

'A permanent talent underclass': Report charts 'excellence gap' among American students

October 22 2013, by Tom Breen

The circle of high-achieving American students is becoming a preserve for the white and well-off, with potentially severe consequences for the country's promise of equal opportunity, according to a new report by University of Connecticut Prof. Jonathan Plucker and colleagues at two other universities.

["Talent on the Sidelines: Excellence Gaps and the Persistence of America's Permanent Talent Underclass"](#) examines the underreported problem of [students](#) from specific backgrounds dominating the ranks of those who perform best on national assessment tests.

While a great deal of attention and resources have been focused on the achievement gap among students, which measures basic proficiency in subjects like math and reading, almost none have been devoted to the "excellence gap" at the highest achievement levels.

The report follows on an earlier study led by Plucker which was issued in 2010. At the time, Plucker said there was the possibility that the excellence gap might narrow. The new data, though, show the opposite has happened: the gap between white, relatively affluent students and their poorer, nonwhite classmates has only widened.

"The current study should crush anyone's optimism about the country's success in developing academic talent," said Plucker, a professor in the

Neag School of Education. "The data we explored for this report, along with a growing body of research, provide considerable evidence that America has a permanent talent underclass."

The report, which uses data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and state assessments, shows that while the percentage of white students scoring at the advanced level in Grade 4 mathematics increased from 2.9 percent to 9 percent between 1996 and 2011, the percentage of high-scoring black students barely budged, reaching 1.1 percent in 2011.

The math scores based on economic background were even more dramatic, with students ineligible for free or reduced-price lunches improving from 3.1 percent in the advanced range in 1996 to 11.4 percent in 2011. Less affluent students, meanwhile, went from 0.3 percent scoring in the advanced range to 1.8 percent.

The report, which Plucker compiled along with DePauw University's Jacob Hardesty and Michigan State University's Nathan Burroughs, also tracked reading scores and compared high achieving American students' performance to their international peers, a comparison that found U.S. students lagging.

The report also offers state-by-state comparisons, where the lack of non-white and poorer students among the highest achievers can be even more stark than the national average. In North Carolina, for example, the percentage of [black students](#) with advanced scores in Grade 4 math rounds to zero, while in Texas, an impressive 17 percent of more well-off students have advanced scores in that category, compared to just 3 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Individual state profiles are available at the report [web site](#).

The [report](#) also contains policy recommendations, ranging from

requiring states to include the performances of advanced students in accountability systems to bringing federal resources, which are now essentially non-existent for excellence education, to bear. Closing the gap will also require an acknowledgement of the role childhood poverty plays in reducing many students' chance at a quality education.

"If the diversity of our school-age population isn't represented among our high-achieving students, we can make the argument that we've failed to achieve either equity or excellence, with serious implications for America's future," Plucker said.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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