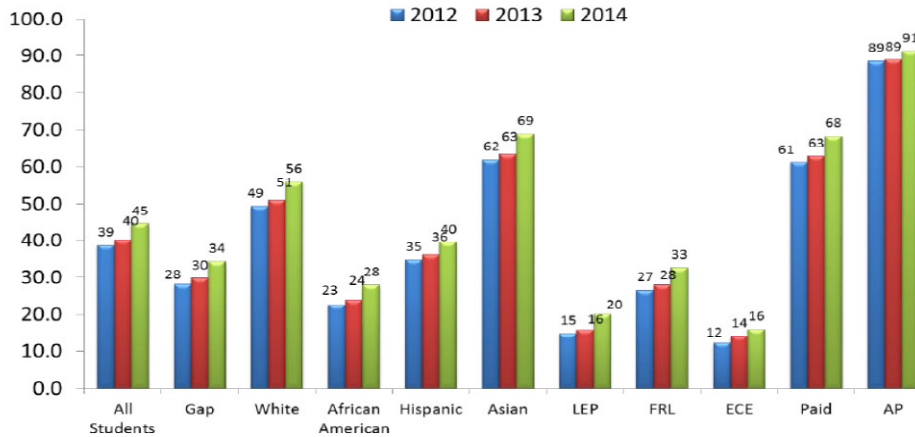


Help FOR push to reduce the Achievement Gap in JCPS

Last October, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) issued its annual district report cards (“Increased Learning” Figure, below). With much fanfare, the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) administration and local media highlighted the increased overall state rating for JCPS and the increases in percentages of students system-wide who were rated either proficient or distinguished on tests covering math and reading. Even the breakdowns by ethnicity, socio-economic status (FRL), special needs (ECE), and English language learners (LEP) showed that all of these “gap” groups had improved their academic performance over the previous two school years (the “gap” category is a catch-all that includes any student in any of these “gap” groups).

Focus Area 1: Increased Learning

% Proficient and Distinguished: Combined Reading and Math by Student Group



The results were encouraging. They seemed to show that JCPS has a mix of programs already in place that can improve academic (and related behavioral) performance for each group of students. Superintendent Hargens said there is much more work to do, but “stay the course”.

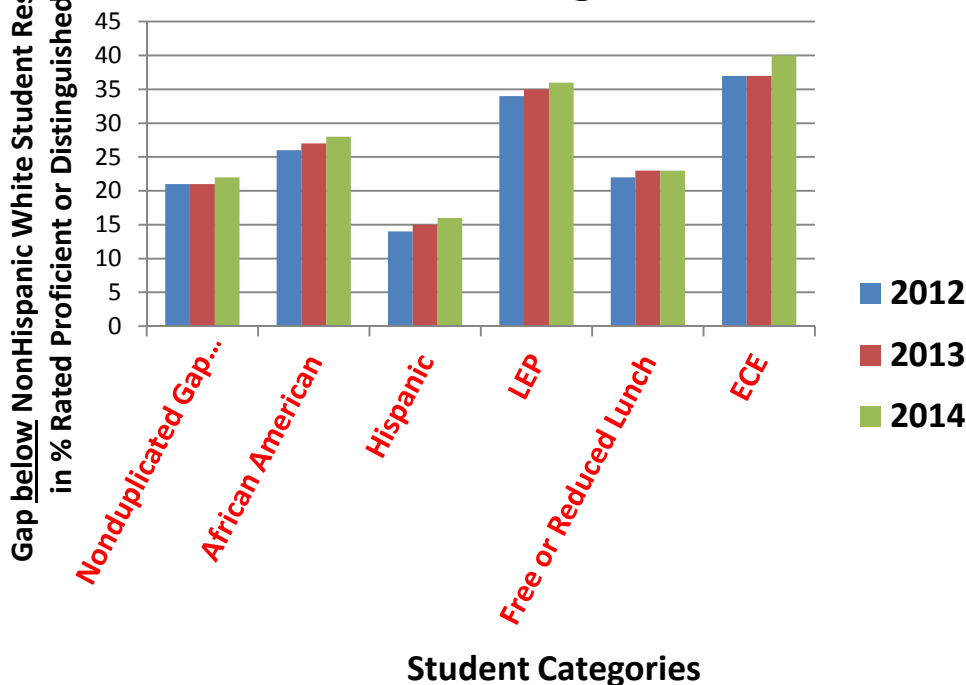
But wait. Well over 60% of JCPS students come from families with low incomes. Just over 50% are people of color. These families represent the majority of the “customers” of JCPS.

