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EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: SOLUTIONS AIMED AT CLOSING
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by
Mallie Elizabeth Imbler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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ABSTRACT

MALLIE ELIZABETH IMBLER: Equality in Education: Solutions Aimed at Closing the Achievement Gap in Mississippi Public
(Under the direction of Christian Sellar)

This thesis attempts to examine solutions aimed at closing the achievement gap in Mississippi public schools. The research questions that are addressed in this thesis include: a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted? c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy? d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap? The methods used include a quantitative analysis of NAEP data in order to construct a series of time-series graphs as well as a series of interviews with policymakers and school district officials in Mississippi in order to write a policy proposal for the state. The research found that while national education policies have had a positive impact on racial achievement gaps, no policy has worked to close the socioeconomic achievement gap.

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Chapter 1: The Achievement Gap and Why it Matters

Introduction

In America, education is a universal right, but the school achievement gap is causing disadvantages among certain student groups based upon their race or economic background. While it could be said that the gap is inevitable, some scholars such as Dewey and Rawls believe that education is crucial to democracy because it is implicit in the history of democracy itself. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey raises the question of the central importance of education in a democratic society. The task of education, in his view, is to provide universally the means for individuals to realize their widely diverse and differing talents and abilities. Dewey assumes that equality in a democratic society ought to mean that it offers all individuals equally the chance for self-fulfillment, or the opportunity for their "pursuit of happiness" (Dewey 1840). However, Rawls claims that "unfair opportunity prevails in education, not only because of differences in social fortune" (Rawls 2005). Both Rawls and Dewey believe that "a social contingency, such as wealth, that causes unequal opportunity in education is unjust" (Weitz 1993). Therefore, I believe, when schools are failing to provide an education which enables all students the chance for "self-fulfillment or the opportunity for their pursuit of happiness," change must be made. In the state of Mississippi, the achievement gap is the key element that inhibits an equal education for all students (Weitz 1993).

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, the achievement gap “refers to any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students” (2013). The most commonly discussed achievement gap discussed is seen in the national standardized test scores. However, the achievement gap can also be seen in graduation rates, college-enrollment rates, college-completion rates, course grades, dropout rates, absenteeism rates, and disciplinary infractions. The following student groups tend to exhibit an achievement gap: white and minority students, male and female students, as well as students from higher-income and lower-income households and communities. While progress was made in the 1970s and 80s toward decreasing the gap, progress stalled in the 1990s which eventually led to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). At the forefront of all education policy today, the achievement gap is said to be “one of the major challenges facing the American public-education system.” A study of 874 American educators determined that the achievement gap was the most significant issue facing educators today (Olson and Hoff 2018).

The Mississippi Department of Education determines the level of proficiency on state mathematics tests among three varying groups of students. Among White and African American students, the gap is at 29.2%, while the gap between not economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged is at 28.4%. Although a much smaller gap exists between female and male students, there is still a 2.8% disparity among the two groups (Wright 2017).

State test scores lead to an obvious inequality when it comes to the achievement of students. Because the achievement gap directly relates to graduation rates, college

graduation rates, as well as success later in life, it is important for policymakers to address this growing problem due to its widespread affect. I plan to research: a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted? c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy? d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap?

Literature Review

In the 1840s, America saw a few public schools, but it was not until the crusade of the Secretary of the Board of Education, Horace Mann, that Massachusetts passed the first compulsory school law in 1852. By 1918, all children in America were required to attend school through at least the elementary level. Mann in his *Lectures on Education*, famously argued that “education is the great equalizer” (Mann 1840). He was a leader in the movement for “Common Schools” in which students of all classes and races were education equally. Furthermore, Mann believed that public schools had a direct link to good citizenship, democratic participation, and societal well-being. In his *Twelfth Annual Report to the Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education* he stated, “A republican form of government, without intelligence in the people, must be, on a vast scale, what a mad-house” (Mann 1848).

Much like Mann, Dewey in *Democracy and Education*, argues that education is crucial to the well-being of a society and even more so in a democracy. Both of these education scholars found that it is education in American society that connects citizens to-

gether and allows for the continuation of these American ideals among future generations. Dewey believes that educating children is an innate function of society required for a society to survive. He states, “so obvious, indeed, is the necessity of teaching and learning for the continued existence of a society that we may seem to be dwelling unduly on a truism” (Dewey 1916). In his view, “renewal by means of education” is the way in which society is self-sustained. This process of renewal through education etymologically means that education is “a process or bringing up.” In this way, education is the means by which societies shape the standards of their populations. This helps to keep alive ideas such as democracy.

