THE STATE OF EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
Over the past few decades, African American students across the nation have made real gains in academic achievement. Yet, too many African American students still are not getting the quality education they need and deserve, and the performance of African American students lags far behind that of white students. These gaps in achievement are driven by gaps in opportunity — African American students receive fewer of the within-school resources and experiences that are known to contribute to academic achievement.

In this brief, we’ve gathered the best available national data on African American student achievement and attainment in both K-12 and higher education, as well as on the unequal opportunities that contribute to these outcomes. We hope that these data will be used to spark conversation — and more important, action — about how to accelerate improvement and raise achievement for African American students across the nation.
Where do African American students attend school?

African American students make up a substantial proportion of enrollment nationwide. About 15 percent of all public school students — or about 7.9 million students — are African American. And in some states, African American students make up a far larger portion of public school enrollment: Half of students in Mississippi and 45 percent in Louisiana are African American. About a third of students in Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, and South Carolina are African American.

Opportunity and achievement for African American students matter for all types of communities and schools. While many African American students, 46 percent, attend urban schools, more than half, 54 percent, now attend schools in suburbs, towns, or rural areas. And while about half of African American students attend schools where the majority of students are African American, 26 percent attend schools where most students are white.
Is performance for African American students improving in key academic subjects?

In both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math, performance among African American students has risen dramatically in recent years, and gaps between African American and white students have narrowed. It’s important, of course, to look at student performance across subjects and grades, but these two measures are especially critical. Research shows that without solid reading skills honed in elementary school and a firm grasp of math by the end of middle school, it is difficult for students to do well going forward.

Between 2003 and 2013, scale scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rose faster for African American students than for white students in both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math.
And these gains reflect real improvement in skills and knowledge. Over the past two decades, the percentage of African American eighth-graders who lacked even basic math skills on NAEP has fallen from 81 percent to less than half. Students at that level struggle with things like applying arithmetic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) and with using diagrams, charts, and graphs to help solve problems.

In fourth-grade reading, the percentage of African American students without even basic skills — those who have trouble locating information in a passage, identifying the main idea of a text, or interpreting what a word means — has fallen from 69 percent to 50 percent.

During the same time period, the percentage of African American students performing at a proficient or advanced level more than doubled in fourth-grade reading and has increased sevenfold in eighth-grade math. Far too few African American students are performing at these levels — but the changes represent marked improvement over past performance.
Are schools performing well enough for African American students?

These improvements are encouraging. However, too few African American students demonstrate the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school and in life. And despite gap-narrowing, African American students still lag far behind their white peers on NAEP.

In both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math, African American students are about **two and a half** times as likely as white students to lack basic skills and only about **one-third** as likely to be proficient or advanced.
Are schools preparing African American students for college and careers?

African American students are increasingly taking the steps necessary for success after high school. Over the past five years, the number of African American high school graduates taking the ACT rose by 22 percent, and the number taking the SAT rose by 12 percent. What’s more, the number of African American graduates taking at least one AP exam more than tripled between 2002 and 2012, outpacing the growth in the number of African American graduates.

But despite these gains, there’s still a long way to go. African American students remain underrepresented among AP test-takers: 15 percent of graduates in the class of 2013 were African American, but African American students made up only 9 percent of those who took AP tests. And even fewer — 5 percent — of those who passed an AP exam were African American.
And just taking these types of assessments doesn’t mean that students are prepared. Few African American graduates who took the ACT met any of its college-readiness benchmarks, which are intended to show whether students have a good chance of succeeding in first-year college courses. Just 1 in 20 African American graduates met all four college-readiness benchmarks, compared with 1 in 3 white graduates who did so.

Are African American students graduating ready for the next step?

Far too many African American students leave high school without a diploma. Nationwide, just over 2 in 3 African American students graduated from high school on time in 2012. That’s compared with 86 percent of white students.
And those who graduate are not necessarily ready for adult life. For example, only about 60 percent of young African American graduates who were interested in joining the U.S. Army met minimum academic standards.

Do African American students have adequate opportunities to learn?

Gaps exist before children enter school, but inequitable and insufficient opportunities to learn exacerbate the gaps between African American students and their white peers and contribute to African American students’ low performance.

