

National Impact: The Real “Gap” In Closing the Academic Achievement Gap: Parental Accountability and No Child Left Behind

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article was to examine the role of responsible parents in closing the academic achievement gap between racial/ethnic minorities and/or disadvantaged students and their White and Asian counterparts. This author discusses the relevant tenets of the No Child Left Behind Act and Title I (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, Pertaining to Parent Involvement) as both pieces of legislation address the critical issue of parental involvement in students' schooling and make recommendations for addressing the problem through recommendations to state and local education agencies. Furthermore, Dr. Brown identifies a gap in the efforts of federal legislation that stipulates guidelines for school quality improvement and the neglect of specific stipulations that hold parents accountable for the level of their participation in children's schooling. Several proven strategies that could enhance parental involvement within the framework of the NCLB while focusing on the responsibility of parents are highlighted. Suggestions for specific mechanisms to hold parents accountable for their children's school success are offered.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of parents in closing the academic achievement gap. A systematic examination of some of the well documented precursors is offered along with recommendations for implementation of strategies for effective parental engagement.

What Is The Fundamental Problem In Closing The Achievement Gap?

Despite federal efforts at genuine school reform, significant challenges at equalizing effective educational opportunities remain unresolved. The educational system in American has miserably failed to identify and adequately address the most critical components that contribute to the persistently expanding gap in academic achievement between African-American students and their white, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. According to former U. S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, the academic achievement gap between minority students and their majority peers is our nation's most urgent, dangerous, and least understood social issue. Recent findings from numerous assessments of American students' achievement in school provide credibility to those concerns (ETS Policy Information Center, 2003; Nation's Report Card, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). These findings are urgent and dangerous because implicit within the huge variability in academic achievement is the notion that our nation—the most economically prosperous land on earth—has miserably failed at serving the educational needs of all racial groups adequately. The most challenging unresolved issue that must be adequately addressed is the determination of the most important underlying contributors to the education achievement gap. This paper discusses one fundamental factor—parents' role in closing the achievement gap and how it relates to national policy.

Understanding Predictor Factors

In order for us to understand the myriad of predictor factors associated with the achievement gap, it is important that we make a systematic examination of some of the well documented precursors in school performance of students from Pre-Kindergarten through grade twelve. It is a fact that the gap in student achievement mirrors similar inequalities inherent in preschool and home circumstances that research has linked to school success—such disparities often translate into even greater inequalities in the adult social and economic lives of minorities.

Differentials between Racial and/or Ethnic Groups

The most remarkably troubling fact about the gap is that wide differentials between racial and/or ethnic groups appear even before children start kindergarten and most often do not disappear throughout schooling and adult life (Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks, 2003). For example, according to information released by the NCES, 60 percent of Black 3-year-olds were enrolled in center-based preprimary education programs, compared to 47 percent White 3-year-olds. Eighty one percent of Black 4-year-olds were enrolled in those programs, compared to 69 percent Whites. At age 5, Black children had 99 percent enrollment in center-based preprimary and kindergarten programs—the enrollment for White children of the same age was 93 percent. Within these kindergarten classes, teachers reported that Black kindergartners were less likely than their White and Asian peers to persist at tasks, be eager to learn, and pay attention (NCES, 2003). Although parents make decisions about what type of preprimary schooling their children participate in (which could impact children's readiness for and attitude about school) the extent to which their decisions are informed with research based data could allow them a greater sense of responsibility for their children's successful schooling. This informed direction in parental responsibility would greatly impact the achievement gap early in children's schooling.

Trends Identified Between Black Children and White Children

According to that same NCES (2003) report, similar trends were identified between Black children and White children with regard to three measures of early literacy activities in the home: being read to, being told stories, and visiting a library. The report found that although the percent of Black 3- to 5-year olds who were read to, told a story to, or taken to a library had increased from 1991 to 1999, Black children in 1999 were still less likely than White children to be read to or told a story to. The report concluded that the percentage of White children being read to was higher than that of Black children-- 89 percent for White children, 71 percent for Black children. Forty five percent of Black children were told stories, compared to 51 percent for White children. On the third measure of literacy activities, library visits, the gap was much smaller between White children and Black children with 35 percent of Black children visiting the library and 40 percent for White children. Once again, parents played the key role in determining which—if any, early literacy activities to involve their children in. Since early literacy activities such as reading to children, telling them stories, and taking them to libraries make substantial differences in children's educational outcomes, responsible parents of disadvantaged children should increase their participation in such activities in efforts to close the achievement gap.

