

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES: TRENDS

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Abstract

This article describes an overview of the academic achievement of African American students who come from low-income families. Data collected from different sources is displayed to underline the failure of many of these students to access and attain successful educational results. The author draws a parallel to the educational reform movement in Latin American and encourages teachers to answer crucial questions in order to move ahead in the educational field.

Resumen

Este artículo es un resumen del contenido de la presentación del Dr. Chernow al V Congreso Latinoamericano de Administración de la Educación, en Santiago, Chile, en mayo de 2002. En sus comentarios él dio un repaso del rendimiento educativo para estudiantes de color y de bajos ingresos en los Estados Unidos. El Dr. Chernow presenta gráficas de varias fuentes para subrayar el fracaso de muchos de estos niños en tener acceso y lograr resultados altos en su educación. Él hace un paralelo al movimiento de reforma educativa en Latinoamérica y hace algunas preguntas cruciales para educadores de Latinoamérica para su consideración en sus próximos pasos.

This article will examine “achievement” in the United States for public school children during the 1999-2000 academic year (2000-2001 data has not yet been released). Though achievement can have multifaceted meanings, for this purpose it will refer to standardized test results as captured by The Education Trust, Inc., an independent nationally recognized organization in the United States that reviews and synthesizes such data. We will also include data from a variety of additional sources.

The commentary on the data will address educational management in the macro system and attempt to draw parallels to issues of management and quality of education faced by Latin American countries. Though

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direct comparisons run the risk of appearing more speculative, we think it serves to raise interesting and important questions as Latin American countries move forward in their efforts to reform or change their public school systems. What is at stake is the hopefulness for the future of millions of children in each country’s public school system.

The “Big Picture” in the United States according to the 2000 statistics is that twenty-six percent of high school graduates entered two-year colleges. Forty-five percent entered four-year colleges and Four percent entered other post secondary institutions (vocational, technical, etc.) Low-income students (defined in this data as eligible for government sponsored free lunch programs) attend post secondary institutions at a much lower rate.

As displayed in Table 1, the higher the income, the more likely one is to attend a postsecondary institution, even if that student is in the lowest quartile ranking. Income level and academic preparation are two major contributors to this statistic. From a percentage viewpoint, as many high-income students in the lowest quartile attend postsecondary institutions as low-income students in the highest scoring quartile.

Low-Income Students Attend Postsecondary at Lower Rates

Achievement Level (in quartiles)	Low-Income	High-Income
First (Low)	36%	77%
Second	50%	85%
Third	63%	90%
Fourth (High)	78%	97%

Source: NELS: 88, Second (1992) and Third Follow up (1994); in, USDOE, NCES, NCES Condition of Education 1997 p. 64


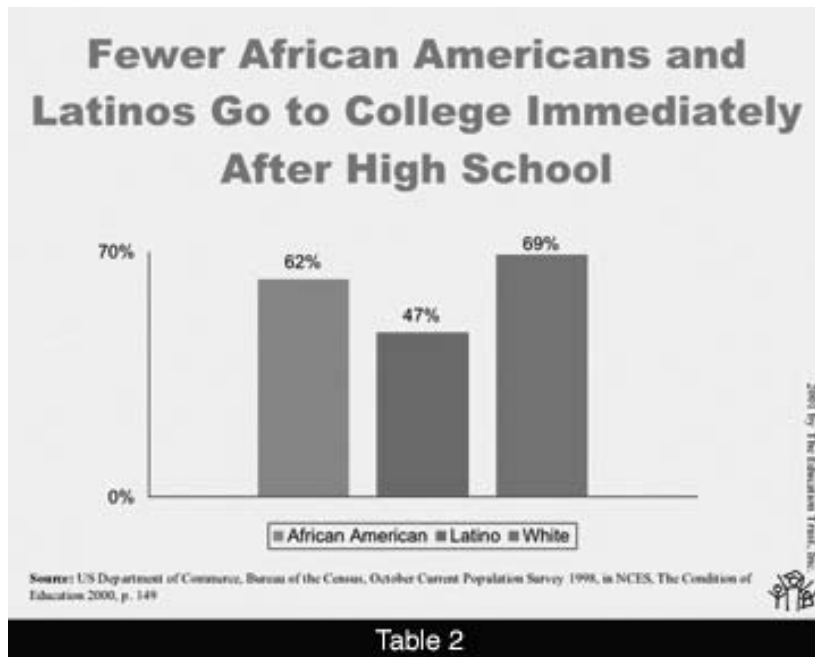
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Table 1

