



Addressing Achievement Through Opportunity:

Washington State's Approach to Closing the Gap

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Addressing Achievement Through Opportunity: Washington State's Approach to Closing the Gap

BY MATT WEYER

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Nearly twenty years ago, frustrated by decades of persistent educational achievement gaps between student groups—often based on socio-economic status and/or race and ethnicity—a group of Washington state policymakers, alongside several community and advocacy organization representatives, set out on a course to address and close these gaps.

Their journey began with developing an understanding of the inputs and outputs of the educational system itself, thinking through the opportunities and resources afforded to all students and how these related to achievement. Next, they set out to authentically involve all stakeholder groups and held critical conversations about race, class, language and culture and their intersections with education.

These conversations involved examining disaggregated educational data and identifying root causes, which led to several policy recommendations and the formation of a legislative oversight committee. Eventually, this committee enacted legislation creating a systemic approach to closing educational achievement gaps.

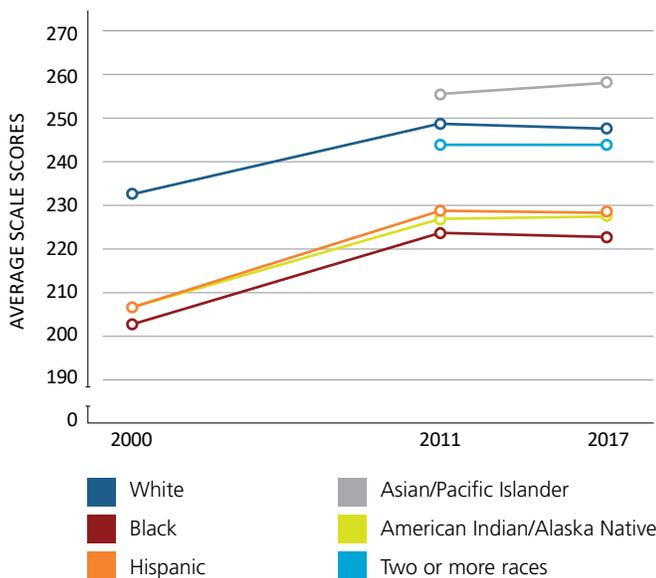
Educational Achievement Gaps: A Decades-Long Issue and Washington state’s New Approach

Achievement gaps have impacted states for decades. On average, African-American, Hispanic and low-income children enter kindergarten significantly trailing their white, Asian and more affluent peers in critical early literacy and numeracy skills.¹ These gaps can persist throughout their K-12 education, contributing to what are commonly known as achievement gaps, normally illustrated by long-term math and reading achievement trends. Achievement gaps have been researched and discussed extensively in the education policy community, and state and federal governments have worked tirelessly to close them.

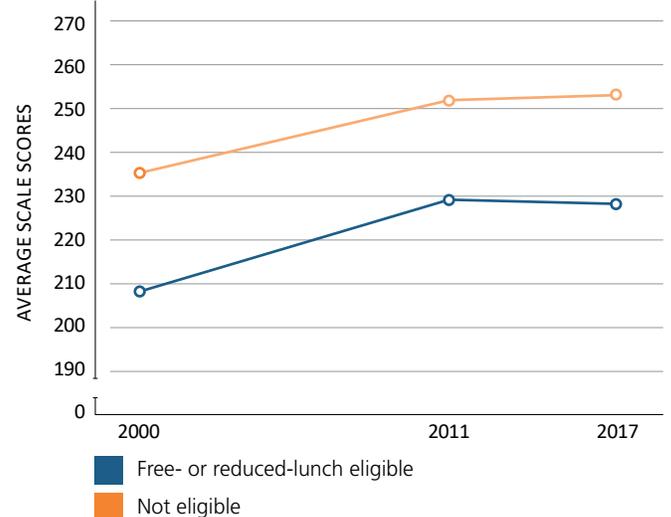
In Washington, a concerned group of legislators and other community and advocacy organization representatives devoted significant time and energy toward rethinking their approach to discussing and framing this challenge and concluded that the “achievement gap” resulted from an “opportunity gap.” To highlight this relationship, they adopted two working definitions:²

- **Opportunity gaps.** The differences in students’ access to highly effective educators, exemplary curriculum and materials and appropriate academic and social support. These opportunities, resources and supports can be thought of as educational *inputs*.
- **Achievement gaps.** The differences in test scores between racial, ethnic and socio-economic student groups. These gaps can be thought of as educational *outputs*, resulting from the educational inputs received.

Fourth-Grade Math Achievement by Race and Ethnicity, 2000-2017



Fourth-Grade Math Achievement by Socioeconomic Status, 2000-2017



Source: *The Nation’s Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress-Data Explorer, 2017*

Timeline: Development and Enactment of Washington HB 1541

2000

Multi-Ethnic Think Tank (METT) is formed and tasked to develop strategies to address chronic academic underachievement.

