STILL
BLACKS FALLING
THROUGH GAPS

The 2012 Update

Blacks Still Falling in the ‘GAP’ in Louisville’s Schools

By Richard G. Innes
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In June 2012, the Bluegrass Institute issued a paper highlighting a serious, ongoing problem in Kentucky’s largest school system: Blacks in the Jefferson County Public Schools District (JCPS) continue to significantly lag behind white students in academic performance. That paper was based on test results from 2011.

Recently, “Unbridled Learning,” Kentucky’s new school accountability program, released school performance data that include newer high school graduation rates and the 2012 test results from the new Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP) academic tests. This policy brief updates the mathematics and graduation rate comments in our earlier report.

Unfortunately, despite all sorts of efforts to reduce achievement gaps, including creating new magnet schools, reconstituting school staff and redistributing student populations, our updated findings demonstrate that math achievement gaps and high school graduation gaps continue to be significant problems in JCPS schools.

Examining the mathematics test results

In our examination of the math performance, we averaged K-PREP’s grade-by-grade proficiency rates in math separately for the whites and blacks in each of the 134 Jefferson County schools that had data available for both races. We then compared those school-wide math proficiency rates for whites and blacks.

We found the white versus black math proficiency rate achievement gap exceeded 10 percentage points in 116 of those schools – 87 percent of all the schools. The white versus black math achievement gap exceeded a far more objectionable 20 percentage points in nearly half of all the schools (65 of them). And, 32 JCPS schools – an increase of one school from our previous report – had math gaps exceeding 30 percentage points, a hugely unacceptable figure.

Worse still, we found even larger gaps in some schools. Eleven Jefferson County schools have white minus black math proficiency rate gaps of more than 40 points.

Incredibly, white versus black math proficiency rate gaps exceed an absolutely astonishing 51 percentage points in two Jefferson County elementary schools. Yet both of these schools actually were named a “School of Distinction,” which is Unbridled Learning’s highest accountability rating. Neither school faces sanctions or corrective action despite these enormous gaps.

Let’s amplify that.

Kentucky’s new Unbridled Learning accountability program overlooks many serious gaps completely!

A federal waiver cancelled No Child Left Behind’s accountability program in Kentucky. As a result, the only identification of minority achievement gaps – and remediation for such gaps – now comes solely from “Unbridled Learning.” If Unbridled Learning misses a problem, that problem gets ignored.

Unfortunately, the new data for JCPS show that dismantling No Child leaves minority students with only a pale shadow of protection from poor school performance. In fact, schools with some of the very largest racial achievement gaps in Louisville got some of the highest accountability grades from Unbridled Learning in 2012.

As previously mentioned, both Norton and Brandeis elementary schools posted incredibly large white minus black math proficiency rate gaps of more than 51 percentage points in 2012. Nevertheless, both schools were recognized as a “School of Distinction.” Furthermore, these two schools are far from alone in getting rewards despite large achievement gaps, as discussed below.
It is simply inexcusable for enormous minority achievement gaps to be present but unnoticed in schools that receive Unbridled Learning’s top award. This sends a terribly wrong message that very significant gaps will, at the very least, be overlooked – if not actually condoned and rewarded.

Unbridled Learning missed other very large achievement gaps, too

Aside from Norton and Brandeis elementary schools, Unbridled Learning failed black students in a notable number of Jefferson County schools.

For example, Dunn Elementary, the leading gap school for math in our first report, isn’t far behind Norton and Brandeis. Averaged across grades 3, 4 and 5, Dunn had a K-PREP white minus black math proficiency gap of 48.8 points in 2012 yet was rated “Proficient” in the new Unbridled Learning report. That rating tells parents that this school performs better than 70 percent of the schools in Kentucky.

However, that’s not true for blacks in Dunn. In fact, out of the 88 elementary schools in Jefferson County with available data, Dunn’s dismal grade 3 to 5 average 13.6 percent black math proficiency rate ranks way down at No. 71. It seems unfair for Dunn to be able to point to Unbridled Learning to claim credit for supposedly better-than-average performance while many other schools clearly did a better job for their black students.

Overall, nearly one in four of the 88 Jefferson County elementary schools had unacceptable white minus black math achievement gaps exceeding 30 percentage points.

For middle schools, 28 percent reported a math gap exceeding 30 percentage points.

The only somewhat brighter picture involves the high schools, where only four of 21 schools, or 19 percent, have math gaps exceeding 30 percentage points. However, this must be balanced against JCPS’ notably below average high school graduation rate (67.8 percent for all students versus the 2011 statewide average of 77.8 percent). It is possible that high dropouts inflate the performance picture presented by those students who remain in the high schools long enough to take the K-PREP Algebra II math test.

It’s geographic!

As in our first report, we again find obvious geographic patterns in the worst white versus black achievement gaps, with the largest gaps generally found in schools in eastern Jefferson County, east of I-65.

Figure 1 shows the locations of the JCPS elementary schools that have K-PREP math gaps of 30 percentage points or more.

Worse, black students in some elementary schools in eastern Louisville like Dunn actually have much lower math proficiency rates than black kids achieve in West End schools like Kennedy and Carter (which don’t have huge gaps and therefore are not shown on the map).

For example, averaged across the three elementary school grades of K-PREP data, Dunn’s blacks scored only 13.6 percent proficient in math, while in the West End’s Kennedy and Carter, blacks scored much higher, 44.5 and 40.1 percent proficient, respectively.

Incredibly, a black student who lives near Kennedy but goes to Dunn instead might be busing to a school that actually offers less chance of academic success.