Arguably, the United States has the most diversified population in the world today. A correlation exists between race and poverty in the United States and throughout this article we will allude to why this correlation exists. In Table 2 we see that fewer African American and Latino students continue on to college immediately after high school than do white students. Much of this has to do with the preparation received during their public schooling, while some of it may reflect the need for lower income students to work to obtain funds for postsecondary schooling.



It should be noted, however, that low-income students are eligible for funds for higher education from a number of sources. Theoretically at least, any student eligible for postsecondary education in the United States can acquire funds through government and private

sources to attend the institution where they are accepted. Lower income students, particularly of color, are less likely to have a comfort with leaving their homes and communities to go away longer distances for college. Their costs are increased and their comfort level is decreased.

Students completing a college by the age of 24 break down very differently in high income (48%) from low income (7%) in their rate of graduation. A look at Table 3 paints a picture of unequal attainment during schooling for four ethnic groups in the United States.

The disparity between white students and students of color is disturbing. Race, income level, and expectations all contribute to this picture. What would a similar graph about your country's racial and income groups demonstrate?



**Of Every 100 African
American Kindergartners:**

**87 Graduate from High
School**

**54 Complete at Least
Some College**

**16 Obtain at Least a
Bachelor's Degree**

(24 Year-Olds)

Source: US Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Educational Attainment in the United States,
March 2000, Detailed Tables No. 2

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Table 3b

**Of Every 100 Latino
Kindergartners:**

**62 Graduate from High
School**

**29 Complete at Least
Some College**

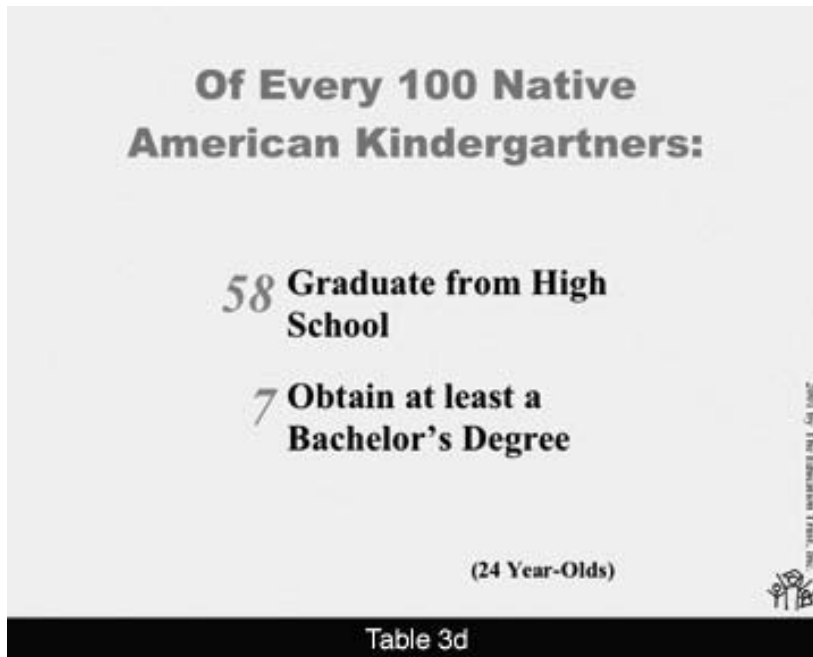
**6 Obtain at Least a
Bachelor's Degree**

