



Learning Matters

June 2005

Closing the Achievement Gap: Answering the Call to Action

By 2010, South Carolina's student achievement will be ranked in the top half of states nationally. To achieve this goal, we must become one of the five fastest improving systems in the country.

Introduction

One of the most significant education challenges is closing the academic achievement gap. A persistent gap exists in achievement between minority and majority students and their economically advantaged or disadvantaged peers. The challenge before schools is to raise the achievement of their lower income students and students of color while maintaining or expanding the levels of achievement of their higher-scoring students.

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

At its June 2005 meeting, the EOC celebrated the accomplishments of 132 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 306,506 third through eighth graders, approximately 55 percent are white, 42 percent are African American, and 3 percent are Hispanic students. Approximately 54 percent of South Carolina's

third through eighth graders participate in the free-reduced price lunch program and 46 percent pay for lunch.

The EOC's third 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: Answering the Call to Action," focuses on three areas:

- Comparison of 2002, 2003 and 2004 performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT);
- The degree to which a gap in achievement exists among demographic categories; and
- Recognition of 132 schools which are making progress in closing the achievement gap.

Focus Area Number 1

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

PACT results for 2002, 2003, and 2004 are displayed in Table 1. The data in the table indicate that pay lunch students have the highest scores in all three years. Overall, the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced is considerably lower than the percentage scoring Basic or above for all groups of students.

The data demonstrate gains in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) across student groups and performance categories. ELA performance, which dropped in 2003, rose back to 2002 levels in 2004. ELA gains in 2004, at both the Basic or above and the Proficient or Advanced levels, were

Focus Area Number 1 (continued)

substantial for all groups, especially for African American and free/reduced price lunch students. The 2004 gains in Math at the Basic or above level were smaller than

seen in ELA, especially for white and pay lunch students, with modest gains for Math Proficient or Advanced performance for all groups.

Demographic Group	ELA								Math							
	% Basic or Above				% Proficient or Advanced				% Basic or Above				% Proficient or Advanced			
	2002	2003	2004	Diff.	2002	2003	2004	Diff.	2002	2003	2004	Diff.	2002	2003	2004	Diff.
All Students	74.7	70.5	75.2	+4.7	31.2	27.3	33.4	+6.1	68.2	73.8	75.9	+2.1	28.6	29.6	31.8	+2.2
white	84.8	81.1	84.9	+3.8	42.9	37.8	44.4	+6.6	80.4	84.9	85.8	+0.9	40.2	41.7	43.9	+2.2
African American	61.2	57.2	62.8	+5.6	15.3	13.6	18.7	+5.1	51.6	59.4	62.9	+3.5	12.7	13.4	15.5	+2.1
Hispanic	NA	NA	61.6	NA	NA	NA	22.5	NA	NA	NA	65.4	NA	NA	NA	21.6	NA
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	63.3	58.9	64.8	+5.9	16.7	14.6	20.3	+5.7	55.4	63.0	66.1	+3.1	15.2	16.1	18.5	+2.4
Pay Lunch	86.9	83.5	86.3	+2.8	46.4	41.4	47.3	+5.9	81.8	85.9	86.5	+0.6	42.8	44.5	46.1	+1.6

Source: SC Department of Education

NA - Not Available

Diff. = 2004 - 2003

Focus Area Number 2

Degree to which a gap exists among demographic groups

Although slight progress is evident, the data indicate that economic factors continue to impact student 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 Table 2 were calculated by subtracting the performance of the target groups (African American, Hispanic, and free/reduced price lunch) from their