METT includes representatives of the following communities:

- African-American
- American-Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian/Pacific-Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- Low socio-economic status

2001

METT releases position statement and five policy recommendations. Position statement: “Historically in Washington State, students of ethnic minority and low socio-economic communities have had the distinction of poor academic achievement. This, however, is not a true reflection of our students’ academic ability. It is a reflection of systemic failure.”

Five policy recommendations:

- Infusing culturally-competent and multicultural education in the state’s learning goals
- Standardizing the data collection, categorization and reporting of racial, ethnic and low-income groups
- Requiring teacher professional development to be culturally and linguistically responsive
- Recruiting and retaining ethnic minority staff
- Providing alternate measuring tools to assess student academic achievement

2005

HB 1659/SB 5938 acknowledged and included the policy recommendations set forth by METT, proposed the creation of a Joint Select Committee on Equitable Opportunity For All and prescribed duties and reporting requirements of the Committee. These bills did not pass out of committee.

By distinguishing between these definitions of opportunity and achievement gaps, and better understanding the relationship between them, this group began to focus on addressing and improving the educational inputs that students receive, to more systematically improve students’ educational outputs, thus closing achievement gaps by closing opportunity gaps.

The timeline above illustrates the steps taken in Washington, beginning with the development of the Multi-Ethnic Think Tank in 2000, to the eventual enactment of Fourth Substitute HB 1541 in 2016.

Laying the Groundwork for HB 1541

Members of the AGC highlighted three strategies that were essential to their eventual success. They (1) created spaces for impactful conversations with affected communities; (2) shifted policy priorities to focus on opportunity gaps rather than achievement gaps; and (3) committed to a long-term vision.

■ **Creating Spaces for Impactful Conversations with Affected Communities.** The AGC began this work by creating an environment

“One of the ways the [AGC] describes our approach is ‘student-centered, success-focused.’ The key, as members of the [AGC] repeatedly state, is to value and support that which the student brings to the table as assets, rather than making value judgements [and holding a deficit-based view].”

—Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos

2008

Washington State Legislature approves \$150,000 appropriation to commission reports on racial achievement gaps.

Legislators interested in learning more about Washington HB 1541 and policy options for closing early learning opportunity gaps can find more information at ncsl.org/closinggaps.

2009

Washington State Legislature enacts Second Substitute SB 5973 establishing the Educational Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (AGC).

The AGC is made up of legislators, educators, parents and representatives from community-based organizations, state and local education agencies and ethnic commissions.

The AGC held community meetings, examined disaggregated data, shifted policy priorities and committed to a long-term vision.

The committee was charged to synthesize the findings and recommendations of the five 2008 Achievement Gap studies and distilled 134 policy recommendations into 10.

In 2012, the AGC changed its name to the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (OGC).

2016

Washington State Legislature enacts Fourth Substitute HB 1541.

HB 1541 enacts “a holistic approach to making progress toward closing the opportunity gap.” The legislation states that the recommendations “are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.” It further states that, “Closing the opportunity gap requires highly-skilled, culturally-competent, and diverse educators who understand the communities and cultures that students come from; it requires careful monitoring of not only the academic performance but also the educational environment for all students, at a fine grain of detail to ensure adequate accountability; and it requires a robust program of instruction, including appropriately trained educators, to help English language learners gain language proficiency, as well as academic proficiency.”

Closing the Opportunity Gap in Washington State

The Educational Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (AGC’s) 10 policy recommendations:

1. Support and facilitate parent, family and community involvement and outreach.
2. Identify data elements and systems needed to monitor progress in closing the gap.
3. Enhance the cultural competence of educators and the cultural relevance of curriculum and instruction.
4. Expand pathways and strategies to prepare and recruit diverse teachers and administrators.
5. Recommend current programs and resources that should be redirected to narrow the gap.
6. Make closing the achievement gap part of the school and school improvement process.
7. Explore innovative school models that have shown success in closing the achievement gap.
8. Promote the health and well-being of underachieving communities.
9. Increase postsecondary education and job training in underachieving communities.
10. Design a seamless birth to age 20 support continuum.

Though the temptation to break the legislation into smaller, more easily tackled pieces was great, the AGC held onto the belief that because opportunity and achievement gaps are a system-wide problem, only system-wide legislation could truly address them.

for direct discussions about race, income, culture and language. Since the AGC was intentionally comprised of respected members of Washington’s minority and low-income communities, the AGC received feedback, trust and buy-in from the students, families and communities most affected by opportunity gaps. Members of the AGC report that these discussions were not easy or comfortable, but the AGC was firm in its belief that these conversations were fundamental to the creation and passage of effective legislation, and ultimately to the progress Washington is making toward closing opportunity gaps.

