Fact Sheet

EQUAL TALENTS,
UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES:
A Report Card on State Support for
Academically Talented Low-Income Students

Across America, low-income students are less likely than their higher-income peers to reach advanced levels of academic performance despite having equal intellects. It is a story of demography determining destiny, with bright, low-income students becoming what one research team referred to as a "persistent talent underclass." This **Excellence Gap,** the disparity between low- and higher- income students who reach advanced levels of academic performance, appears in elementary school and continues through college. In short, smart but poor students who start off their academic careers scoring "advanced" on standardized tests over time fall behind the wealthier students who started in the same place. For those who believe education is the road to social mobility, the conclusion is both ineluctable and devastating: the longer high-performing, low-income students stay in public education, the worse they do. That a majority of states do nothing to stop the backsliding is inexcusable.

At stake is nothing less than the vibrancy of our economy, our nation's future prosperity, and the strength of our global competitiveness. But by implementing commonsense policies to close the Excellence Gap, we can unleash the potential of millions of bright young Americans whose natural talents and intelligence will shape our nation for generations to come.

To shed light on the Excellence Gap and raise awareness of the need for better strategies to support students across the country, **the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation initiated a groundbreaking study that examines state-level interventions that are intended to foster the maintenance of academic achievement within low-income student populations,** with the goal of identifying policies that could be implemented more widely. States were then graded on both their current policy interventions and their student outcomes. The grading criteria were simple and largely non-controversial.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Excellence Gaps exist in all states. No states report equal performance between low-income and other students; fewer than one-quarter report that their low-income students *reach even half the levels of advanced performance* as other students.

2. While some states had remarkable outcomes for the percentage of students performing at the advanced level, no state had impressive outcomes for economically disadvantaged students. Massachusetts, for example, leads the nation with 18% of its students scoring advanced on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test for Grade 8 math assessment. However, only 6% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch scored advanced, while 26% of non-qualifying students did. The 20% gap is simply staggering. Even larger disparities were found in other states.

3. In most states policies that focus attention on advanced learning are simply non-existent. Only a few states have comprehensive policies in place to address the education of talented students generally, let alone the education of high-performing students from low-income families.

4. Policy prescriptions to support high-performing, low-income students are easily implemented and virtually cost-free. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's expert panel confirmed the effectiveness of these easy to implement and virtually cost free policies.

5. In the absence of strong state support for advanced learning, it is likely that available services benefit primarily students in wealthier school districts. This hypothesis is supported by the finding that higher poverty states tend to have the fewest students who reach advanced levels of academic performance and those states tend to have lower outcomes overall.

6. Large excellence gaps (differences in performance between low-income and other students) exist in nearly all states. While the value of some policies is clear—transparency of data, permitting acceleration and holding school districts accountable for the performance of high-performing, low-income students—further monitoring is necessary to identify the policies that are most effective overall at attacking the Excellence Gap.

Several states lead the nation in producing higher percentages of talented students, and many states appear to have the infrastructure in place to begin addressing student talent development more effectively. To inform the national dialogue about how to better support the most advanced students, particularly those from low-income families, the foundation offers the following recommendations to states:

✔ **Make high-performing students highly visible.**

States should require schools and districts to identify high-ability students and collect data on their performance and income levels. When releasing state data on student outcomes, ensure that the performance of high-achieving students is highlighted.

✔ **Remove barriers to accelerated curriculum.**

States should allow and encourage a range of academic acceleration options, such as early entrance to kindergarten, acceleration between grades, dual enrollment in middle school and high school (with middle school students able to earn high school credit), and early graduation from high school.

✔ **Promote access to advanced educational services.**

States can and should take the lead in promoting educational excellence by supporting services for gifted and talented students, ensuring all educators have exposure to the needs of advanced students in teacher and administrator preparation coursework, and monitoring the quality of local gifted and talented programs. Additionally, states should increase opportunities for dual enrollment and AP courses.

✔ **Hold schools accountable for the performance of high-ability students.**

State K-12 accountability systems often drive the discussion of priorities in local school districts. These systems should include measures of growth for high-ability students—regardless of income levels—and other indicators of excellence, including distinct indicators for high-ability, low-income students.

The report can be found at **www.excellencegap.org/reportcard**.

INPUT GRADES:
State Policy Support for Advanced Learning
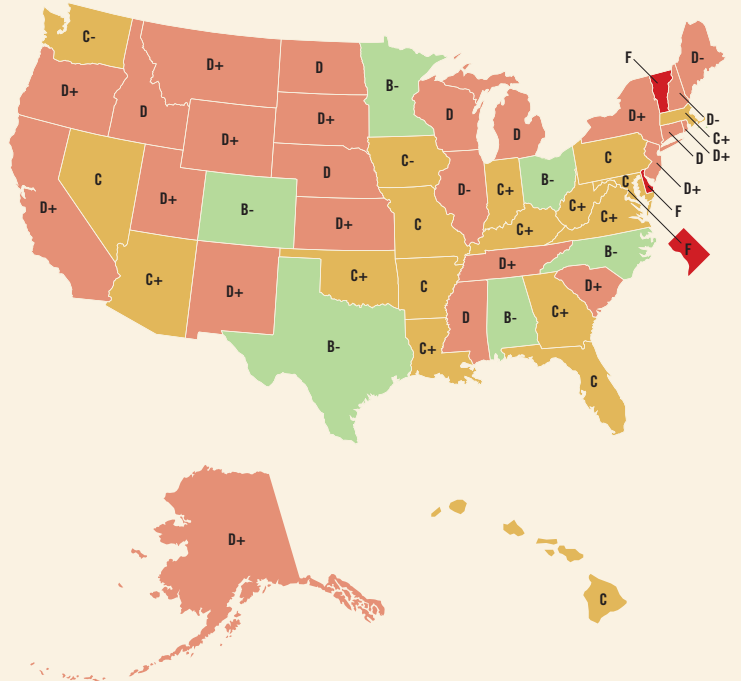
OUTCOME GRADES:
Advanced Student Performance and Excellence Gaps