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## The Academic Achievement Gap: Where is the Sense of Urgency?

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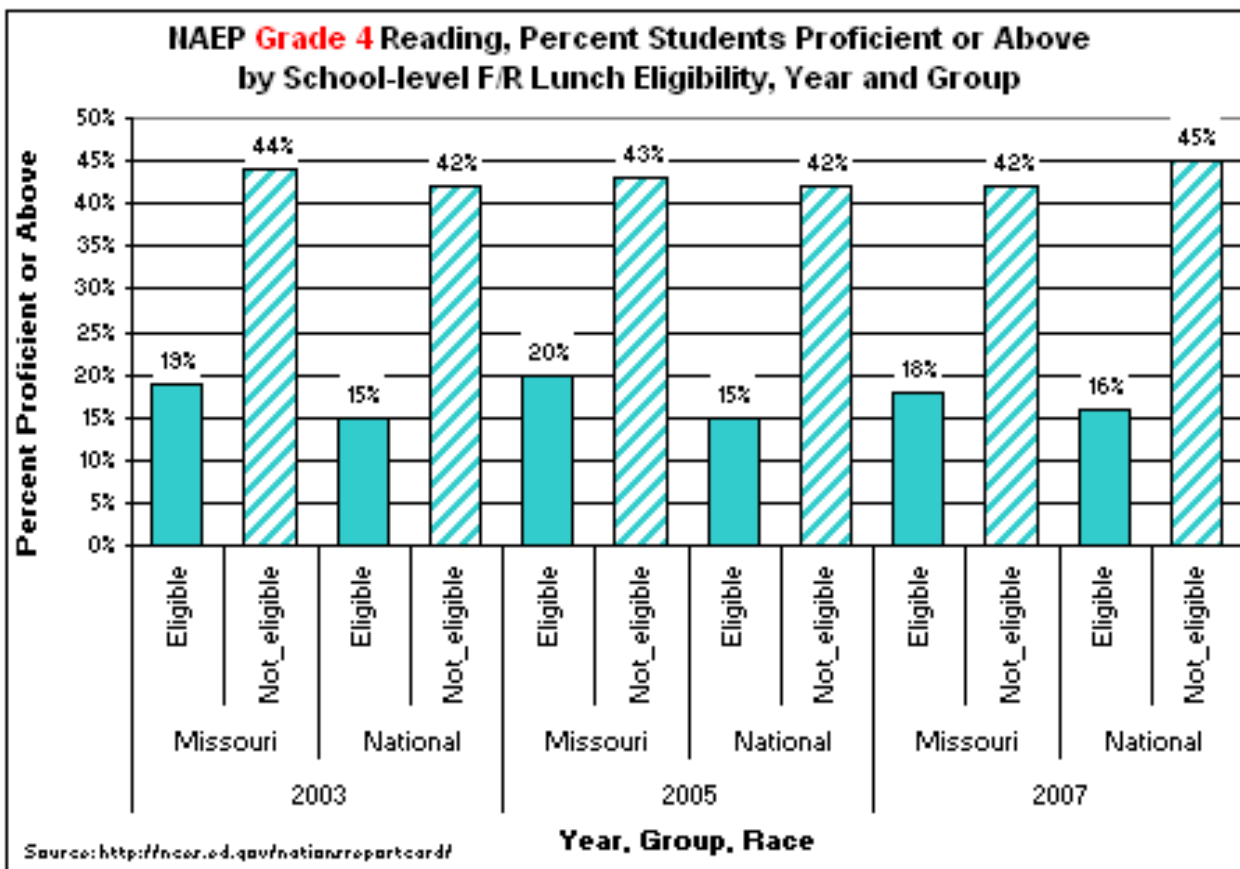
Dr. Ronald Edmonds, the father of effective schools research, stated over thirty years ago, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to successfully teach all children. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

With the implementation of PL 107-110, the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its subsequent regulations, the spotlight shines brightly on the relative performance levels of various identifiable subgroups. For many years, schools and school districts could publicize their achievement data with great pride as they announced that they were “above average.” However, the “little secret,” currently highlighted by NCLB, is that mean scores of large groups of students did little to surface the substantial failure of parents, schools and communities to provide systems of support ensuring that all students attain to the level of their ability.

