

Falling Out of the Lead

Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond

A BRIEF FOR EDUCATORS | BY MARNI BROMBERG AND CHRISTINA THEOKAS

The achievement gap is often framed as a problem of low achievement among students of color and low-income students. But many of these students, like their peers, have strong academic foundations and the intellectual curiosity to soar. Educators are essential to these students' success.

Quantitative data, however, reveal inequities in who maintains top tier performance in high school, and feedback from high-achieving students highlights school practices worth reexamining. High-achieving low-income students, for instance, point to differences between and within schools related to course quality, teacher expectations and support, and college guidance they need to be successful:

- "I took a lot of AP courses, but even my regular courses were rigorous," said one student who felt all her courses were consistently challenging. Another student, however, easily recognized that her work was low-level: "My calculus class wasn't really calculus."
- "I had so many teachers go above the call of duty to help me," said one student who felt supported in his learning. Another student, however, didn't: "When teachers don't take the initiative to explain things to students or help them learn it, students don't feel like they can turn to their teachers for that type of help."
- "[The school] gave us a college counselor who we start working with in 11th grade. ... They make it a requirement that we finish our applications in November, so that we only have to worry about scholarships and financial aid

for the rest of the year," said one student about a system of information and support at her school. Another student was left to flounder. "My school didn't really tell us what we needed to do in order to apply [to college], so a lot of students felt overwhelmed."

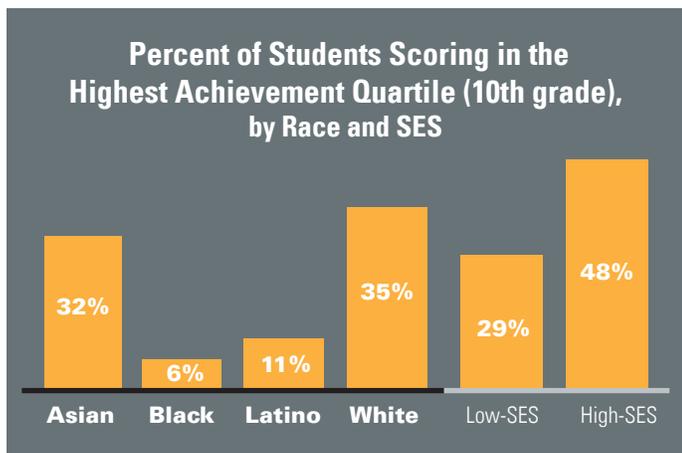
These students' experiences reflect real challenges high schools face in ensuring high-achieving low-income students are engaged in rigorous learning that pushes them to higher levels, while also providing structured support to help them navigate a path forward. In this report, we share data on how we are doing as a country with this group of young people and provide insight on how educators can best support them. It includes:

- A summary of which students are high-achieving and how they do on key measures of postsecondary readiness and enrollment¹
- Reflection questions to prompt discussion of practices and policies that may lead to better strategies to serve high-achieving students of color and low-socioeconomic status (SES) students
- Advice directly from high achievers on what worked best for them

¹ We use data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (2002). We examine public school students who scored within the top quartile on a math and reading assessment as sophomores in 2002, examining their college readiness outcomes in 2004 and their postsecondary outcomes in 2006. For more information about the data and methods used in this report, please refer to the full paper, available here: www.edtrust.org/fallingoutofthelead.

AT THE START: WHO IS HIGH-ACHIEVING?

When students walk through the door of their high schools for the first time, troubling gaps in achievement already exist. As sophomores, roughly 1 in 17 black students and 1 in 9 Latino students perform in the top achievement quartile on a math and reading assessment. These rates are substantially below those of white and Asian students, 1 in 3 of whom perform in the top quartile. Similarly, only 1 in 10 low-SES students perform within the highest achievement quartile, compared with nearly half of high-SES students.



Despite these wide disparities, there are large numbers of high-achieving students of color whose talents need to be nurtured. For instance, there are over 42,500 high-achieving Latino students. This actually exceeds the number of high-achieving Asian students (about 33,000), since Asian students constitute a smaller proportion of the overall population. And, the 10 percent of low-SES students performing in the highest achievement quartile represents over 60,000 students.

