The “achievement gap” in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other success measures. It is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between African-American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white peers, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those who are better off. In the past decade, though, scholars and policymakers have begun to focus increasing attention on other achievement gaps, such as those based on sex, English-language proficiency and learning disabilities.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, closing achievement gaps among these various student groups became a focus of federal education accountability, and schools and districts were required to disaggregate student test scores and other performance data by student characteristics to enable better comparisons between groups. This created both to greater awareness of racial disparities and to rising concern about other kinds of achievement gaps. The attention led to more targeted interventions for different groups of students, but had not closed most achievement gaps to an appreciable degree a decade of the law passed.

While National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show that, over time, black and Hispanic students have made great strides in improving performance in reading and mathematics, a breach still separated them from their white peers. For example, special analyses by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2009 and 2011 showed that black and Hispanic students trailed their white peers by an average of more than 20 test-score points on the NAEP math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades, a difference of about two grade levels. These gaps persisted even though the score differentials between black and white students narrowed between 1992 and 2007 in 4th grade math and reading and 8th grade math (NCES, 2009, 2011). Students’ high school course-taking patterns provide a slightly more positive progress picture. Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that students across the board greatly increased the average number of course credits they earned by graduation by 2009. Black students went from taking the least credit-hours in 1990, 23.5, to the most of any student group in 2009, 27.4. Hispanic students increased their average credits from 24 to 26.5; white students from 23.7 to 27.3; and Asian American and Pacific Islander students from 24.2 to 27 credits during the same time period. All student groups likewise improved the number of core academic courses they took during that time, with black students overtaking white students in their participation in core academic courses. But all other student groups continue to trail Asian American students in core coursework. However, both white and Asian American students
were at least twice as likely to take classes considered academically rigorous in those subjects than black and Hispanic students. Fewer than 10 percent of black or Hispanic students participated in rigorous courses in 2009 (NCES, 2009). Such disparities have also been evident in graduation-rate and college-success statistics. Changes in 2008 to federal regulations on educating students in poverty required school districts to be held accountable for the graduation rates of students in different racial, language, poverty, and disability groups.

According to Editorial Projects in Education Research Center’s annual Diplomas Count report, while each major racial and ethnic group had more students graduate as of the class of 2008, massive gaps remained between different groups of students. While 82.7 percent of Asian students and 78.4 percent of white students in the class of 2008 graduated on time, that was the case for only 57.6 percent of Hispanic, 57 percent of black and 53.9 percent of American Indian students. Likewise, only 68 percent of male students graduated on time in 2008, compared with 75 percent of female students. Over the long term, only about one half of male students from minority backgrounds graduate on time (Education Week, 2011).

Under President Barack Obama’s Administration, the U.S. Department of Education also stepped up attention on gender and racial gaps in students’ college enrollment and success rates, toward a goal that the United States will lead the world in college graduates by 2020. According to the American Council on Education’s 24th annual status report on minorities in higher education, as of 2008, 38 percent of Americans age 25-34 had earned at least an associate degree, while only 26 percent of African-Americans ages 25-37 obtained a two-year degree and 18 percent of Hispanics 25- to 34-year olds. Moreover, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that as of 2010, 36 percent of women ages 25 to 29 held a bachelor’s degree or better versus only 28 percent of men in the same age group.

Achievement disparities are often attributed to socioeconomic factors. According to 2009 data from the Census Bureau, of all children younger than 18 living in families, 15.5 million live in poverty, defined as a family of four with less than $21,947 per year. This includes 4.9 million, or about 10 percent, of non-Hispanic white children, and one in three black and Hispanic children, at 4 million and 5.6 million, respectively (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011). According to a seminal study of language development in 1995, by age 3, children in poverty have smaller vocabularies and lower language skills than children from middle-income families. Research has also shown that dropout rates tend to be higher for children who live in poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s 2011 Condition of Education report, about 68 percent of 12th-graders in high-poverty schools graduated with a diploma in 2008, compared with 91 percent of 12th-graders in low-poverty schools (NCES, 2011).

A recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that children who both live in poverty and read below grade level by 3rd grade are three times as
likely to not graduate from high school as students who have never been poor (Hernandez, 2011).

Researchers have tried to pinpoint why race and class are such strong predictors of students’ educational attainment. In the 1990s, the controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, claimed that gaps in student achievement were the result of variation in students’ genetic makeup and natural ability—an assertion that has since been widely discredited. Many experts have since asserted that achievement gaps are the result of more subtle environmental factors and “opportunity gaps” in the resources available to poor versus wealthy children. Being raised in a low-income family, for example, often means having fewer educational resources at home, in addition to poor health care and nutrition. At the same time, studies have also found that children in poverty whose parents provide engaging learning environments at home do not start school with the same academic readiness gaps seen among poor children generally (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Viadero, 2000, Sparks, 2011).

Education and school funding policies can exacerbate these opportunity gaps. Analyses by *The Education Trust*, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, and others have found that students in poverty and those who are members of racial minority groups are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest-achieving schools. For example, in California, black students are six times more likely than white students to attend one of the bottom third of schools in the state, and Latino and poor students are nearly four times as likely as white students to attend one of the worst-performing third of schools (EdTrust West, 2010). Likewise, research has shown that good teaching matters (The Teaching Commission, 2004; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998), and that poor and minority students tend to have less access to the most effective, experienced teachers with knowledge in their content field. One study of 46 industrialized countries found the United States ranked 42nd in providing equitable distribution of teachers to different groups of students: For example, while 68 percent of upper-income 8th graders in the U.S. study sample had math teachers deemed to be of high-quality, that was true for only 53 percent of low-income students (Braeden, 2008).

Some researchers are also exploring more subtle factors that can contribute to achievement gaps such as peer pressure, student tracking, negative stereotyping, and test bias. Research also has shown that students from a disadvantaged group can perform below their normal ability when confronted with negative stereotypes about their group. For example, in 2009 the Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice at Stanford University found that specific student groups underperformed in stereotypical ways on state exit exams—girls performed worse on math, for example, or students from Asian-American backgrounds scored lower on reading—suggesting that the high-stakes nature of the tests could contribute to students’ performance anxiety (Viadero, 2009).
In principle, the public has been behind closing the achievement gap, and schools have employed a variety of tactics to address it. Common reform recommendations have included reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, expanding early-childhood programs, raising academic standards, improving the quality of teachers provided to poor and minority students, and encouraging more minority students to take high-level courses. Still, progress in reducing academic divides has been slow or nonexistent.

Achievement gaps seem likely to remain a focus in the next authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The requirement that schools, districts and states disaggregate students’ test scores and graduation rates by race, gender, language and socio-economic status remains one of the few parts of NCLB with broad bipartisan support for reauthorization. Moreover, the economic-stimulus law passed by Congress in 2009 required states to close achievement gaps and provide more equitable distribution of high-quality teachers for poor and minority students. Policymakers and educators hope to find new ways to close achievement gaps faster in the decade to come.