(24 Year-Olds)

Source: US Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Educational Attainment in the United States,
March 2000, Detailed Tables No. 2

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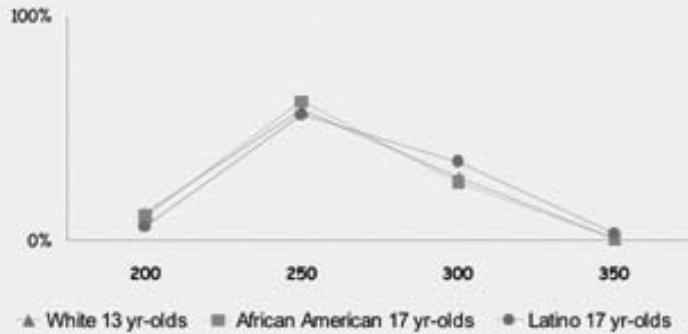

Table 3c



What Do We Know About Student Achievement

The achievement gap between white students versus African American and Latino students in public schools remains significant based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data. Tables 4 and 5 reflecting long-term summary trends tell us that seventeen year-old African American and Latino students perform at the same levels as white thirteen year-old students in reading and mathematics. The statistical correlation viewed in these charts is staggering. Is it intelligence? We think not. Our experience in schools tells us it is related more to expectations for these students and teaching strategies than anything else. Research by Bamburg, Gonder, Moll, Nieto, Omotani, and Oakes collaborates this point of view. Teachers with high expectations for all students are most likely to translate these beliefs into a more demanding and engaging curriculum.

African American and Latino 17 Year Olds Do Math at Same Levels As White 13 Year-Olds



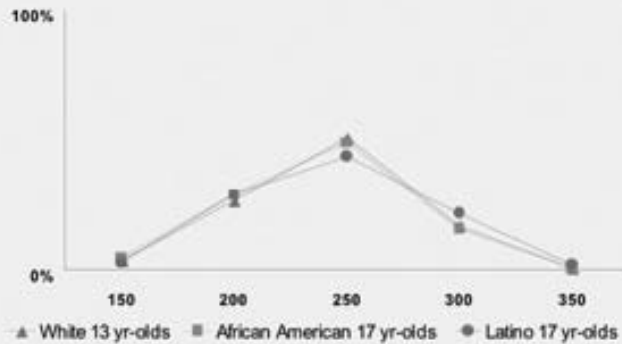
Source: USDOE, NCEES, 1999 NAEP Summary Tables online.

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Table 4

African American and Latino 17 Year Olds Read at Same Levels as White 13 Year-Olds



Source: USDOE, NCEES, 1999 NAEP Summary Tables online.

