

The Stump

A blueprint for closing the gap

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As a new study of Oregon's achievement gap makes clear, the state should put more effort into early intervention and dig deeper into what works

The stubborn gap in academic achievement in Oregon between Hispanic students and their white classmates used to be somewhat of a mystery. Not any more.

The main causes of this gap are well-diagnosed. So are at least some of the solutions, plus the areas desperately needing further research.

Hispanic students learn at the same pace as their white peers, according to a [new study](#) conducted by EcoNorthwest for the Chalkboard Project, an Oregon-based education nonprofit. The trouble is, Hispanic students start out behind in the early grades and typically don't catch up.

The reasons? Hispanic students are more than twice as likely to come from low-income homes. They're more likely to change schools, a transition that can disrupt performance. They're also more likely to attend schools with concentrated poverty. These lower-income schools tend to have more novice teachers and higher staff turnover, another form of disruption.

The achievement gap show up on the third-grade reading and math tests, then persists steadily through high school, as the study found. These findings mirror a [2008 report](#) by the same organization on the achievement gap between white and African American students in Multnomah County.

"What this does is force the question," says economist John Tapogna, who directed the study. "What are we willing to do, in sort of an inequitable way, to get resources and talent to the schools where students need them most?"

What to do? It's increasingly clear that targeted investments in the early grades, particularly in terms of intensive help with reading, pay big dividends. When students thrive academically in elementary school, they are less likely to need costly, last-ditch remedial efforts in the upper grades.

Schools also should lavish attention on children who move frequently, especially in mid-year. Students who can gain their footing quickly, both academically and socially, are far less likely to fall behind.

Just as important, Oregon needs more intensive research that explores two questions: Why are some schools able to close their achievement gaps? And what are the key ingredients of Oregon's more effective programs for English language learners?

At least 42 schools in Oregon -- 29 elementary schools, six middle schools and seven high schools -- demonstrate significant success in closing their achievement gaps between white and Hispanic students in reading or math. Oregon needs an independent performance audit to compare these schools with average ones and look for patterns. The more quickly the state can learn from these standout schools, the better.

Oregon's adult population remains largely white, but its public schools tell another story. Almost one-third of Oregon's students are racial or ethnic minorities. The percentage of Hispanic students has nearly doubled over the past decade to 17 percent of the state's K-12 student population. These students are our future workers, parents and business owners.

Meanwhile, more families of all ethnic backgrounds find themselves struggling with the same issues, including less money and less stability at home. These challenges should play out at school as concrete, solvable problems.

Not as fate.

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