Gap

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worked on this problem for years, including in this city, and have not made broad headway," Madison Schools Superintendent Art Rainwater said.

He heads to Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., next week for the first meeting of the network.

"This group believes that since we have a lot in common, we are in a position to look at it," said Rainwater, who is white. "A major piece of this is going to be joint research."

The communities' liberal images aside, a closer examination reveals the ways in which these hometowns of America's educational elite may actually accentuate achievement gaps. And how that happens helps explain why racial equality nationally is so elusive.

These are communities where the public schools are geared to the needs and demands of some of the nation's most academically driven students. They are children who soar above their peers elsewhere and whose parents are more focused on fortifying their children's competitive advantage than achieving more equal outcomes, some say.

"We have parents in Ann Arbor who love their children more than anything else in the world — their children and their children alone," said Cheryl Garnett, a former School Board chairman, who is black.

"They like the idea that their children live in a community that is racially diverse," said Garnett, whose five children graduated from the Ann Arbor schools. But, she added, "It is not diversity at all cost. It's diversity as long as it's at no cost."

And then, because in all these communities the difference in average achievement is so glaring, so worried-over and so enduring, the gap has become a given, lowering expectations for all black students in ways that can further undermine their success.

"At the heart of this problem, if you had to single out any one thing, it would be expectations and a mind-set that some can learn and some can't," said David Flowers, Ann Arbor's interim superintendent, who is white.

Brad Orr, a white parent and University of Michigan physics professor who serves on the Ann Arbor School Board, said that because the schools work well for a large percentage of students, their parents oppose change.

In Madison, as in just about every large school district in the nation, the average grades and test scores of black, Hispanic, Southeast Asian and American Indian students lag behind those of their white counterparts.

The precise reasons for the gap are difficult to pinpoint, researchers say, because race, poverty and other overlapping factors such as mobility and parents' education all can influence students' achievement levels.

When it comes to race, researchers have found that minority students' achievement levels can be harmed if teachers have low expectations of them, if the curriculum or tests are culturally biased or if the students and their families don't feel connected to teachers and the schools.

The Madison School District, with the help of a program known as Schools of Hope, is channeling enormous resources, including more than 460 volunteer reading tutors, toward a campaign to begin shrinking the racial achievement gap.

The pattern has troubled Madison families and school officials for more than a decade.

Last year, for example, the average score for black students on the state's Knowledge and Concepts exam trailed the average score for whites by more than 40 percentage points in every grade and every subject except fourth-grade science.

For Hispanics, the gap averaged about 30 percentage points and for students of Asian descent, about 26 points.

The gap shows up in other areas, too. In the 1996-97 school year, the last year for which data are available, the high school grade-point average of every major racial and ethnic group in Madison increased slightly compared with the year before. But because whites' GPA rose the most, the racial achievement gap failed to narrow.

In that year, blacks, Hispanics, Southeast Asians and Native Americans, on average, all had lower GPAs than did whites, with blacks trailing the most — 1.26 points on a four-point scale. Only other Asians, largely the children of parents affiliated with UW-Madison, attained a higher GPA than that of whites.

Barbara Golden, an education consultant and parent educator with the nonprofit Family Enhancement organization in Madison, said she'd like to see more diversity in classroom teaching materials to ensure that minority students are engaged in the classroom.

Golden, who is black, remembers one of her daughters saying in a primary grade, "Our teacher never talks about anything in class that we talk about at home."

Schools "need to understand that they are perpetuating a culture that is good for a certain percentage of students but that isn't good for everybody," Golden said.

Patty DeYoung, a white elementary school principal in Ann Arbor who has been active in efforts to get rid of a practice called tracking, saw how many black children were labeled slow in first grade and never recovered, and how threatened many teachers and white parents were by reform.

Tracking is the practice of offering different levels of courses to students based on an evaluation of their potential.

"We have worked very hard to eliminate tracking," Madison's Rainwater said. "We don't believe in it."

For instance, the district is phasing out lower-level classes such as general math and consumer math in favor of algebra and advanced algebra at the high school level, he said.

Anne Wheelock was a consultant to the NAACP in its effort to reduce tracking in the Amherst, Mass., schools a few years ago, against much teacher and parent opposition. It met with mixed success.

"People could imagine black students or Hispanic students succeeding, but they fell back into a kind of ranking mentality in which (those students) still could never be as good in their minds as the most able, articulate white student," said Wheelock, who is white and lives in Boston.

In a 1996 article in the Harvard Educational Review, UCLA education professors Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna detailed how elite white parents were able to successfully resist detracking efforts in 10 racially integrated school districts (they do not name the communities) because the white parents held all the cards. Their trump card: We lose, we leave.

