

BLACKS FALLING THROUGH GAPS

Blacks Still Falling in the 'GAP' in Louisville's Schools

By Richard G. Innes





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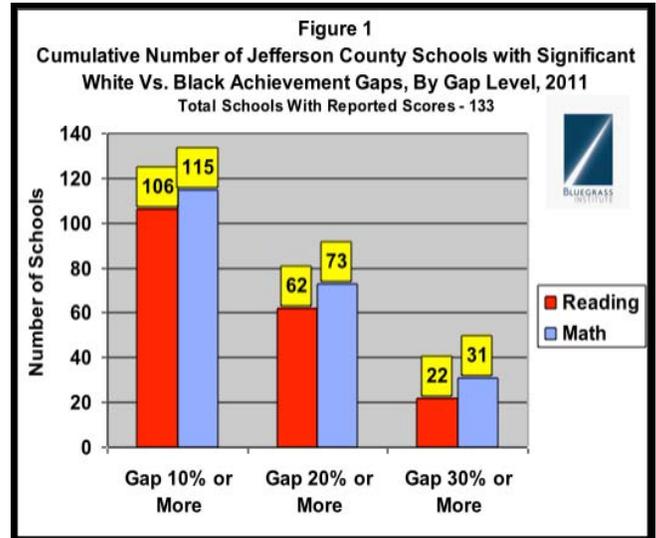
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The problem seems eternal – blacks in the Jefferson County Public Schools District (JCPS) lag behind white students in academic performance.

All sorts of efforts – creating new magnet schools – reconstituting school staff – redistributing student populations – etcetera have been attempted as a way to combat chronic education gaps. But, despite these efforts and more, our new analyses indicate that education gaps between whites and blacks in JCPS schools remain significant.

In both reading and mathematics, the white to black proficiency gaps on the 2011 state assessments were objectionably high in a depressingly large proportion of Jefferson County’s schools. The latest high school graduation rates continue to be unbalanced by race, as well.

Of even greater concern, it’s not just students’ skin color, but where they attend school, that seems to have a bearing on test performance and whether or not they will graduate.



Despite all the education reforms, large achievement gaps remain

The Bluegrass Institute examined the white-versus black proficiency rate gaps of JCPS students in both reading and mathematics using scores from the Kentucky Department of Education’s Gap-to-Goal Excel Spreadsheet.

We found significant gaps – far too many inexcusably wide ones – exist in Jefferson County’s 133 schools that reported reading and mathematics proficiency rates in 2011. White versus black proficiency rate gaps in reading and mathematics exceed 10 percentage points in the vast majority of the city’s schools.

About half of the JCPS’ schools had larger gaps of at least 20 percentage points.

In math, nearly one in four schools had depressingly large gaps exceeding 30 percentage points.

