

**Connecticut State Education Resource Center**  
**“Engaging Families of Color to Ensure Their Children are**  
**College and Career Ready”**

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For many families, the challenges facing Latinos and African Americans in Hartford, Willimantic, and other Connecticut communities have never been overcome. The result has been a cycle of poverty passed down through the generations.

So I applaud the work of the Connecticut State Education Resource Center. The work you are doing in our schools and community organizations to help overcome the socioeconomic conditions that lead to this recurring story in America’s inner cities is commendable.

You see the face of those families. You know the real challenges they confront. You can feel their very real pain. Where does it all start? Why does this story keep recurring?

Let me share a brief perspective. In cities such as Hartford, low-skilled manufacturing jobs were exported overseas long ago. Chronic unemployment or low-paying jobs have forced many families to turn every family member, including older children, into wage earners in order to survive.

The instability of renting vs. home ownership, the high level of teenage pregnancy, and the prevalence of single-parent households further erode the family unit and the support received in the home by children in our urban communities. Poor health and nutritional deficiencies are also harsh realities in the lives of families living in poverty. Outside the home, a world of drug-related gang violence has turned our inner cities into war zones.

This scenario impacts the children of low-income urban families from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

What has emerged is a longstanding, continued gap in the academic progress of schoolchildren from these families when compared to affluent students. And students of color are disproportionately impacted.

Over the past four decades, educators and public policymakers have worked hard to assess the academic progress of schoolchildren in America, using state and national tests to evaluate student achievement. Today, all states participate in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing, which measures students’ academic performance in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades in writing, reading, mathematics, and science. The NAEP has been administering its nationally normed tests and gathering and reporting data since 1990.

What has emerged over time, both nationally and from state to state, is a consistent profile in which white, suburban, affluent students outperform low-income students living in our cities, especially Latinos and African Americans.

Despite billions of dollars in educational funding, numerous reform movements, and a growing recognition that this achievement gap is detrimental to the children it impacts and society at large, the numbers are not improving.

What is startling is the biological fact—supported by data—that all children, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status, start off life on equal ground.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data shows that there is no significant statistical difference among ethnic groups for cognitive and motor skills at age nine months. In fact, the data shows that at age nine months, babies in this country generally demonstrate the

same cognitive and motor skill development, regardless of ethnicity, the educational level of the mother, or income levels.

So imagine a hospital nursery full of healthy babies from all backgrounds—white babies, black babies, brown babies, babies who will go home to mansions, babies who will go home to tenement apartments.

Even at nine months of age, they are still operating with similar mental and physical acuity. From there, their paths start to separate, their stars start to glimmer more brightly or begin to dim. Their futures, while not cast in stone, begin to form a predictable path.

By age two, NCES data begins to show cognitive performance separation based on income levels, and by age four, a gap in cognitive performance is evident on the basis of both ethnicity and income levels. When national NAEP testing of schoolchildren begins in the fourth grade, the gap translates into significant differences in academic performance in school.

NAEP test results show that African American and Latino students trail their white counterparts by an average of more than 20 test-score points on math and reading in the fourth and eighth grades—about two grade levels. Similar gaps exist in the subject areas of science and writing. The gap in Connecticut is more than 25 points on each test and for both grades.

Equivalent national data can be seen on 12<sup>th</sup>-grade tests in all four subject areas, again with similar disparities between affluent, suburban white students and urban students of color from low-income families.

National high school graduation rates and college completion rates reflect this academic achievement gap. According to Census Bureau data, while 91 percent of whites in our country have a high school diploma, only 62 percent of Latinos do. The figures for bachelor's degree attainment are 31 percent and 13 percent respectively. Eighty-two percent of African Americans have a high school diploma, and 17 percent have a baccalaureate degree.

**And Connecticut Has The Worst Gap in the Country!** Simply put, the difference between NAEP test scores of students from more affluent suburbs and those of low-income students in Connecticut's most depressed urban areas is the largest among the 50 states.

For instance, the gap of 41 points between low-income and affluent students in Connecticut on the eighth grade mathematics test is the largest in the nation.

Perhaps the most discouraging set of statistics of all is that, as Latino and African American students in Connecticut move through the school system, the gap between their test scores and those of Connecticut's white students actually worsens. For example, the gap between white presumably more affluent students and their African American and Latino counterparts in Connecticut grew by six and eight points respectively in mathematics between the fourth and eighth grades on 2009 NAEP tests. The gap in reading scores between white and African American students in the same report grew by five points from fourth to eighth grades.

It appears that whereas economically advantaged students, more likely to be white, suburban residents, prosper in stimulating school and home settings, Latino and African American children, as well as white students from low-income families living in our cities, are finding neither the motivation nor the support to gain ground.

When test scores are set aside, and graduation rates—the ultimate measure of high school success—are used, both socioeconomic and ethnic correlations are evident. Data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that “. . . the gap between Connecticut's overall graduation rate and the rate for economically disadvantaged students was 21 percentage points—the largest such gap among all the states reporting data.”

When ethnicity was compared, “Eighty-nine percent of Connecticut white, non-Hispanic students graduated from high school in 2011, compared with 71 percent of black students and 64 percent of Hispanic students.”

At the same time that Connecticut’s overall high school graduation rate of 79.3 percent is above the national average, the high school graduation rate in Hartford is only 59.9 percent. For those Connecticut students from non-English speaking families, just 53 percent finish high school.

**The Language Hurdle.** The symbols of poverty in our nation’s cities are all too familiar: urban decay and the loss of manufacturing jobs; chronic unemployment; low-wage jobs; lack of education; single parent families; gangs and street violence; the frequent moving and instability inherent in renting versus owning a home; nutrition and health issues; cultural isolation; and more. These issues confront our nation’s urban poor regardless of national heritage and ethnic background. However, for Latinos, the language barrier must be added to this list, a barrier that cannot be underestimated.

This barrier of language may be the most enduring and troublesome impediment to academic success for Latino schoolchildren. National data suggests that a child who enters first grade without grade-level English language skills is one year behind the day he or she walks through the door. A study by the National Council of La Raza shows that by first grade, there is a full one-year reading gap between English Language Learners and their English-proficient peers, which grows to a two-year gap within a few years.

I share all of these data points with you not to depress you or to sap you of motivation to do the good work you are doing. I share the information to make the point that all children start off with equal mental capacity and the ability to succeed. Society’s inequities—in metrics that range from income to employment, class, education, and more—soon put children of color behind the mainstream.

This story has been told for generations, but when professionals like you decide to impact our children in life-changing ways, I am inspired that we can turn the tide. Thank you!