But James Rosenbaum, a professor of education at Northwestern University, thinks these districts, which serve significant poor as well as middle-class black communities, are too hard on themselves, noting that "most of the difference you find in the 12th grade is seen in the first grade."

Rosenbaum, who was a parent in the Evanston schools, said one finds kindergartners there who are already fluent readers sitting next to children who don't know their ABCs. It is silly, he said, for educators there to beat themselves up because they cannot even the score. Even the black kids lagging behind in Evanston are better off than in neighboring Chicago, he said.

Perhaps that is true in Evanston, but in Ann Arbor, middle-class black students are doing less well than poor white students (which is consistent with a national pattern). And black students in Ann Arbor don't, on average, do as well as black students in the rest of Michigan, even though their parents tend to be better educated and their schools are reputed to be among the best.

Some black students do, of course, excel.

Jessica Ransom is one of the relatively few blacks in advanced classes at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor. Once there, she said, "There's a lot of pressure to do well, to break the stereotype." But others who might succeed won't risk failure or isolation from their peers.

"Nobody is invested in these kids," said Gloria Ladson-Billings, a black education professor at UW-Madison. Too often, she said, the teacher attitude toward black children is, "If you want to learn, fine; if you don't want to learn, that's OK, too."

Ladson-Billings, the author of "Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children," is deeply involved as a researcher and mother in the Madison schools but, she said, last year a teacher tried to keep her daughter, a nearly straight-A student, out of eighth-grade algebra, a critical course for the college-bound. The teacher said her daughter lacked the aptitude for it. "I went absolutely ballistic," Ladson-Billings said. "But what if I hadn't advocated for her?"

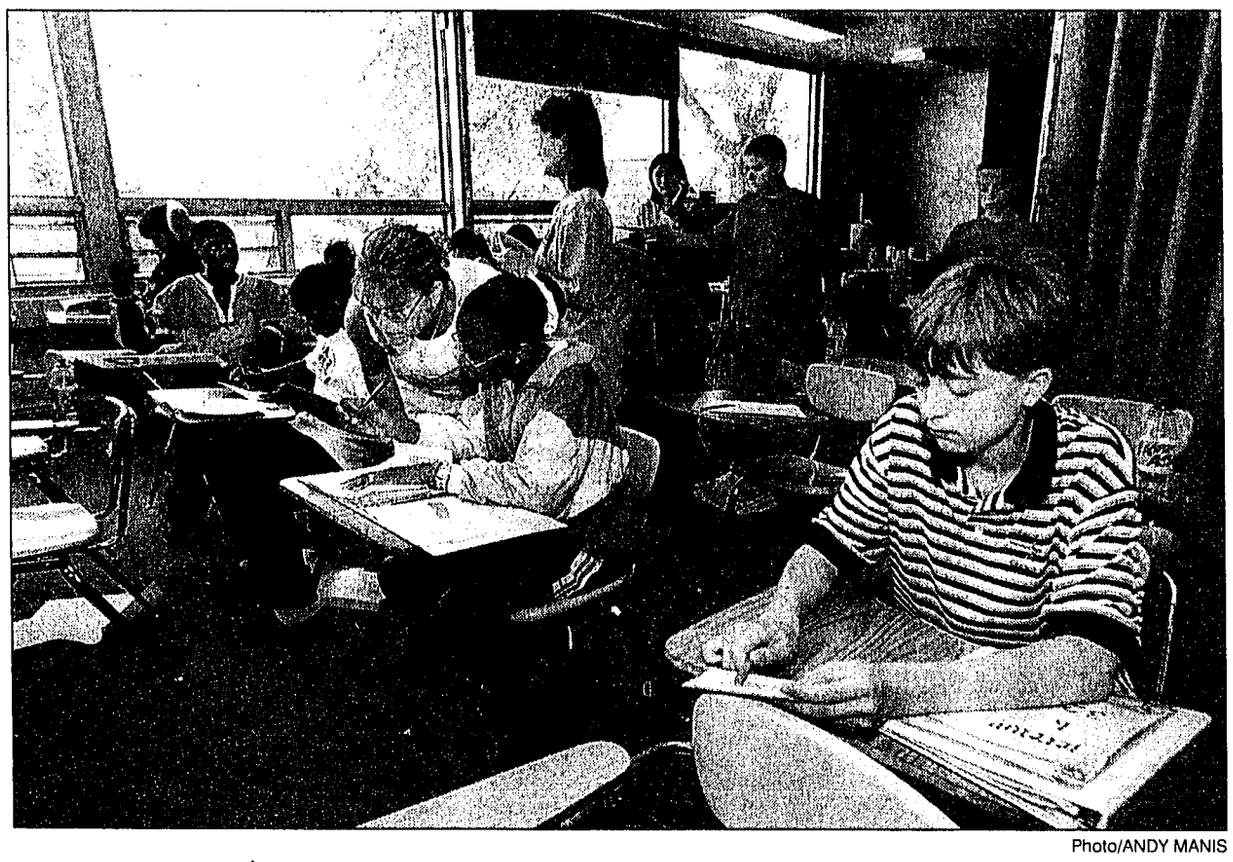
Joe Quick, spokesman for the Madison School District, said Ladson-Billings' experience is opposite of what the district advocates.

