Study: Top Minority Students Fall Off During High School

Students of lower socioeconomic status score 100 points lower on the SAT than their more advantaged peers.

By Allie Bidwell  April 2, 2014  Leave a Comment  SHARE

Despite entering high school at the tops of their classes, many high-performing minority and disadvantaged students finish with lower grades, lower AP exam passage rates and lower SAT and ACT scores than their high-achieving white and more advantaged peers, according to a report released Wednesday by The Education Trust.

The gaps based on race and socioeconomic status suggest “differential learning experiences” while the students are in high school, the report says. Overall, high-achieving students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds were twice as likely as their white and more advantaged counterparts to not take college admissions tests, for example. And when they did take the SAT,
high-achieving black students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds scored nearly 100 points lower, the report says.

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"These are the students who arrive at high school most ready to take advantage of rigorous and high-level instruction," Marni Bromberg, The Education Trust’s research associate and co-author of the report, said in a statement. "But to reach the academic levels that they are capable of, they need exposure to challenging curriculum as well as support and guidance from their schools, including in selecting a college that can really challenge them."

The report also found racial and socioeconomic status gaps in terms of students' GPAs. High-achieving black and Latino students were significantly more likely than high-achieving white students to have C averages. In fact, more than three-quarters of high-achieving black students had a B average or lower, compared with a little more than half of white students. High-achieving students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were also significantly less likely to have higher GPAs than their more advantaged peers.

Although the Ed Trust report did not look into explanations for the disparities in grades among high-achieving students of different races, it notes that previous research – which explored student, family and school characteristics that could influence grade differences – identified teachers' perceptions of students as the most influential.

"In particular, teacher beliefs about how hard their students worked explained a great deal of this gap, as opposed to student-reported study habits and behavior records," the new report says.

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Comparisons for college enrollment were more mixed. While high-achieving black students were no less likely than high-achieving white students to enroll in a four-year college or university, white students' chances were significantly higher than Latino students'. Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were also significantly more likely than those from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in four-year schools.

Additionally, high-achieving students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds were significantly less likely to enroll in highly selective four-year colleges and universities. Many highly selective colleges and universities typically accept fewer than 20 percent of applicants. While 34 percent of high-achieving white students enrolled in highly selective universities, just 19 percent of black students and 24 percent of Latino students did so.

"Serving high-achieving students well is a serious responsibility for our high schools," Christina Theokas, director of research for The Education Trust and co-author of the report, said in a statement. "Our nation can’t afford this loss of potential. With attention, schools and educators can disrupt the inequitable outcomes experienced by black and Latino students and students from less advantaged backgrounds."

The report also found that although high-achieving white, black and Latino students take similar course loads in high school, high-achieving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were
more likely to take advanced math, science and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses than their more disadvantaged peers.

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Taking all of those gaps into consideration, the report's authors write it's "perhaps unsurprising" that these students are less likely to enroll in selective four-year colleges and universities, as they appear less competitive at the end of high school.

"Low-[socioeconomic status] students and students of color deserve better," the report says. "It is up to schools and educators to equip the students with the experiences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will put them in contention for postsecondary opportunities that can truly dislodge long-entrenched patterns in our society."

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