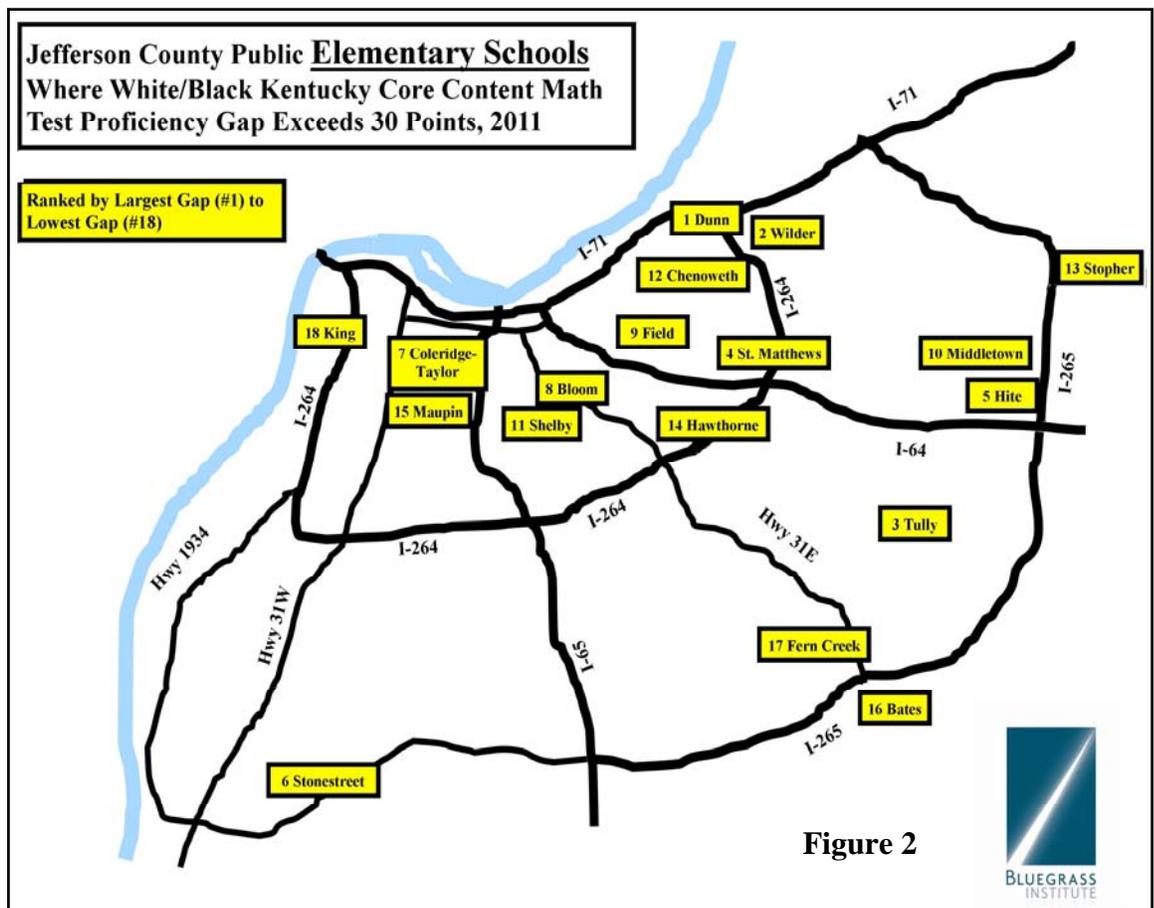


Figure 2



Noe Middle School had the worst-case gap for reading with an enormous proficiency rate difference of 43.27 percentage points between whites and blacks. While virtually every white student at Noe reads proficiently (92.12 percent), less than half of the school's blacks met the state's reading standard in 2011.

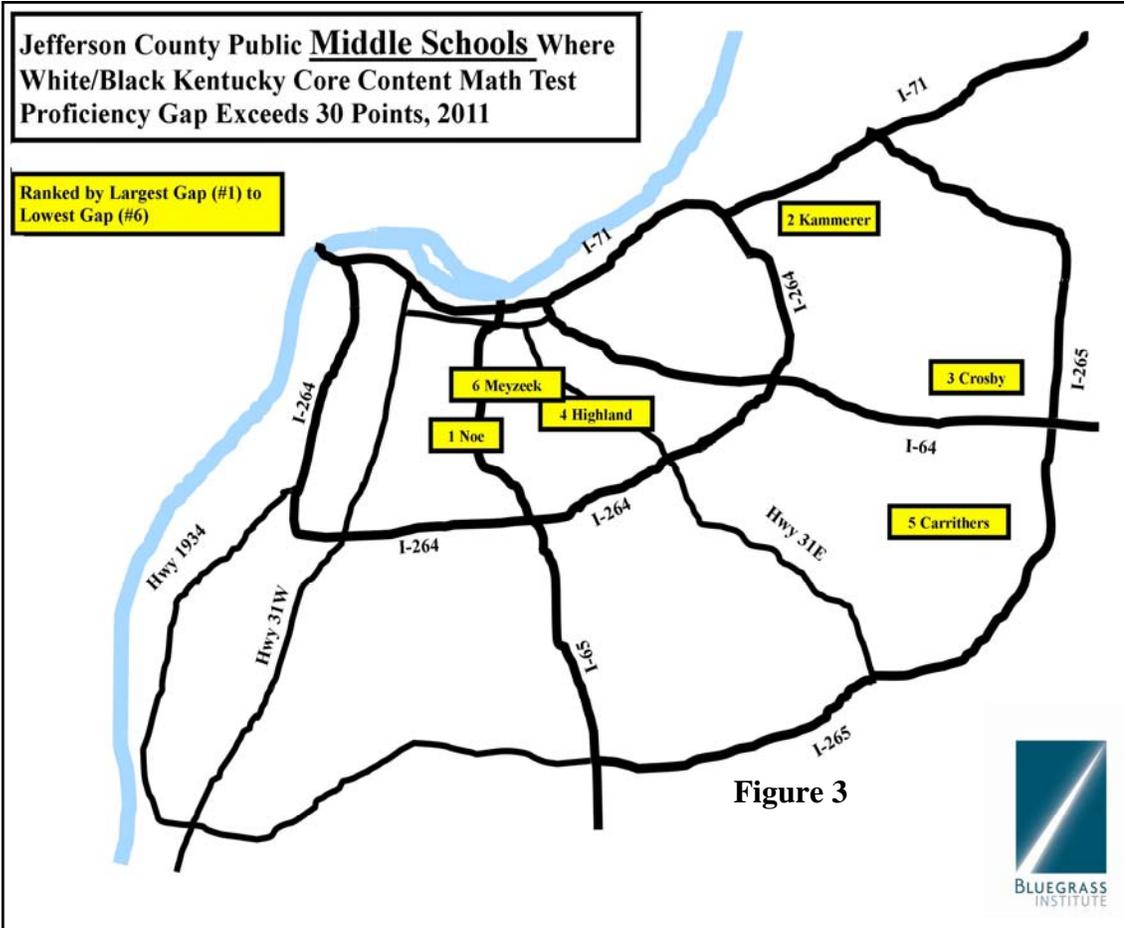
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Dunn Elementary School is the gap leader in mathematics with an incredible difference of 55.66 percentage points in white and black proficiency rates. While 94.55 percent of the whites in this school scored proficient in mathematics in 2011 state testing, only a dismal 38.89 percent of its black students achieved the state's math performance target.