Reflect on Your Context:

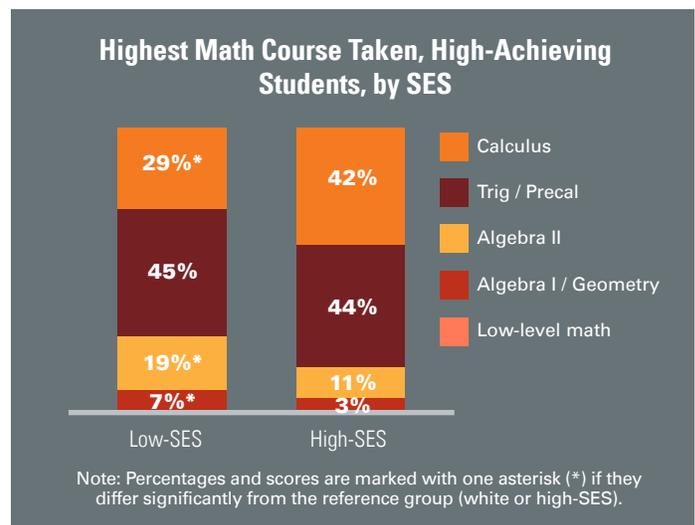
- How many high-achieving students of color and low-SES students are in your school? Is there equity in the top tier?
- How do you identify them?

IN THE END

1. ACCESS TO RIGOROUS COURSES

When we examine the final transcripts of high-achieving black, Latino, and white students, we find some good news: Regardless of race, they are similarly likely to take advanced courses. For instance, there are not significant differences by race in the percent of students who reach a math course beyond Algebra II, take physics and chemistry, or gain access to AP/IB courses.

Unlike high-achieving students of color, high-achieving low-SES students have fewer curricular opportunities than similarly prepared high-SES students. Low-SES students are less likely than their similarly prepared high-SES peers to take advanced math courses, advanced science courses, and AP/IB courses. For example, only about 50 percent of high-achieving low-SES students take at least one AP course, compared with over 70 percent of high-achieving high-SES students.



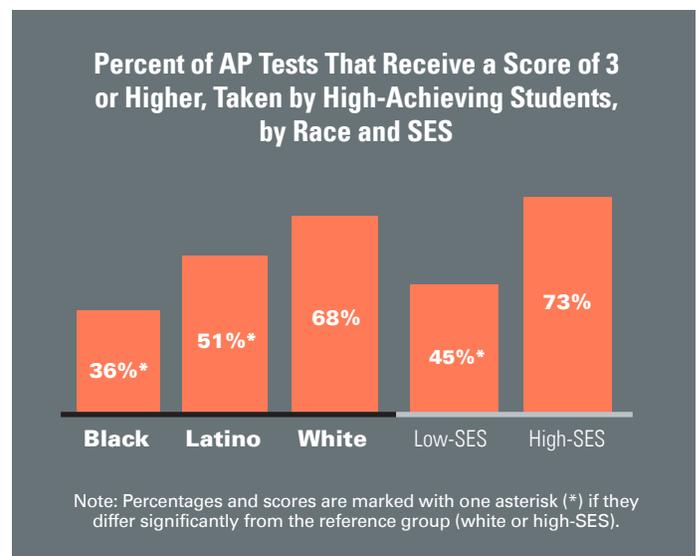
Reflect on Your Context:

- Does your school offer advanced course opportunities, such as advanced math, upper-level science, and AP or IB courses? Why or why not?
- How does your school place students into courses? Could these practices be improved to ensure equity for high-achieving students?

2. SUCCESS IN AP COURSES

While the AP course-taking patterns of high-achieving black, Latino, and white students are roughly similar, high-achieving black and Latino students obtain passing scores on a smaller share of the AP tests they take (36 and 51 percent) than high-achieving white students (68 percent). Similarly, high-achieving low-SES students pass 45 percent of all the AP tests they take, whereas high-achieving high-SES students pass 73 percent of their exams.

Because all these students had similar academic skills and were placed into these classes, varying success rates could indicate that students encounter differences in instructional quality, academic support, or classroom environments.