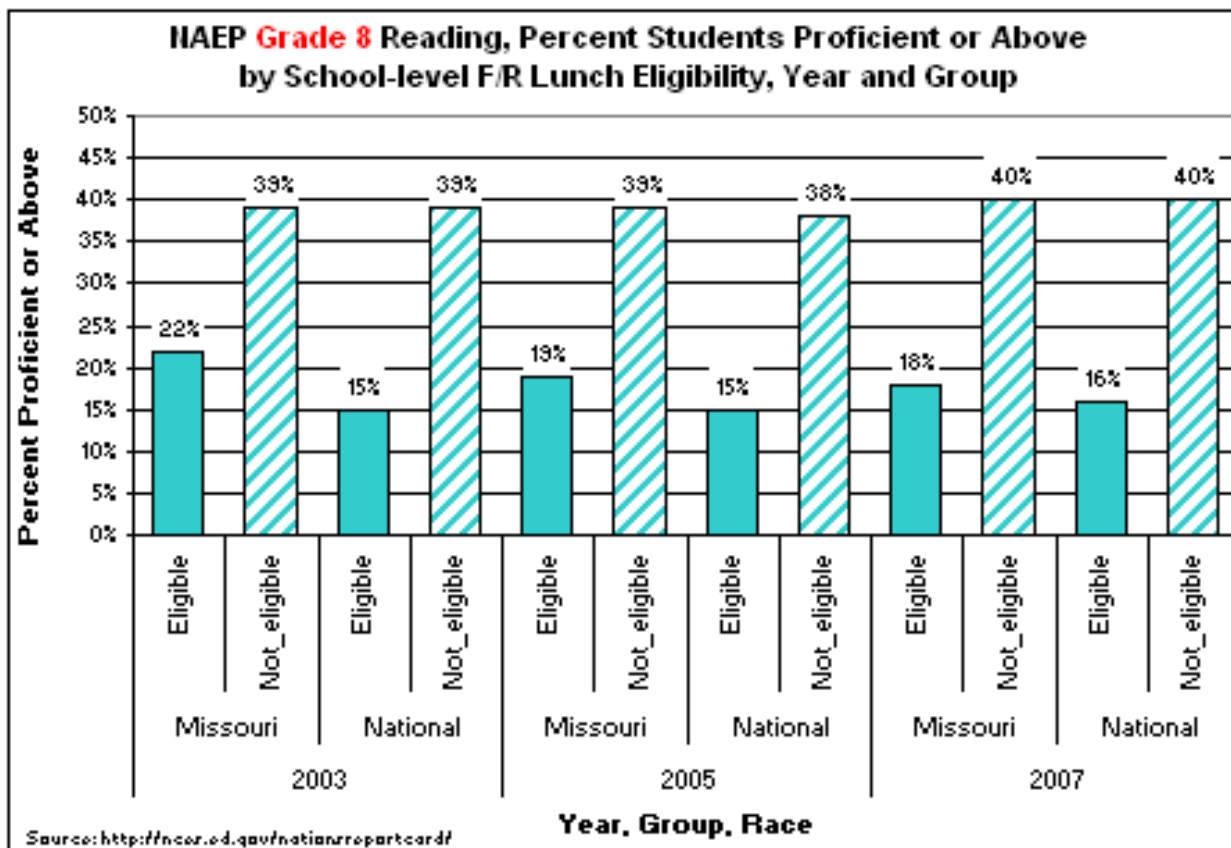
To some, it may not be a realistic goal to have all children perform at the same level on a standards-based assessment; however, it does seem to be a reasonable goal to eliminate poverty and race as powerful predictors of success in school. To this end, all segments of society must take seriously the challenge of mitigating the conditions that create barriers to success for every child. Schools alone cannot ensure no child is left behind. Absent from the political rhetoric is a strong commitment to address this critical moral, social and economic challenge of our day. Realization of the American dream by members of disenfranchised groups through universal free public education appears to be in jeopardy.

Although much time and energy is spent verifying the nature of the problem, data are sufficiently clear in showing the current condition. The following graphs, presenting the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading data, clearly indicate an achievement gap across large populations —and not much is changing.

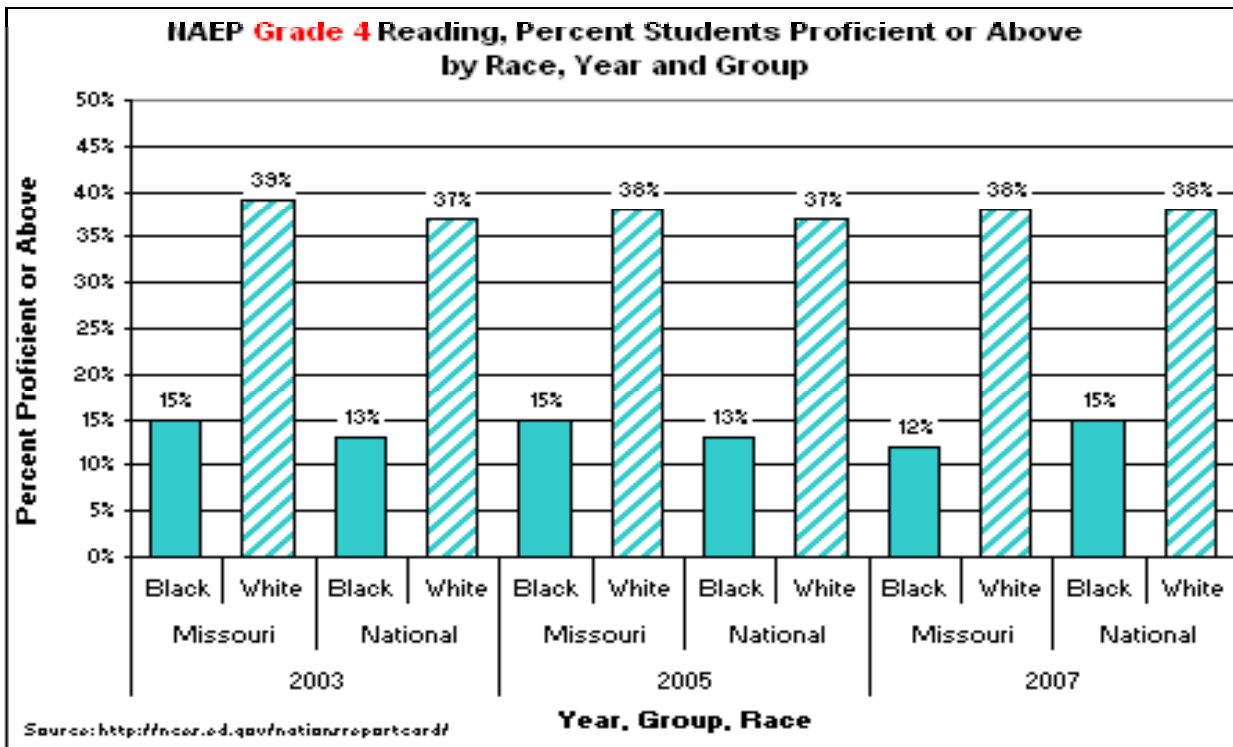
**Graph 1.**



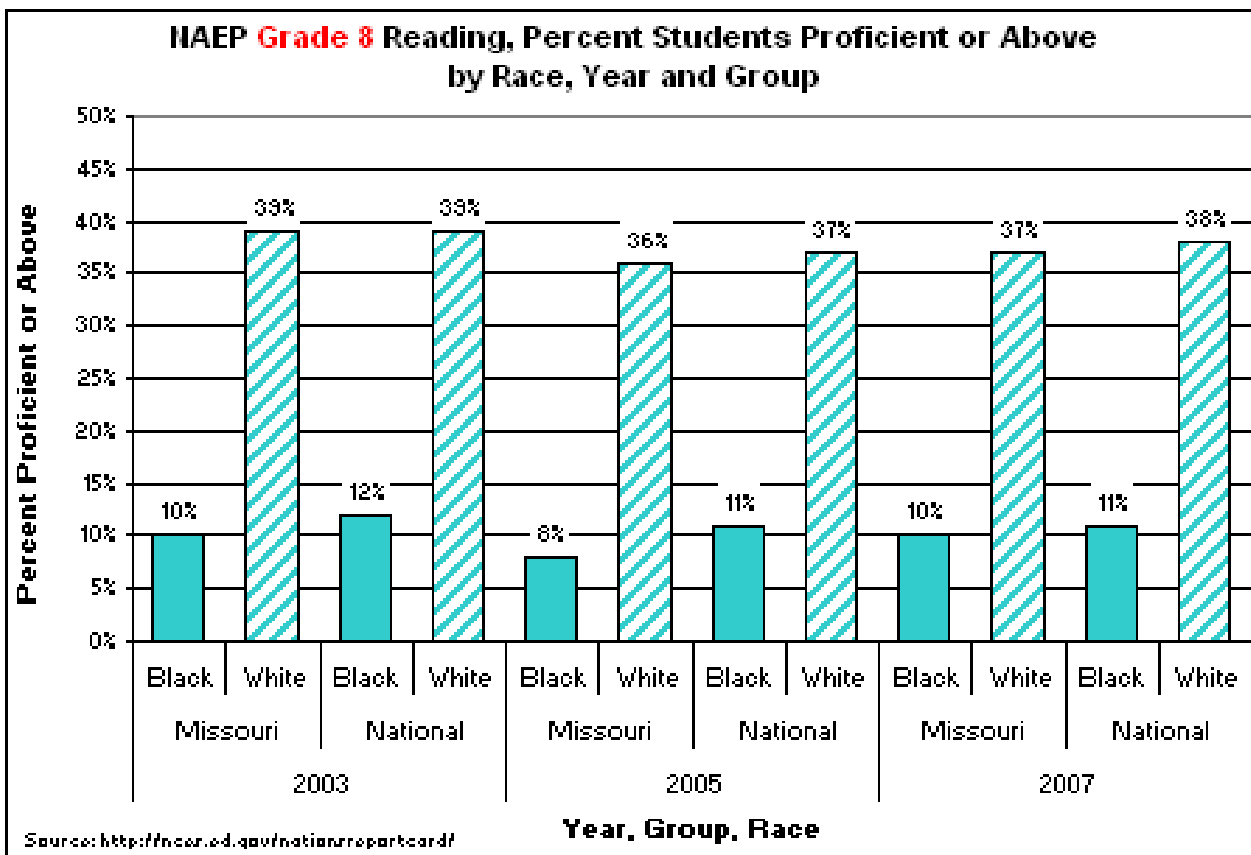
**Graph 2.**



**Graph 3.**



**Graph 4.**



The highly respected research of Bob Marzano and colleagues at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) identified factors significantly impacting student success in school. Considered as third generation effective schools research, the study is a meta-analysis of thirty-five years of studies.

In *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*, Marzano separates these factors into three groups: School-level factors, teacher-level factors and student-level factors. School-level factors include: (1) a guaranteed and viable curriculum, (2) challenging goals and effective feedback, (3) parent and community involvement, (4) safe and orderly environment, and (5) staff collegiality and professionalism. Teacher-level factors include: (1) instructional strategies, (2) classroom management, and (3) classroom curriculum design. The most significant, according to the research, are the student factors, including: (1) the home atmosphere, (2) learned intelligence and background knowledge, and (3) motivation. Marzano and colleagues have produced at least a dozen excellent books and guides drilling deeply into these factors. Due to space constraints, this article will look primarily at efforts to scaffold “background knowledge and learned intelligence.”

As a result of NCLB, the Missouri State Board of Education charged the Assistant Commissioner for Teacher Quality and Urban Education to develop strategies that address existing gaps. Thus, a design team was formed to consider ways to capitalize on the comprehensive meta-analysis research referenced previously. The design team also examined the experience of McREL in mobilizing an intensive school improvement initiative for the Indiana Department of Education.

