor announced \$100m program of incentive pay for teachers who demonstrate success in improving student performance in high poverty schools.	Innovative policies to improve teacher quality in all public & private preK; to integrate preK, K, Head Start, & child care via community partnerships. <i>Targeting.</i> Emphasis on poor & EL children. Goal is to provide full-day, full-year child care & early education to all eligible children.	Provides high aspirations, rigorous curriculum, & financial incentives for academically successful low-income students to attend TX public higher education institutions.
FL		Merit pay program began in 2006, primarily based on student scores on state exam. <i>Targeting:</i> Disallows disproportionate numbers of new, temporarily certified or out-of-field teachers or teachers in need of improvement from teaching in low performing schools.	Universal, voluntary preK for 4-yr-olds since 2002; Includes rigorous teacher certification standards.	The FL Partnership for Minority & Underrepresented Student Achievement works w/the College Board to expand AP course participation; provide college admissions testing in inner-city & low-income communities; organize programs that link college students & faculty w/high school students; & provide early diagnostic testing.
NY	Longstanding resource focus on rigorous curriculum & high expectations for all students. Regents’ exam, now required in 5 subjects for h.s. graduation, has driven a high quality curriculum for all state students.	Longstanding focus on high quality teaching. Since 1980s, middle school teachers need subject-specific certification. Since 2005, banned uncertified teachers; raised standards for new ones. Low levels of out-of-field teaching in core subjects. Regents Teaching Policy creates career-long system, w/high standards for prep, certification, induction, prof’l development, recruitment, retention. <i>Targeting:</i> Systems of support for teachers in low-performing districts; financial incentives to teach in hard-to-staff areas.	Universal preK policy since 1997 but not fully implemented due to lack of funding.	

More specifically, we can derive three key lessons from looking across state efforts:

- *There are basic policy ingredients for success in closing the gap.* States that make strides are all drawing from the same menu of effective policy options, and that menu encompasses the basic ingredients for gap-closing success.
- *The policy options for closing the gap and those for just plain ensuring good education are one and the same; the key is making sure that all groups of students get the benefits.* States have gained clarity about which policy approaches—with the resources these imply—are needed to undergird a solid, 21st-century education system. The exact same approaches apply to closing the achievement gap. But to close the gap, policies must attend to the reality that students who consistently fall short of expectations need at least the same level of essential resources provided to their more privileged peers. They very often need more.
- *Success requires a coherent approach that not only includes the basic ingredients but also appropriately targets resources.* Using one or two of the essential policy options is unlikely to lead to gap-closing; success requires a coherent policy framework that includes all the key ingredients. More than that, it must particularly focus on students who are falling behind.

The basic ingredients for gap-closing success are:

- *High standards and aligned curriculum and instruction.* The starting point is setting high academic standards statewide and maintaining high expectations for all students—as opposed to the still-common lower expectations for poor and minority

students. Policies need to ensure that all students have access to a challenging curriculum that's aligned to the standards; students can't learn what they haven't been taught. Curriculum rigor, in turn, helps ensure that instruction reflects the standards.

- *Effective teaching.* NCLB requires a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. Beyond ensuring appropriate credentials, states need to enact policies that strengthen teacher preparation programs, provide incentives that draw the best teachers to the neediest students and hardest-to-staff schools, and provide resources for focused professional development that equips teachers for the challenges of needy students and schools.
- *Extra learning opportunities.* Students need extra help as soon as they start falling behind. Usually this requires extra learning time, either during the school day, before- or after school or on Saturday. NCLB provides additional resources that states may use to provide just such help. States can apply these funds to the pinpointed needs of struggling groups of students.
- *Early intervention for college.* Minority and low-income students lag behind others in college attendance. Their high schools sometimes don't offer college-requisite courses. Many lack the knowledge or resources to navigate college applications or financial aid systems. Policies need to ensure college-preparatory course opportunities, including access to Advanced Placement courses, as well as provide early and complete information about what it takes academically, financially, and otherwise to go to college.
- *Early childhood intervention.* Many poor and minority students are behind

before they begin kindergarten, and the gap then tends to grow throughout school. States need to provide high quality childcare and preschool that bolster school readiness skills among children from low-income families. The

large initial state investment is a policymaking challenge, but research indicates that the potential payoffs—in terms of such indicators as high school graduation and future employment rates—are major.

