Policy Brief

Time to Act:
Closing the Racial Achievement Gap
Introduction

The sobering reality of California’s public education system is that not enough of our schools focus on preparing all students to succeed. It is clear that for many students of color, the education system has not advanced their ability to succeed in college or careers. African-American and Latino students are the largest group of young people in our schools but they are not achieving at acceptable rates and not nearly at the rates of White and Asian-American students.

Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Silicon Valley Education Foundation confronted these issues head on by partnering on an educational series to dig deeply into the causes and remedies of the racial achievement gap. This invitation-only series brought leaders in education, business, civic, nonprofit and philanthropic communities together charged with examining the facts and discussing policy options that local leaders could support and school boards could adopt.

This brief is the product of those discussions. It presents five essential policy recommendations to address the racial achievement gap and the systemic inequities in our schools that contribute to it. Recognizing that motivation, school engagement and academic performance can decline as students move into middle and high school, these policy recommendations are aimed at these crucial transition points.

Closing the racial achievement gap is the critical education issue of our time if we are to build a diverse workforce and engaged citizenry equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in a more complex, competitive world.

“Race and racism are not the only factors contributing to the achievement gap, but rather the missing factors in our exhaustive attempts to reform schools.”

- Glenn Singleton
  Executive Director, Pacific Educational Group

Background

Large and pervasive gaps in achievement and educational opportunity remain between low-income students and students of color, and their more advantaged peers. The state’s recently released 2009 Base Academic Performance Index data reveal that low-income and students of color are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest-achieving schools with 39 percent of African-American and 44 percent of Latinos attending the bottom 30 percent of schools. These students disproportionately receive less of everything that matters in education: less school funding, less qualified teachers and less access to rigorous coursework.

While the reasons why poor children of color perform comparatively less well can be explained by the fact that such children are educated in schools that, on most measures of quality and funding, are inadequate, what is more difficult to explain is why children of color from middle class, college educated families continue to lag significantly behind White students on most achievement measures. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that low-income white students out-perform higher-income African-American students (See Figure 1).

Glenn Singleton, executive director of Pacific Educational Group and nationally recognized speaker, trainer and author suggests that there has been no real investigation into the impact of race on student achievement. He challenges us to examine the powerful relationship between race and schooling and how this plays out in education policy and practice.

“It is imperative that with the changing demographics of the state, everyone be willing to undertake courageous conversations about race and racism no matter how uncomfortable they might be.”

- Jack O’Connell
  State Superintendent of Public Instruction

 Figure 1 – Average American College Testing (ACT) Composite Scores by Parental Income and Race/Ethnicity, 2008-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Afr. Amer.</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$30,000</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;$100,000</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Silicon Valley Community Foundation
Access

A growing body of evidence indicates that competence in mathematics is essential for functioning in everyday life as well as succeeding in our increasingly knowledge-based economy. The study of Algebra I, in particular, is commonly recognized as a gatekeeper to the college track. A recently released Noyce Foundation study of nine San Francisco Bay Area school districts reveals a disturbing picture of progress toward increasing the number of students successful in Algebra in eighth grade. For example, 14 percent of Asian students who were successful in eighth grade Algebra were again placed in ninth grade Algebra, compared to 33 percent of Latinos, 59 percent of Filipinos and 37 percent of Whites. Furthermore, over half of the students who were placed in Algebra for a second time did not improve and in some cases did worse (See Figure 3).  

Additional findings in the study raise a troubling issue: students of color appear more likely to be adversely affected by variations in placement decisions. Such variation implies that who students are and where they attend school, rather than their achievement level, can be the deciding factor in whether they progress from eighth grade Algebra to ninth grade Geometry, or whether they must re-take the same course. Placement in Algebra should be based on objective, predictive criteria, and not on random judgments, impacted by educator bias. There is too much at stake.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish consistent criteria for student placement in grade 7 pre-Algebra, grade 8 Algebra and the subsequent course sequence in grades 9 through 12.

“Teachers’ grading systems vary [and are subjective] so recommendations for placement vary.”

— Closing the Racial Achievement Gap Forum Participant

Figure 3 – Percentage of Ninth Grade Students Enrolled in Algebra I Who Received a Grade of "B-" or Better in This Same Course in the Eighth Grade, 2007-08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Filipino</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51% of students who were successful in Algebra as eighth graders but placed in Algebra again as ninth graders did not improve the second time around.

Source: Noyce Foundation

Recommending professionals to attract and retain the most qualified and effective teachers for our high need schools and students.

Teachers and Instruction

Teachers are the single most important school-based influence on student success. Research has shown that a lack of consciousness about the cultures of students and families of color can lead educators to unintentionally lower their expectations. The student population in Silicon Valley, like the rest of the state, is increasingly diverse. Our teachers, on the other hand, do not reflect this diversity (See Figure 2).  

Unions and collective bargaining agreements are often cited as barriers to getting good teachers into high-need schools. These agreements usually grant preference to teachers with seniority. However, a 2006 study included in the Stanford University Getting Down to Facts research project found no systematic evidence that the seniority preference rules in collective bargaining agreements independently affect the distribution of teachers among schools. Furthermore, there were examples of administrators who have made hiring and assignment decisions in the best interests of their students despite strong union language and regardless of seniority preferences.

