

Black children left behind

By Marc H. Morial
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Back in 2002, President George W. Bush with much pomp and circumstance enacted the ambitious and controversial No Child Left Behind education law, which established a series of standards that schools and states must meet or face severe penalties.

Its ultimate stated goal was to narrow the educational divide between African-American and white students by 2014. Like a lot of political ideas with lofty expectations, the rhetoric doesn't always translate into effective laws, and there is rarely complete consensus on success rates.

"There are good results of No Child Left Behind across the nation," declared Bush at a North Carolina school last month, giving assurances that "the gap is closing," the *New York Times* reported. At the other side of the spectrum, Michael T. Nettles, a senior vice president at the Educational Testing Service, recently informed an audience at Columbia University that the divide is actually "showing very few signs of closing."

And even Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a group that advocated for No Child Left Behind, concluded that "poor and minority students are doing very poorly, and in most states are not making significant gains."

This by no means implies that black children have not made progress. They have - but incrementally, according to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress. Just not enough to keep pace with their white counterparts, who are hardly breaking achievement records. The difference in percentage of white and black students performing at an adequate level in both reading and math appears to be expanding, not closing.

From 1992 to 2005, the percentage of African-American fourth-graders who read at or above proficiency grew from 8 to 12 percent, according to the report card. Over the same period, the percentage of white students reading at the same level increased from 35 percent to 41 percent.

Yet, as average achievement test scores improved, the chasm between adept white and black readers widened by 1 percentage point - from 27 to 28 over the 1992-2005 period:

Where black children have shown strong progress on the mathematics front, an encouraging trend given the importance of technology in our nation's current and future economy. From 1990 to 2005, the percentage of African-American fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency soared more than 13-fold from 1 percent to 13 percent. But, once again, the gap between white and black fourth graders with adequate math skills grew by four percentage points - from 20 to 24.

No Child Left Behind has helped us quantify the achievement gaps based on race - an important step. Regardless, the numbers are pretty gloomy. Overall, more than 60 percent of U.S. fourth- and eighth-graders in 2005 failed to perform at their grade level in reading and math.

That's an embarrassment to say the least for the world's richest nation and bodes ominously for our future. How can we

expect our future workforce to compete in a global economy against competitors with better-educated children?

Much like civil rights activists in the 1960s, we must seize control of our children's destiny. We cannot sit back and expect our elected leaders to find a quick fix for a problem that took decades to develop. Just imagine if civil rights crusaders of the 1950s and 1960s had waited around for Uncle Sam to help ensure everyone's right to vote.

It is partially our responsibility as parents and members of the community to ensure that future generations acquire the skills needed to thrive in a dynamic and competitive world economy and to hold the powers that be accountable for their obligation to provide a good public education to all - regardless of color, religion or economic class.

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