In order to understand democracy, Dewey sought to examine what it was about a successful social life that lead to a desirable society. He used two measures, “the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups” (the traits of a democratic society) to determine what it was that lead to undesirable societies (Dewey 1916). What he found is that these undesirable societies stem from barriers both internally and externally within a society. Meaning that a society which allows equal participation in all institutions is a democracy. To understand how common interests and freedom of interaction lead to a democratic state, the explanation is found within education. Dewey states that “any education given...tends to socialize its members.” Therefore, democracy and education go hand in hand. Common interests and freedom such as personal initiative and adaptability leads to democracy, but common interests and freedoms are caused by education which explains why Dewey believed that “the devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact” (Dewey 1916). This idea that interests within a democracy must be shared by all

contributes to the idea all society holds that education must be provided equally to all citizens. However, it also calls into question the level and quality of education that each student receives. If it is vital to society that a student receives an equal education in terms of the ideals that are taught, then it seems that the achievement gap, which is present across the nation as a whole, should not exist. Instead, all students should be granted equal access to an equal education, but that is not the case in most American schools today.

While education and democracy are somewhat synonymous according to Dewey, there are cases in which the freedom and equality of education is challenged. While examining Plato's philosophy on education, Dewey realizes that in order for the criteria of shared beliefs in democracy to be met, "all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and take" (Dewey 1916). He compares the division that occurs among social and racial classes to that of slavery. Whereas education can turn those privileged enough to access such instruction into masters, those excluded from education are thus turned into slaves. While education creates cohesive societal ideals, a separation of classes and thus an exclusion of education prevents democracy. Thus, the achievement gap is further perpetuated in American society.

One way that Dewey believes that separation and division within education occurs is through the different curriculum tracks offered. David Hansen, in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect*, responds to Dewey's claims that education fosters democracy. Reba Page, a contributor to the book lays out the differing foundations of lower-track curriculums and regular- or upper-track curriculums. From her perspective, Dewey is highly critical of both tracks claiming that these contrasting curriculums usually

rely solely upon class-based differentiations. Dewey goes so far as to argue that setting up a school in which some students based upon class receive different levels of instruction “is equivalent to the setting up of different types of life-experience, each with isolated subject matter, aim, and standard of values” (Dewey 1916). He also states that those privileged to higher track educations “are shut off from equality and generality of social intercourse” (Dewey 1916). Because Dewey believes that Democracy is based upon the shared ideals of a group based upon school curriculum, he refutes the idea that not all students should be privileged to a college prep curriculum. He states that “democracy cannot flourish where assumptions about social class are the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction” (Dewey 1916). In this way, Dewey is arguing that Dewey believed strongly in the idea that all students should be granted access to an equal education, and furthermore, sending certain students straight to a lower-track curriculum path only facilitates the widening of the achievement gap in public schools. Instead of granting all students an equal opportunity, only those deemed worthy of higher-track curriculums are given access to college-prep materials. It is also true that more times than not, those granted access to college-prep curriculums and higher tracks are those born into a higher “class” of society whether that be based upon parental education levels, demographic, or socioeconomic levels (Hansen 2006).

In contrast to Dewey’s belief that education forms society and is the foundation of democracy, Rawls approaches education from a deductive standpoint in which he focuses on education from a justice view. Rawls begins by laying out the powers of citizens by determining that any citizen in possession of the two moral powers (a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good) and the other capacities that enable

[them] to be normal and fully functioning members of society” are granted “the same basic rights, liberties, and opportunities, and the same protections of the principles of justice” (Rawls 2005). However, whereas Dewey believes that providing equality in education is the responsibility of society, Rawls states that “variations in moral and intellectual capacities as skills exists” (Rawls 2005). His argument is that these variations are handled justly due to “free competition against the background of fair equality in opportunity, including fair equality of opportunity in education (Rawls 2005). Rawls also believes that Democracy and political participation must be taught in schools as opposed to stemming from equal education as Dewey would argue. He believes that children’s education should be structured in a way that encourages political participation while also preparing students to be “fully cooperating members of society” (Rawls 2005). While Rawls more clearly lays out the foundation that justice plays a role in societies providing equal education, he also believes that these inequities are combatted through free competition which does not always work. In terms of free competition among school aged children, if a child is zoned for an underperforming school district, no amount of free competition will combat the achievement gap that will stem between that child and a similar child at a high performing school. While competition can encourage students, allowing justice to be the only deterrent from providing equal education has proven to fail in the past and will continue to fail those already well below state achievement levels.

