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Schools Slow in Closing Gaps Between Races

By SAM DILLON

When President Bush signed his sweeping education law a year into his presidency, it set 2014 as the deadline by which schools were to close the test-score gaps between minority and white students that have persisted since standardized testing began.

Now, as Congress prepares to consider reauthorizing the law next year, researchers and a half-dozen recent studies, including three issued last week, are reporting little progress toward that goal. Slight gains have been seen for some grade levels.

Despite concerted efforts by educators, the test-score gaps are so large that, on average, African-American and Hispanic students in high school can read and do arithmetic at only the average level of whites in junior high school.

“The gaps between African-Americans and whites are showing very few signs of closing,” Michael T. Nettles, a senior vice president at the Educational Testing Service, said in a paper he presented recently at Columbia University. One ethnic minority, Asians, generally fares as well as or better than whites.

The reports and their authors, in interviews, portrayed an educational landscape in which test-score gaps between black or Hispanic students and whites appear in kindergarten and worsen through 12 years of public education.

Some researchers based their conclusions on federal test results, while others have cited state exams, the SATs and other widely administered standardized assessments. Still, the studies have all concurred: The achievement gaps remain, perplexing and persistent.

The findings pose a challenge not only for Mr. Bush but also for the Democratic lawmakers who joined him in negotiating the original law, known as No Child Left Behind, and who will control education policy in Congress next year.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Representative George Miller of California, who are expected to be the chairmen of the Senate and House education committees, will promote giving more resources to schools and researching strategies to improve minority performance, according to aides.

“Closing the achievement gap is at the heart of No Child Left Behind and must continue to be our focus in renewing the act next year,” Mr. Kennedy said in a statement.

Experts have suggested many possible changes, including improving the law’s mechanisms for ensuring that teachers in poor schools are experienced and knowledgeable, and extending early-childhood education to more students.

Henry L. Johnson, an assistant secretary of education, said: “I don’t dispute that looking at some comparisons we see that these gaps are not closing — or not as fast as they ought to. But it’s also accurate to say that when taken as a whole, student performance is improving. The presumption that we won’t get to 100 percent proficiency from here presumes that everything is static. To reach the 100 percent by 2014, we’ll all have to work faster and smarter.”

The law requires states, districts and schools to report annual test results for all racial and ethnic groups, and to show annual improvements for each. It imposes sanctions on schools that do not meet the rising targets.

Many experts and officials, including the president’s brother, Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, have supported the goal of raising all students to academic proficiency, but they have also called it unrealistic to accomplish in a decade.

But President Bush, who put education at the center of his 2000 campaign, has been insisting that it is not only feasible but that the gaps are already closing.

“There are good results of No Child Left Behind across the nation,” Mr. Bush said last month at a school in North Carolina. “We have an achievement gap in America that is — that I don’t like and you shouldn’t like.”

“The gap is closing,” he said.

The researchers behind the reports issued last week in Washington, D.C., New York and California were far more pessimistic, though.

“The achievement gap is alive and well,” said G. Gage Kingsbury, an author of the report issued in Washington by the Northwest Evaluation Association, a nonprofit group based in Oregon that administers tests.

Examining results from reading and math tests administered to 500,000 students in 24 states in the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005, the study found: “For each score level at each grade in each subject, minority students grew less than European-Americans, and students from poor schools grew less than those from wealthier ones.”

Minority and poor students also lost more academic ground each summer, the study said.

Ross Wiener, a principal partner at the Education Trust, a group that works to close achievement gaps and has consistently supported the federal law, called those findings "profoundly disturbing" and said it showed that schools continued to be a "significant source of disadvantage for minority students."

"The Bush administration wants to hang a 'Mission Accomplished' banner over N.C.L.B., but a fair assessment is that progress thus far in closing achievement gaps is disappointing," Mr. Weiner said. He pointed to financing and teacher assignment systems that lead to schools with mostly poor and minority students getting less money, offering fewer advanced courses and having weaker teachers.

