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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Reading and math scores have increased for both Black and White students, but the hope of closing the racial achievement gap is still a strenuous work-in-progress.

A new report, issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), is the first that primarily focuses on the Black-White achievement gap at the state level. Based on the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), widely known as the Nation's Report Card, highlights scores for grades 4 and 8 in reading and math that dates back from the 1990s to 2007.

Scores in 2007 ranked higher for both Black and White students in all four assessments (reading and math at grades 4 and 8) nationwide than in previous assessments in 1990. This illustration marks the "first possible pattern of performance–score increase for Black and White students, with a larger increase for Black students, resulting in a narrowing of the gap," described Stuart Kerachsky, acting commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics. On average Black students trailed 26 points behind White students in each subject on a 0-500 scale.

A reason for the achievement gap consists of a disproportionate number of Black students that are lower-performing than their White counterparts. According to Kerachsky, "the achievement gap can be reduced by increases in the scores of low-performing students or by declines in the scores of high-performing students, with the former, of course, being the desirable pattern."

Hugh B. Price, professor at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School and a former president of the Urban League, notes from the study that only half of Black and Hispanic fourth-graders are actually performing at or above "Basic" in reading while nearly two thirds are in math. As illustrated by senior associate of the ETS Policy Information Center, Paul Barton's study, Price argues that schools and schooling need to improve, but there are also "developmental deficits that impact students' capacity, motivation and readiness to learn in-school and non-school factors that influence achievement."

However, there are other factors that contribute to this continuing decline for Black students. Issues of race, inequalities in school and community, lack of resources, unstable home lives, ineffective and inattentive teachers, among others are significant factors that are associated in Black students' lack of academic progress, argues Warren T. Smith, Sr., member of the National Assessment Governing Board and Vice President of the Washington State Board of Education.

Implications we can use that might rectify these discouraging measures might be to reinforce the lessons from the military. Price believes that while he is not suggesting militarizing public schools, he suggests a military approach of providing teamwork, motivation, self-discipline, mentoring, accountability, rewards and recognition among others that should be considered and implemented in today's schools.

Other recommendations to motivate and encourage student learning that may positively affect the Black-White Achievement Gap, as proposed by Price, include:

- Organizing achievement month rallies and festivals to rejuvenate learning in schools;
- Coordinating “Doing the Right Thing” assemblies and events in schools and communities;
- Planning awards ceremonies that recognize literacy and achievement;
- Hosting achievement fairs that focus on various content areas (i.e., literacy, math, science) for students to demonstrate academically relevant projects;
- Coordinating achievement day parades for fourth and eighth graders who successfully pass the state-mandated examinations in reading and math; and
- Recognizing graduating seniors who earned B averages or better throughout their high school careers.

While the scores reported in the NCES report do not provide a complete picture of all student performance, it does signify the relative margin of scores for Black and White students in each state and how the size compares to the national gap, as well as how the gaps have changed over time, suggests Kerachsky. Now it is up to parents, school administrators and students to be held accountable for what learning in the 21st century looks like to reform achievement in and out of schools. Until then, as Dr. Maya Angelou professes, “all great achievements require time.”

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