

Closing the Achievement Gap

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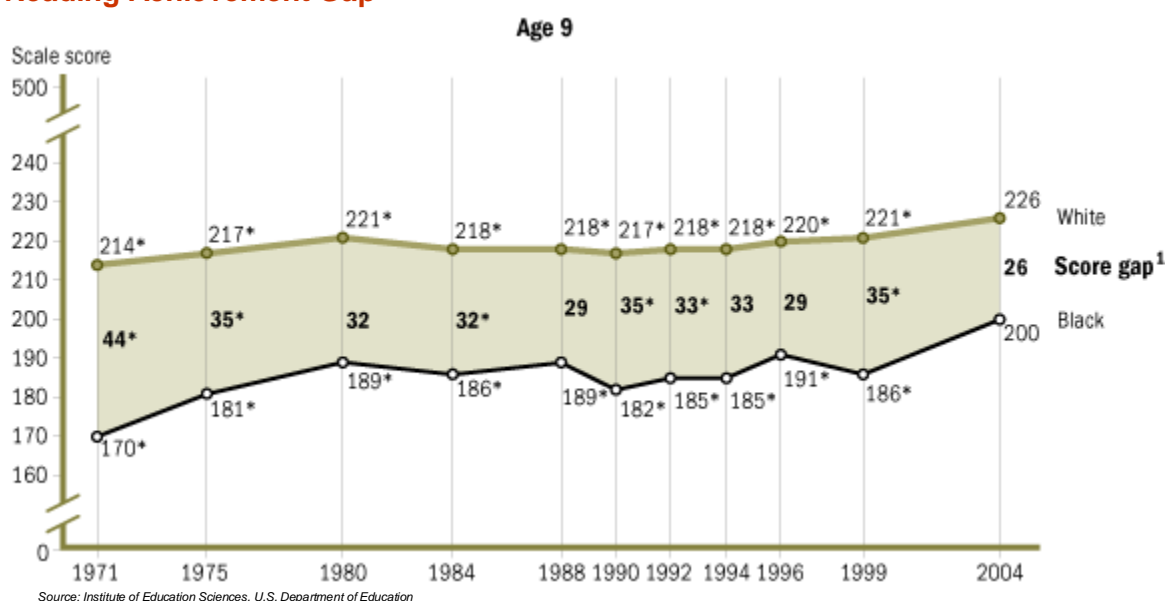
(Kagan Online Magazine, Spring 2007)

The "Achievement Gap" is a national crisis. [Kagan offers a solution to close the gap and truly leave no child behind.](#)

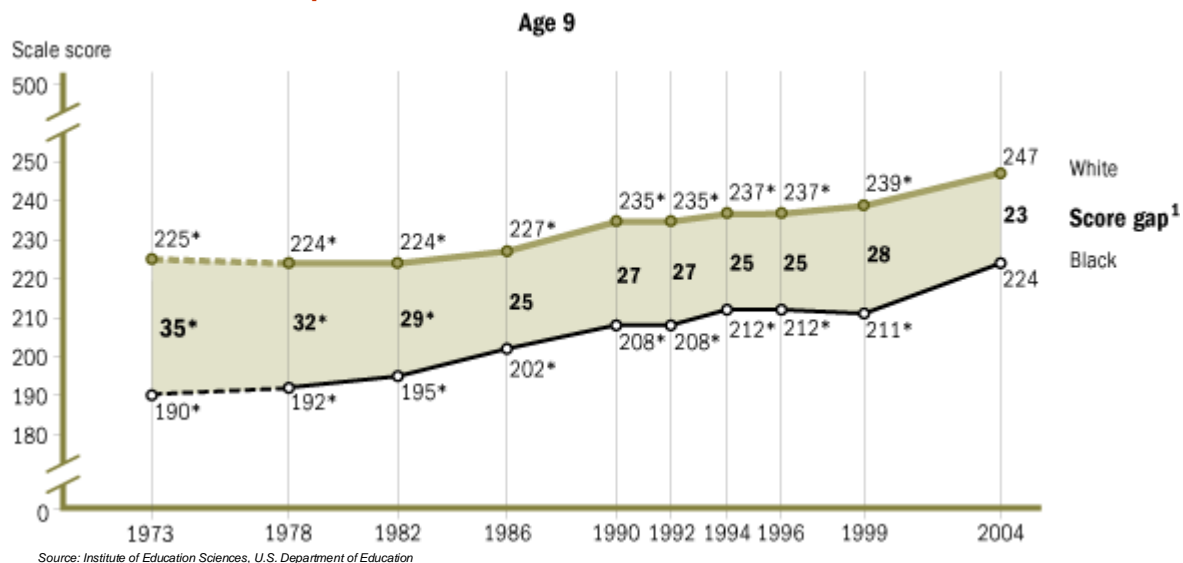
To support our democratic philosophy our educational system is based on notion of equity. Regardless of your race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or language background, schooling in a democracy is to provide everyone an equal opportunity of excelling academically and excelling in our open society. That's the American Dream — but it's not the American reality.