By the way, eight Jefferson County elementary schools (Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10 and 18 in Figure 1) all received Unbridled Learning accountability ratings of at least “Proficient.” None tripped what are supposed to be extra protections for minorities in Unbridled Learning that would make these schools “Focus Schools.” Thus, all eight schools are receiving praise based on Unbridled Learning while their large achievement gaps go unidentified and unsanctioned.
Clearly, Kentucky’s new accountability program has some problems, including totally missing some very poor performance.

The middle-school situation also is troubling. Figure 2 shows Jefferson County middle school locations where the white minus black math proficiency rate gap exceeds 30 percentage points in the new K-PREP testing.

Once again, the geographic orientation of these schools – mostly east of I-65 – is clear.

Among the big gap schools in Figure 2, Crosby, Meyzeek and Brown got Unbridled Learning scores of “Proficient” or better. Only one of the three, Crosby, tripped over an Unbridled Learning check and also is listed as a “Focus School.” This apparent conflict in Unbridled Learning results is creating lots of confusion with the public. How can a school get praise for being in the top 30 percent of all schools in Kentucky and still be in trouble as a Focus School? Shouldn’t it be one or the other?

The high school situation shows similar geographic patterns for the largest gap schools. Figure 3 shows the high school locations where math gaps on the K-PREP Algebra II End-of-Course exam exceed 25 points. Note that this is changed from the 30 percent gap used for the lower grade schools to allow a larger number of high schools that still have exceptionally severe gaps to be plotted. A bit of good news: Only four of the plotted schools do have gaps exceeding 30 percentage points, down from seven in our previous report.

Among the high schools shown in Figure 3, Ballard, Atherton and Eastern High Schools all earned Unbridled Learning grades of “Proficient” or higher. Only one, Ballard, tripped on extra checks in Unbridled Learning and is a “Focus School.”

Why aren’t all the high gap schools discussed in this paper in line for extra help and monitoring for their large achievement gaps as “Focus Schools”?
The graduation gaps show disturbing trends, too

In our first report we were surprised to discover that the 2010 graduation rate data show blacks in some Jefferson County high schools actually have notably better odds of getting a high school diploma compared to the odds for whites in those same schools. We find the same patterns in the updated graduation rate information for 2011 released with the Unbridled Learning report, as shown in Figure 4.

High schools shown in Figure 4 have graduation gaps exceeding 10 percentage points. In eastern Louisville, whites have better odds than blacks of graduating. However, blacks in schools shown with white letters on a black background graduate at surprisingly higher rates than whites.

For example, in 2011, the graduation rate reported with the Unbridled Learning data for white students at Western High School was a truly grim 47.7 percent. Blacks at the same school graduated at a 73.2 percent rate. While neither rate is acceptable, clearly Western’s blacks perform much better than its whites.
In fact, blacks at Western have better odds of graduating than do blacks in a large number of other schools in Jefferson County.

On the other hand, while Eastern High’s white graduation rate is 80.7 percent, the school’s blacks only successfully complete their educational excursions at a 41.6 percent rate, a differential of nearly 40 percentage points. Blacks in no other high school in Jefferson County graduated at lower rates in 2011. Using a term coined at Johns Hopkins University, Eastern is a “Dropout Factory” for its black students.

Despite appearing on both our high school math gap map and our graduation rate map, Eastern High is listed in Unbridled Learning reports as a “Proficient” school – a claim that supposedly means it is doing better than 70 percent of the schools in Kentucky. It may be for whites; however, blacks in this school may beg to differ.

**Why, after years of education reform, do the gaps continue?**

Continuing widespread gaps in test scores and graduation rates in JCPS schools offer stark testimony that all efforts to reform the school system to date have not fixed a major problem: the continuing severe gaps in educational performance for the city’s black population.

The dramatic gaps and the equally disturbing geographic relationships outlined above raise a very uncomfortable question: While Louisville says its schools are integrated, is that really true?

Even though the racial make-up at the school level might appear acceptable based on “head counts,” what happens when you go into individual classrooms? Do black kids get tracked into different, lower-performing classrooms while whites get into other, faster-paced programs?
We can’t go behind Jefferson County’s school walls to get answers to those questions, but someone in authority certainly should. Something must explain the chronic, geographically related gap problems we found in Kentucky’s largest school district in two successive years of data. If it isn’t some sort of classroom-level segregation, then what is it? Answer that question, and we might be able to start fixing the problem.

Several things are certain: Louisville’s schools need some different answers. Charter schools have been cutting into the gap problem in other states, and it seems like it’s time to try in charters in Kentucky, and especially in Louisville, as well.

Also, Unbridled Learning clearly needs more work. It will not achieve credibility if it continues to praise schools with huge achievement gaps.

Technical “stuff”

For this update The Bluegrass Institute examined the elementary and middle school white versus black proficiency rate gaps for Jefferson County Public School District students in mathematics using disaggregated scores from the Kentucky Department of Education’s enormous K-PREP “Grade” Excel Spreadsheet, which contains over 255,000 lines of information (Must use Excel 2007 or later to open). For the high schools, we used the “K-PREP End-of-Course” Excel Spreadsheet for math scores and the “Graduation Rate” Excel Spreadsheet for the graduation rate material. All of these Excel spreadsheets can be accessed from links with the same names on the Data Sets page from the KDE’s State School Report Card web pages (http://applications.education.ky.gov/SRC/DataSets.aspx).

– Richard G. Innes is the staff education analyst at the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. December 10, 2012