

Towards Excellence and Equity in Connecticut Schools

Connecticut Opportunity Gap Policy Brief (April 2016)

The purpose of this brief is to discuss educational excellence and equity in the state of Connecticut. In driving this, the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and Transformation of Schools (Metro Center) examined student performance on the 3rd grade Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), analyzing both statewide trends as well as comparing trends of low-performing school districts to other districts throughout the state.¹ The data reveal that Connecticut has made considerable gains with respect to achieving excellence and equity, but more can be done to help lower-performing districts as well as Black and Hispanic students.

Overall, reading proficiency rates increased for 3rd-grade students across the state between 2006 and 2013. Statewide, the reading proficiency rate increased from 69.2 percent in 2006 to 72.4 percent in 2013 (*Table 1*). During the same period of time, the data show a narrowing of the both the Black-White and Hispanic-White achievement gaps. The discrepancies between the reading proficiency rates of Black students and White students decreased, as did the discrepancies between the reading proficiency rates of Hispanic students and White students. These positive trends are heartening and are representative of a state that is working to address educational inequities.

Still, data suggest that more can be done to support low-performing schools and the struggling students within those schools. Moreover, while progress has been made with respect to closing the achievement gap, there is still a considerable amount of work needed to achieve educational equity in the state. In looking at schools in Alliance Districts, we can see how these issues are inextricably linked.

Table 1: Percentage of students proficient on the 3rd Grade CMT

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
State	69.2	69.3	68.4	71.1	72.3	73.9	74.5	72.4
Black	43.8	43.4	45	47.9	50.3	53.9	54.1	52.3
Hispanic	41.1	41.7	42.6	46.7	48.5	53.1	53.6	50.1
White	80.9	81.2	79.3	81.7	82.8	83.5	84.3	83.2
Black-White Gap	37.1	37.8	34.3	33.8	32.5	29.6	30.2	30.9
Hispanic-White Gap	39.8	39.5	36.7	35.0	34.3	30.4	30.7	33.1

The Alliance District program is a unique and targeted investment in Connecticut's lowest-performing districts.² These Alliance Districts serve over one-third of students, a large majority of which are students of color. As such, the Alliance District program seeks to improve lowest-performing schools, as well as serve as a driver of equity within the state. The examination of these districts in comparison to the rest of the state elucidates a key place for additional policies and practices that support educational excellence and equity.

Looking at the percentage of students who were proficient on the 3rd Grade Reading Connecticut Mastery Test, there is a noticeable achievement gap – this low-performance is the defining feature of Alliance Districts compared to other school districts (*Figure 1*). However, in comparing the performance of Alliance Districts to

¹ Data were collected from the Connecticut State Department of Education <http://www.ctreports.com/>

² Metro Center took a retrospective view of the performance of the Alliance Districts, looking back to data from before they were designated as such. For more information about Alliance districts see: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2683&Q=334226>.

the rest of the state, it is apparent that growth in student achievement from in Alliance Districts generally mirrors those changes in the rest of the state.