Coleman, in *Equality and Achievement in Education*, seeks to understand Rawls’ theory of justice and how it relates to equality in education. What is discovered is that “only those inequalities are justified which are to the benefit of the least advantaged” (Coleman 1990). While Rawls does not directly state it, it is clear from his view of

equality and justice that a lack of educational equality, which is seen in the achievement gap, does not represent a true democratic society. What Rawls is proposing though, if an effort to create a truly equal education system is the removal of all outside forces that can impact a child's education such as family influences or anything that would "give one person more opportunity than another" (Coleman 1990). Coleman points out that this an extreme position and one that cannot be achieved. Instead, Coleman believes there must be ways, once a child reaches school age, to provide equal opportunities both in education and life in order to alleviate the current achievement gap.

In contrast to Rawls' theory of justice argument, Weitz in "Equality and justice in education: Dewey and Rawls," points out that Rawls' theory of justice is far from equitable due to the relationship of human qualities and the distribution of goods in society. What Rawls is advocating for calls into question "how far should state power extend into the individual's life without endangering the liberty necessary for the pursuit of happiness?" (Weitz 1993). Weitz, however, questions to what extent educational resources can be distributed or withheld, depending upon the particular student, in an effort to ensure equality of the good in question (education). In comparison to Rawls' idea, Dewey views education as a means to universally provide individuals the tools and resources to "realize their widely diverse and differing talents and abilities" which then equates to these individuals having equal access to the chance for "self-fulfillment" under Dewey's social theory of education (Weitz 1993). However, it is also important to take into account individual abilities which might account for the inequities seen in Rawls' theory of justice. If Rawls' different principle (removing all outside barriers to equality) cannot stand in edu-

cation, he believes that “the principle of redress, meaning that individuals are to be compensated for lesser capacities by receiving greater educational resources” may be able to solve the inequalities seen in education (Weitz 1993).

When thinking about education and the achievement gap in present terms, efforts such as school vouchers and school choice models might be current model for the principle of redress in an effort to compensate for the unequal resources granted a student in the natural lottery. These efforts are designed solely for the purpose of students in low-achieving, low-income areas such that they may be able to gain far greater educational resources than those offered at their current school. New and emerging school types such as Charter Schools are a continuation of the principle of redress ideals presented by Rawls. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures school choice models can be defined in three major categories as: public school choice including open enrollment policies and magnet schools; charter schools; as well as private school choice including school vouchers, scholarship tax credits as well as personal tax credits and deductions. They acknowledge that each of these initiatives in school choice legislatures has been enacted “with the intent of improving student achievement throughout the education system, seeking innovative methods of instruction and school governance, and providing parents with an alternative to neighborhood schools” (NCSL 2018).

Current school reform initiatives such as school choice models stem from the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which was the beginning of the current educational reform movement we see in America. ESEA was passed on April 9th, 1965 as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” At its core, ESEA was a civil rights law which “offered new grants to districts serving low-income

students,” known as Title I, in the hopes of improving the quality of education in America for all students. President Johnson believed that “full educational opportunity should be our first national goal.” When this law was first written, it served primarily to hold schools accountable and increase equality in education due to the “large achievement gap stratified by race and poverty.” One of the largest aim’s of the law was to close the gap “by setting benchmarks and goals to measure the progress of students.” This was the first time that American’s saw federal government involvement in education, which was typically a state and local matter (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2017).

Following the passage of ESEA in 1965, for almost 20 years, schools continued to operate as before. However, in 1983, President Ronald Reagan presented to the press and the nation a report garnered as “an open letter to the American people.” This report, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education called for reform and change in the nation’s failing public schools, which has since sparked many of the same policies, proposals, and debates in education policy seen today. Within the report, the authors declared that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” Furthermore, the authors believe that the failure of the public school systems puts at risk one of the “first promises made on this continent: All regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost” (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). The result of this promise broken promise, which was first addressed in this report, is what is now known as the achievement gap.

