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On Education

How One Suburb's Black Students Gain

By MICHAEL WINERIP

SHAKER HEIGHTS, Ohio

IT is hard to pick up an education article these days without reading about some excited governor or mayor who is busy closing the achievement gap. Test scores of minority children go up a few points, and there stands the politician on the 6 o'clock news declaring that merit pay for teachers or laptops in the classroom or the federal No Child Left Behind law is closing the gap between white and minority children.

Here in this integrated, upper-middle-class Cleveland suburb, you would think they would be boasting. African-Americans' combined math and verbal SAT scores average 976, 110 points above the national average for black students. The number of black sixth graders scoring proficient on the state math test has nearly doubled in three years and is more than 20 percentage points above the Ohio average for blacks.

Top black seniors get into top colleges. In recent years, Charles Inniss went to Swarthmore, Karelle Hall to Dartmouth, Winston Weatherspoon to Georgetown and Danielle Decatur to the University of Virginia.

While many a politician discovered the gap in 2002, when No Child Left Behind required that test data be separated by race, Shaker Heights has battled it for decades.

Twenty years ago, an after-school tutoring center opened at the high school. In 1990, a committee of a dozen top black male seniors, the MAC scholars (for Minority Achievement Committee), was formed to mentor struggling black underclassmen, and the program has become a national model, featured last year on CNN. Seniors like Malik Wiggins (who has an A average and works 18 hours a week at a grocery) and Kenneth Owens (who has a B+, was the football team's fullback and plans to study dentistry) continue that tradition.

Studies show the gap starts early, so eight years ago, Shaker Heights began giving 30 minutes of extra daily instruction to kindergartners who scored poorly for reading readiness. Three years ago, Shaker Heights started after-school study circles staffed by teachers and aimed at expanding black participation in honors and advanced placement classes. In six years, the number of blacks taking honors and A.P. courses has increased 50 percent.

"After the CNN story, I had 50 calls," says Mark Freeman, the superintendent. "They'd say, 'Can you tell us how you closed the gap?' They think we're done." He tells them that even here, there is a long way to go.

While it's good that No Child Left Behind has focused attention on the gap, the law is so driven by test

scores that public discussion often takes a cartoonish form, as if a stiff dose of test prep will end the gap.

Ronald Ferguson, a Harvard professor who has spent a decade studying the gap in 15 integrated suburbs like Shaker Heights, says it is not going away soon. In a 2003 Supreme Court decision upholding affirmative action, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said that because of America's history of racial bias it would take 25 years more, and Professor Ferguson thinks maybe longer. "If you were betting, it would be unwise to bet on anything less than 25 years," he says.

For every positive statistic there is a sobering one. Blacks' SAT scores here are still nearly 100 points behind the national average for whites (1,068) and 246 points behind the average of whites in Shaker Heights (1,222). The average grade for a black Shaker Heights senior is C+, and it is B+ for whites. The high school is about half black, yet blacks make up 31 percent of the students in honors classes and 11 percent of those in A.P. classes. As Corbin Sykes, a MAC scholar with many A.P. courses, says, "In all my classes except weightlifting, there's just a couple other African-Americans."

Professor Ferguson estimates that half the gap is economic. While many black residents here are professionals, the average black family income (\$54,500) is half the white average. A black child looking for study help has parents with less academic experience (45 percent have four-year degrees versus 90 percent of whites).

Half of black homes have a single parent, versus 10 percent for whites. Blacks are more transient. Half the black children in the kindergarten reading-support program in 2001 had moved away by the fourth grade.

When Professor Ferguson compares blacks and whites of similar income, he finds whites outperform blacks (A- versus B+ at the top income). His research shows that in the same courses, blacks spend as much time on homework as whites but finish less of it. "It's more a skills gap than effort gap," he says. This is why the tutoring center is open from 4 to 7 p.m. daily. Andre Smith, a MAC scholar, apologized for not talking; he was going for calculus help.

The middle and high school study circles grew out of research at the University of California, Berkeley showing that Asian-American students tended to study in groups, while black students struggled on their own. The sixth-grade after-school program here takes 60 of the brightest black students and pairs them with six teachers.

"We're giving them skills to study together," says Chante Thomas, a teacher. "But we also want them to find relationships with other smart kids that they'll have the rest of their time at Shaker."

THE gap is about culture, too. Professor Ferguson has run seminars with teachers emphasizing the challenges black children face and the need to push them to excel. Shaker Heights tries to hire blacks - 20 percent of teachers are black, as are three of the eight principals.

And the gap's about child rearing. Professor Ferguson's surveys show that blacks read less to preschoolers than do whites and black students watch twice as much TV.

A black parent group here has sponsored many projects aimed at narrowing the gap, including a summer enrichment program started in 1997. In October, Alisa Smith opened a parent room at the high school to encourage more adult involvement. Ms. Smith, a Columbia graduate and a stay-at-home mother, and her husband, a doctor, have three children in the schools, including Andre, the MAC scholar. While she says her children have been underestimated at times because they are black, over all she is delighted with the

schools.

Ms. Smith thinks federal supporters of No Child Left Behind could learn from Shaker Heights. "If they spent as much time funding the kinds of programs we have in Shaker, as they do on testing," she said, "it would be a lot better law."

E-mail: edmike@nytimes.com

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