



# The Bell Policy Center

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## **Incomes Are Outcomes In The Classroom** **Latest CSAP scores show persistent achievement gap** **between children from poor and affluent families**

**By Ari Stiller-Shulman, Bell Summer Fellow**

***The Boulder Daily Camera* • August 28, 2005**

Before the first sack lunch is packed and the first school bell rings, before mom waves goodbye from the car and sees her son or daughter race into a kindergarten class, the child's lifetime scholastic achievement—in many cases—is already largely determined.

Throughout their public education, students from low-income and minority families score lower on standardized tests, take fewer college preparatory courses in high school, and are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school. In an economy where education is more necessary than ever, low academic achievement hampers the chances for opportunity for students from low-income families.

The 2005 CSAP scores recently released by the Colorado Department of Education confirm that the education achievement gap between low-income and middle- to high-income students is significant and persistent. Test results show that although most students improved in most subject areas, there has been little change in the gap in test scores between students from middle- to high-income families and those from low-income families. The gap likewise did not budge significantly between white and Asian students compared to black, Hispanic, and Native American students.

- Reading test scores increased at five grade levels for white and Asian students.
- Black and Hispanic students increased in reading at four grade levels and Native American students improved on two grade levels.

The Bell Policy Center compared 32 sets of reading test scores between white and ethnic minority students from 2004 and 2005. We found the gap widened in 17, stayed the same in seven and closed in eight.

In a comparison by family income, 76 percent of middle- to high-income fourth-graders read at or above the proficient level compared to 43 percent of low-income fourth graders — a 33-point gap.

Math scores improved nearly across the board for the six grade levels tested during the 2004-2005 school year, the state-labeled "year of math." Yet in Bell's 24 comparisons of math test scores between white and minority students, the scoring gap widened in 11 comparisons, stayed the same in seven and closed in six.

Although the CDE cites general math improvement, 10th-grade math scores remain abysmal. In 2005, only 42 percent of Asian students, the highest scoring racial group, scored proficient or above. Just 35 percent of students from middle- to high-income families scored proficient or higher.

Nine percent of Hispanic and black students and 11 percent of students from low-income families scored at or above proficient in 10th grade math.



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Overall, since CSAP tests started in 1997, success has been mixed on narrowing the achievement gap.

Bell made 92 comparisons of scores from the first year each test was given and the 2005 scores. For different race and income-level groups, the achievement gap widened in 46, stayed the same in 15 and narrowed in 31.

While unsettling, this is old news for Colorado's educators and policy-makers. The gap between the highest and lowest scoring race and income-level groups has not changed significantly over eight years of testing.

The reason? Quite simply, there is no surefire way to bring all students to the same level of proficiency. But recent reports, including the Bell Policy Center's new study "Understanding Colorado's Achievement Gap," suggest that the following practices and policies work:

- Expand quality preschool education. In 2005, the General Assembly restored 3,300 slots to the Colorado Preschool Program, a state-sponsored preschool system for at-risk youngsters. But another 3,000 children in Colorado who meet the criteria for enrollment won't get to attend because of funding shortfalls, according to the program's 2005 report to the Colorado Legislature.
- Broaden use of test and survey data to reform school-level practices. A recent report from CDE's Office of Learning and Results shows that Colorado's schools with large low-income student populations and consistently high math scores use data from tests and surveys to adjust their practices so all students improve.
- Support quality teachers. A 2005 study from the Education Trust notes that gap-closing schools invest in "intensive, focused professional development." The trust found a 49-point difference in test scores on a third grade math test for students who had three years with experienced teachers versus those who had three years with inexperienced teachers.
- Place at-risk high school students in challenging courses. The RAND Foundation reports that demanding college-preparatory courses create high expectations and motivate students to achieve.

Scores from this year's CSAP show that most students are improving. But improving or not, unless the achievement gap closes and closes soon, the academic fate of most children is sealed from the first ring of the school bell.

*Ari Stiller-Shulman was the 2005 summer fellow at Bell Policy Center, a nonprofit nonpartisan progressive think tank serving Colorado. He is continuing his studies at Colorado College, where he is majoring in comparative literature and international affairs. The Bell Policy Center's new report on the achievement gap is available online at [www.thebell.org](http://www.thebell.org)*