■ **Shifting Policy Priorities to Focus on Opportunity Gaps Rather than Achievement Gaps.** This authentic community engagement led to a shift in how the AGC, and subsequently the Washington education policy community, approaches education policy. Rather than asking what their struggling students lacked, they considered how to better leverage the assets that students and communities already have in place. This meant considering policies designed to recognize and reward the assets and growth of struggling students, rather than ranking and penalizing them. The AGC questioned how best to account for, and incentivize, the assets and growth of struggling students in state and local policy, representing a significant paradigm shift.

■ **Committing to a Long-Term Vision.** The Educational Achievement Gap and Oversight Committee committed itself to one long-term goal: an equitable education for each and every Washington student. Keeping this goal at the center of every decision, the committee slowly built the relationships and organizational structure necessary to support long-term improvements, while consistently and authentically engaging minority and low-income communities. The ACG was intentionally built to exist independently of state and local education agencies and political leadership. With this independence, the AGC created longevity to accomplish its long-term vision.

By using these important strategies, the ACG created and positioned a community of legislators, students, parents, educators, principals and district leaders dedicated to addressing opportunity gaps in the short and long term.

In 2012, the Educational Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee intentionally changed its name to the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (henceforth referred to as the OGC). After years of work and repeated filings, Fourth Substitute HB 1541 was passed in 2016.³ The OGC now vets and oversees the statewide implementation of the policies enacted in this bill and serves as a hub for authentic community feedback on all education policy in Washington.

Addressing Achievement Through Opportunity: Lessons Learned

States across the country have been grappling with achievement gaps for decades. By engaging their most-affected communities and students, understanding the relationship between opportunity and achievement gaps and committing to a long-term vision, the OGC and Washington have made strides toward creating an educational system that better serves all its students.

The Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee now has a permanent seat at the education policymaking table and is recognized as a vetting agency for policies affecting oppor-

“We developed the solutions to specific issues and determined that if these solutions were to be successful, they had to be implemented together.

We had to continuously educate our peers on the process that created HB 1541 to keep the legislation intact.”

—Senator John McCoy, chairman of the
Opportunity Gap Oversight
and Accountability Committee

tunity gaps. In the OGC’s 2018 report to the Legislature on the status of implementation of Fourth Substitute HB 1541,⁴ the committee highlighted the progress the state made on its 2017 policy recommendations, including:

OCG Concern	2017 Report Policy Recommendations	Examples of Progress
Disproportionalities in Student Discipline	<p>The Legislature should adopt the following mandate: School districts must publish annual school discipline reports, beginning with the 2016-2017 school year.</p> <p>The Office of Student and School Success (OSSS) in the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) must add a school discipline section to the school improvement plan document.</p>	<p>Reports prepared by the OSPI regarding suspension and expulsions are also required to be disaggregated by race and ethnicity.</p> <p>The OSSS has been reorganized as the Office of System and School Improvement and is redesigning supports for schools in improvement status under the Every Student Succeeds Act.</p>
Disaggregated Student Data	<p>To encourage community engagement with student data, the OSPI should use the guidance published by the Race and Ethnicity Student Data (RESD) Task Force to create a mandatory annual training for all principals and superintendents, as well as representatives from every school district in the state.</p>	<p>Guidance and technical assistance is being provided to districts through the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) Department at the OSPI, along with an updated CEDARS data manual. This manual will require school districts to collect and submit data according to RESD’s list of disaggregated race and ethnicity subcategories.</p>
English Language Learner (ELL) Accountability	<p>Adopt dual language instruction as the preferred transitional bilingual instructional program (TBIP).</p> <p>The Legislature should increase the amount of state allocated TBIP funds and schools should use the additional funds for the sole purpose of hiring staff that are certified teachers with bilingual education and/or ELL endorsements.</p>	<p>No Action.</p> <p>The OSPI received additional TBIP funds but does not require school districts to use the additional funds for the sole purpose of hiring teachers. However, if districts do choose to use these additional TBIP funds to hire teachers (rather than paraeducators, program administration or materials), the requirement for the ELL or bilingual endorsement comes into effect for the 2019-2020 school year.</p>
Teacher Recruitment, Hiring and Retention	<p>The Legislature should convene a workgroup tasked with identifying the roles, types of bonuses and different compensation options that incentivize working at high-needs schools.</p> <p>The Legislature should expand the capacity and reach of the “Grow Your Own” teacher strategy.</p>	<p>No Action.</p> <p>HB 1827 was introduced in 2018 “to support a multipronged grow-your-own initiative to develop persons from the community.”</p>

Our economy urgently needs more young people with skills in science and mathematics, and with the ability to think critically and work collaboratively. We need leaders, problem-solvers, skilled craftspeople, technicians, researchers, educators and health care professionals. For our economy to recover and progress, we need every young mind prepared to compete and win in a high-tech, fast-changing global economy. If we fail to develop our most precious resource—the talent and imagination of every young person—we can have little hope for our future prosperity.