It's geographic!

We found alarming geographic patterns in the worst white versus black achievement gaps, with the largest gaps generally found on the East side of town.

For this analysis, we only



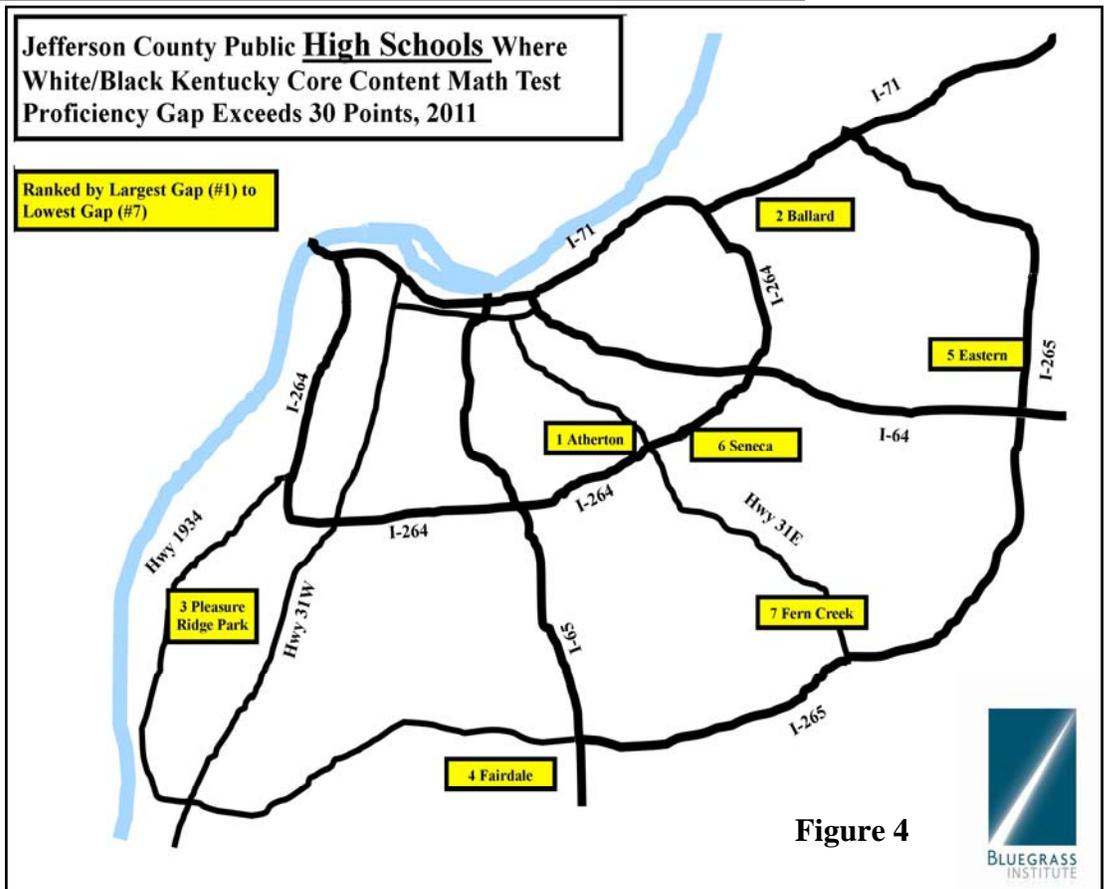
looked at schools where the mathematics achievement gap exceeded 30 percentage points – a difference far too high to be acceptable under any condition.

It turns out that, regardless of school level, most of the 'biggest gap' schools are found East of Interstate 65.

But, it gets even worse.

Black kids in some East Side schools like Dunn actually have much lower proficiency rates than black kids achieve in West Side schools.

