

# Study finds gains for minority students but English learners still lag

January 13 2017, by Miriam Wasserman

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Researchers say black, Hispanic and Asian students have made gains compared to their white peers but socioeconomic factors still hold students back.

Against increasing odds, minority students have made significant academic gains relative to white peers of similar [socioeconomic background](#), according to a new study co-authored by Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE) Professor Martin Carnoy.

But there is one important exception: Hispanic and Asian students who classified as English Language Learners are making no progress in academic achievement relative to white students and are falling further behind their non-ELL ethnic peers.

Carnoy and Emma García, of the Economic Policy Institute, conducted a comprehensive review of racial and ethnic differences in mathematics and reading [test scores](#) at U.S. schools using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). They matched individual student characteristics with their 8th grade math scores between 1996 and 2013 as well as reading and mathematics scores for 4th and 8th grade between 2003 and 2013.

"It is not that white students are doing worse," Carnoy said. "This is a period when test scores went up by quite a bit. Minority students are gaining ground relative to rising scores, so it is quite a movement."

Even more striking, these gains happened while there was a substantial increase in student poverty and in the share of students attending high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch). And both of these factors tend to have a negative effect on test scores.

Moreover, these negative trends affect [minority students](#) disproportionately. "Black and Hispanic students made these test score gains despite the fact that they are much more likely to go to high-poverty, high disadvantaged-minority schools," Carnoy said.

This was the case even if the students themselves were not poor. Carnoy and García found that about one in five black and Hispanic students who were not eligible for free or reduced price lunch attended a high-poverty school –compared with just 3.2 percent of non-eligible white students. In all, more than 40 percent of black and Hispanic students attended a high-poverty school compared to only about 7 percent of white students in 2013.

Because the data allowed researchers to separate students who were designated as English Language Learners (ELL) from the broader Hispanic and Asian student populations, their results offer dramatically contrasting trends:

- The [achievement gap](#) closed substantially between non-ELL Hispanic students and white students of similar socioeconomic background. For instance, Hispanic students were testing only the equivalent of 5 points behind (out of 100 point test) compared to similar whites in 8th grade math tests in 2013.
- Non-ELL Asian students made phenomenal gains in a short period of time. They started out scoring higher in math and about the same in reading as equivalent white students. But their advantage grew and by 2013, non-ELL Asian students scored the

equivalent of almost 15 points higher than similar white students in math—an advantage almost as large in size as the math achievement gap between black and white students..

- Although the black/white achievement gap remained large, black students made progress in narrowing the distance in both reading and math with respect to whites of similar socioeconomic background. The size of the gap for African Americans in math in 8th grade in 2013 was the equivalent of scoring 50 points versus 68 for whites out of a 100-point test.
- In sharp contrast, Hispanic and Asian English Language Learners showed the largest achievement gaps with respect to whites of all the groups in the study. In 8th grade reading, for instance, the gap between Hispanic English Language Learners with respect to white students with similar socioeconomic characteristics was of about 34 points: the equivalent of scoring 50 points when white students of similar socioeconomic background scored 84 on a 100-point test in 2013. Moreover, ELL students made no progress in closing the gap in mathematics and fell farther behind in 4th grade reading compared to whites of similar socioeconomic characteristics during the period of study.

The results show that white students may be feeling increasing academic competition at different levels of the income distribution.

Second and third generation Hispanic students who do not face a language barrier are rapidly catching up with white students of similar socioeconomic background. "When you separate out the [language learners](#), the Hispanic/White gap are reaching levels that are not all that important," Carnoy said. But, whether or not this translates into higher college attendance for Hispanic students or narrowing of the gaps in labor market outcomes remains to be seen.

Even though being designated an English Language Learner is a

temporary state, and students cycle out of it as they become more proficient in English, the results of the study highlight the fact that language barriers remain an important hurdle in academic achievement and deserve attention.

Understanding why Hispanic and Asian ELL students are not closing the large gap with [white students](#) is an important first step. According to the researchers, it could be that the students who are entering the ELL category are coming in from increasingly language disadvantaged Hispanic or Asian subgroups or that there has been a change in the rules for assigning [students](#) to ELL classes.

"The fact that they are not making gains could also reflect that we are not improving the way that we are teaching them or that we are not integrating them fast enough," Carnoy said.

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Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Study finds gains for minority students but English learners still lag (2017, January 13)  
retrieved 24 April 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2017-01-gains-minority-students-english-learners.html>

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