The result of the planning effort was the beginning of Project Success: Close the Gap Consortium, comprised of representatives of DESE, OSEDA, McREL and twenty-five carefully selected secondary schools with high concentrations of free and reduced lunch and minority students.

It was obvious to the design team that, ideally, the work would begin at the lowest grade levels, if not at the pre-school level. However, many of the school districts participating in the consortium were also implementing Reading First at the primary level. It was also noted that it was at the middle school and high school where the greatest challenges in meeting proficiency standards reside.

The Consortium work was initiated in 2004-05, and completed the planned three years of intensive intervention in June 2007. The intervention model might be described as a classic “train the trainer” model with the addition of an outside mentor employed to work with the building leadership team and project coordinator. Using the shared leadership team concept, each principal was joined in training sessions with teacher leaders who would take strategies provided by McREL back to the faculty for implementation. Twelve to sixteen days of training were provided annually by McREL. Some of the sessions were held in Columbia with schools from Southeast Missouri, St. Louis and Kansas City converging to work together. As the project progressed, more of the training was delivered to cohort groups regionally. Mentors were authorized to provide up to 46 days of support to the “building leadership” teams.

With student factors accounting for 75-80% of the effect on student achievement, some might argue that the die is cast. The school can’t possibly make up the difference. In the Close the Gap Consortium work, a heavy emphasis was placed on building academic vocabulary as a way to address the lack of background knowledge. Success in the classroom and on standards-based assessments requires both higher order thinking skills and strong communication arts skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). We can all recognize that it is difficult for students to score well on the assessment if they don’t have the vocabulary needed to understand the question or prompt. Likewise, it will be difficult for the student who lacks the vocabulary to effectively write a response.

Hart and Riley indicate that children from a lower socio-economic home have experienced about 250,000 utterances in a year. On average, a preschooler from a professional family experienced about 4,000,000 utterances per year. It would appear that this difference in oral language experiences not only begins the school experience at a disadvantage, but also the effect is cumulative over years. McREL trainers indicated that their view of the research indicated that children from a lower socio-economic family experienced a 5,000 word deficit in vocabulary when they enter school.

Although research found that when specific instruction designed to promote vocabulary development is instituted, children do show substantial gains in both vocabulary and comprehension (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Pople, 1985), it has also been noted that there is little emphasis on the acquisition of vocabulary in schools. Further, it is noted that often vocabulary words are taught through a process of looking up words in a dictionary and memorizing the definition.

In the Consortium schools, building leadership teams worked with faculty to identify key vocabulary in each curricular area. Instructional strategies highlighted in the Marzano work were employed to ensure greater effectiveness in learning these key terms. Methods for direct instruction might include the Frayer Model, personalized non-linguistic representations, noting similarities and differences between words, and other research-based strategies. Terms critical to understanding and learning were front loaded by either direct instruction or planned incidental strategies. As procedural vocabulary required more intensive use for mastery, over twenty exposures to the term were encouraged and factual vocabulary words were also identified. Student and teacher feedback indicated that this focus on vocabulary throughout the school played a major role in improved student learning.

The limitations of this three-year project appear to be that not all student, school and classroom

factors could be addressed within the scope of the project. However, participants expressed confidence that it “is the right work” and is making a positive difference. The quality, fidelity, integrity and consistency of implementation continue to differentiate between schools observing improved test scores and those with little gain. It is apparent that the role of the district office, board of education, parents, social service agencies and the , must be serious about improving student performance if in fact no child is left behind. Given the prediction that a third grader reading below grade level will likely have difficulty throughout school, and given that 74.8% or 9,256 of accountable Black third graders taking the MAP in communication arts scored below the proficient level, and 69.7% or 20,817 students receiving free and reduced lunch scored below proficient levels on the MAP in communication arts, our work is cut out for us. The data are impressive, but the real story is in the eyes of kids with names and hopes and dreams. The art of teaching has been reinforced with the science of teaching. We know what it takes to be effective, the question remains whether we have the will to make it so.

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