Policymakers, education leaders and teachers alike are saying that seniority rules are outdated and that other factors related to teacher performance should be considered when making staffing decisions. In a recent brief, The Education Trust–West makes a compelling case for why and how districts can use teacher evaluation data in making layoff decisions within state education code parameters.

A key question then is how do we best prepare a predominantly white teacher population to work effectively with racially and culturally diverse students? Teachers must critically examine their own values and belief systems about race and achievement; particularly those that fail to respect the identity and maximize the achievement of culturally diverse students. They must receive professional development in culturally relevant and responsive instruction defined by curricula as well as performance and delivery standards that recognize the need to build upon the characteristics, learning styles, strengths, interests and cultural background/heritage of students in the classroom.

Districts also need to enact policies that attract and retain highly qualified and effective teachers for low-income, high-minority schools. Students of color are disproportionately taught by inexperienced and out-of-field teachers. Seniority-based layoffs are all too common—with Latino and African-American students more likely to be impacted by teacher turnover—and have intensified due to devastating cuts in the state’s public education spending.

Source: California Department of Education

Figure 2 – Percentage of Students and Teachers by Ethnicity in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, 2008-09

![Graph showing percentage of students and teachers by ethnicity](image)

Source: Noyce Foundation

Swaps

Students

Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afr. Amer.</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Policy Brief

5 Time to Act: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap
Rigor and Expectations

All students must have access to rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, effective instruction and targeted supports. High expectations for all are the basis for success in school, college and careers. Researchers at the University of California/All Campus Consortium for Research Diversity and the University of California at Los Angeles Institute for Democracy, Education and Access noted that Hispanic and African-American students face a “double layer of inequality.” First, schools where those minorities are the majority are less likely to offer A-G courses, and fewer of their teachers have the knowledge and credentials to teach them. Second, if they attend majority White and Asian schools, they will have fewer chances to take A-G classes.11

In school year 2008-09, less than 25 percent of Silicon Valley’s Latino students met college preparation (UC/CSU) course requirements compared to over 70 percent of Asians and over 50 percent of Whites (See Figure 4).12

Local districts should make A-G courses the default curriculum in high school for all students to eliminate these disparities, following the recommendation of the California P-16 Council Implementation Subcommittee. Benefits associated with this include higher expectations for students who will strive to reach them, while avoiding tracking students of color into easier courses under the assumption they cannot handle the work. Counselors can encourage students to start thinking about college in ninth grade. Research has shown that when students are informed of the importance of A-G coursework, they often make different decisions about their coursework.13 Acknowledging that the college pathway may not be applicable to all students, high school curricula can nevertheless offer a rigorous, linked learning approach that combines academics and real-world experience to students with options that they choose rather than a course selection process that keeps them from reaching their full potential. Preparing students for post-secondary success, either in college or careers has economic benefits for both students and society as a whole.

A Call to Action

Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Silicon Valley Education Foundation recognize that serious action is needed in four areas if we are to ensure that students of color succeed. We must confront institutionalized racism through courageous conversations about race and its impact on education policy and practice. We must expose students of color to highly qualified and effective teachers. We must examine how students are placed in higher-level gatekeeper courses such as Algebra I. We must look at academic rigor for students of color as reflected in completed coursework.

We believe the policy recommendations in this brief, while not exhaustive, will make a difference if implemented in a systemic and intentional way. They are presented as a beginning plan of action for school districts to adopt. Closing the racial achievement gap is a problem we can solve as long as we address the challenges directly. Failure to do so will mean losing a growing and essential portion of human capital to poverty. The price will be paid not only by individual students and families but by the entire country.

Endnotes

4. Ibid.

Figure 4 – Percentage of High School Students Completing UC/CSU Courses by Ethnicity, 2008-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>2008-09 Percentage</th>
<th>Source: California Department of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afr. Amer.</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>22.7, 34.5, 26.5, 56.6, 51.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Equity is a mindset and that students of color can do the work.”

– Closing the Racial Achievement Gap Forum Participant
Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is a catalyst and leader for innovative solutions to our region’s most challenging problems. Serving all of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, the community foundation has $1.7 billion in assets under management and 1,500 philanthropic funds. The community foundation provides grants through donor advised and corporate funds in addition to its own endowment funds. The community foundation serves as a regional center for philanthropy, providing donors simple and effective ways to give locally and around the world. For more information visit www.siliconvalleycf.org.

Silicon Valley Education Foundation

Silicon Valley Education Foundation (SVEF) focuses on raising student performance in the critical areas of math and science across all 33 Santa Clara County school districts. Everything we do supports our objective of Silicon Valley being the number one geographic area in California in the percentage of high school graduates academically prepared for college and careers. Our goal is to be the leading advocate for public education in our region. We are known for our clear focus on achieving results, partnering, and emphasizing creativity and innovation. Beyond serving students, teachers, and administrators, we provide value to the larger community by making investing in education easy. Visit www.SVEFoundation.org for more information.