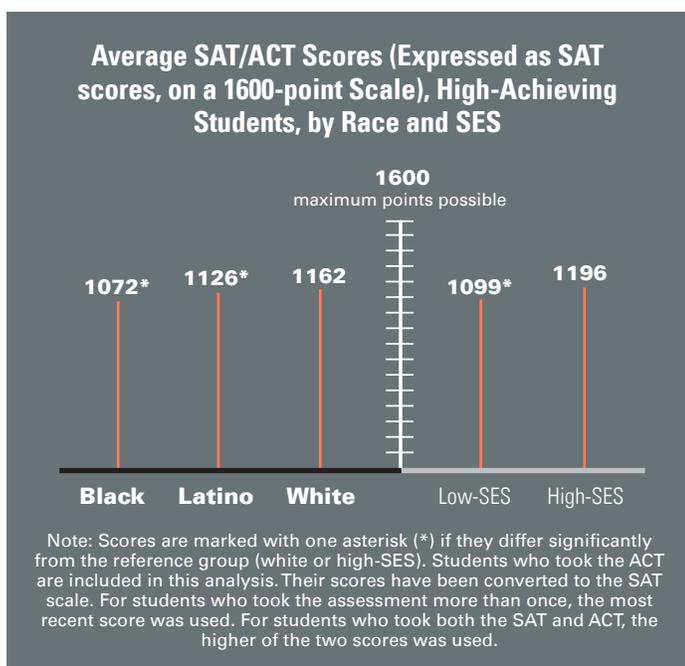


Reflect on Your Context:

- Do your school's AP courses expose students to learning opportunities that would prepare them to succeed on AP assessments?
- Are all sections of AP courses teaching the same content with the same level of expectation for student work?

3. SAT/ACT PERFORMANCE

The average SAT score for high-achieving black students is 1072 out of a possible score of 1600, about 90 points lower than the average score for high-achieving white students: 1162. High-achieving Latino students score in between these two groups, with an average score of 1126. High-achieving low-SES students also score about 100 points lower than their high-SES counterparts. In addition, high-achieving students of color and low-SES students are twice as likely as white and high-SES students to not even take a college admissions test, essentially barring them from enrolling in selective colleges later on.



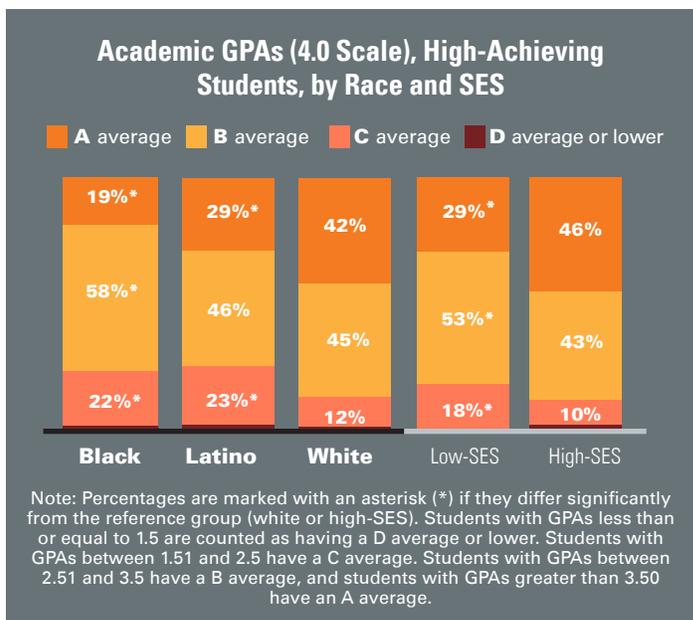
Reflect on Your Context:

- Does your school provide information about college admissions tests and support to help students prepare for the SAT or ACT?
- What sets of skills and knowledge would students need to demonstrate on the SAT or ACT to qualify for your state's flagship university?

4. GRADES IN ACADEMIC COURSES

High-achieving students of color and low-SES students receive lower grades in their academic courses than high-achieving white and high-SES students, eliciting cause for concern. Particularly striking, high-achieving white students are about twice as likely as high-achieving black students to receive an A average. While a number of factors could underlie these trends, recent research found that teachers perceive African

American students as exerting less classroom effort than white students and this accounted for a large proportion of the gap in school grades.² However, students reported similar school behaviors and attitudes, which suggests some disconnect between teachers' perceptions of students and what students actually do and believe.



Reflect on Your Context:

- What would low-SES students and students of color in your school say about grading practices and policies?
- What additional supports could be put in place to help students of color and low-SES students earn grades commensurate with their potential?

5. COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

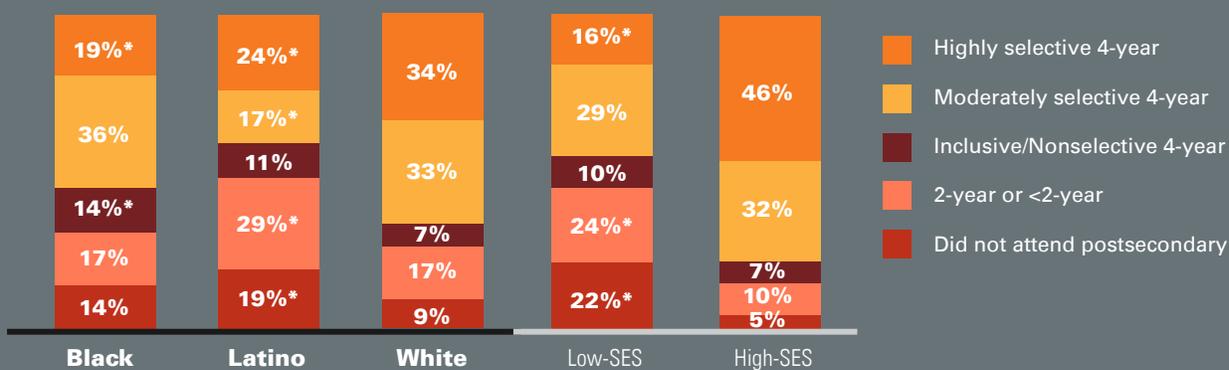
College readiness indicators like AP scores, SAT/ACT scores, and GPAs are outcomes that count when it comes to opportunities after high school. And indeed, when we follow students who started high school as high-achieving into adulthood, we again see a mixed picture.

On the one hand, initially high-achieving black students are about as likely as high-achieving white students to enroll in postsecondary school and to attend a four-year college. However, they are less likely to attend a selective four-year college or university, as are high-achieving Latino students.

Initially high-achieving students from disadvantaged families are less likely than initially high-achieving students from advantaged families to enroll in college at all, and they are much more likely to enroll in a two-year school as opposed to a four-year school. What's more, only 16 percent of the nation's top-achieving low-SES students attend a highly selective college, compared with 46 percent, nearly half, of high-SES students.

² Tina Wildhagen, "How Teachers and Schools Contribute to Racial Differences in the Realization of Academic Potential," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 114, No. 7 (2012): 1-27.

Postsecondary Enrollment and Selectivity, High-Achieving Students, by Race and SES



Note: Percentages and scores are marked with one asterisk (*) if they differ significantly from the reference group (white or high-SES).

Reflect on Your Context:

- Among students at your school who are high-achieving at the outset, how many end up at selective four-year colleges or universities? Are students of color and low-SES students as likely to enroll as white and high-SES students?
- What are the barriers that preclude students from enrolling in selective colleges or universities? Preparation? Information? Cost? Distance? How can your school mitigate these issues?

BENEATH THE DATA: STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS

Our interviews with five high-achieving, low-income graduates illustrate just how instrumental high school experiences are in preparing students for life after graduation. Their reflections have some clear implications for high school educators.

- Students want rigorous curricular experiences, and they want them early. The students we spoke to thrived when their high school classes mirrored the expectations in college-level courses. In fact, they were deeply grateful for the opportunities they had in high school to discuss and evaluate ideas with peers, to write at length, and to take challenging assessments.
- Many of the students reflected on times when adults had made either positive or negative assumptions about them or their peers, showing the high importance of the words

and messages educators communicate. As one student said, "What holds back a lot of students is people tell them, 'No.'" Their reflections suggest that they want educators to believe in their goals and help them to find solutions to potential barriers.

- For many of the students, mentors served as important advocates when it came to navigating high school bureaucracies and applying for college. While it's no secret that educators are already strapped with tons of responsibilities, the students we spoke to all emphasized the importance of mentorship, suggesting that time spent talking to students about future plans and helping them access information would be time well-spent.
- Most of the students we spoke to mentioned that their peers helped keep them on track. Creating a college-going culture is a powerful strategy for ensuring that high-achieving students are not isolated in their school community.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our data suggest that too many high-achieving students of color and low-SES students are falling out of the lead during high school. Educators can dislodge these long-entrenched patterns by equipping students with the information, opportunities, and experiences that will put them in contention for postsecondary opportunities that will help them soar. ■

For more information about the methods, data, or students profiled in this summary, see the full version of *Falling Out of the Lead*, available here: www.edtrust.org/fallingoutofthelead.



The Education Trust