

# Continuing to Expose and Close Achievement Gaps



## BACKGROUND:

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) has directed federal resources to schools for more than four decades to help ensure all children have equal access to a quality education. The most recent reauthorization—or congressional update to the law—occurred with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Although ESEA was due for reauthorization in 2007, NCLB has governed education policy in states and school districts for more than a decade. While waiting for Congress to complete its next reauthorization, the U.S. Department of Education has offered states flexibility from prescriptive provisions of the law that have become barriers to state and local implementation of innovative education reforms. ESEA flexibility moves away from top-down policies, instead supporting decisions informed by data and expertise at the state and local levels. All participating states must show how their reform plans advance all students' achievement by maintaining a high bar for student success, closing achievement gaps, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing equity by better targeting support and resources to schools based on need.

## DISCUSSION:

When NCLB required states and school districts to report on the academic achievement of all students by subgroups\*—such as minority students, low-income students, English Learners, and students with disabilities—for the first time, the law prevented the average performance of all students from masking the underachievement of particular student groups. Despite this positive outcome, NCLB's limited, pass/fail performance benchmarks led to an over-identification of schools as "failing," and neglected to recognize any improvement or growth in student achievement. These benchmarks also mandated the implementation of one-size-fits-all interventions in those schools that failed to recognize the unique needs of the schools and students, and required the use of Title I\* funds to support these interventions. As a result, it became difficult to concentrate resources and support on the needs of particular students in the schools with the most extreme and chronic performance challenges. States participating in ESEA flexibility are committing to a renewed focus on eliminating achievement gaps.\* Many states are adding proactive "triggers" to their accountability systems that identify groups of students for specialized assistance when those groups chronically underperform. Earlier and more targeted interventions mean more students are getting the help they need to succeed in college and careers.

Through ESEA flexibility, the Department will both recognize states for demonstrating success—such as making progress toward eliminating persistent achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers—and challenge states that fall short of their goals to pursue rigorous reform efforts that focus on what is best for students.

\*See the Definition Box.

## Definition Box:

**\*Student Subgroups:** Categories of students for which ESEA requires reporting and accountability, including students with disabilities, English Learners, low-income students, and students from major racial/ethnic groups: e.g., White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native.

**\*Title I:** A federally funded program providing financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with a high percentage of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards.

**\*Achievement Gaps:** Differences in academic performance between subgroups of students and their peers.

## History in Review:

Achievement gaps have existed for decades between white students and racial minorities, poor students and their more affluent peers, native English speakers and students who are English Learners, and students with disabilities and those without. Education journals from the early 1970s—referring primarily to the achievement gap between White and non-White students—began to document performance gaps among early learners that extended to students in secondary and postsecondary schools. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), considered the nation's report card, showed a narrowing of the gap in reading and mathematics during the 1970s and 1980s between African-American and White students. However, trends over the last two decades have shown no sustained progress toward narrowing that achievement gap.

## STATES IN ACTION:

Examples of strong plans that states have proposed to close achievement gaps follow.



Through ESEA flexibility, Kentucky will:

- Hold nearly 1,000 additional schools accountable for subgroup performance than under NCLB; and as a result,
- Implement statewide initiatives to help close achievement gaps among students with disabilities and English Learners and their peers, and deliver support and technical assistance to these schools.

### Fast Facts:

- Between 1990 and 2007, only four states narrowed achievement gaps between Black and White students on the NAEP in eighth grade mathematics.
- Since the early 1990s, the Hispanic-White achievement gap for public school students has not narrowed for fourth- or eighth-graders on the NAEP in either reading or mathematics, nationally and for almost every state.



South Carolina's flexibility plan:

- Involves the development of an A-F grading system for individual schools; and
- Will hold schools accountable by grading them not only by the performance of the entire school, but also by individual subgroup performance.



Within Indiana's plan:

- School performance data is used to identify existing achievement gaps within a school and how well that school's subgroups are performing compared to the same subgroups statewide.
- Therefore, an otherwise high-performing school's achievement gap(s) are exposed, and the school is targeted for interventions.

*"Colorado's education reform initiatives go beyond what was required by *No Child Left Behind*. ... We are working to help ensure every student receives an excellent education, is prepared for postsecondary education, and is workforce ready."*

- Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper,  
*ESEA flexibility granted February 9, 2012*

