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Testing and Accountability Measures Are Not Enough To Close Persistent Achievement Gap, New Report Contends

*Research Studied by the Center on Education Policy Makes Clear
Other Remedies are Needed after Performance Differences are Identified*

WASHINGTON — April 30, 2001 -- As they map the future of federal education programs, President Bush and the Congress have been asking test questions — how many, how often, which kinds, and what the consequences of poor performance should be for schools, school districts, and states.

But testing alone will not be sufficient to close the persistent gap in achievement between White and minority students — the aim of much of the federal government's efforts in elementary and secondary education, a new report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) indicates.

It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap examines more than a quarter-century of test data and research on the performance differences among students. It offers policymakers remedies for erasing the gap, and explains many of the complex issues surrounding the differences in student achievement.

“High standards for all students and tests to measure against them play an important role in defining the achievement gap, but we should exercise caution because misused accountability measures may actually exacerbate the problem,” said Jack Jennings, the center's director. “At the same time, policymakers shouldn't hesitate to be bold when it comes to implementing the steps proven to raise the performance of students who are trailing.”

Based on the conclusions of CEP's report, Jennings noted that the testing and accountability provisions that have drawn the most attention on Capitol Hill and in the media may have the least impact of actually closing the achievement gap. If the gap shrinks in coming years, it will likely be because states and the federal government have taken steps to reduce class size in high poverty schools, improve teacher quality, provide high-quality preschool, and other efforts proven to boost minority student performance.

“It’s irresponsible to lead the public to believe that testing and accountability alone will close the achievement gap,” Jennings said. “Research shows that, to succeed, we need a comprehensive approach to a complex problem. States and the federal government will have to provide adequate funding and other incentives to help states and school districts raise student achievement. Testing alone will not do it.”

The Need for Sustained Attention

The achievement gap between White and minority students has persisted despite generally improving educational results for all students. The stakes for closing the gap are rising dramatically given the changing demographics in American schools.

By the end of the decade, Black and Hispanic students are expected to make up 34% of the nation’s schoolchildren. *It Takes More Than Testing* contends that the United States can ill afford to have that significant a percentage of its population falling three to four years behind their White counterparts in core academic subjects such as reading, math, and science.

The standards movement of the last decade and the tests that states have put in place as a consequence have brought the achievement gap into sharp focus. While praising that result, the report contends that those reforms will be no substitute for expansion of interventions shown to narrow performance differences.

Complex Picture, Comprehensive Solutions

It Takes More Than Testing offers an accurate picture of the achievement gap. Differences in performance exist before students even reach school, the report shows. This raises questions about the fairness of harsh penalties for students tied solely to test results.

CEP cites data that the achievement gap narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s when the federal government focused on improving educational opportunity and reducing poverty. Based on this experience and research on raising minority student performance, *It Takes More Than Testing* identifies a set of strategies most likely to close the gap:

- Getting more experienced and better trained teachers into high minority schools.
- Lowering class size in schools with high minority enrollment.
- Increasing participation of minority students in challenging academic coursework and rigorous instruction.
- Expanding the opportunity for minority children to attend high-quality preschools.
- Providing extended learning opportunities, such as summer programs, for students falling behind.

The Center on Education Policy is the national independent advocate for public education and more effective public schools. Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center’s work is funded largely through philanthropic contributions. To obtain a copy of It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap, call (202) 822-8065. The report is also available on the Center’s Web site at www.ctredpol.org.