And they might see this same data in a very different light. Only one out of three students from families with low incomes has reached proficiency at their grade level. For every 100 African American students, only 28 have been rated proficient—half the rate for all white students. Students who have special educational needs or who are English language learners scored even lower. Yes,

there can be significant disparities that are tied to how the students started out in life. Don’t these parents, though, have a right to know if JCPS is reducing or amplifying these gaps between their children and those of white middle-class families who are still the dominant demographic in Jefferson County?

Unfortunately, there was no reporting on the trends in the very visible achievement gaps between the groups, other than that broad statement that there is work to do. FOR’s Aim Higher committee used the limited publicly-available KDE data to

Increases in JCPS Achievement Gaps in Reading and Math



take a simple look (“Increases in JCPS Achievement Gaps” figure).

The preliminary results are alarming. Even though all groups’ proficiencies rise, the gaps—the differences in proficient ratings between the white student group and each gap group— increased for every gap group over the two school years. Every group improved, but the baseline white student group improved faster.

We need a measurable gap reduction target to bring focus on the evidence for programs that differentially help the gap students and to shift budgets accordingly. The goal of the shifts is to change the rates of improvement so struggling students catch up. JCPS needs to demonstrate and track its ability to help level the playing field for the majority of its students by the time they graduate.

There could be many other ways to evaluate the change in gaps (even though the data for this one is data the state relies on for evaluating the achievement progress). Defining that measurement tool is the job of the JCPS management and the Board of Education, with careful input and review from the community. Perhaps the size of the changes by this particular gap evaluation method are not statistically significant. The same question can be raised about the year-to-year achievement data itself. Some are concerned that measuring achievement results by the state’s proficient “rating can be “gamed” by focusing on mentoring “bubble” students—those whose test scores are just below proficient. And no credit is given for the hard work to mentor students who rated “novice”—the lowest score—so they reached the next level in skills—“apprentice”. Alternatively, we could be measuring the change in the gaps between achievement score increases for all students below proficiency, group by group. This is a discussion long past due.

How might having a gap reduction metric and requiring hard evidence of success shift the resource decisions and program mix of JCPS and accountability for success? Here are some examples, drawn from Board meetings this year:

- If research showed more selective impacts on academic improvement, student/teacher ratios and teacher allocations would be further fine-tuned up and down on a classroom basis, not just overall school demographics;
- If evidence shows students respond better academically to teachers who “look like them”, the Board could hold JCPS management accountable for far more aggressive efforts to increase in the percentage of minority teachers—which remains virtually unchanged for years;
- Out-of-school suspension (10,000+ a year) would be an unacceptable outcome for most behavior issues. Much more rapid, system-wide expansion of effective programs for assessment and targeted support before student behaviors deteriorate would maintain a classroom climate for learning and match troubled or disengaged students with appropriate resources ways of learning; and
- Overwhelming evidence for the value of major pre-K programs would drive a Board-driven, public campaign for implementation and shouldering the costs through tax increases.

JCPS and its board are reformulating their previous five-year vision (Vision 2015) this year. The board will be re-evaluating goals at a retreat in late May. Now is the time for you to tell your school board member and the superintendent that-- for a public school system-- proficiency for all must be every bit as important as excellence for some. Tell them to:

- **Require staff to begin immediately to collect JCPS and nation-wide evidence to find which combinations of programs rapidly improve academic achievement of gap groups;**
- **Require evidence of how programs affect achievement gap as you build the SY 2015-2016 budget. Drop what hasn’t worked and “increase the bets” dramatically on the most effective programs, staffing, and facilities strategies;**
- **Put measurable Achievement Gap Reduction goals into Vision 2020—if you don’t have a target, you can’t reach it; and**

- **Actively monitor and make mid-course corrections for achievement gap reduction!**

Leveling the playing field through education is still a core American value, and one that county residents can and should make happen in parallel with opportunities for excellence. If you are member of other community organizations, please ask them to endorse this campaign (contact us through FORnonviolence@ gmail.com or Chris Harmer at 899-4119).

Chris Harmer is on the FOR Steering committee and Louisville FOR's Aim Higher committee. Aim Higher works on reducing the influence of the military and military recruiters in our schools and community. That work led it to the parallel work of advocating for equity of educational opportunity.