Even in high school, indications of the gap were apparent—especially in rigorous academic coursework that could improve students' standardized test scores and prepare them for success in college. The NCES report revealed that Black students were less

likely than White students to take advanced mathematics courses and some advanced science courses and less likely than Hispanic students to take advanced foreign language classes. For example, fewer Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students (26, 30, and 27 percent, respectively) took advanced mathematics courses than White—45 percent, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, 56 percent. Although there were no differences reported in the percentage of Blacks at 10 percent, Hispanics at 11 percent, and Whites at 16 percent who reported chemistry II or physics II or advanced biology as their highest science course taken—for about 12 percent of Black and Hispanic high school graduates, chemistry I and physics I was their highest level of science taken, compared to 18 percent of White graduates. Since caring parents want to make responsible choices about students' coursework and scheduling, their informed participation in this aspect of high school students' schooling should make a difference in the achievement gap.

Achievement Gap Exists on College Entrance Examinations

As could be predicted by the facts of racial and/or ethnic disparities in early education already discussed, the NCES reported further evidence of the achievement gap in well-documented differences in performance on college entrance examinations between Black students and White students. In 2001, Blacks students scored lower than all other racial groups on both the verbal and the mathematics section of the SAT and on the ACT test. On average, Black students scored 96 points lower than White students on the verbal section and 105 points lower than White students on the mathematics section. A composite score below 19 on the ACT indicates minimal readiness for college, and students receiving such scores are likely to need additional preparation for success in college. The average composite score for Blacks in 2001 on the ACT was 16.9, lower than any other racial group. Once again, parents of disadvantaged students need to be informed about and guided toward readily available resources designed to prepare high school freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors to earn high scores on college entrance examinations. Parents are students' primary source of guidance in college preparation—even if it is an opportunity that they, themselves, have never experienced. As such, responsible parents must seek out training that would help them guide their children toward the necessary resources for enhanced performance on college entrance examinations.

Implications for Trans-generational Perpetuation of Academic Deficiencies

Although each of the facts discussed so far are well-documented precursors and strong determinants of academic success, the most apparent common thread is the strength of parental involvement. The extent to which disadvantaged students perform

academically is to a very large extent a reflection of the degree of responsibility the parents take in ensuring that they—and their children—are equipped with the necessary information, understanding and guidance that is almost always readily available. In every case—be it decisions about the quality of preprimary education, participation in early literacy activities, or even decisions about the level of students' high school coursework, parents are the critical key components in the solution to closing the achievement gap. Whether parenting for academic success or parenting for life success, practices that parents apply to children's educational experiences are usually framed by their own educational experiences.

Even more dangerous and insidious than the racial and/or ethnic disparities that currently haunt the educational system in America is the possibility of intergenerational transmission of incompetent parental participation. The *real* problem in closing the academic achievement gap is directly linked to the level at which caring parents demonstrate their effective involvement in and unwavering support for children's successful schooling—from preschool years through college. It is in our best national interest to make every diligent effort to not only provide parents of disadvantaged learners with the highest quality training that would enable them to help their children succeed in school and to pass those newly learned traditions to future generations, but also to measure parents' level of participation in their children's school success.

Federal Policy Progress and Closing the Achievement Gap

Closing the academic achievement gap has been determined to be of such importance to our national interest, for the first time in our nation's history, its resolution has become a matter of federal policy. The main purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind high quality. There is no question that accountability, flexibility and choice are necessary conditions to close the achievement gap, but the big question is, *“are they sufficient conditions to actually close the achievement gap or are there critical factors external to the school environment that need to be addressed?”* As important as accountability, flexibility, and choice are, they are all aspects of *school* quality. The big question—quite often posed by teachers, teacher support groups, and school administrators is—*“can improving school quality alone close the achievement gap?”* Many teachers and school administrators argue that the achievement gap is such a complex and well-entrenched phenomenon that factors beyond the school environment must be considered in any intervention strategy for which there is any hope of authentic resolution of the problem.