The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a battery of reading and math tests administered to thousands of students in every state, showed some rising scores for all ethnic groups, and the black-white score gap narrowed in a statistically significant way for fourth-grade math. But on fourth-grade reading, and on eighth-grade reading and math, the black-white and Hispanic-white gaps were statistically unchanged from the early 1990s.

Over the past three decades, the gaps narrowed steadily from the 1970s through the late 1980s but then leveled out through 1999. Since then, some have narrowed again, but at a rate that would allow them to persist for decades. That picture showed up in a separate National Assessment test devised to measure long-term trends, administered in late 2003 and early 2004.

That test showed that regardless of race, scores increased a bit over three decades for 9- and 13-year-old students, with the best gains coming between 1999 and 2004.

Test administrators warned against attributing those gains to the federal law, because it had been in effect for about only a year when the 2004 test was given. Prekindergarten programs, higher standards and increased testing carried out by many states during the 1990s also contributed, they said.

But Bush administration officials have routinely credited the law for the improved scores on that test.

A group that has supported the federal law, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, whose leaders include former officials from the Reagan and the current Bush administrations, conducted a review of state exams and other indicators and issued a report this month. It found that none of the 50 states had made widespread progress in narrowing the gaps, and that eight states, including New York and New Jersey, had made "moderate gains."

Chester E. Finn Jr., the foundation president, said, "Poor and minority students are doing very poorly, and in most states are not making significant gains — and this in spite of N.C.L.B. and all the other reforms of the last 15 years."

Suggestions abound for ways to narrow the score gaps faster. Since scholars have documented that minority children enter kindergarten with weaker reading skills than white children, some experts advocate increased public financing for early education programs.

No Child Left Behind provides money for tutoring in schools where students are not succeeding, but critics say it does not provide sufficient financing to help states and districts turn the schools themselves around.

Several of the new reports urged better provisions to ensure that poor and mostly minority schools have quality teachers, to reward teachers who help struggling students improve, and to keep good teachers from leaving city schools for higher-paying suburban ones.

“If I’m in a bad school and make serious progress, I need a reward,” Dr. Nettles said. “If you perform on Wall Street, you get a bonus.”

But the news is not all bad. Individual schools in some states have made progress in narrowing the gaps between black and white, Hispanic and white, and the poor and more affluent, according to a Standard & Poor’s unit that analyzes school performance.

The unit credited Morgan County Elementary School in Madison, Ga., with significantly raising the scores of black fourth and fifth graders. The principal, Jean Triplett, attributed that success in part to after-school tutoring by volunteers in black churches.

Edwin E. Weeks Elementary School in Syracuse was singled out for narrowing the gap between black and white students. Dare Dutter, the principal, credited a prekindergarten program and a school health clinic that helped keep poor students from missing class.

Standard & Poor’s has sifted test data from 16,000 schools in 18 states, identifying 718 schools making significant progress toward the national goal.

“They are the classic diamonds in the rough,” said Paul Gazzerro, director of analytics at Standard & Poor’s School Evaluation Services. “But in general, schools are not closing achievement gaps.”

One of the exceptions, the unit said, is Hoover Middle School in Lakewood, Calif., a community in Los Angeles County where the aircraft manufacturing industry has been hit by job losses. The school has raised Hispanic scores so much that in the spring of 2005 Hispanic students outperformed whites, said the principal, Michael L. Troyer. He said the progress resulted from focused instruction, frequent diagnostic testing and several tutoring programs.

“Some of it’s after school, teachers do it at lunch, and we have people who tutor in the morning before school, too,” Mr. Troyer said.

Across California, however, achievement gaps have not narrowed, and in some cases they have widened since 2001, according to a study of California test results released last week by Policy Analysis for California Education, a research center run jointly by the University of California and Stanford.

“Not only have all boats stopped rising, but the boats that are under water are sinking further down,” said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who contributed to the study.