For example, Dunn's blacks scored only 38.89 percent proficient in math, while in West End schools like Young Elementary and Atkinson Elementary, blacks scored much higher at 51.26 and 59.34 percent, respectively.



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

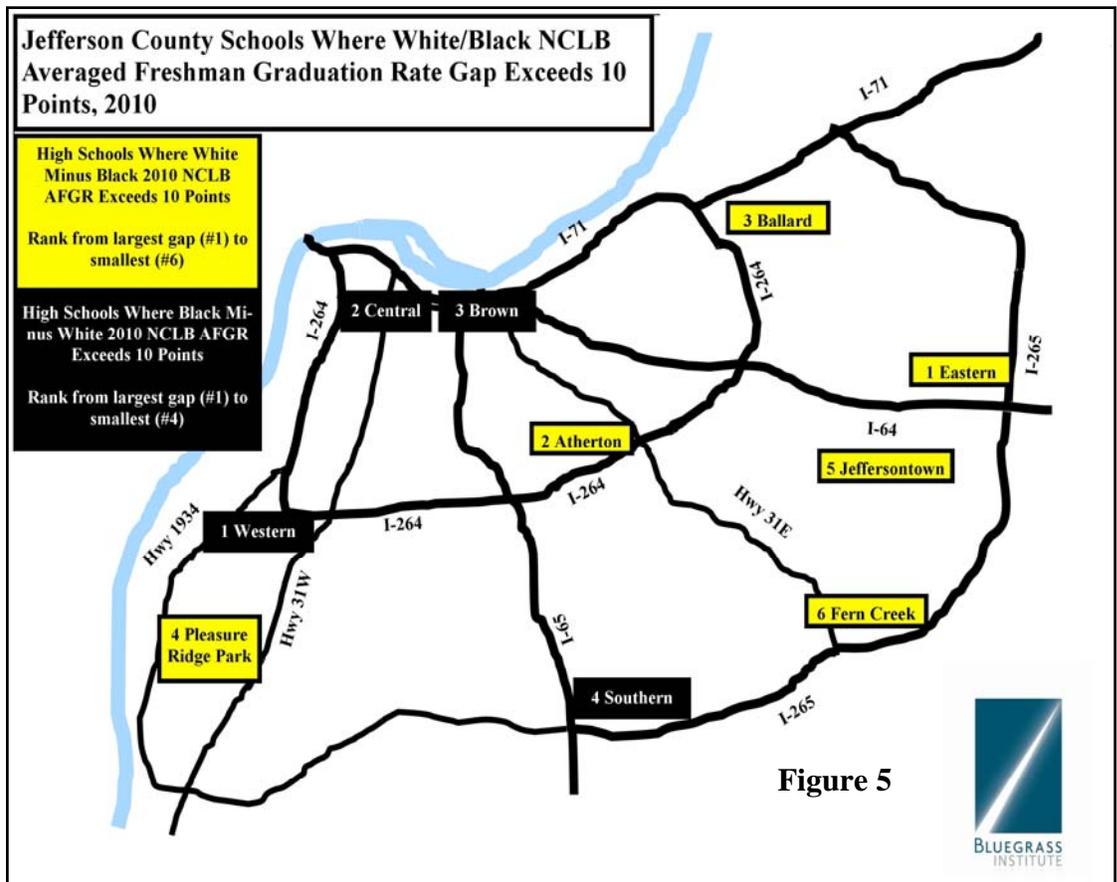
The graduation gap shows disturbing trends, too

We were surprised to discover that the latest available graduation rate data show blacks in some schools have notably better odds of getting a high school diploma compared to the odds for whites in those same schools. The last map in this paper (Figure 5) shows high schools where the graduation gap exceeds 10 percentage points. On the East Side, whites have better odds of graduating. However, and shockingly, blacks on the West Side graduate at higher rates!

For example, the graduation rate for white students at Western High School is a truly grim 34.87 percent. Blacks at the same school graduate at 66.43 percent. While neither rate is acceptable, clearly blacks have something much better than white students going on in this school.

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 82.82 percent, the school's blacks only successfully complete their educational excursions at a 49.16 percent rate. Blacks in only two other high schools in Jefferson County did worse in 2010. Using a term coined at Johns Hopkins University, Eastern is a "Dropout Factory" for its black students.



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 African-American population.

The dramatic gaps and their geographic relationships outlined above raise a very disturbing 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 classrooms? Do black kids get tracked into different, lower-performing classrooms while whites get into other, faster-tracked programs?

We can't go behind those school walls to get answers to those questions, but someone in authority certainly needs to do that. Something must explain the chronic, geographically related gap problems we found in Kentucky's largest school district. If it isn't some sort of classroom-level segregation, then what is it?

One thing is 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.

— Richard G. Innes is an education analyst for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank.