



Learning Matters

June 2006

Closing the Achievement Gap: Renewing the Call to Action

"Closing the achievement gap is one of the most persistent challenges in American education today."

- William Cox, executive managing director of Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services

Introduction

Improvements in academic achievement are occurring in South Carolina. At the same time, a significant gap continues to exist between those groups of students who are succeeding academically and those who are not. In particular, the gap among students of different demographic groups (African American, Hispanic, and white), and different socioeconomic groups (free- or reduced-price lunch), persists.

The achievement gap presents a unique challenge for schools -- to raise the achievement of their lower scoring students while maintaining or expanding the levels of achievement of their higher-scoring students.

In 2003, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) issued its first report on the achievement gaps in South Carolina and recognized 87 elementary schools for reducing the gap. In 2004, 110 schools were recognized for their efforts; 132 schools in 2005.

In April 2006, the EOC celebrated the accomplishments of 138 elementary and middle schools in which historically underachieving groups of students had scored either in the top quarter or top tenth of all students statewide.

Among the state's third through eighth graders, approximately 54 percent are white,

40 percent are African American, four percent are Hispanic students, and two percent belong to other ethnic demographic groups. Approximately 54.5 percent of South Carolina's third through eighth graders participate in the free-reduced price lunch program and 45.5 percent pay for lunch.

The EOC's annual study on the achievement gap examines student performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT), noting performance patterns among students of different demographic groups (African American, Hispanic, and white), as well as patterns emerging from students participating in the federal free/reduced price lunch program and those who do not participate in the program.

The study, "The Performance of Historically Underachieving Groups of Students in South Carolina Elementary and Middle Schools: Renewing the Call to Action," focuses on three areas:

- Recognition of 138 schools which are making progress in closing the achievement gap;
- comparison of 2002 - 2005 performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT); and
- the degree to which a gap in achievement exists among demographic categories.

At A Glance:

1. Performance at the Basic or above level in both ELA and math did not increase in 2005, compared to 2004. Approximately, 25 percent of students scored Below Basic in ELA and math.
2. With the exception of white vs. Hispanic group comparisons, there has been minimal progress diminishing the gaps at the Proficient and Advanced levels for all groups.
3. Gaps between white and African American students, while lower each year studied through 2004, remain consistently larger than gaps between white and Hispanic students and between pay and free- or reduced-price lunch students.
4. Although progress is being made, the sizes of the gaps are discouraging if South Carolina is to meet its 2010 achievement goal for all students.

Focus Area Number 1

Recognition of 138 schools that are making progress in closing the achievement gap

To provide further insight into the achievement gap in South Carolina and to encourage progress, the EOC identified schools that showed high levels of performance by one or more of the target groups in ELA, math, or both. Among the 863 elementary and middle schools in the study, 138 schools were identified as showing progress in closing the gap on PACT in at least one content area for at least one group of students. To be considered for the study, schools must have test results from at least one of the target groups. The target group in the school must include at least 30 students enrolled and tested. In addition, the target group and the “all students” category in the school must meet the NCLB AYP objectives for percent tested, performance, and attendance.

Although schools were not recognized for 2005 PACT performance in science and social studies, beginning next year schools closing the gap in these subject areas will be recognized.

The number of elementary and middle schools recognized for closing the achievement gap for at least one target group in at least one subject area has increased over the three years studied: 87 schools were recognized in 2002, 110 in 2003, 132 in 2004; and 138 in 2005 (seven of the schools recognized in 2005 were recognized for the performance of Hispanic students only.)

Of the schools identified this year, 64 had also been recognized in 2004 for high performance by at least one target group in at least one subject area. Thirty-two schools have been recognized all four years studied (2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005.)

School profile information from the 2005 annual school report cards was analyzed to assist in identifying characteristics of the “gap-closing” schools compared to other schools. As in previous years, the overall achievement for all students in these schools tended to be high. Of the 138 report card absolute ratings issued for these schools, 40 were rated Excellent, 78 were rated Good, and 20 were rated Average. These schools also received recognition for achievement and for other qualities in the past year:

- 11 received Palmetto Gold or Silver Awards;
- 2 received the Palmetto’s Finest award;
- 3 were National Blue Ribbon Award schools; and
- 9 received Red Carpet awards.

In all four years studied the identified schools had a higher poverty rate than schools rated Excellent or Good overall, but lower than that for all schools. In

all years the dollars spent per student were less than all schools, but higher than schools rated Excellent or Good. The identified schools had at least somewhat higher levels on the profile factors listed below than did schools rated Excellent or Good and for all schools listed:

- *teacher attendance;*
- *student attendance;*
- *teachers with advanced degrees;*
- *teachers under Continuing Contract;*
- *total years principal has been at school; and*
- *percent of gifted and talented students.*

The identified schools also had somewhat lower percentages of students with disabilities than schools rated Excellent or Good or all elementary and middle schools. The differences between the identified schools and those rated Excellent or Good and all schools on most measures were modest, but indicate that the identified schools may have had somewhat more experienced staffs and higher attendance by both students and teachers.

Although the differences between the report card profiles of identified schools and other schools are small, teacher, student, and parent survey results are an exception. Identified schools tended to have consistently higher results than the schools with which they were compared. This difference was observed in 2002, 2003, and 2004 as well. Parents, teachers, and students in the gap-reducing schools tended to be much more satisfied with the physical and social environment and with home and school relations than survey respondents from other South Carolina schools. Parents and students also reported greater satisfaction with the learning environment in gap-closing schools than in schools rated Excellent or Good or in all schools.



Focus Area Number 1 (continued)

Teachers in the gap-closing schools expressed slightly less satisfaction with the learning environment than teachers in schools rated Excellent or Good (although teachers in both the gap-closing schools and in schools rated Excellent or Good reported much higher levels of satisfaction with the learning environment than teachers in all South Carolina elementary and middle schools.)

The performance of the identified target group(s) in these schools was at such a high level that the achievement gap for those students compared to students statewide was virtually eliminated. Obviously, what the adults in these schools and in their communities do every day is making a positive difference in the lives of these students.

The survey data suggest that teachers, students, and parents in gap-closing schools perceive their schools to be welcoming and positive places with a strong focus on learning.

Focus Area Number 2

Comparison of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT)

PACT results for 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 are displayed in Table 1-3. The data in the table indicate that pay lunch students continue to have the highest scores in all four years. Overall, 75 percent of students score Basic or above in ELA while only 33 percent are scoring at the Proficient or Advanced levels.

performance of all students and white students performing Basic or Above in Math. ELA performance, which dropped in 2003, rose back to 2002 levels in 2004. Math gains in 2005, particularly at the Proficient or Advanced level, were substantial for all groups.

The data demonstrate either gains or no change in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) performance across student groups and performance categories. One exception is a slight dip in the

It is discouraging that in both 2004 and 2005, almost one-fourth of all students failed (scored Below Basic) the ELA and Math PACT tests.

Demographic Group	% Basic or Above					% Proficient or Advanced				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	Diff.	2002	2003	2004	2005	Diff.
All Students	74.7	70.5	75.2	75.3	+0.1	31.2	27.3	33.4	33.7	+0.3
White	84.8	81.1	84.9	84.9	no chg.	42.9	37.8	44.4	44.8	+0.4
African American	61.2	57.2	62.8	62.9	+0.1	15.3	13.6	18.7	18.8	+0.1
Hispanic	NA	NA	61.6	63.2	+1.6	NA	NA	22.5	23.7	+1.2
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	63.3	58.9	64.8	65.1	+0.3	16.7	14.6	20.3	20.6	+0.3
Pay Lunch	86.9	83.5	86.3	86.6	+0.3	46.4	41.4	47.3	48.3	+1.0

Source: SC Department of Education
 NA - Not Available
 Diff. = 2005 - 2004

Focus Area Number 2 (continued)

Demographic Group	% Basic or Above					% Proficient or Advanced				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	Diff.	2002	2003	2004	2005	Diff.
All Students	68.2	73.8	75.9	75.8	-0.1	28.6	29.6	31.8	33.2	+1.4
White	80.4	84.9	85.8	85.7	-0.1	40.2	41.7	43.9	45.0	+1.1
African American	51.6	59.4	62.9	62.9	no chg.	12.7	13.4	15.5	17.0	+1.5
Hispanic	NA	NA	65.4	65.4	no chg.	NA	NA	21.6	23.5	+1.9
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	55.4	63.0	66.1	66.3	+0.2	15.2	16.1	18.5	20.1	+1.6
Pay Lunch	81.8	85.9	86.5	86.5	no chg.	42.8	44.5	46.1	47.8	+1.7

Source: SC Department of Education

NA - Not Available

Diff. = 2005 - 2004

Demographic Group	Social Studies		Science	
	% Basic or Above	% Proficient or Advanced	% Basic or Above	% Proficient or Advanced
All Students	68.3	27.0	60.1	26.1
White	79.5	38.1	74.4	38.2
African American	53.2	12.1	41.2	10.1
Hispanic	61.7	19.0	49.5	16.2
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	56.1	14.2	45.7	13.1
Pay Lunch	82.3	41.8	76.7	41.1

Source: SC Department of Education

Achievement gaps in PACT science and social studies performance were studied for the first time in 2005 (Table 3). Performance in both subject areas was lower than ELA and math. The largest gaps in achievement were observed on the science test. Beginning with the Spring 2006 test results, schools closing the achievement gaps in PACT science and social studies will be identified for their achievements.



Focus Area Number 3

Degree to which a gap exists among demographic groups

Although progress is evident, the data indicate that economic factors are correlated with performance. Students in the pay lunch category continue to score higher than students on free/reduced price lunch. The achievement gaps among the groups listed in Tables 4, 5 and 6 were calculated by subtracting the performance of the target groups (African American, Hispanic, and free/reduced price lunch) from their comparison groups (white and pay lunch). Since the comparison groups score higher than the target groups, the differences are positive.

For example, the percentage of white students scoring Basic or above in ELA was 23.6 percentage points higher than African American students in 2002; 23.9 percentage points higher in 2003; 22.1 percentage points higher in

2004; and 22 points higher in 2005. The gaps in 2005 ranged from 20.2 percent (Math percent Basic or above for free/reduced vs. pay lunch students) to 28.0 percent (Math percent Proficient or Advanced, white vs. African American students).

Among the six possible comparisons of 2005 and 2004 gaps, all but one of the gaps at the Basic or above levels for ELA and Math declined in 2005. The gap between free/reduced vs. pay lunch students did not change for ELA, Basic or above.

However, three of the six gaps at the Proficient or Advanced levels (Math white vs. Hispanic; ELA white vs. African American; and ELA pay lunch vs. free/reduced price lunch) were smaller in 2005.

Comparison Group-Target Group	PACT English Language Arts % Basic or Above				PACT English Language Arts % Proficient or Advanced			
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
<i>White-African Amer. Diff.</i>	23.6	23.9	22.1	22.0▼	27.6	24.2	25.7	26.0▲
<i>White-Hispanic Diff</i>	NA	NA	23.3	21.7▼	NA	NA	21.9	21.1▼
<i>Full Pay - Free/Red. Diff.</i>	23.6	24.6	21.5	21.5	29.7	26.8	27.0	27.7▲

Source: SC Department of Education

▲ = gap increased from 2004

▼ = gap decreased from 2004

NA = unavailable

Diff.= Comparison Group-Target Group	PACT Math % Basic or Above				PACT Math % Proficient or Advanced			
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
<i>White-African American</i>	28.8	25.5	22.9	22.8▼	27.5	28.3	28.4	28.0▼
<i>White-Hispanic Diff</i>	NA	NA	20.4	20.3▼	NA	NA	22.3	21.5▼
<i>Full Pay - Free/Red. Diff.</i>	26.4	22.9	20.4	20.2▼	27.6	28.4	27.6	27.7▲

Source: SC Department of Education

▲ = gap increased from 2004

▼ = gap decreased from 2004

NA = unavailable

Focus Area Number 3 (continued)

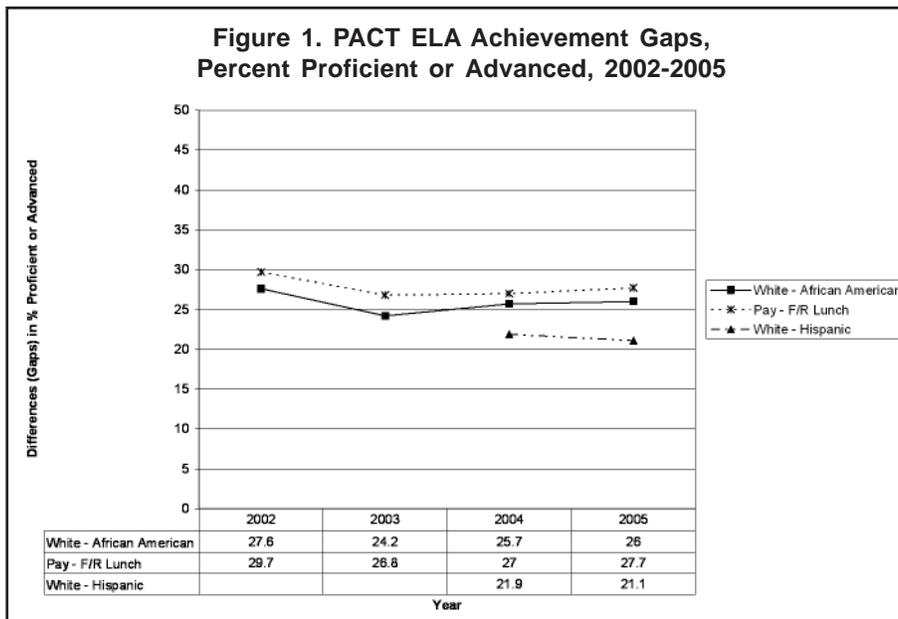
The results from the PACT science and social studies tests were used for the first time in the calculation of school and district ratings in 2005. The performance of demographic groups of students in these subject areas was evaluated in this year's achievement gap report. The gaps in performance are significantly higher in Science, particularly in the percentage of students scoring Basic or above.

As seen in Table 6, the gaps in science achievement between white and African American students are the largest of all the demographic comparisons on all of the PACT tests in 2005. The achievement differences between white and Hispanic students are smaller than those observed between white and African American students and pay lunch and free- or reduced-price lunch students.

Diff.= Comparison Group- Target Group	PACT Science		PACT Social Studies % Proficient or Advanced	
	% Basic or Above	% Proficient and Above	% Basic or Above	% Proficient and Above
<i>White-African American</i>	33.2	28.1	26.3	26.0
<i>White-Hispanic Diff</i>	24.9	22.0	17.8	19.1
<i>Full Pay - Free/Red. Diff.</i>	31.0	28.0	26.2	27.6