Key Findings

Key findings from various diverse sources support the aforementioned arguments from teachers and school administrators. For example, as early as 1966, James Coleman and his colleagues issued a controversial report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, that examined several factors associated with inequality in schooling. Coleman studied over 600,000 students from 4,000 schools across the nation and found that although school opportunities between Blacks and Whites were similar—teacher training, teacher pay, and curriculum were relatively equal, the factor that was most predictive of students' school success was related to family background in the early years (Coleman, 1966). If the conclusions in the Coleman report were accurate, that means that factors such as school quality—the elements contained in the NCLB reform strategy-- are less important determinants of student performance than the level of family support the student receives and that a closer examination of the responsibility of parents should be undertaken.

Examples of Effective Parental Engagement Programs

Over the past three decades, researcher Joyce Epstein—a Professor at Johns Hopkins University and Director of its National Network of Partnership Schools—has worked toward the systematic study of the importance of parents' involvement in increasing students' academic achievement. In her work, she has stressed the importance of parental involvement in specific various out-of-school activities and has founded her studies on the fact that effective engagement of parents in their children's education is potentially far more transformational than any other type of education reform. Epstein has developed the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs that groups—such as the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) have adopted and adhered to. The underlying idea that supports the program is that targeted parent and family involvement increases student achievement and school success (National PTA Report).

Local school district parent involvement projects, like the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project have also found that factors outside of the school environment contribute quite heavily toward students' school success. Ruth Yoon, Director of Parent Involvement Initiatives for the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project, believes that parent involvement improves student achievement (NEA Report). The findings from this project—as highlighted in the NEA report-- support the fact that, (1) the family made critical contributions to student achievement from preschool through high school; (2) when parents were involved at school as well as at home, children did better and stayed in school longer, and; (3) when a critical mass of parents was involved, the whole school improved.

Similarly, the San Diego (CA) County Education Department has conducted numerous studies that examined the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement. Based on the results of their studies, the most accurate predictor of

students' achievement in school was parental involvement outside of the school environment. They found that parents who created home environments that valued learning and expressed high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's school and career success had children who tended to have higher school performance (NEA: What Research Says, 2002 – 2004).

The general public shares the point of view held by many teachers, teacher support groups, researchers, and school administrators—that improving school quality alone will not close the achievement gap. According to a recent Phi Delta Kappa Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools, the public—while accepting that closing the achievement gap was important—blamed the gap on factors unrelated to the quality of schooling. In fact, results of the poll revealed that the public felt that the most important factors contributing to the achievement gap were factors like home life and upbringing (97%), the amount of parent involvement (97%), student interest or the lack thereof (95%), and communication environment (94%) (Phi Delta Kappa, 2002).

Predictors of Children's School Success Relative to Parental Engagement

There is enormous support for the fact that parental involvement in children's education is the common thread that contributes most strongly to school success, however, there is a central theme that seems to join most of the data sources we have examined so far. The most accurate predictor of a child's achievement in school is the extent to which the child's family is able to:

1. create a home environment that respects and encourages learning;
2. communicate high expectations for children's achievement and future careers, and;
3. become involved in their children's education at school and within the community (San Diego, CA County Education Department).

Although schools, communities, and parents all share the responsibility for children's education, parents—as children's first and most important teachers—seem to make the most crucial impact on children's school success, and the magnitude of the achievement gap. According to Henderson and Berla (1981; 1987; 1995), student academic achievement is positively related to the degree to which parents are comprehensively involved in children's schooling. Even though schools must be held to the strict accountability standards set forth in the NCLB act, a large portion of the responsibility for students' school success must be directed toward concerned and committed parents.

Expanding the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Law for Active Parental Engagement

Evidence, history, as well as common sense makes it clear that school quality is one of the major determinants of students’ school performance and therefore contributes to the magnitude of and variability within the achievement gap. There are examples that clearly demonstrate how school quality improvement alone made substantial differences in student performance and caused considerable narrowing of the achievement gap (Gilkeson, 2004). Furthermore, there are examples of schools whose enrollment was made up of almost one hundred percent children from poverty, students with limited English proficiency, and/or learning disabilities, and yet, through improving school quality students’ performance on measures of academic achievement improved (The Achiever, 2004). Although parents and communities provided some assistance with these accomplishments, the school was generally the initiator and controlling entity for these feats. In any case, the improvement of student performance and the narrowing of the achievement gap required a Herculean effort on the part of the school, which may not be within the reach of enough schools to cause a significant impact on closing the gap—which is desired and needed by our nation.