"We want teachers to encourage kids to work their hardest, to strive for the best," he said.

Allan Loeb, the president of the Ann Arbor teachers' union, said the notion that teachers are sending negative signals to black students doesn't ring true with his 25 years of experience in Ann Arbor schools. And Ann Arbor School Board member Chris Argersinger, who is white, also is skeptical. "That's such a lame excuse," she said. "Get over it."

Far more crucial, she said, is the issue of black parental involvement. "The parents need to go to school conferences, they need to get their kids up in the morning." And, she said, if black youths are discouraging each other from achieving, "you know there isn't a white person in the world that's going to be able to change it."

State Journal reporters Doug Erickson, Andy Hall and Phil Brinkman contributed to this report.



Photo/ANDY MANIS

While adults in Madison and elsewhere try to find a way to close the average achievement gap between white students and minority students, these students in the summer school program at Madison's Cherokee Middle School were learning last week how to write a check. At right, Jeremy Kwiatkowski, 13, checks his work while teacher Candy Olyer, leaning over, helps Candis Walker, 12.

GPA varies widely by race

Madison School District figures:

	1996-97 GPA	Gap*
American Indian	2.05	-0.87
Southeast Asian	2.42	-0.50
Other Asian	3.14	0.22
Black	1.66	-1.26
Hispanic	2.18	-0.74
White	2.92	—

NOTE: Excludes students in Exceptional Education Needs (EEN) or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Southeast Asians include students whose families speak Hmong, Khmer, Vietnamese or Lao at home.

* Comparison of each racial/ethnic group's average GPA to that of whites.

SOURCE: State Department of Public Instruction WSJ graphic

Madison's racial achievement gap

Below are results for Madison students on the state's 1998-99 Knowledge and Concepts exam broken out by racial and ethnic group. Numbers reflect the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced.

Student group	Total enrolled	Reading	Math	Language arts	Science	Social studies
Grade 4						
American Indian	5	*	*	*	*	*
Asian	156	51	49	51	56	59
Black	302	40	34	35	57	48
Hispanic	84	59	49	44	63	61
White	1,138	83	75	82	89	86
Grade 8						
American Indian	16	63	56	31	50	57
Asian	129	55	56	35	48	59
Black	275	31	28	10	21	43
Hispanic	79	56	51	24	38	55
White	1,194	79	77	59	71	85
Grade 10						
American Indian	10	70	60	20	30	70
Asian	128	53	40	40	30	51
Black	250	34	22	13	12	28
Hispanic	67	43	35	22	19	36
White	1,342	77	68	55	55	74

SOURCE: State Department of Public Instruction WSJ graphic

Madison to reduce class sizes, expand reading

The Madison School District plans to reduce class sizes in elementary grades and expand a remedial reading program for low-achieving first-graders in an effort to close a persistent gap in average test scores of minorities.

On Monday, School Board members directed Superintendent Art Rainwater to move toward those goals, even if it means shifting money away from other programs in the years ahead.

SCHOOLS of HOPE

The plan would:

- Reduce class sizes to 15 students in grades kindergarten through second in all schools with more than 40 percent poor students.
- Reduce reading class sizes in those schools with a 20 percent to 39 percent poverty rate.
- Expand Reading Recovery, a one-on-one, intense reading intervention program for first-graders.

Small class sizes have been shown to increase student achievement, and Reading Recovery is part of the district's goal to have all students reading by the end of third grade.

The directives grew out of recommendations from Schools of Hope, which began in 1995 as a civic journalism project by the Wisconsin State Journal and WISC-TV (Ch. 3). It has expanded into a community effort, led by United Way of Dane County.

Schools of Hope leaders from the public and private sectors have vowed to begin raising the achievement levels of minority students by the end of the 1999-2000 school year.

— Doug Erickson