In reality, our school systems are failing to promote equity. There is an "Achievement Gap" between the academic attainment of the "haves" and the "have nots", between the "whites" and "blacks", and between the "minority" and the "majority". Schooling is not the great equalizer that we want it to be. There are numerous ways to look at the achievement gap. The graphs below illustrate the black-white achievement gap for reading and math from the 1970's to 2004:

Reading Achievement Gap



Math Achievement Gap



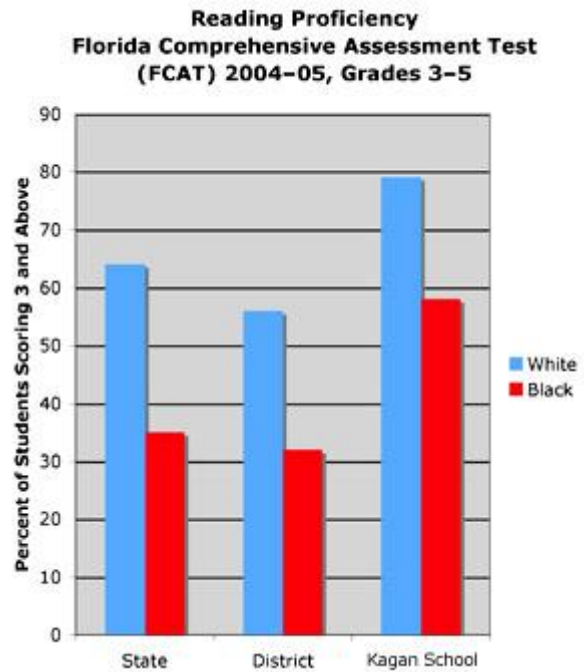
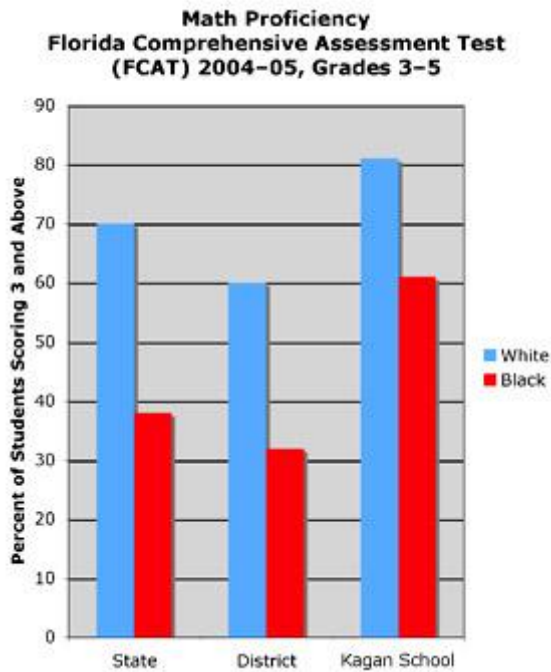
On the vertical axis are the achievement scale scores. On the horizontal axis are the years. On the positive side, notice how white and black students are performing better recently than in the past. Scale scores are up. Also positive is the fact that in 2004, the gap was smaller in Reading and Math than it's been in years past. Those are two big pluses. However the gap persists and remains unacceptable. The Education Trust concluded that by twelfth grade, African-American and Latino students have skills in English, math, and science that are as much as four full years behind their white peers. Further, minority students are more likely to drop out of high school. The trend holds in every state of the nation.

The No Child Left Behind legislation has put great pressure on schools to close the gap. Not only must schools perform well academically overall, if they continually fail to close the gap, there are serious repercussions. Schools and districts are struggling to close the gap. Kagan offers a solution that works.