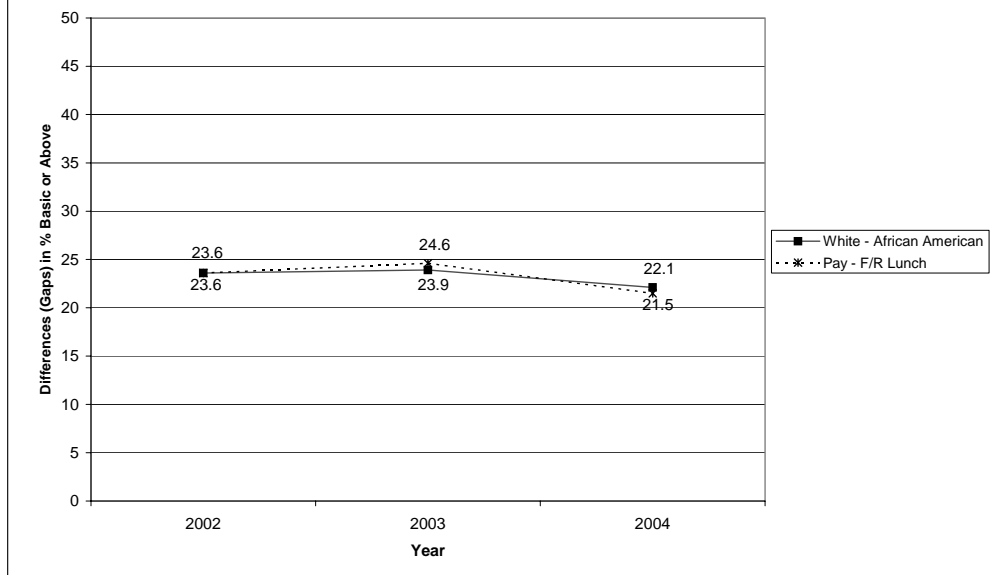
Comparison Group - Target Group	ELA						Math					
	% Basic or Above			% Proficient or Advanced			% Basic or Above			% Proficient or Advanced		
	2002	2003	2004	2002	2003	2004	2002	2003	2004	2002	2003	2004
white - African American	23.6	23.9	22.1↓	27.6	24.2	25.7↑	28.8	25.5	22.9↓	27.5	28.3	28.4↑
white - Hispanic	NA	NA	23.3	NA	NA	21.9	NA	NA	20.4	NA	NA	22.3
Pay Lunch - Free/Reduced Price Lunch	23.6	24.6	21.5↓	29.7	26.8	27.0↑	26.4	22.9	20.4↓	27.6	28.4	27.6↓

NA - Not Available

↑ = gap increased from 2003

↓ = gap decreased from 2003

Figure 1. PACT ELA Achievement Gaps, Percent Basic or Above, 2002-2004



gaps among the target and comparison groups were similar each year studied. The gaps increased slightly in 2003 compared to 2002, but then decreased in 2004 so the 2004 gaps are slightly lower than those observed in 2002. Minimal progress in reducing the gaps in ELA at the Basic or above levels has been achieved since 2002.

In contrast, progress in reducing the gaps in PACT Math performance at the

Basic or above levels has been consistent and encouraging since 2002 (Figure 2). Gaps between white and African American students remain consistently larger than gaps between pay and free/reduced lunch students. However, the gaps between these students have been decreasing each year.

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, and 22.1 percentage points higher in 2004. The gaps in 2004 ranged from 20.4 percent (Math percent Basic or above for white vs. Hispanic students and for free/reduced vs. pay lunch students) to 28.4 percent (Math percent Proficient or Advanced, white vs. African American students).

Among the eight possible comparisons of 2004 and 2003 gaps (comparisons involving Hispanic students were not available for the 2003 data), all the gaps at the Basic or above levels for ELA and Math declined in 2004. However, three of the four gaps at the Proficient or Advanced levels (ELA white vs. African American; ELA pay lunch vs. free/reduced price lunch; and Math White vs. African American) were larger in 2004 than in 2003, and only one gap (Math pay vs. free/reduced price lunch) was smaller.