If we are sincerely dedicated to making genuine reforms in education policy that would close the achievement gap, we as a nation must commit ourselves to a national policy that recognizes the research documented fact that both home factors as well as school quality are about equally important determinants of children’s educational circumstances. Although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, along with provisions described in Title I (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged), provide a superb framework for improving school quality that could—with extremely exhausting efforts by the schools-- lead in efforts to close the achievement gap, it delegates the entire weight of responsibility for accomplishment of this feat to the schools.

Neither of the national policies provides specific guidelines for parental responsibility and accountability in children’s academic achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act provides enormous support for the improvement of factors within the school environment—school quality, teacher quality, accountability measures, and explanations about ways that schools could involve parents in various aspects of student achievement, but it falls extremely short in its attention to efforts to hold parents accountable for ensuring children’s home educational opportunities. This oversight could be one of extreme detriment to the otherwise superb efforts of the NCLB act—neglect in specifying the parental responsibility component.

What the Law Says About Parental Involvement

The NCLB Act of 2002 was hailed by many national education policy makers as the beginning of a “new era of education in our nation’s history” (Paige, 2003). As such, the law states that accountability, local control and flexibility, new options for parents, and record funding for academic practices that work are now the cornerstones of our

education system. In the booklet, *No Child Left Behind: A Parent's Guide*, the Department of Education stated that the NCLB law helps parental involvement in schools because it: (1) provides more information for parents about their child's progress; (2) supports learning in the early years, thereby preventing many learning difficulties that may arise later; (3) alerts parents to important information on the performance of their child's school; and (4) gives children and parents a lifeline (U. S. Department of Education, 2003). The law refers to key sections of Title I that further elaborate parental involvement in educational reform and students' academic achievement. Both the NCLB law as well as the key sections of Title I clearly define, describe, and explain the responsibility of state and local school districts in the involvement of parents in various aspects of student achievement and hold these agencies to the strictest level of accountability for implementation of these policies. Stipulations in the law give federal agencies—who provide funds for Title I programs throughout the nation-- the power to enforce state and local school districts' adherence to these mandates. Schools who receive Title I funding from the federal government do so in proportion to the extent that they clearly demonstrate their responsible adherence to NCLB policies that have been designed to achieve the national mission to ensure that every child in America is educated and no child is left behind (U. S. Department of Education, 2003).

Next Steps for Policy Reform: A NCLB Parental Involvement/Accountability Component

If indeed, the formula for closing the achievement gap entails a combined effort to both improve school quality and increase children's home educational opportunities, then the tenets of the NCLB act seriously neglect one critical element—and probably the most important factor in the formula—the active parental responsibility in closing the gap. This “gap” in the achievement gap formula should be of utmost concern to our national policy makers—so much so that it should be at the forefront of national debate. For example, NCLB should contain an inherent structure for assessing parents' efforts to improve children's home educational opportunities. The key word here is *structure*. The relevant literature provides massive information—some of it quite instructional and some of it less informative—relevant to improving parental involvement in children's home environment.

As a part of the act, the NCLB should not only fund programs that provide parents of disadvantaged children with easy to read guides for parenting practices that are informed by the best research available, but the act should also provide incentives commensurate with parents' level of participation in programs designed to enhance children's academic achievement by enriching the home environment. Parents' efforts to participate in and practice these easy-to-comprehend programs should be assessed and rewarded with federal funds through state and local education agencies. Just as such programs as the D. C. Choice: Opportunity Scholarships help parents of disadvantaged children obtain a high quality education in a school of their choice and is federally funded but overseen by both the U. S. Department of Education and the District of Columbia,

parental participation incentive programs could be offered to parents based on a measure of the quality of their involvement with their children's academic performance and funded similarly. Furthermore, these programs should include high quality, well trained facilitators who conduct informational sessions and workshops in areas easily accessible to parents of disadvantaged learners—especially in federally subsidized housing projects. For example, in Section III8 Parental Involvement of Title I (#8), in order to build capacity for involvement, each school and local educational agency may pay reasonable and necessary expenses associated with local parental involvement activities to enable parents to participate in school-related meetings and training sessions. The NCLB Act should require schools and local educational agencies to: (1) notify parents of involvement training programs; (2) hold as incentives provisions for transportation and childcare; and (3) measure and reward parents' participation in such programs. The NCLB Act should clearly set up funding criteria, priorities, and procedures for selection that are consistent with its proscribed policies. This act of commitment on the part of national policy makers would be one step in the direction toward a strong parental involvement component—the real “gap” in the achievement gap issue.

