

**STATEMENT ON ACHIEVEMENT GAPS:
*How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform
in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of
Educational Progress***

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I would like to welcome you to San Antonio, my home town, and to District 26, where you are meeting this afternoon. I have had the honor of representing District 26 in the Texas Legislature for the past 20 years. It is wonderful to have all of you visiting my district.

As you may know, I am a pharmacist as well as a state senator, and I have been concerned with health care issues for much of my career in the legislature. I have also been very concerned with public education, and serve as a member of the Senate Education Committee. But my concern for education also stems from my family—I have six wonderful children and two adorable grandsons—and from my family background. My mother worked as a choir instructor and helped develop mariachi programs for the San Antonio public schools.

I know that a good education is the way ahead in our country and in all countries around the world today. It is the way ahead for Latinos, and the report NAEP is issuing today shows that we are moving ahead, but not fast enough to close the achievement gaps, which are still substantial.

The report is called, “Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.” The data here represent the educational progress for the group of students that federal government programs, such as the U.S. Census and NAEP, call Hispanic, in comparison to their White peers.

There certainly are important connections and important commonalities among all the people called Hispanic, but there also are important differences between Chicanos in Texas and Puerto Ricans in New York and Cubans in Florida. This report does not have break-outs for such Hispanic student groups, but it does show very considerable differences in how well Hispanic children are achieving in the different states, how large the achievement gaps are between themselves and non-Hispanic White students, and whether or not achievement is rising and the gaps are shrinking.

In Texas the average scores for Hispanic students are higher than for Hispanics nationwide. But the scores of White students in Texas have also been higher than or

comparable to the averages for Whites nationwide, and so the gaps are similar to the gaps nationwide.

Both Hispanic and white students have made gains in Texas over the past two decades except in 8th grade reading where the average scores have been stubbornly unchanged. But having similar gains for the two groups has meant that the gaps between the two are almost the same now as they were almost 20 years ago. That has to be disappointing.

NAEP gives us an enormous amount of information about what our students have achieved. However, for better or worse, NAEP itself cannot tell us what produces high achievement. The National Assessment tests representative samples of students at different points in time; it is not designed to prove cause and effect. However, NAEP does collect a great deal of background information on the resources and practices that go into education in the different states and for different groups of students.

This is available not in the printed reports, but in the NAEP Data Explorer on the web. The correlations that any of these factors show to achievement should not be used to prove causation, because we know very well that these can't be the only things at work. But they are often very interesting.

- For example, more than half of Hispanic students in grades 4 and 8 are enrolled in schools where a majority of the students are also Hispanic. And the average achievement of these students is significantly lower than that of Hispanics who attend school where Hispanic enrollment is less than 25 percent.
- Among all students nationwide, achievement is somewhat higher for those whose teachers have a regular teaching certificate, rather than a provisional or temporary license. The score difference by teacher certification is greater for Hispanic students than for White students, yet the percentage of Hispanic students whose teachers have a regular certificate is consistently lower than the percentage of White students. For example, in 2009, 83 percent of Hispanic students in 8th grade mathematics were taught by a teacher with a regular teaching certificate, compared to 92 percent of White 8th grade mathematics students whose teachers had a regular certificate.
- In 8th grade in 2009 about the same proportion of Hispanic students as White students were taking a higher-level mathematics course, which NAEP defines as at least a standard Algebra I course or the second year of a two year Algebra I sequence. The students in these courses scored higher on NAEP than those taking lower-level mathematics courses. However, the gap in average scores between Hispanic and White students was considerably larger in the higher-level mathematics courses than in lower-level mathematics.

Although we cannot tell from NAEP why this is happening, the information certainly should cause us to look carefully into the content of these courses, and the preparation

of the students who are taking them. Are the courses really covering the same material even though their titles are the same? Are the students adequately prepared in basic math to handle algebra?

As Commissioner Buckley has said, this report overall shows improvement in the achievement of Hispanic students since the early 1990s, but no significant narrowing of the Hispanic- White achievement gaps. However, when we look within that almost 20 year period there have been some very interesting changes along the way.

During the 1990s the gaps appears to widen at grade 4 in both reading and mathematics and at grade 8 in mathematics. Over that decade the pattern in math was similar at both grades: Hispanic and White students both made gains in grade 4 mathematics, but White students gained more. For grade 8, only White students made gains. In grade 4 reading the pattern was less positive: no change for White students, but a decline in Hispanic student achievement. In grade 8 reading, there were similar slight gains for both groups so there was no change in the gap.

Since 2000, however, the patterns of change have been different. At grade 4 Hispanic students have made substantially greater gains than whites in both subjects, particularly in the early years of the decade. The gaps have now gone back to about where they were around 1990, even though the Hispanic population has grown tremendously.

At grade 8 the mathematics achievement of Hispanic students has gone up steadily and substantially since 2000. The achievement of whites has improved too, but more slowly, so the gap has been reduced by 5 points. In grade 8 reading Hispanic students have made small but steady gains—up 4 points since 2003, compared to just a 1 point gain for whites, which has narrowed the gap slightly.

I think the picture from all this is positive, but not positive enough. Even though state budgets are tight and the federal budget may face cutbacks too, we must provide the resources our schools and our children need to progress. And we need the data NAEP provides to see clearly where we are going.