

Racial disparity on end-of-year tests grows in New Hanover

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More than 10,000 white students filled the halls of New Hanover County's elementary and middle schools during the 2011-12 school year.

When those students took the annual end-of-year math and reading tests, they did well. About 85 percent passed the tests.

During that same year, more than 4,000 black students filled the same halls. But when they took the same math and reading tests, they didn't do as well. Only about 45 percent passed the tests.

There's a gap – a 40 percentage point gap. Ten years ago, there was also a gap – a 30 percentage point gap.

To put it simply, it's getting worse.

An achievement gap between groups of students is one of the oldest stories in education. In New Hanover County, the biggest gaps are between black and white elementary and middle school students. But there's also a gap between white students and other minorities.

From third grade through eighth grade, students take state-mandated tests in reading and math at the end of each year. A solid majority of white students passed those tests last year. Fewer than half of black students did the same.

The root of the problem is up for debate. Some say centuries of racial tension in New Hanover County combined with a school board decision to adopt a neighborhood schools model contributes to that gap. Others say students who don't have adequate family support struggle to do well in school. Still others say it's hard to attract quality teachers to a school that struggles because of a lack of resources.

But all agree it's a hard cycle to break. Ten years ago, the county – and on a larger scale, the state – put together committees whose goals were to work on fixing it. Today, many of the ideas they came up with are still in place. But so is the gap.

REDISTRICTING A CAUSE?

Some say the school board's decision in recent years to support a neighborhood schools model loads some schools with poor children less likely to do well.

Poverty often links with race in New Hanover County: Schools with more minority students tend to also have a higher population of poor students. The burdens that come with being poor can affect whether a student can learn, said Elizabeth Redenbaugh, a former school board member who championed diverse schools during her time on the board.

“When you're living in poverty, there are so many other things that are going on in



Photo by Matt Born

College Park Elementary teacher Natalie Lafferty works with fifth-grade and kindergarten students at the school.

your life,” she said. “Safety, shelter, food – all those needs have to be met before you can even think about learning.”

And if a school is full of poor minority students, those burdens can become overwhelming.

In the mid-1990s, the school board also supported a neighborhood schools model, where students attend schools closest to where they live. Legal Services of the Lower Cape Fear filed a complaint with the federal Office for Civil Rights, saying a push for neighborhood schools in a county with segregated housing patterns discriminated against black students.

In 1995, as part of a compliance agreement from that complaint, the Office for Civil Rights ordered that the district draw its attendance zones to include between 15 percent and 50 percent black students. But that order expired in 1997, said schools spokeswoman Valita Quattlebaum. By 2006, during the next round of school redistricting, the school board approved a neighborhood schools plan for elementary schools. In 2010, the board did the same for middle schools.

By 2011, 15 of the county's 33 elementary and middle schools had a student body that was less than 15 percent black. Thirteen of those schools had a student body that was less than 10 percent black in the 2011-12 school year. Districtwide, 22 percent of the students are black.

Robert Smith, a professor in the University of North Carolina Wilmington's Watson College of Education, said, “Neighborhood schools work well if you have a neighborhood that is well-enhanced” – strong schools, desirable housing and a community that supports education. But with much of Wilmington's black population clustered downtown, the students in that “neighborhood school” need more help to achieve the success students see at schools elsewhere in the county.

“Having schools that are on either one end or other of the continuum” – a school whose student body is 90 percent black and poor, or a school whose student body is 90 percent white and well-off – “is not a successful model for all students,” Smith said.

ANALYZING THE NUMBERS

Look at recent test scores at different schools across the county. More than 95 percent of Parsley Elementary's white students passed end-of-year tests, while 87.5 percent of its black students passed – a 7.5 percentage point difference. And at Ogden Elementary, more than 95 percent of black students passed the tests, beating out the 92.8 percent of their white counterparts who passed them.

But look at the demographic makeup of those schools: There were just 15 black students among Parsley Elementary's 563 students. Ogden Elementary had 16 black students in its 660-student body.

At schools where the number of black students drastically outweighs the number of white students, the gaps are bigger. Snipes Elementary, with 436 black students and 32 white students contributing to its 511-student body, has a 56 percentage point gap. About 84 percent of Snipes' white students passed the tests; just 28 percent of black students did.

Freeman Elementary, another school with a disproportionately black population, has the lowest gap in the county – just a 4.6 percentage point difference between white and black students. But neither group did very well on end-of-year tests. Just 45.5 percent of white students passed it. For black students, only 40.9 percent got passing scores.

Curriculum and tests in North Carolina are made more rigorous about every five years, causing scores to fluctuate among all student groups, said Tammy Howard,

director of accountability services for the state Department of Public Instruction. But there is still a consistent gap between the scores of white and black students.