Chief Obstacles to Policy Implementation in California

Unquestionably, experiments in other states provide helpful direction. What they don't offer California is a roadmap. No state can point to a long-term track record of success, and—even if any could—no state's challenges match the magnitude of California's. A key obstacle, then, to an effective policy strategy for closing California's achievement gap is this:

- *Lack of sufficient, specific knowledge about what works in the California context.* We don't yet know enough about exactly how to combine, calibrate, and supplement the key ingredients for gap-closing success in a state as large, complex, and diverse as California.

More specific obstacles include:

- *High standards but weak support for schools.* Compared with similar states, California has higher standards but has not adopted policies that would provide all schools and students with the resources and support they need to achieve at these high levels.
- *Lack of resource targeting.* California has particularly lagged in targeting resources to the students who need them most. For example, while making strides in reducing its number of under-prepared teachers, the state has not instituted incentives for attracting the best teachers to hard-to-staff schools. The state invests \$1.8 billion annually in K-3 class size reduction to support early-grade teaching and learning, but the program does not target the poor and minority children

who benefit most from smaller class sizes. Current preschool programs do target low income children, but these programs lag behind many states in terms of funding, consistent quality, and families' access to them.

- *Lack of local flexibility.* In the nation's most diverse state, policies give schools and school districts little flexibility to use education dollars in ways tailored to meet local student needs. One-size-fits-all approaches—especially given low overall funding compared with other states—limit efforts to reduce the achievement gap, by inhibiting local innovation and policy learning.
- *Limited ability to gauge whether policies are working.* California too rarely evaluates policies to determine their effectiveness. Critically, research that does occur is hobbled by the absence of the kind of comprehensive statewide data system that other states use to track the progress of individual students.
- *Gaps in overall policy strategy.* With the adoption of high standards and an aligned accountability system in the late 1990s, California made strides against piecemeal policymaking. But key pieces of its strategy remain missing or not folded in. For example, the state has enacted reforms in teacher preparation, induction, and professional development, but, unlike states such as New York, has not pulled these pieces together into a career-long system. Moreover, changes in teacher

compensation approaches such as career ladders or extra pay for certain assignments, such as incentive pay newly adopted in Texas, are not yet part of the state's overall strategy. And

certain major investments—notably K-3 class size reduction—stand apart from the strategy rather than being integrated to help reach achievement and gap-closing goals.

Policy Implications

Without a roadmap and given the unprecedented scale of its challenge, California needs to invent—through trial and error—a California-specific approach that both incorporates and builds on the key ingredients for gap-closing success. The urgency of the problem argues for making high-priority, significant investments in developing policies that focus overtly on reducing the gap. This will be a learning process, requiring at least these steps:

- *Pilot innovative approaches.* Do this on a relatively small scale in a carefully selected sample of schools. Policy experimentation could prove especially fruitful in areas where our current knowledge about what works and what does not remains weak, including policies that address teachers' careers (preparation, recruitment, evaluation, and compensation); supplementary services and extended learning time; and programs and practices to improve instruction for English language learners (ELS; e.g., [1]).
- *Make smarter use of resources.* California can do a much better job of ensuring that scarce resources are allocated in ways that support the accomplishment of the state's policy priorities, including closing achievement gaps. This might include initiatives that move toward implementing: 1) a weighted student formula that provides additional financial support to schools and districts that educate students with greater needs; 2) financial and other

incentives to encourage the state's best teachers to accept assignment to the most challenging schools; and 3) policies that target programs such as preschool, extended school days and years, and reduced class sizes to the students who need them most.

- *Rigorously evaluate each new policy and program.* Policymakers need evidence about success or failure to make critical decisions.
- *Institute a comprehensive, statewide data and tracking system.* States that have such systems are way ahead in their ability to analyze what's working and what isn't. Using individual student identification numbers, they can track students anywhere in the system and learn more about the quality of teachers, the effectiveness of schools, and the strengths and weaknesses of programs. Numerous California stakeholders vocally support full development of such a system, and we concur. Without one, we have to wait for results from yearly standardized tests to have any sense of changes in the achievement gap, and those scores provide only limited help in determining policy effectiveness.
- *Develop robust strategies for sharing information* about effective programs and practices across schools and school districts. Local partnerships and networks can help to ensure that new knowledge about effective policies and practices becomes available to educators throughout California.

References

1. Koppich, J. (2008). *Reshaping teacher policies to improve student achievement*. PACE Policy Brief 08-3. Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.