For example, only 35 percent of African American students who had high math performance in fifth grade were enrolled in at least Algebra I in eighth grade, compared with more than 60 percent of white fifth-graders with high math performance.
This trend continues into high school. Among African American students with high potential for success in AP math courses, only 3 in 10 took any such course. The same is true in science. Part of this is because 15 percent of African American high school students attend schools that don’t offer at least one AP course in each of the four core subjects: math, English, science, and social studies.

African American students also are highly likely to be disciplined in ways that take them out of the classroom. Although African American students made up 16 percent of students in the 2012 Civil Rights Data Collection, they made up 33 percent of students suspended once, 42 percent of students suspended more than once, and 34 percent of students expelled.
Overall, African American students are enrolling in college in larger numbers. African American high school graduates enrolled in college the following fall increased, from 57 percent in 2002 to 62 percent in 2012. African American students made up 15 percent of all undergraduates in 2012 compared with 12 percent 10 years ago. These are impressive gains, but African American students are still attending college at lower rates than their white peers.

African American students are also more likely than white students to begin college in either a for-profit or community college, where their chances of earning a degree are lower.
While access to higher education for African American students has been increasing, gaps in degree completion persist. Consider six-year graduation rates at four-year colleges:

At community colleges, 13 percent of African American students earn an associate degree or certificate within three years compared with 24 percent of white students.

Of those students who initially enrolled at any two-year college with the intent to transfer, white students are twice as likely as African American students (22 versus 11 percent) to transfer to a four-year institution within three years.

As a result, only 20 percent of African American students ages 25 to 29 held at least a bachelor’s in 2013, compared with 40 percent of their white peers.
Are some states, districts, schools, and higher education institutions doing better than others for African American students?

No state is performing as well as it should be for African American students, but wide variations in performance across states show that what states do matters. For example, on NAEP, African American eighth-graders in Massachusetts are four times as likely to be proficient in math as their peers in Michigan and Alabama.

The same variation exists across districts. Twenty-five percent of African American fourth-graders in Charlotte, North Carolina, read at a proficient or advanced level, compared with just 6 percent in Cleveland.
And some schools across the nation are educating African American students to high levels of achievement. At George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama — where 99 percent of students are African American — 94 percent of the African American fifth-graders exceeded state math standards, and 73 percent did so in reading. Statewide, less than half of African American fifth-graders and about 70 percent of white fifth-graders exceed reading and math standards.

At Arcadia Elementary School in Olympia Fields, Illinois, 9 in 10 students are African American. Seventy-nine percent of the school’s African American third-grade students met or exceeded state reading and math standards — compared with 41 percent of African American third-graders statewide who met or exceeded state reading standards and just 31 percent who met or exceeded state math standards.

And at Elmont Memorial High School in Elmont, New York, three-quarters of students are African American — and 94 percent of black students in the class of 2012 graduated on time. That’s compared with about 60 percent statewide. Moreover, for the class of 2013, 98 percent of African American students at Elmont met state standards in secondary-level English and math, compared with roughly 70 percent of their counterparts statewide.
Similar examples exist in higher education, where some colleges are successfully graduating increasing percentages of African American students. At Northeastern University in Boston, for example, the African American student graduation rate was **62.3 percent** in 2012, representing a **20.2 percentage point jump** since 2002. Other schools have eliminated completion gaps between groups of students. Georgia State University has graduated black students at **similar or higher** rates than white students for almost a decade, all while consistently raising graduation rates for both groups.

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**Six-Year Graduation Rates, Georgia State University**

![Graph showing six-year graduation rates for African American and White students at Georgia State University.]()
Where do African American students attend school?


Is performance for African American students improving in key academic subjects?


Are schools performing well enough for African American students?


Are schools preparing African American students for college and careers?


- **ACT college readiness**: ACT, “The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013: National” (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT, 2013), http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr13/pdf/CCCR13-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf. College readiness benchmarks are scores on the ACT subject-area tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.

Are African American students graduating ready for the next step?


Do African American students have adequate opportunities to learn?


Are African American students going to college?
And where?


Are African American students graduating from college?


• **Transfer rates:** Education Trust Analysis of Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS), 04:09 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education).

Are some states, districts, schools, and higher education institutions doing better than others for African American students?


- **George Hall Elementary School performance:** Alabama State Department of Education, Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT) Results, [http://www03.alsde.edu/Accountability/Accountability.asp](http://www03.alsde.edu/Accountability/Accountability.asp).