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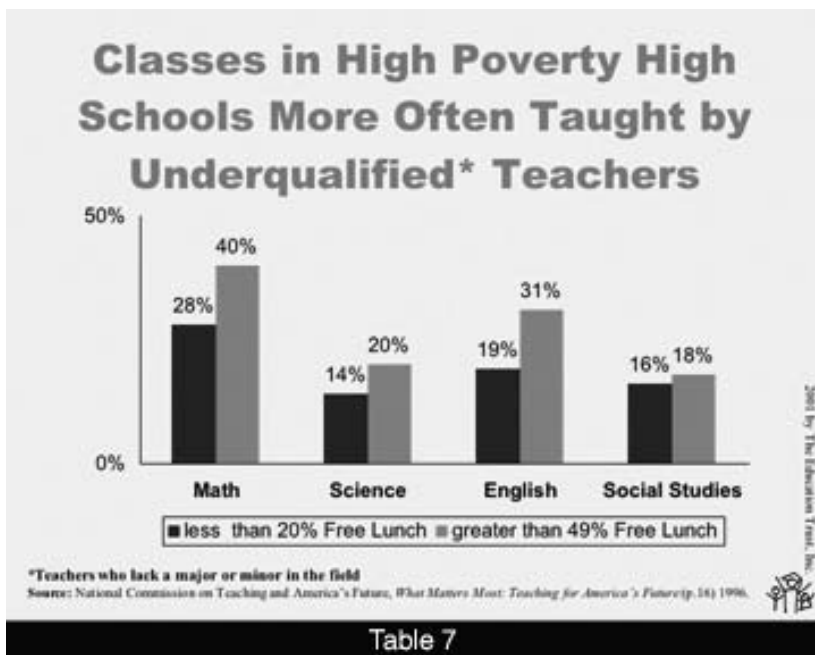
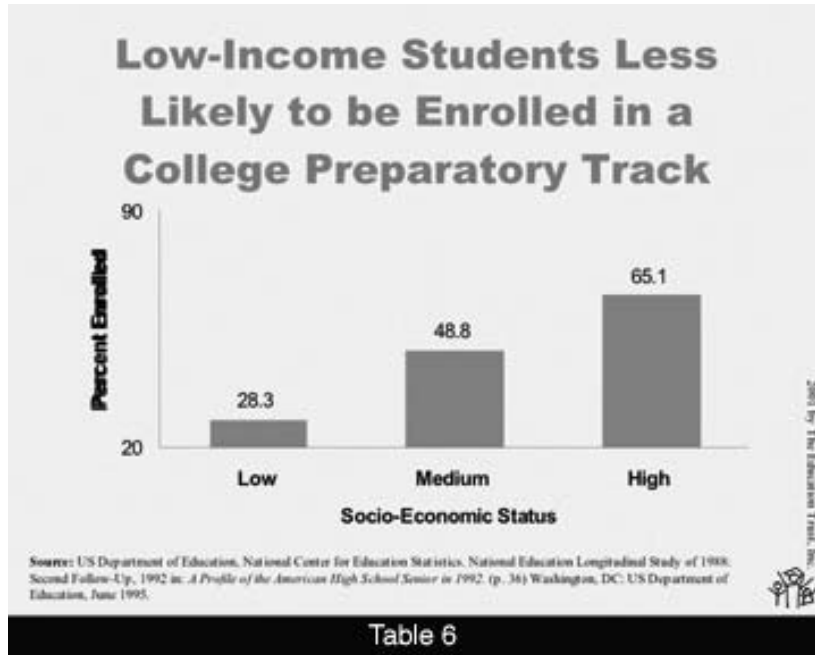
Table 5