A closer look at the achievement gaps for 2002, 2003, and 2004 are displayed in Figures 1-4 for all demographic groups but Hispanic students (gap data for Hispanic students were not available in 2002 and 2003). Figures 1 and 2 present the data on the gaps in the percentages of students scoring at the Basic or above levels on PACT ELA and Math, respectively. In PACT ELA Basic or above (Figure 1), the sizes of the achievement

As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the achievement gaps observed at the Proficient or Advanced levels in PACT ELA and Math, respectively, are larger than those at the Basic or above performance levels for both tests. Further, the gaps in PACT ELA increased slightly in 2004 compared to 2003, although they remain smaller than the gaps observed in 2002 (Figure 3).

In PACT ELA Proficient or Advanced, the gaps between pay and free/reduced price lunch students are slightly larger than between white and African American



Focus Area Number 2 (continued)

students. From 2003 to 2004, the size of the increase between white and African American students was significantly larger than the increase in the gap between pay and free/reduced price lunch students.

The largest achievement gaps were observed in PACT Math at the Proficient or Advanced level (Figure 4). The sizes of the gaps for all groups have increased slightly since 2002.

Figure 2. PACT Math Achievement Gaps, Percent Basic or Above, 2002-2004

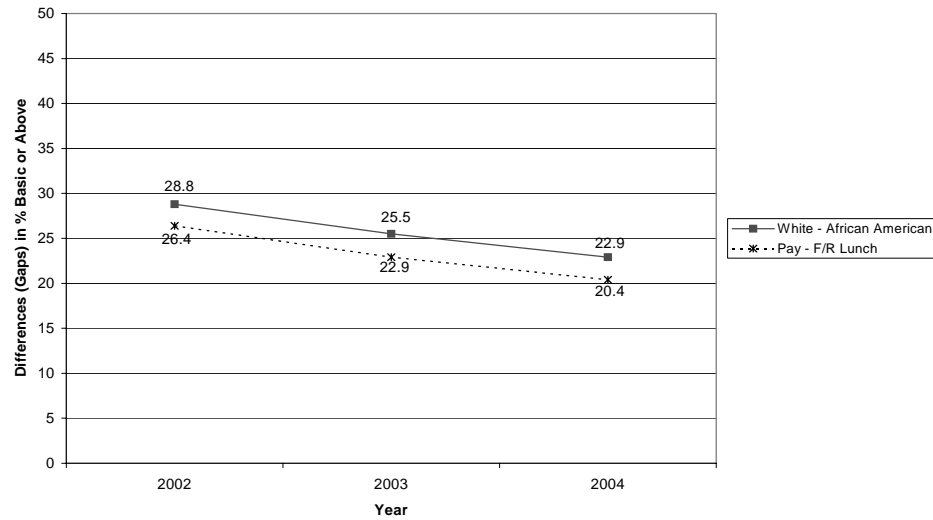


Figure 3. PACT ELA Achievement Gaps, Percent Proficient or Advanced, 2002-2004

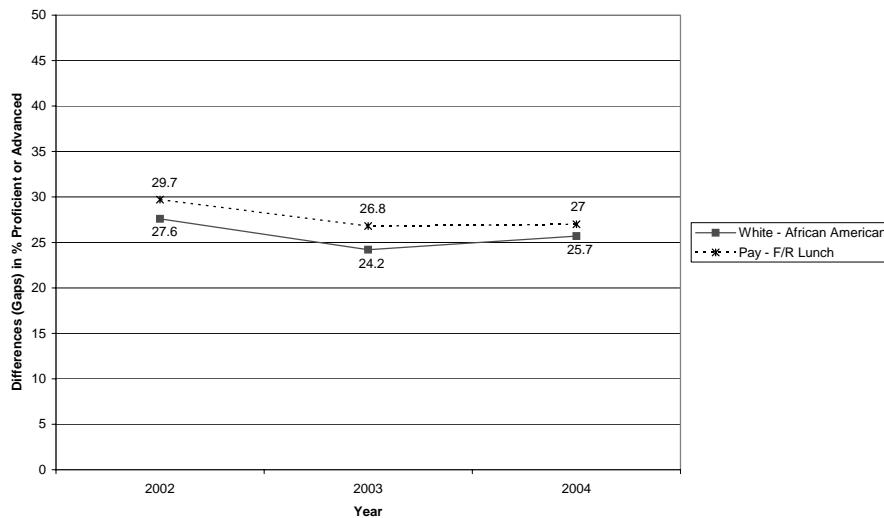
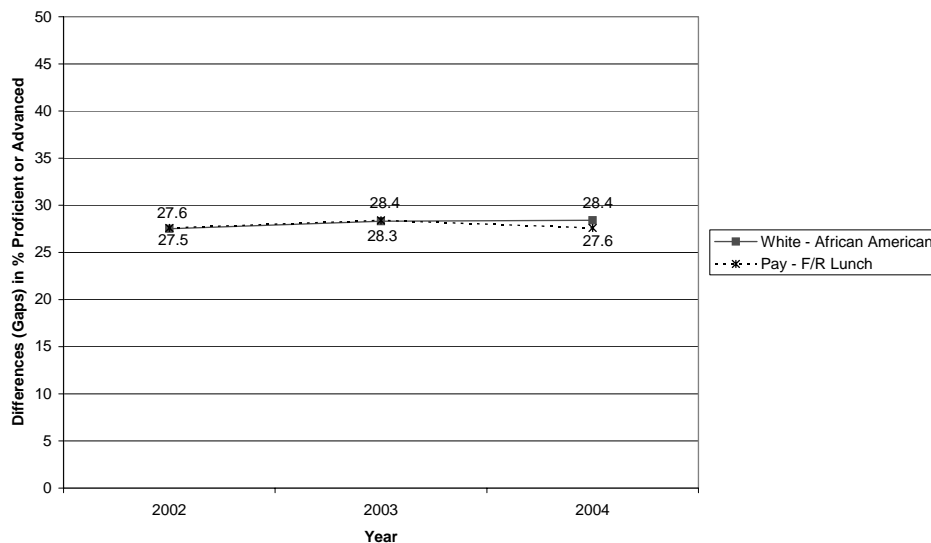


Figure 4. PACT Math Achievement Gaps, Percent Proficient or Advanced, 2002-2004



Focus Area Number 2 *(continued)*

Several observations can be made based on these data:

- Since 2002, slight progress has been made in reducing the gaps in English Language Arts (ELA) at the Basic or above levels.
- There has been minimal progress diminishing the gaps at the Proficient and Advanced levels for the majority of comparison groups.
- Consistent progress continues in reducing the gap in Math performance, at the Basic or above levels.