Source: SC Department of Education

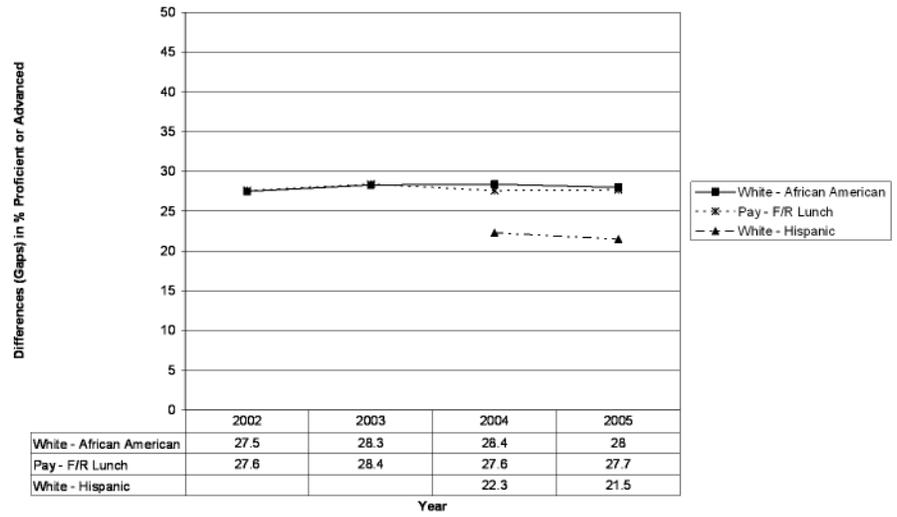
A closer look at the achievement gaps for 2002 through 2005 are displayed in Figures 1 and 2 for all demographic groups of students scoring Proficient or above. With the exception of comparing the achievement of white and Hispanic students in ELA, the achievement gaps observed at the Proficient or Advanced levels in PACT ELA and Math, are larger than those at the Basic and above performance levels for all groups of students.



Focus Area Number 3 (continued)



Figure 2. PACT Math Achievement Gaps, Percent Proficient or Advanced, 2002-2005



Discussion

The 2004 EOC report on closing the achievement gaps made a set of recommendations in its call to action on the part of South Carolinians to improve the achievement of all children. The 2005 analysis of the PACT achievement gaps suggests that the 2004 recommendations had little measurable effect.

While progress has been made since 2004 in increasing funding levels for public schools and in adopting policies and legislation (such as the Education and Economic Development Act) which should increase achievement levels over time, the effects of those efforts are not yet reflected in a substantial reduction of PACT achievement gaps for most affected student groups. Patience may be needed, perhaps, but at the present rate of progress (one-third of our students scoring Proficient or Advanced and one-fourth scoring Below Basic for the last two years) it is difficult to see how we will achieve our state's 2010 goal and the 2014 No Child Left Behind goal without increasing our sense of urgency about the need to improve achievement levels for all students.

With that sense of urgency in mind, the 2004 recommendations are repeated below (with an additional recommendation based on sources of information not available in 2004):

- Carry out all the recommendations of the *African American Student Achievement Committee Report*;
- Focus attention on those students falling behind in school and provide for their needs as provided in the EAA:
- ✓ Increase instructional time for these students;
- ✓ Develop clear, effective Academic Assistance Plans for each child and rigorously fulfill the Plan;
- ✓ Improve the literacy development of our youngest children by providing effective family literacy programs;
- ✓ Focus our preschool intervention programs, such as the four year old child development program, on children most at risk for later school failure;
- Provide for the health and safety of all our children, with special attention to children who currently lack access to care;
- Provide strong interventions to reduce the academic weaknesses of students entering high school;
- Consider implementing the recommendations contained in the following recently reported studies:
 - ✓ *Common Ground for School Improvement (EOC, 2006c)*
 - ✓ *Report to the Governor of the South Carolina Education Reform Council (Governor's Office, 2006)*
 - ✓ *Results and Related Recommendations of the Inventory and Study of Four-Year-Old Kindergarten Programs in South Carolina (EOC, 2006b)*
 - ✓ *Report of the High School Redesign Commission (S. C. Department of Education, 2006).*



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2005 Gap Assessment



Pictured at left: 2006 recipients of award for closing the gap.

The names of the 138 schools recognized are published within the full report available online. Readers are encouraged to visit these schools and learn from their successes.

The complete 2005 study, "The Performance of Historically Underachieving Groups of Students in South Carolina Elementary and Middle Schools: Renewing the Call to Action," is available at www.sceoc.org.

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