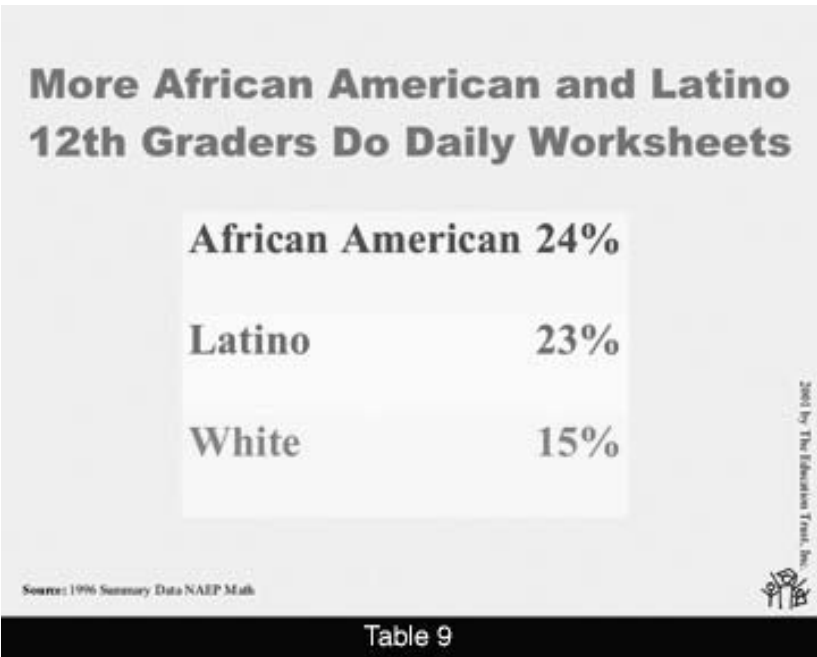
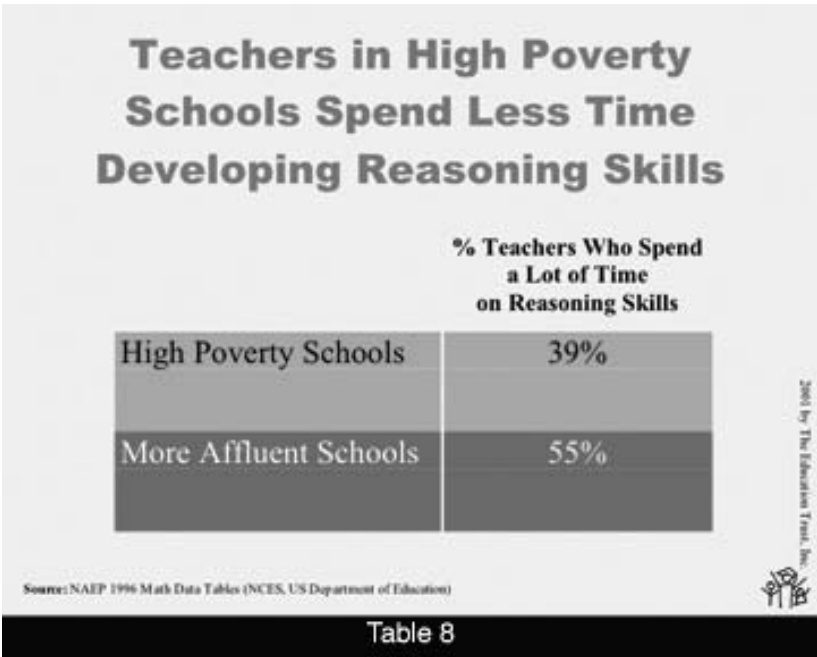
An important question for Latin American educators is “*Does the comparable data for higher income students in private school versus lower income public schools students reflect similar results?*” Without identifying poverty level, parent educational attainment levels or other such factors as excuses for the results, what does the data tell us? We interpret our data as expressing the functional inequalities of our educational system for low-income students, especially those of color. Questions that educational reformers in the United States ask center on classroom strategies used in teaching, curriculum employed for specified “levels” of students (e.g. gifted, remedial, etc.), and the content based competency of teachers found in public schools with high percentages of lower income students populates schools. These are issues directly influenced by school site teachers, administrators and teaching institutions as opposed to issues such as equity of funding or family background that are out of a local school’s control.

Further illustration of this point can be found in several instances as noted in Tables 6 and 7.

Students in the lowest quartile gain more from college prep courses than they do from boring and repetitive worksheets. The very students who most need a challenging, rigorous and thoughtful curriculum are the ones who least receive it (refer to Tables 8, 9 & 10). Much of this has to do with expectations and the thinking about learning from teachers, administrators, parents and society for these students.

We make assumptions on what these students are capable of based on our assumptions of where they are on the social/economic scale. When we expect that certain students cannot meet high expectations, the result is generally they will not. When we generalize this to the race or income level of students, an expectation of failure is the result. We would venture that these results are universal when applied to the “haves” of any country compared to those seen as “have nots.” The question must be asked: Who is it that gets educated?





