

# The achievement gap: Is your school helping all students succeed?

Is your school equitably serving its students? Successful schools have found fair, effective ways to raise the performance of all.

By GreatSchools Staff

Many diverse schools experience an achievement gap, meaning that some groups of students achieve at a much higher level than other groups, especially on standardized tests. It is common to see persistent patterns of underachievement for lower-income, African American, and Hispanic students on standardized test scores. More and more, standardized tests are serving as gatekeepers to a child's academic future. As a result, schools are being asked to close this gap and to help all children reach high standards.

If your school, or the school you are considering for your child, has disparities in outcomes between groups of students, you should look into why this gap exists and what measures the school is taking to close the gap. Schools should strive to create an environment where all children feel valued and all children are learning to high standards. To find out if your school is working to close the achievement gap, schedule a school visit to meet with the principal and observe some classes.

## Meeting with the principal: Questions to ask about equity

Here are some questions to ask the principal that will help you assess the school's commitment to helping all children reach high standards:

**Ask:** *How are students achieving in the school now? Are there any groups of students that are scoring below others on standardized tests? If so, what is the school doing to address this challenge?*

**Listen for:** Exact achievement data for each group of students in the school; specific strategies the school is using (curricular programs, interventions, etc.) to raise the achievement of low-performing students; and concrete, measurable school goals for improving test scores.

**Ask:** *How do the teachers hold all children to high expectations and measure progress to ensure that all students are learning?*

**Listen for:** Concrete examples of assessments that teachers use to gauge student learning and ways that teachers analyze this assessment data to make sure all students are on track.

**Ask:** *How is the school working to close the achievement gap? Are teachers using any new curriculum or instruction? Are they offering extra academic support for students?*

**Listen for:** Specific actions the school is taking to raise achievement for low-performing students. Potential actions include: Implementing new teaching strategies that have been proven successful in other schools and providing additional academic support for students, during the school day and after school. Ask how many children take advantage of these resources and how parents are notified about this extra help.

**Ask:** *Do all students have equal access to the most challenging classes or are lower-achieving students grouped in remedial programs?*

**Listen for:** Evidence that all students have access to high-level courses and enriched curriculum and the school discourages permanent "ability grouping" and remedial programs. If you're not sure, ask to see the demographics of the students in accelerated courses vs. remedial courses.

## Walking around the school: Looking for signs of equity

Take a walk around the school, visiting classrooms and observing the surroundings. As you walk, keep an eye out for some of the following signs that this school is striving to be equitable for all students:

- Teachers using a variety of instructional strategies, including cooperative learning (students working in groups) and directed lessons to meet the learning needs of the students. Watch to see if students look engaged in the lessons and if the purpose of the lesson is clear.
- Artwork and decorations, both in the hallways and in classrooms, that value and affirm the culture, language and backgrounds of the students.
- Evidence that the school makes an effort to communicate with parents through their home language and encourages parents of all ethnic and cultural groups to participate in the school.
- Accommodations for students with physical handicaps to access all parts of the school.

It may take years for a school to reverse historical trends of underachievement and inequity. The key is to look and listen for evidence that the school is aware of its challenges and is working actively to raise the achievement of all students.