THE EXCELLENCE GAP IS GROWING

What is the excellence gap?
The excellence gap is the discrepancy between the percentage of lower-income versus higher-income students who reach advanced levels of academic performance, due to unequal access to resources, quality instruction, and educational opportunities.

How is the excellence gap changing?
The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a nationally representative assessment that measures U.S. K-12 students’ knowledge in various subject areas. In reading and in mathematics, across grades 4, 8, and 12, NAEP data show that lower-income students are less likely than their peers to attain an advanced level of achievement. Furthermore, an analysis of NAEP data since the mid-1990s reveals that the excellence gap is growing:

This growth is driven primarily by increases in advanced performance among more affluent students. Higher-income students have made substantial gains at top levels of academic performance, whereas advanced performance of students from lower-income families has grown at a much slower rate.

Figure 1: Growth in Excellence Gaps
Percent of Students Scoring “Advanced”

Figure 2: Excellence Gaps Have Widened in the Past Two Decades

What does this mean?
This excellence gap, which begins in elementary and middle school, has far-reaching consequences.

There are over 25 million K-12 children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — 1 million of whom rank in the top 25% academically — and these children are increasingly unlikely to reach their full potential.

High-achieving students from lower-income backgrounds are less likely than their higher-income peers to participate in advanced courses, attend college, and attend more selective postsecondary institutions.

For more information on the excellence gap, go to www.jkcf.org/excellencegap.

About the Data: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a congressionally mandated project administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Students receive one of three scores: Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. Data accessed through www.nationsreportcard.gov. “Low-income” students are defined as those eligible for the National School Lunch Program (with a family income less than 185% of the poverty level). “Other” students are defined as those not eligible. A small percentage of students for whom financial data are not available were excluded from this analysis.
Figure 3: Percentage of Students Scoring at the “Advanced” Level on National Assessment of Educational Progress

The NAEP exam was administered in varying grades and subjects each year, thus the years presented are different for each grade and subject presented.