**Percentage of Students
Who Use Computers
Primarily for . . .**

	Simulations and Applications	Drills and Practice
African American	14%	52%
Asian	43%	27%
Latino	25%	34%
White	31%	30%

Source: Education Week, Technology Counts '98 (Washington DC: Editorial Projects in Education, October 1998)

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Table 10

There is strong substantial evidence that students in high poverty schools who are enrolled in college prep courses score higher in mathematics and reading than their fellow students. All students represented in groups taking rigorous math courses (algebra, geometry and pre-calculus/calculus) score higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. When expectations are raised for students, then results are raised as well. We will display evidence of this in the next section.

Expectations

In the UCLA School Management Program's work with over 700 schools in California, we hear an enormous dialogue with regard to expectations for students. In general, these comments can be captured as they appear below representing remarks from teachers and administrators:

- The students are poor;
- Their parents do not care;
- They come to school hungry;
- There are not enough books;
- They come from “broken” homes.

While these are legitimate reasons why student achievement is impacted, they should not be used as excuses for allowing low student achievement to continue. Evidence tells us that an “A” student in high poverty schools scores at about the same level; as “C” students in more affluent schools on standardized tests. Thus, “A” students from identifiable poverty schools are at a distinct disadvantage when they attend post secondary institutions with the “A” students from affluent schools. Again, this occurs as a direct result of teacher competencies, curriculum, and expectations found in both categories of schools. Look at Table 11, 12 and 13 below. These figures represent three high poverty situations demonstrating that when expectations are raised for low income and African American or Latino students, it can produce a difference result. You will note on Table 11 that not only did scores rise for all cohorts of students, but also the achievement gap between the students measured was significantly reduced. Not only that, but El Paso, a district with 37% Latino student population, went from fifteen “low performing” schools and zero “exemplary schools” in 1992 to zero “low performing” and eighteen “exemplary schools” in 2000. Table 12 reflects how high poverty schools can be competitive and generate different results for their students when standards and expectations are raised. Seven of the twenty top schools in the state of Kentucky in 1999 classified as high poverty schools excelled after that state had focused on standards and expectations. In Table 13 we see similar results for mathematics and writing results.