Debora Williams, special assistant for graduation and dropout prevention initiatives in the state Department of Public Instruction, won't speak specifically to how neighborhood schools affect the achievement gap. But she did say that schools should be a place where students are exposed to differences.

“School is the best mechanism for doing that,” she said. “It's not only exposure to other cultures and ethnicities, but other ways of doing and being.”

OTHER FACTORS CONTRIBUTE

Neighborhood schools aren't the only factor in creating – or the only hindrance in fixing – an achievement gap.

Smith said children's success in school doesn't depend on a single variable.

It's contingent on a student's family and home life, on the teachers they'll encounter, on the funding and support their community puts into schools.

Ten years ago, the state and the county created committees whose goal was to figure out how to close the achievement gap. At the state level, the Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps commission focused on making people aware of the gap between black and white students and helping districts map out how to close it, Williams said. In New Hanover County, the group served a similar purpose, starting a conversation about the gap, said Nelson and Dale Pelsey-Becton, New Hanover County Schools' assistant superintendent for instruction.

EXPLORING SOLUTIONS

The committees laid the foundation for a variety of programs that either deliberately or indirectly work to close the gap. Pre-kindergarten, for example, is now widely regarded as a crucial educational first step, and both North Carolina and New Hanover County have many more pre-k programs now than they did 10 years ago.

To Tannis Nelson, a former state PTA president who served on both committees 10 years ago, early education is a crucial part of closing the gap. From day one of a child's life, parents should work with them, then send them to a high-quality pre-k program.

The exposure a pre-k program gives a child – essentially teaching them how school works – is invaluable, Pelsey-Becton said. Students in the district's pre-k programs, which are geared toward poor families, do things like going on an elementary-school orientation before their first day.

It's hard to find a parent who doesn't want their child to be successful, Nelson said. But not every parent knows how to set up that success. Nelson stressed that parents have to stay involved in their children's education – and that the community should step in and help out when parents can't.

That's where school boards and parent-teacher associations have to step in, Smith said.

School boards must ensure that a school's facilities and resources are up to date, and PTAs – parent-teacher associations – must fill in where school boards fail. Students in a well-maintained school with access to laptops and iPads will likely do better than students in a crumbling building with outdated technology.

The district also puts special attention on its neediest students and teachers, Pelsey-Becton and Superintendent Tim Markley said. Pelsey-Becton pointed to the district's Striving to Achieve Excellence, or STAE, program, which nurtures middle and high school students who will likely be the first people in their families to go to college. Markley highlighted incentive programs for teachers at high-poverty schools.

Teachers at Sunset Park Elementary School, where more than 95 percent of the students are considered high poverty, have an extra incentive to get their National Board certification – an exhaustive program to recognize strong teaching ability.

There are programs and opportunities like this at every school in the county, Pelsey-Becton and Markley said. So why is there still a gap?

“What we have control over is 8 (a.m.) to 4 (p.m.) with that student,” Markley said. His focus, he said, is to make the education in New Hanover County “as intense and academically rigorous” as possible. Pelsey-Becton emphasized that, too, repeatedly saying that teachers should hold high expectations for their students. If a student needs extra help to meet those expectations and live up to that academic rigor, it will be provided, Markley said.

But “I can't always make sure parents access it,” he said.

WILL THE CHANGES WORK?

Newly reopened Virgo Middle School is a perfect example of extra help at a high-poverty school.

Nancy McCullough, a retired teacher from Maryland, moved to Wilmington four years ago. She started volunteering this year at Virgo Middle when it reopened in the fall after spending a year with its doors shut due to low test scores and declining enrollment.

The new Virgo Middle has 121 students this year. More than 80 percent of that student body is black. More than 95 percent of that student body is on free and reduced-price lunch.

But it's covered in resources. Virgo Middle partners with nonprofit organization Blue Ribbon Commission to give parents a place to come to the school. They can volunteer in their children's classrooms or get help in their own education. Students at Virgo Middle hear from artists-in-residence and visit local businesses as part of their curriculum. Teachers have a passion for their students' education.

It's a place made up of “intelligent kids who have such promise,” McCullough said. They have big dreams about what they want to do with their lives. But they come from communities where there is no set path to turn middle-school dreams into a college degree and a good job.

Come end-of-grade test time – just a few weeks away – the district will see if it works. It's a microcosm of the larger problem in the district. Can a school with mostly poor minority children overcome its burdens? Will the special attention and extra resources net higher test scores? Can New Hanover County, through Virgo Middle, reverse its past and close the achievement gap?

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