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Unequal Access to Good Schools in New York State

John Yinger

The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, joyinger@syr.edu

It's Elementary

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Unequal Access to Good Schools in New York State

Different ethnic groups in New York State do not have equal access to the state's best public schools. This column explores the extent of this inequality in the 2013-14 school year.

The proficiency rate on state tests is often used as an indicator of school quality. One way to measure inequality in the access to good schools, therefore, is to determine the proficiency rate in the school attended by the average student in each ethnic group.

For example, suppose there are only three types of schools, which have proficiency rates of 75 percent, 50 percent, and 25 percent, respectively. Now suppose one-third of white students go to each type of school, whereas half of black students attend schools where the proficiency rate is 50 percent and half attend schools where it is 25 percent. Then the school quality in the school attended by the average white student is [(1/3)(75) + (1/3)(50) + (1/3)(25)] = 50 percent proficient. In contrast, the school quality in the school attended by the average black student is [(1/2)(50) + (1/2)(25)] = 37.5 percent proficient. Because, in this example, black students do not have access to the best schools, the average black student attends a school of much lower quality than does the average white student.

To measure a school district's proficiency for this column, I average the proficiency rate on both mathematics and ELA tests in grades three through eight.[1] In other words, a school district's overall proficiency rate is the sum across the twelve tests (two tests multiplied by six grades) of the students who achieve proficiency divided by the sum across test of the student who take the test. The proficiency rate in the school attended by the average student in an ethnic group equals the sum across districts of the share of students in that group in a district multiplied by the proficiency rate in that district.

The results for various ethnic groups in New York State, excluding New York City, are presented in Figure 1. The average white student attends a school district where the overall proficiency rate is 36.4 percent. The average black student attends a school district where the overall proficiency rate is almost 12 percentage points lower, namely, 24.5 percent. The comparable gaps for Native Americans (9.3 percentage points) and Hispanics (6.5 percentage points) are also disturbingly high. In contrast, the average Asian student attends a school district where the overall proficiency rate is 4.1 percentage points higher the rate for the average white student.[2]

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[1] ELA stands for English language arts.
[2] The data used for these calculations can be found at: http://data.nysed.gov/

Another way to express these results is to determine what share of the students in an ethnic group are in schools with overall proficiency rates below a certain level. Figure 2 provides this type of information for black and white students. This figure shows that half of black students are in districts with overall proficiency rates below 20 percent, whereas only 8 percent of white students find themselves in districts where the proficiency rate is this low. The comparable patterns for Native American and Hispanic students fall between the patterns for blacks and whites.

These results reflect the balance between the high poverty rates and other factors that raise the cost of education and lower tax bases in districts where historically disadvantaged ethnic groups are concentrated and the extra state aid that these districts receive.[3] They also demonstrate that the current balance leaves districts where these groups are concentrated at far lower levels of student proficiency than other districts.

According to the Court of Appeals, the State of New York is responsible for ensuring that every child receives the "opportunity for a meaningful high school education, one which prepares them to function productively as civic participants." The courts have explicitly ruled that poverty and other factors that raise educational costs cannot be used as an excuse for failing to meet this standard. These results provide yet more evidence that the State of New York is not living up to its educational responsibilities.

Students cannot receive a "meaningful high school education" if they live in a district where only a small share of students attain proficiency in the tests leading up to ninth grade. Moreover, regardless of where one sets the acceptable share, Native American, Hispanic and black children are concentrated in districts where the share is too low. Even if the acceptable share is set as low as 20 percent, half of black children attend school in a district that does not reach this share, compared to only 8 percent of white children. This outcome violates the standard set by the Court of Appeals and it violates widely held principles of equal opportunity and fair treatment for children in different ethnic groups.

The principal problem here is not the low weight placed on value-added test scores in evaluating teachers or a lack of charter schools; instead, it is the failure of the State of New York to implement a state aid formula that compensates poor districts for their higher educational costs. It is far past time for New York State to return to, and fully implement, the formula it passed in 2007.[4]

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[3] These issues are discussed in many of my previous columns, such as the one for April 2014.
[4] Further discussion of the 2007 aid formula and subsequent moves away from it can be found in my November 2013 column.

Figure 1. Proficiency Rate in the School District Attended by the Average Student in Various Ethnic Groups, New York State Excluding NYC, 2014
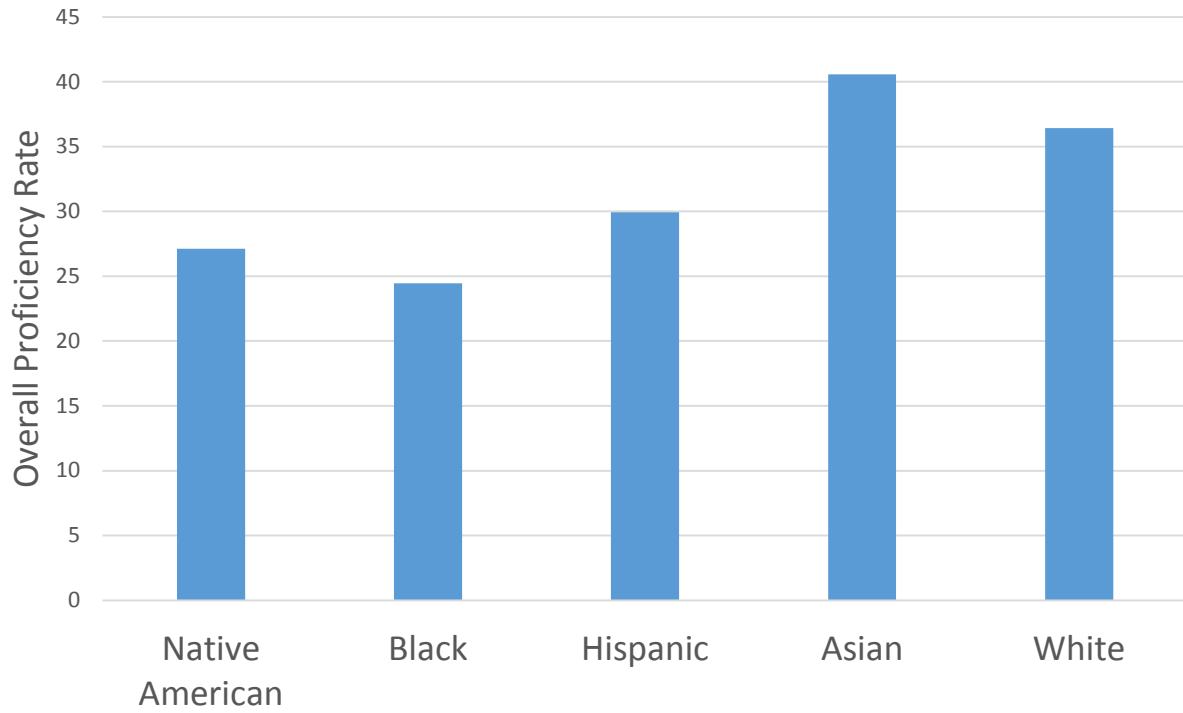
Figure 2. Distribution of Students by Overall District Proficiency Rate, New York State Excluding NYC, 2014