—African-American Achievement Gap Report

With the passage of HB 1541, Washington set a new course toward addressing and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. By soliciting authentic feedback from the communities most affected by gaps, focusing their work on educational inputs and designing and implementing policies that give all Washington students more opportunities to learn and grow, Washington is creating the foundation for improving educational outcomes. The state made strides toward improving student data and reporting, improving the teacher workforce, supporting English language learners and more, all to the benefit of Washington students.

Though challenges lay ahead, Washington has come together around a common vision to close opportunity and achievement gaps, creating a strong system for more quickly identifying policy problems. Under the watchful eye of the OCG, effective policies are being developed with community feedback and are carefully implemented. In 2018 and 2019, the OGC will focus on studying the concepts of time-based learning versus competency-based learning, culturally responsive attendance policies and alternative education systems, with the goal of attaining equitable education for all Washington students. As other states continue to work toward closing opportunity and achievement gaps, the design, passage and implementation of Washington HB 1541 may provide helpful ideas and direction.

Learn more

Legislators interested in furthering authentic community engagement in their own states can find policy levers in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 federal education law which encourages state leaders to use authentic and ongoing community engagement to further educational equity. Many states have already begun this work. Learn more at:

- [Meaningful Local Engagement Under ESSA: A Handbook for LEA and School Leaders](#)
- [Process and Protest: Have State Engagement Efforts Under ESSA Been Meaningful?](#)

A long-term vision and infrastructure is not easy to build or maintain, but a few states, and some of the top-performing countries around the world, have managed to do so. Find examples at:

- [No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State](#)
- [The Kentucky Prichard Committee](#)
- [Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education](#)

Appendix 1

Quotes from Ethnic Commission Reports

From the African-American report

“An educational system that welcomes, respects and engages African-American students is achievable. Closing the education gap is achievable. The Committee identified many instances where African-American students are achieving at high levels. These are challenges that require focused, sustained effort, but success is within our reach. This is a struggle we can win if we heed the research about what works, focus resources and expertise where they are needed, and hold ourselves and each other accountable for achieving results.”

From the Asian/Pacific Islander report

“The report seeks to make visible Asian-American achievement gaps that are hidden by (1) their racial stereotyping as a “model minority” group; (2) the practice of combining all Asian-American ethnic groups into a single category; and (3) a predominant reliance on mainstream sources, with little attention to community-based research, to explain Asian-American educational status and experiences.”

From the Hispanic/Latino report

“While Latino students are distinct in that they represent the fastest growing K-12 public school population, they are distinct, too, in that they consistently rank at the bottom or near the bottom on state assessments and other indicators of academic achievement. Examining test scores, however, does not tell us why test scores for Latino students remain worse overall than any other school population in Washington’s K-12 schools. This academic achievement study commissioned by the State Legislature goes beyond test scores and examines why Latino students are performing at their current levels. For one, understanding the opportunities to learn for Latino students in the state of Washington reveals the underlying basis for the gaps in achievement that is evident today.”

From the Native American report

“Graduation rates, high achievement rates, and truancy data and test scores: these are real outcomes, and we do need to work to improve these outcomes for Native youth. But these outcomes literally mean nothing to the collective Native community if the child has no knowledge of Native language, culture, and history. This achievement gap is merely a symptom of an entire system that needs deep evolution. We all want this achievement gap to close. We all want to see consistencies among the variety of people and cultures in [state test] scores, graduation rates and college graduations. But we will not make significant changes to these [concrete indicators] unless a much deeper system change occurs.”

Notes

1. A. Friedman-Krauss, W.S. Barnett, and M. Nores, *How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2016), <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NIEER-AchievementGaps-report.pdf>.
2. R. Bertschi et al., *Closing Opportunity Gaps in Washington’s Public Education System: A Report by the Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee* (Olympia, Wash.: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction).
3. Washington Fourth Substitute House Bill No. 1541, 2016.
4. M. Flores and L. Huynh, *Closing the Opportunity Gap in Washington’s Public Education System: 2018 Annual Report by the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC)* © Olympia, Wash.: EOGOAC, 2018), http://www.k12.wa.us/Workgroups/EOGOAC/pubdocs/EOGOAC-2018_LegislativeReport.pdf.

NCSL Contact:

Matt Weyer

Senior Policy Specialist

303-856-1424

Matthew.Weyer@ncsl.org



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William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place, Denver, Colorado 80230, 303-364-7700 | 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515, Washington, D.C. 20001, 202-624-5400

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