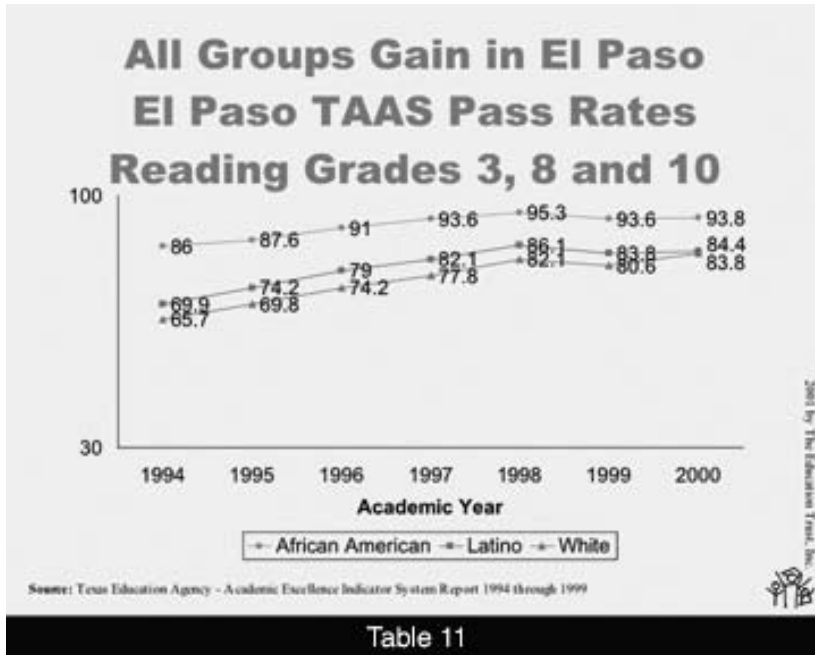


Table 11

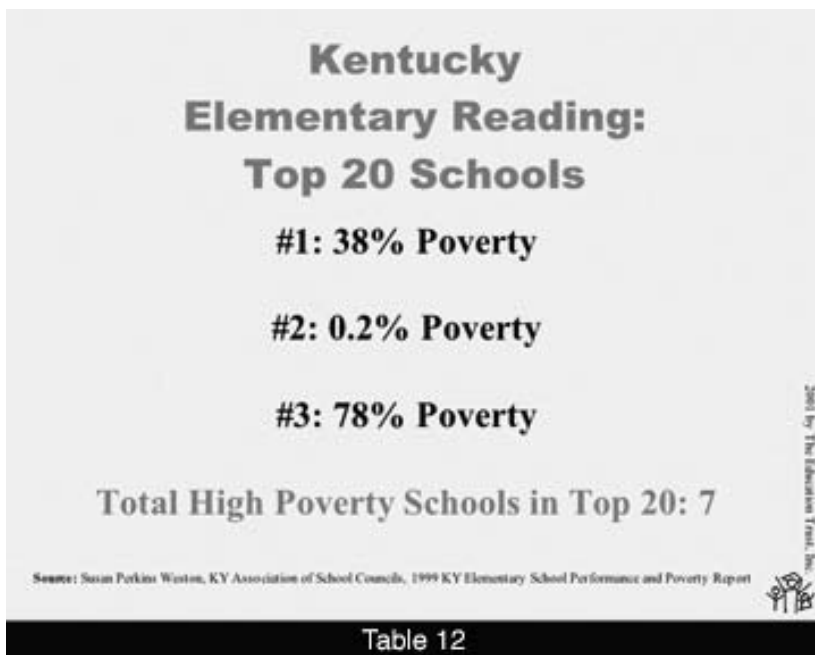


Table 12

**Kentucky
Elementary Top 20 Schools**

- **Mathematics: Top 20 Includes 8 High Poverty* Schools**
- **Writing: Top 20 Includes 13 High Poverty* Schools**

*High Poverty is defined as greater than 40% free and reduced price lunch.
Source: Susan Perkins Weston, KY Association of School Councils, 1999 KY Elementary School Performance and Poverty Report

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Table 13

What have we heard from students on the subject of expectations in our focus groups and surveys? Students have told us they can learn, but:

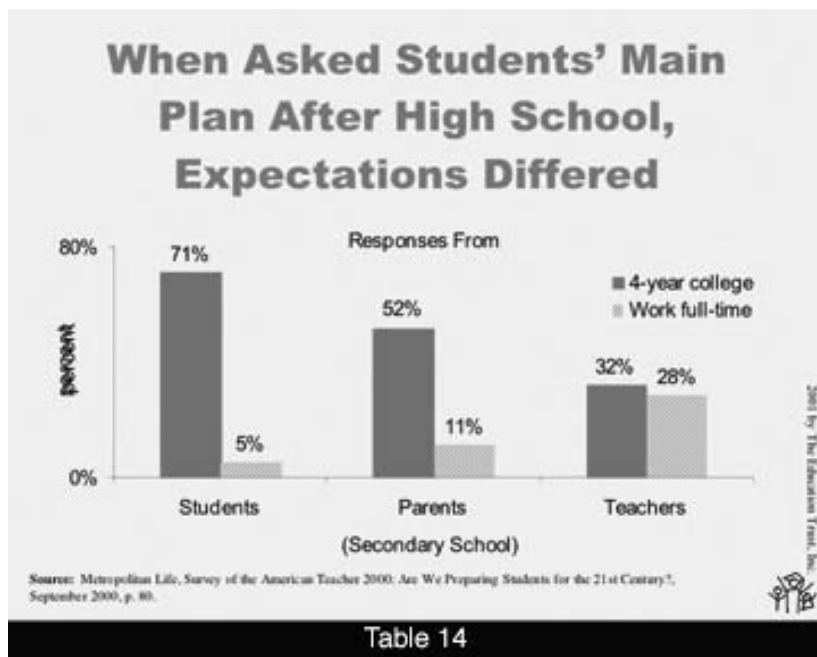
- Some teachers do not know their subjects;
- Counselors underestimate student potential;
- Administrators dismiss their concerns;
- Curriculum and expectations are low.