Closing the Gap with Kagan

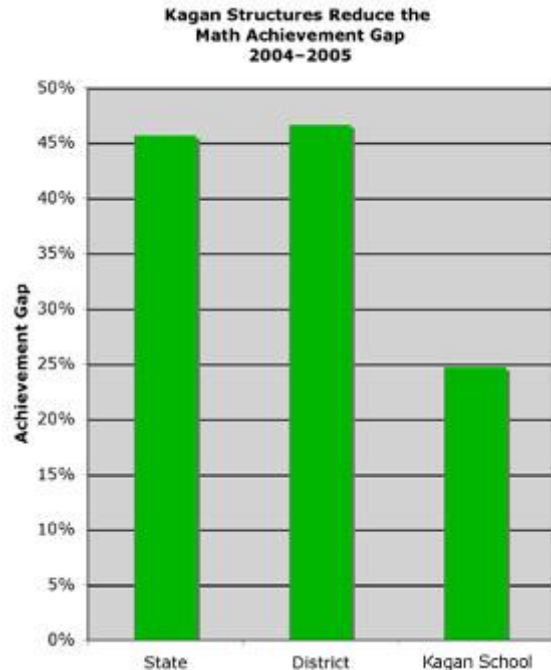
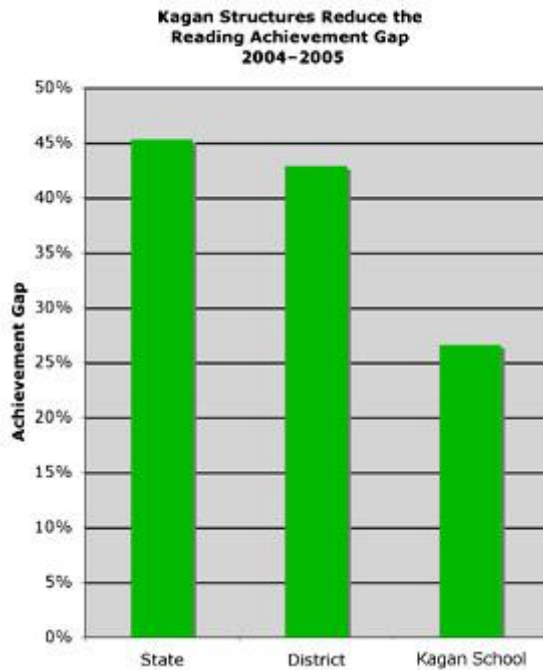
Early research on cooperative learning showed that cooperative learning was a promising intervention for closing the achievement gap (Kagan, 1994). Both minority and majority students' achievement levels were greater with cooperative learning than with traditional teaching methods. Most impressive was the fact that **minority students gained at an accelerated rate, narrowing the achievement gap.**

Recent school performance corroborates early research. Cooperative learning closes the achievement gap. Take a look at these recent reading and math achievement graphs comparing a Kagan school to its district and state neighbors. The graphs show the achievement scores of black and white students.



The school designated itself as a "Kagan School," and provided all of its teachers training in Kagan instructional strategies. The result: The school obtained **greater overall proficiency in reading and mathematics than its state and district counterparts**. White students outperform white students in the state and in the district. The same is true with the black students. Black students in the Kagan school outperform black students in the state and district. Also of interest, in both math and reading, black students from the Kagan school outperform their white peers from their district.

When we chart the size of the gap, notice how much smaller the achievement gap is at the Kagan school. Without emphasis on closing the achievement gap per se, teachers are successful at closing the gap with Kagan. The achievement gap is approximately 45% for schools in the state and district. The gap is reduced to approximately 25% for the Kagan school.



How does it work? How does Kagan close the achievement gap? There are many ways Kagan instructional strategies work to close the achievement gap including, increased motivation, peer tutoring, immediate feedback, peer support, and better ongoing formative assessment. Let's focus here on two of these factors: The heterogeneous team and active engagement.

Heterogeneous Teams

In the Kagan classroom, we create teams of mixed ability and race. We put black and white students on the same team. We put high-achievement and low-achievement students on the same team. We don't relegate low achievers to a low group and give them remedial curriculum or instruction. When we homogeneously group students by ability, we increase the likelihood of perpetuating or even exaggerating the achievement gap. Instead, we give all students the same challenging curriculum and have high expectations for all students to succeed. Through peer tutoring, modeling, and support within their teams, students who have the most to learn gain the most. As the early research and recent graphs show, everyone learns more, but [there is a veritable "catching up" effect for the traditionally disadvantaged students.](#)

Active Engagement

In the Kagan classroom, we use structures that actively engage every student. We require everyone play a part in the learning. In many classrooms, students can choose not to participate. They simply don't raise their hands. One student in a whole class of students is easily overlooked. The voluntary participation model allows students to slip through the cracks. [In the Kagan classroom, non-participation is not an option.](#) We don't tell our students that we want everyone to be actively engaged. We structure for active engagement. Students are in small teams. Each has an important role in the team. For example, in a **RoundRobin**, every teammate has their turn. Students are counting on their teammates to participate. They aren't lost in a crowd. The more we can engage all of our students, the more all of our students will learn.

[Close the achievement gap with Kagan and truly leave no child behind!](#)

References:

- Kagan, Spencer. *Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing, 1994.
- NCLB School Public Accountability Report
- National Governors Association. www.nga.org
- Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education