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School racial achievement gap proves tough to narrow

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PHOENIX — The achievement gap between black and white students in Arizona has stagnated and even widened in recent years, a new study shows.

The percentage of black students passing Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards — the AIMS test — is at a near-standstill, and in some cases the students are actually losing ground, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy. The study looked at test results between 2005 and 2007.

Here's a sample of what the study found in Arizona:

- In 2007, 55 percent of black eighth-graders passed the AIMS reading exam, down from 57 percent in 2005. Both years, 79 percent of white eighth-graders passed the reading exam.
- About 64 percent of black sophomores passed the reading exam in 2007, down from 66 percent in 2005. Both years, 86 percent of white sophomores passed the same test.
- Black fourth-graders' passing rates on the reading exam remained steady at 55 percent over both years. The study gave them a 1-percentage-point gain only because white passing rates dipped from 81 percent to 80 percent the same years.

Across the country, black students on average are catching up with white students. And while Arizona's black students are raising their AIMS test scores overall, scores are still not high enough to actually pass the grade-level exams in greater numbers, said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy.

Education experts list a number of reasons for the gap in achievement among Arizona students.

Black students make up 5 percent of the 1.1 million students in Arizona schools. Their small percentage often forces schools to put these students' particular needs at a lower priority, researchers and educators say.

For example, there is less pressure for schools to stock books that would grab the attention of black students or textbooks that examine roles of blacks in history, said Minnie Andrews, a Northern Arizona University education professor.

Andrews added that black parents are often reluctant to visit schools. Many faced racism in school as a child or don't know how to have their voices heard, she said.

And if they don't volunteer or attend board meetings, schools are unlikely to respond to the needs of their students, said Leroy Dean, an electronics technician who grew up in south Phoenix.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has reshaped Arizona classrooms with one overriding goal: Push poor, minority kids until they match the academic progress of their white and wealthier peers.

But the law cannot be expected to cure a decades-old problem, even if it had provided all the money it promised, said David Goldberg of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.

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