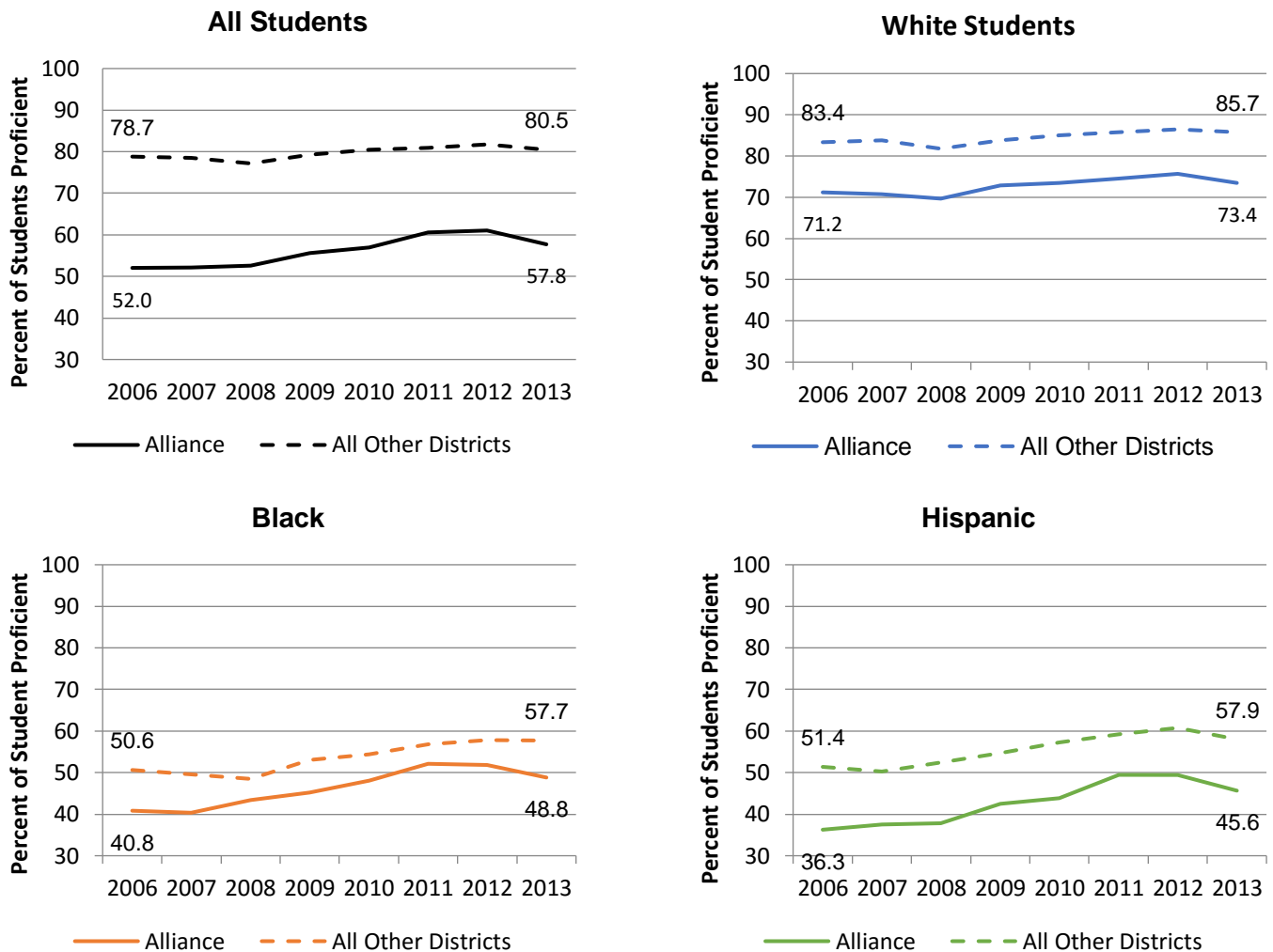
What is important to note is that despite overall improvements in performance, the gaps in performance between Alliance Districts and other districts in the state remain constant (*Table 2*). That is, the low-performing districts are not able to catch-up with the rest of the districts in the state. These persistent gaps between Alliance Districts and the rest of Connecticut speak to a need to provide more innovative and intensive service and programs to meet the needs of students lower performing school districts.

Table 2: Reading Achievement Gap between Alliance Districts and non-Alliance school districts, 2006-2013

	Achievement Gap in 2006	Achievement Gap in 2013	Change
State	26.69	22.71	-3.98
Black	9.82	8.89	-0.93
Hispanic	15.12	12.32	-2.81
White	12.24	12.27	0.03

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Figure 1: Comparison between Alliance Districts and all other school districts in Connecticut, 3rd Grade Reading CMT



Developing Equity and Excellence in Connecticut Schools

Developing equity and excellence in Connecticut's schools requires a genuine interest in providing support and services in the lowest performing districts in the highest need communities through strategic planning and action at local and state levels. Moreover, it necessitates concerted efforts both outside of schools and inside of schools – supporting children from birth to career.

Outside of schools, factors include poverty, unstable housing, institutional racism and limited access to early care and education for low-income children. Other factors influence school performance, but do not ordinarily receive adequate focus, such as school and community safety, community-school partnerships, and have clear cradle-to-career pathways and support. Within schools, the achievement gap can be significantly narrowed through educational excellence at the schoolhouse. This includes highly effective teachers and administrators, focus on a clear mission, data-driven decision-making, a proven curriculum, cultural competence, on-going professional development and high expectations of every student.

As Connecticut continues to strive towards equity and excellence in its communities, it is important to keep in mind that school improvement is an inherently complex process – it requires the use of multiple strategies, many of which are born out of the schools themselves. Like most things in education, school improvement is more akin to raising a child than launching a rocket ship. Both are difficult tasks, but in the latter, having figured out how to do it once means that you have a replicable process that can be done successfully over and over again. With respect to the former (raising a child/school improvement), the number of variables at play – individualities of personalities, context, needs, etc. – mean that multiple stakeholders – parents, community organizers, researchers, professional educators, government official- need to come together to develop targeted and sustainable change.

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About the Metro Center: The *Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools* (Metro Center) is a comprehensive, university-based center that focuses on educational research, policy, and practice. Metro Center is a partner and resource at the local and national levels in strengthening and improving access, opportunity, and the quality of education in our schools. Its mission is to target issues related to educational equity by providing leadership and support to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers.

About the Commission on Children: Created with bipartisan support in 1985 by the Connecticut General Assembly, the *Commission on Children* brings together the various levels of government, the private sector, nonprofit agencies, and philanthropy to promote public policies in the best interests of children. Its board members, who serve as volunteers, are appointed by legislative leaders of both parties.