Accountability and Flexibility within the Parental Involvement Component

Another and possibly more important step in closing the “gap” within the achievement gap is to ensure accountability and flexibility within the parental involvement component. It is not enough to make information easily available for parents of disadvantaged school children, but, part of the structure that NCLB should provide is flexibility and accountability in parents' access to this information. Parents—especially those whose children are in most dire need of educational enrichment in their homes—should not only be provided with research-based academic enhancement information and trained by highly qualified facilitators on how to use the information, but they should also be held accountable for their level of participation in their children's academic success. For example, in Section III8 entitled Parental Involvement, Subsection (e), Part (4), specifies that each school and local educational agency shall promote parent involvement programs that assist parents in participating in the education of their children. This federal mandate is quite clear about the role of local educational agencies in parental involvement, however, it should go at least one step further. The NCLB Act should also require local agencies to develop and submit plans to assess and reward parents' participation in such programs—especially parents who receive federal funding for their children's well being. This act of commitment on the part of national policy makers would compliment and reward parents' commitment to the academic success of children.

Finally, yet equally important, national education policy makers should take notice of successful efforts by education organizations-- such as the National Education Agency (NEA: Stepping Forward—Promoting Community and Parent Involvement) to promote and fund collaborative efforts between community agencies, parents, and educators. The NCLB act should strongly encourage and reward community and other

agencies-- outside of the school environment—to actively support efforts of parents and schools in closing the achievement gap. Section III8, Subsection (e), Parts (11), (13), and (14) identify ways that parental involvement in education may be enhanced through community models and/or programs. The law proclaims that each school and local educational agency assisted under this part—

- (11) may adopt and implement model approaches to improving parental involvement;
- (13) may develop appropriate roles for community-based organizations and businesses in parent involvement activities; and
- (14) shall provide such other reasonable support for parental involvement activities under this section as parents may request.

In order to encourage parental participation in children's academic achievement—especially parents of disadvantaged learners—the NCLB Act should allow incentives (similar to the Choice Incentive Fund) for community-based organizations and businesses who provide leadership in parental involvement activities. Since close partnerships exist between schools' goals for student success and the economic development of communities, it makes good sense for community-based organizations and businesses to be strategically involved in education reform.

Community Organizations Work as Partners for Increasing Parental Responsibility

An example of how community organizations and/or businesses work as partners to increase parents' responsibility in their children's education was in Natrona County, Wyoming where an NEA Urban grant helped build a partnership between the Natrona County Education Association and a community group called Parents Pulling Together. The main goal of this collaboration was to increase communication between parents and teachers so that parents would be better informed about ways in which they could help their children succeed in school. This venture has been quite successful in that both teachers and parents have come to better understand the ways in which both contribute to children's academic achievement. Although the NEA provided funds for this project, NCLB should have at its forefront policies that reward this type of joint venture—similar to the President's new Community-based Job Training Grants.

In Dekalb county Georgia, the Organization of DeKalb Educators has started a Parents as Partners Academy with the main goal of building concrete relationships between schools, parents, and community organizations. Members in the Academy meet one time each month to share information between parents and teachers about various topics that are important to students' school success. Another important activity of the Academy is that its members often discuss pending state and federal legislation that involves education. This Academy could serve as a model program for other school districts to follow, especially if funding through NCLB was available as an incentive for community involvement.

Sweeping Reform of Federal Efforts to Support Elementary and Secondary Education in the United States

As has been stressed throughout this article, the NCLB Act is the federal government's most heroic commitment to providing a high quality education for all children in America, regardless of ethnicity, income and background. The law is the cornerstone of the American education system in that it was built on four common-sense pillars: strict accountability for high standards and results, expanded local control and flexibility, new options for parental involvement, and record-level funding for research-based academic enhancement programs. The NCLB Act represents a sweeping reform of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States, including certain specifications for parental involvement. Its primary goal is to ensure that no child is left behind in educational opportunities that lead to success in school and later on in life. One major area of neglect of the act is that it places the majority of the responsibility for students' success on state and local school agencies—without specific guidelines for parental accountability, especially for parents of disadvantaged learners.