Ongoing focused professional development must be implemented in classrooms and shared with colleagues. Teacher and administrator learning must be constant and ongoing to sustain a learning community that grows. Accountability systems for implementation are necessary or professional development becomes a wasted effort. It all must be aligned to school goals and curriculum objectives. An essential question is what do we want all students to know and be able to do.

Parent Understanding. Parents matter! If we exclude them from the system, everyone loses. Being educated is not a prerequisite to being concerned or helpful to their child's educational achievement.

Race and/or economic status are not barriers to student learning or achievement. They can present obstacles, some real (hunger, background preparation) and some unreal (color of skin dictates intelligence, poverty equates to not being educable), but the real truth is that every child with the appropriate intensity of support can achieve at a higher level. It may take a differentiated effort and focus, but we know it can be done.

This matches what we have found across many schools and supports the role of expectations in achievement. When you match up the expectations from students, parents and teachers (Table 14) it presents a poignant picture of what different expectations can have on student learning and achievement. If we educators do not believe and conduct our school activities in a way that invests in the ability of every child to learn, than what we do in schools will give us the results we expect.



Implications

How do the achievement statistics and issues in the United States correlate to the conditions in Latin America? Can we generalize from one to the other? We believe the answer to this latter question is yes. In that answer is contained a response to the former question.

Though much of our data is built around race, it is also about poverty, as the two remain generally congruent. This does not mean that all whites are not poor, or that all African American and Latino students are poor, but a higher percentage of African American and Latino children in their portion of the population in the United States are likely to fall into the poverty category. The data is clear that poor students generally do not do as well as more affluent students. Our experience point to not everyone believes poor students can achieve at high levels. The fact is that they can. Evidence supports this conclusion. For Latin American educators the following questions need to be answered to determine if reform will occur and be sustainable:

1. Do you understand and reflect in your practices the belief that every student is capable?
2. Do you recognize that differentiated instruction is often necessary to meet high content standards?
3. Are you prepared to be a learner yourself as you do action research?
4. Do you have more questions than answers?
5. Are you prepared to have the inequities in your society between those who fall in the categories “haves” and those in the “have nots” addressed?

If you answered yes to these questions, then you are serious concerning real engagement in educational reform. Learn from those who are underway in this endeavor and stay the course. It has taken a long time to arrive at where we find ourselves. It will not change overnight.

Conclusion

In looking at what makes a difference for improvement in low achieving schools, the UCLA School Management Program has arrived at several conclusions from our own work with over 700 schools that correlate with the research.

- A school mission and vision that is understood by all members of the school community. Everyone in the school community must share the common understanding of what they believe the school sees as its purpose. Everyone should be able to articulate these things.

- Clear subject matter or grade level standards that are shared. Grade level or subject area teachers must share common, high expectations for all students and collaborate together in supporting student learning, as well as their own learning. Students and parents need to understand and share in these expectations.

- Teacher conversation at grade level/subject matter about student work. Teacher's conversations should always be focused on student efforts and results. There are numerous processes to do this and everyone has a stake in the successful implementation of these processes.

School reform efforts come and go. Most things are tried, discarded and tried again at another time. The truth is there is no magic bullet or answer that can be prescribed. The answer is found in the ongoing learning that takes place as schools struggle to attain high student achievement. The answer comes in efforts that are inclusive of all parties in the school community (including the state) and always ask the central question in any decision that is made: Does this support student learning?

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