- In three of the four comparisons, gaps between white and African American students, while lower each year, remain consistently larger than gaps between pay and free/reduced lunch students.
- Although progress is being made, the sizes of the gaps are not encouraging if South Carolina is to meet its 2010 achievement goal for all students.

Focus Area Number 3

Recognition of 132 schools that are making progress in closing the achievement gap



To encourage and inform 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 833 elementary and middle schools in the study, 132 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.

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, and 132 in 2004 (seven of the schools recognized in 2004 were recognized for the performance of Hispanic students only.)

Of the schools identified this year, 65 had also been recognized in 2003 for high performance by at least one target group in at least one subject area. Thirty-eight schools have been recognized in 2002, 2003, and 2004.

Figure 5 displays a geographic representation of the 2004 recognized schools. The map shows that although some of the recognized schools are located in small towns and rural areas, many of the recognized schools are concentrated in areas of suburban growth and in large metropolitan areas.

School profile information from the 2004 annual school report cards was analyzed to assist in identifying characteristics of the “gap-closing” schools compared to other schools. As in previous years, recognized schools were similar to schools rated Good or Excellent on most factors. Of the 135 report card absolute ratings issued for these 132 schools (three schools received both elementary and middle school report cards), 70 were rated Excellent, 60 were rated Good, and 5 were rated Average. These schools also received recognition for achievement and for other qualities in the past year:

- 54 received Palmetto Gold Awards;
- 7 received Palmetto Silver Awards;
- 1 received the Palmetto’s Finest award;
- 3 were National Blue Ribbon Award schools; and
- 7 received Red Carpet awards.