The omission of the law in specified parental participation accountability leaves open a “gap” in the achievement gap between African American and/or disadvantaged students and their White and Asian peers. Since school quality and home educational opportunities are equally critical in students' academic achievement, a key issue in closing the achievement gap would be for the NCLB Act to specify policy guidelines that share the weight of responsibility for student learning between school quality and parental participation. Evidence clearly demonstrates that although some school efforts at implementing strategies that enhance disadvantaged students' performance on achievement tests work well, such strategies on the schools' part require enormous efforts. Not all schools are equipped to effectively orchestrate such efforts. Research has also taught us that the strongest predictor of students' school success is family support (Coleman, 1966).

Three Component Areas Should Be Targeted by NCLB

The present article has identified three component areas that should be targeted by NCLB in order to address parental accountability. *First*, the NCLB Act should not only fund programs that provide parents of disadvantaged children with easy to read guides for parenting practices, but the act should also provide incentives commensurate with parents' level of participation in enhancing the quality of educational opportunities at home. As recommended earlier in this article, federal policy should require schools and local educational agencies to: (1) notify parents of involvement training programs; (2) hold as incentives limited provisions for transportation and childcare; and, (3) measure and reward parents' participation in such programs. Attention to this component at the federal level could become the spark that generates an organized and effective commitment on the part of responsible parents.

Second, NCLB should devise strategies to ensure accountability and flexibility within the parental involvement/accountability component. For example, federal policy should require local school agencies to submit plans for their efforts to encourage, assess, and reward parents' participation in certain parental involvement programs such as Head Start, Reading First, Even Start, etc. – especially those parents of disadvantaged learners who receive federal funding for their children's well-being. By holding state and local school districts accountable for the quality of education children receive; federal policy has actually enhanced educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners. By the same token, such accountability mechanisms could be critical in enhancing the home educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners.

Third, and finally, national policy makers need to encourage and reward the successful efforts of community organizations—such as the National Education Agency affiliates across the nation who promote and fund collaborative efforts between community agencies, parents, and educators (NEA: Stepping Forward—Promoting Community and Parent Involvement, 2004). Since close partnerships exist between schools and the economic development of communities, it makes good sense for community-based organizations and businesses to be rewarded for their contributions to school reform. Throughout the country, one success story after another clearly demonstrated that when community organizations and/or businesses collaborated with education agencies, students, parents, schools, and the community all shared tremendous benefits.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, if we as a nation are to make every diligent effort to close the achievement gap between African American children and their White and Asian peers, it is of utmost necessity that federal policy makers make revisions in the NCLB Act that would usher in parental personal responsibility for children's academic success. Yes, it is imperative that schools provide the highest level of education for each child—teachers must be highly qualified, testing and assessing students' progress in academic subjects such as Reading and Mathematics must be a significant part of statewide accountability, parents must be able to make informed choices about the schools they send their children to. All of the measures implemented by the No Child Left Behind Act are excellent mechanisms that scaffold a trajectory toward enhanced achievement for every child in the nation.

In conclusion, once on the course of that trajectory toward closing the achievement gap, there is an appreciable gap in the otherwise comprehensively structured education reform legislation. There is an urgent need for policy makers to attend to this gap if all children in America are to be ensured the best quality educational opportunities. The children of America—especially those who are most in need of extra academic assistance, those who are in the most danger of being left behind, those who are at the undesirable end of the ever-widening achievement gap-- deserve to have homes that are enriched with educational opportunities so that when they start school their chances for

success will be heightened. The parents of America—especially those parents of disadvantaged youngsters—need to have additional assistance as well as strong encouragement in their efforts to help their children experience a high quality education and success in life. Parents need to have access to and high quality training that would help them make responsible informed decisions about high quality preprimary programs, early literacy activities, and other educational opportunities. The very best decision for federal policy makers is to reform NCLB so that the weight of responsibility for children's education will be shared equally between schools and parents.

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