

“Brief Thoughts on the Nature, Scope and History of the African American Achievement Gap, with Emphasis on the Impact of Education Law and Policy”

Gary M. Ratner

Presented to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Issue Forum  
March 6, 2008 Washington, D.C.

Thank you so much to Amirah Salaam and the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation for inviting me to participate in this Forum. I am honored to be here. I have been asked to explain what the African American achievement gap is and to put it into a broader context as background for the following discussion on “zero tolerance.”

I. The Nature and Scope of the African American Achievement Gap

A. Definition and Measurement of the Gap

In the context of current discussions of school reform, especially the No Child Left Behind Act, the achievement gap refers to the differences in academic achievement of minority and low income students versus white and non-disadvantaged students, particularly in reading and math. The most reliable available measure of this gap is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card.”

NAEP has four different levels of achievement: “Advanced,” “Proficient,” “Basic” and “Below Basic,” and is regularly measured at 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. A rating of “Proficient” roughly reflects that a student has the academic knowledge and skills necessary to perform at grade level in that subject. “Basic” represents partial mastery or rudimentary knowledge of what the student should know at that grade, and “Below Basic” reflects that the student lacks even that rudimentary academic knowledge and skill.

Since the national goal in NCLB is to bring all children to academic “proficiency,” the achievement gap focuses especially on the comparative percentages of children who are not “Proficient,” as measured by NAEP. In addition, I believe it is important to look at the relative concentrations of students who are “Below Basic,” because that rating represents the most serious learning deficiencies.

B. Scope of the Gap

As of 2007, only about 14% of African American students were “Proficient” in reading versus 42% of white students. In math, about 13% of black students were “Proficient” versus 47% of whites. So, in both reading and math, the proportion of black students who are Proficient is no more than one third as high as that of white students; the achievement gap could be thought of as 300%. Put differently, while less than one sixth of black students are “Proficient” in reading and math, almost one half of white students are Proficient in these subjects.

As to the disparity in “Below Basic,” about 50% of African Americans are “Below Basic” in reading versus 19% of whites. In math, 45% of African Americans are “Below Basic”, contrasting with only 14% of whites.

So, about 85% of black students are below “Proficiency” in reading and in math, and 50% are “Below Basic” in each subject. To illustrate what this means as a practical matter, fourth graders “Below Basic” in math cannot “use basic facts to perform simple computations with whole numbers.” Eighth graders below “Proficiency” in reading cannot “give details and examples to support themes that they identify” in eighth grade literature.

## II. Brief History

To better understand why the African American achievement gap exists, it may be helpful to look at it historically, especially the impact of law and public policy.

### A. Slavery

The starting point, I believe, is the period of slavery before the Civil War. Because the law deemed slaves to be the property of their masters, slaves had no right to education – whether they were to be educated was in the owners’ discretion. After about 1835, and the culmination of a movement of slave insurrections, most white Southerners agreed that it was too dangerous to educate slaves because education could encourage them to rebel against slavery. (Indeed, at times, Southern laws made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write.) Thus, slaves were widely denied even rudimentary education. By contrast, white Southerners were free to be educated; they emphasized college education for plantation owners’ children. Today’s African American achievement gap was seeded in slavery.

### B. Post Slavery

In 1872, during Reconstruction, the Southern states first established public education as a state responsibility and African-American children began to get access to free public schools, albeit on a segregated basis. But for decades thereafter, until at least *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Southern schools were “separate” and severely “unequal”, on average providing only 38 cents/black child’s education for every \$1 provided for a white child. The achievement gap sewn by slavery was perpetuated by inferior educational opportunities.

### C. Tracking

Then, in 1918, a prestigious national commission determined that the vast majority of students did not need a high level education because they were not going to become professionals or managers, but would just work on the assembly lines or in similar jobs not requiring strong intellectual skills. Thus, it recommended that separate tracks be created in high schools: an “academic” track for those students expected to go to college, and academically much less challenging “vocational” and “general” tracks for everybody else.

Over the next couple decades, this “tracking” system was adopted by school districts nationwide. African American students were disproportionately assigned to the non-academic tracks, with a much less academically rigorous curriculum and lower expectations for academic achievement.

This tracking policy had profound consequences for teachers, principals, parents and students. Teachers in “general” and “vocational” tracks did not have to have high level

academic knowledge and pedagogical skills because they were only expected to teach a “watered down” curriculum. Principals were not expected to be able to raise all students to “academic proficiency,” but only to maintain a two track system with a relatively small percentage of students in the college track who needed to become “proficient.” Many parents of students in the non-academic tracks accepted the schools’ implicit messages that their children had limited academic ability and there was little that parents could or should be doing to help their children learn at a high academic level. And the students, seeing that the schools expected little of them academically, were not often motivated to apply themselves academically, did not study hard, and performed (as designed by the system) well below grade level.

Sometimes we forget the obvious: at root, only students can do the learning; for them to learn, they need to be motivated; and they can only learn what they are taught. For the huge number of African American students who have been consigned to non-academic tracks, tracking has deprived them of a challenging and interesting curriculum, sapped their academic motivation and perpetuated the achievement gap.