Figure 5. 2004 Schools of Recognized for Closing the Achievement Gaps



Note: Midway Elementary in Anderson District 5 was a new school in 2004 and is not displayed.

In all three 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 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 and 2003, 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. 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). Teacher satisfaction with the learning environment may be an indicator of the levels of academic achievement they expect their students to attain: teachers who believe that the students in their school are being asked to achieve at high levels and are attaining those levels may express more satisfaction with the learning environment. 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.

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

Focus Area Number 3 (continued)

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.

Discussion

Last year's EOC report on closing the achievement gaps made the following recommendations in its call to action on the part of South Carolinians to improve the achievement of all children:

- 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.

Progress has been made in carrying out the recommended actions:

- The base student cost was fully funded for the 2005-2006 school year;
- Funding for summer school increased by almost 50 percent, from \$21 million to \$31 million;
- \$46 million were allocated for K-5 instructional improvement grants, and \$2 million were allocated for instructional improvement in grades 6 through 8;
- Beginning in Fall 2005, students entering ninth grade who scored below Proficient on the eighth grade PACT ELA test can participate in EAA summer school and/or in comprehensive remediation strategies;
- Efforts were made to improve student reading skills, including directing 25 percent of funds for professional development on the academic standards toward

improving teachers' skills at teaching reading; expanding the Governor's Institute on Reading to include the high school grades; providing a special \$500,000 appropriation for high school reading; including knowledge about the teaching of reading in the content of the Principal Executive Leadership Institute; and preliminary evaluation data from the South Carolina Reading Initiative indicated progress in reducing gaps in reading achievement;

- Development and expansion began of the Parents and Adults Inspiring Reading Success (PAIRS) initiative, a project of South Carolina's daily newspapers administered by the SC Education Oversight Committee which provides a supportive network for programs to improve children's appreciation for and skills in reading;
- Family literacy programs now are required to have an intergenerational focus;
- The Education and Economic Development Act was passed to support students' motivation and purpose for successfully completing school through career development;
- State regulations on student attendance were revised to improve the identification of students truant from school, established categories of truancy based on the extent of school non-attendance, and more clearly defined actions to be taken, including judicial referral, to prevent and treat truancy;
- State regulations regarding programs for gifted and talented students will provide for the disaggregation of data from students participating in these programs;
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Education Accountability Act increased the use of disaggregated test scores and other data for decision making;
- NCLB provided for school choice and supplemental educational services for students attending schools failing to make adequate progress; and
- A wide variety of local community and school district efforts were undertaken, such as the African-American Community Achievement Network in Aiken, SC; single gender and magnet school programs in a number of school districts; and the development of freshmen academies for entering ninth graders in high schools.



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2004 Gap Assessment

“At Honea Path, we create an atmosphere that encourages parental involvement and creativity among our faculty. We recognize students have the right to learn, teachers have the right to teach, and no one has the right to interfere with this.”

- Dr. Lee Rawl, Principal, Honea Path Elementary (recognized 2002, 2003, and 2004 for progress in reducing the achievement gap among student groups.)

Although the percentage of schools making progress toward closing the achievement gap has increased during the three years of study, only 16 percent of South Carolina elementary and middle schools are making progress toward eliminating the gap. In many cases, schools are making progress for some, but not all, groups in one subject area.

What adults in schools and communities do makes a difference in the achievement levels of students, regardless of the risk factors students bring to school. Continued, focused efforts are critical for *all* students to achieve at high levels.

The complete 2004 study, “The Performance of Historically Underachieving Groups of Students in South Carolina Elementary and Middle Schools: Answering the Call to Action,” is available at www.sceoc.org.

Names of the 132 schools are published within the full report available online. Readers are encouraged to visit these schools and learn from their successes.

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