



# issue insights

September 2009



“Measurements of the intelligence of [children] less than one year old show virtually no racial or social-class differences, yet racial and social class achievement gaps are firmly established by the time students start kindergarten. Something happens before kindergarten that produces differences in proficiency.”

Dr. Ronald Ferguson, Director, the Tripod Project and the Achievement Gap Initiative, Harvard University <sup>1</sup>

Racial and socio-economic gaps in children's school readiness and achievement have consequences far beyond gaps in performance. They become gaps in children's chances for life success. These disparities are man-made, and yet they have the power to shape young people's lives and to distort the contours of our society. African-American and Hispanic children, for example, on average lag far behind their white peers in reading and math by kindergarten, and although the gaps narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, nationally they have remained fairly constant since.<sup>2</sup>

The issue is even more urgent when we consider that a larger percentage of school enrollment in the next half-century is projected to consist of children who are likelier to be at risk – and who deserve a level playing field for achieving success. Eliminating such race- and social-class-based gaps is, simply put, the major issue for democratizing education in the 21st century.

# the gaps

School readiness and achievement gaps nationwide are profound and persistent.

In Maryland, the gaps are decreasing but still unacceptable.

- Nationally, African-American and Hispanic children score the equivalent of 8 IQ points below white children in reading and math at the start of kindergarten.<sup>3</sup>
- In Maryland, 48% of African-American and 58% of Hispanic eighth-graders met the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) standard for math in 2008-09, compared with 81% of their white peers.<sup>4</sup>
- Forty-seven percent of Maryland kindergartners who received Special Education services were fully school-ready in 2008-09, compared with 76% of those who did not.<sup>5</sup>
- Sixty-five percent of Maryland kindergartners receiving Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) were fully school-ready in 2008-09, as compared with 79% of non-FARMS kindergartners.<sup>6</sup>
- Sixty percent of Maryland's English Language Learners in kindergarten were fully school-ready in 2008-09, compared with 75% of their English-proficient peers.<sup>7</sup>



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## why are there gaps?

The reasons for racial and socio-economic gaps in achievement are numerous and becoming clearer. We know, for example, that 90% of a child's brain development happens by age five, and brain growth is greatly affected by how a young child is stimulated (e.g., being held, read aloud to, given frequent eye contact). Young children who do not receive these stimuli are at risk for lower achievement, and it is these very stimuli that often suffer in highly-stressed impoverished settings. While too many children of all races endure poverty, children of color are disproportionately subjected to such environments. Risk of Low Birth Weight babies, also associated with poverty, adds to the problem. Poverty also increases other risks – including emotional trauma, violence, decreased parental involvement with child learning, and decreased access to quality early child care – that tend to lower achievement.

Further, student achievement is compromised when schools lack sufficient resources, and when teachers are unable to reach students in ways that relate to students' frame of reference. Students may fail to understand lessons or tests simply because of language or differences in assumptions about the "real world." Low self-esteem, peer pressure, and race-based low expectations can also harm students' pursuit of success.



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## effects of the gaps

Racial and social-class gaps in achievement can carry devastating lifelong effects for young people. A child who is not school-ready by kindergarten is likelier to fall behind in subsequent grades and to be at higher risk for dropping out of high school, becoming involved with the criminal justice system, and suffering the myriad life problems associated with un- or under-employment: poverty, health risks, inadequate health care, low self-esteem, depression, and a cycle whereby lack of preparation for success is passed on to the next generation. Eliminating the gaps means the difference between educational justice and injustice, between equal and unequal access to life satisfaction.

Economically, society gains when we close the gaps. Economist Arthur Rolnick (featured in a 2007 Ready At Five Symposium), has shown that investing in early care and education earns a 16% rate of return for a community through fewer grade retentions, fewer children in special education, lower dropout and criminal activity rates, and a higher likelihood of a young person's eventually becoming an employed taxpayer.

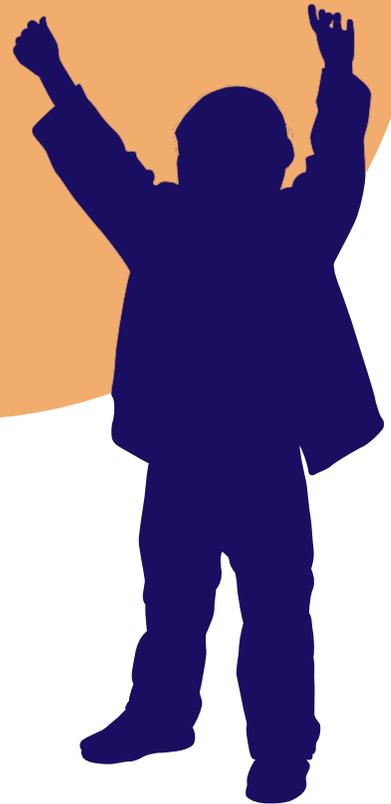
## how do we close the gaps?

Closing racial and social-class gaps in achievement will require, not surprisingly, that we confront a stubborn spectrum of issues in society and communities as well as within education:

- In schools, Dr. Ronald Ferguson's "Tripod" approach calls for three "legs" to support achievement: strengthening teachers' understanding of content; enhancing how teachers communicate material to students; and improving teachers' empathic relationships with students to better motivate and enable young people. Part of this is a protocol called "Teaching the Hard Stuff," which teachers can use to evaluate the reasons why they are or are not getting through to students on specific assignments or class work.<sup>8</sup>
- The Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African-American Males identifies a range of needed actions, including placing the most effective and culturally competent teachers and principals in the highest-need situations; ceasing and reversing the over-identification of African-American males for special education; increasing in-school supervised suspensions and reducing unsupervised out-of-school ones; funding and recruiting for mentor and father education programs; funding a Judy Center for every elementary school where there is an African-American/white achievement gap; providing health care (including dental and mental health services) in high-need areas; and increasing college preparation and financial support.<sup>9</sup> These actions are also relevant to Hispanic children and all other children who suffer racial achievement gaps.
- Supporting the role of parents as their child's first teacher is crucial. Substantial research shows that differences in parenting behaviors, when African-American and Hispanic mothers are compared with white mothers, parallel the gaps in school readiness, and that as much as half of the gaps stem from differences in parenting.<sup>10</sup> The progress of Geoffrey Canada's "Baby College" program for parents in Harlem shows great promise on this front.<sup>11</sup>
- The underlying problems that weaken communities – joblessness, poverty, drug addiction, incarceration – must be addressed in order to permanently reverse the cycle of causation for perennial gaps in achievement.

Gaps in achievement have already harmed far too many children and damaged far too many communities. **We must eliminate the gaps.** We must make the commitment now. We must sustain our efforts on every front until every child in Maryland is free to achieve without impediment.

Visit [www.readyatfive.org](http://www.readyatfive.org) for additional MMSR data, other issues involving young children and to download *Issue Insights*.



<sup>1</sup> Interview with Dr. Ferguson in the *Harvard Education Letter*, November/December 2006

<sup>2</sup> Haskins and Rouse, "Closing Achievement Gaps," *The Future of Children Policy Brief*, Spring 2005

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Early Childhood Education Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-KC)*, 2004

<sup>4</sup> Maryland State Department of Education, 2009

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The Tripod Project, [www.tripodproject.org](http://www.tripodproject.org)

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African-American Males*, 2007

<sup>10</sup> Brooks-Gunn and Markman, "The Contribution of Parenting to Ethnic and Racial Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children* Vol. 15 No. 1, 2005

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tough, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*, Houghton Mifflin, 2008

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