#### D. Standards, Assessments and Accountability

In the early 1990s, in part in response to the 1983 warning of “A Nation At Risk, the states launched the “standards, assessments and accountability” movement. The movement was intended to improve the quality of public education and thereby make our students more competitive economically in the international arena. Its key ingredients were, and are, state establishment of: academic standards; standardized tests to measure whether students are meeting the standards; publication of the test results for each school; and sanctions for failure to meet the standards. Because the “standards, assessments and accountability” movement relied so heavily on “testing and sanctions,” the resulting accountability systems are often referred to as “high-stakes testing.”

The most well known and influential of these was in Texas, during George Bush’s governorship, when Texas’ high-stakes testing movement became known as the “Texas Miracle.” Illustrative of this purported “miracle,” a large Texas city reported that, from 1997-2001, student achievement on state tests had gone up so much that the proportion of schools that were in the highest two ratings had jumped from 8% to 43% and the achievement gap had been narrowed. [Rice Study, pp. 4, 12, 16]

Under the educational accountability system adopted by this city, and in Texas generally, accountability was rigorous. If a sufficient percentage of students did not get passing scores on Texas’ standardized tests, principals would lose their jobs; if scores were high enough, they were entitled to cash bonuses. Students had to pass the test to graduate from high school. [pp. 4-5]

In fact, according to a recent study from Rice University and the University of Texas, the supposed “progress on overall achievement and of narrowing the achievement gap” known as the “Texas Miracle” was an “illusion.” [p. 16] Rather, this purported “miracle” was largely created by increasing the percentages of low-performing students (disproportionately African Americans and Latinos) who were retained in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and thus excluded from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade tests on which ratings were based. [pp. 5-6, 16-17, and 29-30]

The fundamental error in state high-stakes testing schemes is that they focus on raising test scores as an end in itself: they jump from imposing academic standards and testing at the *front end* to imposing sanctions at the *back end* for failure to raise test scores without first doing the critical work in the *middle* needed to enable schools to dramatically improve student learning. That is, what they fail to do is to raise the level of the curriculum and greatly strengthen the knowledge and skills of: teachers to effectively teach a challenging curriculum to diverse students; principals to lead school transformations; and parents to provide support for their children's learning.

#### E. No Child Left Behind

NCLB essentially federalizes the Texas "test and sanctions" approach, while altering its proficiency requirements and sanctions, and is built on the same fundamental error. It falsely assumes that what's needed is just to pressure teachers and principals to work harder, when, in fact, they need much better preparation, mentoring, peer collaboration and support to improve instruction. In so doing, NCLB causes serious harms to the very students it's supposed to help, including: narrowing the curriculum, "drill and kill" instruction, focusing on students close to passing state tests at the expense of those well below or above, undermining teachers' professional discretion and morale and driving out good teachers.

#### F. Neither High-Stakes Testing Nor NCLB Closes the Achievement Gap

Neither the high-stakes testing scheme operating in Texas since the early 1990s nor the similar "test and sanctions" scheme of NCLB has remotely closed the achievement gap between African Americans and whites in reading or math, let alone brought substantially all students to "Proficiency" on the NAEP, or close to it.

To the contrary, in Texas, the percentage of black students who have become "Proficient" in reading has barely increased in the last 15 years. It is now only about 15%, while the percentage of whites "Proficient" is almost three times as high—but still only 44%. And, although the percentage of black Texas students proficient in math has increased significantly from an almost negligible 2%-3% fifteen years ago, it is still only 19%, while whites have increased to about 55%, almost 3 times as high.

So, the African American achievement gap in reading and math in Texas remains huge. Similarly, nationwide, as mentioned at the beginning, only about 14% of African American students are "Proficient" in reading and 13% "Proficient" in math, while at least three times those proportions of white students are at those levels.

During the NCLB testing period, 2003-2007, the percentage of black students becoming "Proficient" has been increasing only at the rate of about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of 1%/year in reading and 1 and  $\frac{1}{8}$ %/year in math. At those rates, it would take 344 years for all African American students to become "Proficient" in reading and 77 years to do so in math. This cannot be considered effective in closing the achievement gap.

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that what we see from a brief look at the history of education law and policy is that slavery intentionally created an "achievement gap," putting African Americans at an immense academic disadvantage. While blacks in the South began to

receive some public education after the Civil War, it was far inferior to that given to whites.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tracking institutionalized a much lower level of public education for many African American students nationwide. The states' high-stakes testing movement and NCLB helpfully put the spotlight on the fact that minority students as a group were not getting well educated. But these initiatives sought to improve learning by sanctioning failing test scores, rather than raising the level of the curriculum, improving instruction and strengthening family support for academic achievement.

In short, NCLB and high-stakes tests suffer from at least three critical defects: they fail to address the underlying educational problems they are purportedly trying to remedy; they are inherently punitive, rather than supportive; and they perpetuate the achievement gap. These same three defects seem to characterize the zero tolerance disciplinary policies to which we now turn.

Thank you.