The conversation on the need for school reform was sparked by the passing of the ESEA but was not put into effect until Reagan's *A Nation at Risk*. By the mid 1980s, states across the country began to search for alternatives to traditional school methods. One of the first states to initiate a major educational change was seen in Minnesota in 1988 with the passing of its public school choice laws which gave students the option to attend any public school in the state in an effort to allow equal access to quality education. Two years later, Wisconsin established a never before seen program that took school choice a step farther with a voucher program. This program enabled low-income students to attend a private school of their choice by reallocating funds from traditional public schools to the student in the form of a voucher to pay for private school tuition. Following Minnesota's successful school choice initiatives, they passed the first charter school law in 1991 which allowed for the nation's first privately operated public school to open (DeWitt 1990).

Perhaps the largest and most widespread education reform came in with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, known as No Child Left Behind. This act, under President George W. Bush, included provisions for disadvantaged students passed with overwhelming support from both houses of Congress. The overall goal of the act was to "advance American competitiveness and close the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers" (Klein 2018). However, the largest change with this reauthorization came from the increased role of the federal government in public school districts. While states did not have to comply with the requirements of the act, but they would risk losing Title I money if they did not. Under NCLB, states were required to test students in grades 3 through 8 in both

reading and math along with producing reports for the entire student population as well as subgroup reports including racial minorities and children from low-income backgrounds. The main requirement was that states must bring all students to a proficient level, to be decided by the individual states, by the end of the 2014 school year. The way that state's progress towards these goals were tracked was through the AYP or Adequate Yearly Progress which came with sanctions if schools failed to meet these goals. These sanctions included allowing students within a school district that failed to meet AYP for two years in a row to transfer to a better-performing public school; offering free tutoring at schools that failed to meet AYP for 3 years, and eventual state intervention after 4 to 5 years of failure to meet AYP (Klein 2018).

No Child Left Behind, while the largest effort by the federal government to close the achievement gap since the ESEA went into effect, failed. The sanctions from failure to meet AYP standards did little to improve student achievement according to Edweek (Olson and Hoff 2018). Also, teachers and parents largely criticized the reliance on standardized testing as well as the lack of funding for the law. Most importantly though, the 2013-2014 school year came and went without a single school district in America reaching 100% proficiency rates. In fact, 38 percent of schools, up from 29 percent in 2006 were failing to meet AYP altogether (Klein 2018).

In the meantime, under President Obama's administration, another reform known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative which was coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, was launched in 2009. Common Core, which is a set of learning goals that specify what students should know at each grade level in math and english, was designed

to create a cohesive set of standards across U.S. education. Furthermore, the adoption of Common Core Standards allowed states to remove themselves from the requirements of the NCLB Act by instead adopting these standards which removed them from the AYP requirements as well as the standardized testing requirements. Instead, states were able to adopt their own standardized evaluation systems for both students and teachers. Although, at its core, Common Core Standards were aimed at producing graduates ready to pursue either a college degree or a job in the workforce, Common Core, education reform at this point in America's history centered around the closing of the achievement gap. As of 2015, which came time for further reauthorization of the ESEA, 42 states had fully or partially adopted Common Core Standards. However, in most states including California, Kentucky, and Mississippi, the achievement gap grew during the period of Common Core, although researchers are unsure whether Common Core is actually to blame for this growth (Common Core State Standards Initiative).

The most recent educational reform the U.S. Federal Government has issued was in 2015 when Congress, under President Obama, reauthorized the ESEA, known known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, which redistributes control back to individual states, in terms of accountability for student achievement including the achievement of both students in poverty and minority students. The state must set "ambitious" goals for those students that are current falling behind with the end goal of closing the achievement gap, which must be explicitly stated in the state's plan. Mississippi's version of ESEA, known as Mississippi Succeeds, contains an "ambitious plan to close the achievement gaps among student groups by 2025" (Amy 2018). However, in evaluating the achievement gap in Mississippi, the gap grew among minority groups and their white peers in both

English and math as well as among economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students. During the 2017 school year, the gap among White students and African-American and Hispanic students in English was 28.9% and 19.2% respectively, up from 28% and 18.9% in 2016. Furthermore, the gap among not economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged students in English reached 28% in 2017. The gap results in Mathematics, looked almost the same among White and African-American students at 29.2%, but it was significantly smaller among White and Hispanic students at 12.7%. However, the gap among non-economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged students in mathematics in 2017 reached 28.4% (Wright 2017).

When evaluating Mississippi alone, it is clear that no previous efforts at educational reform have significantly improved the achievement gap. Although the Mississippi Succeeds Act has set the goal of closing the achievement gap, there is no current data as the program has yet to be implemented. Furthermore, Mississippi only currently has three charter schools in the state, which shows the lack of school choice initiatives in our state. However, other forms of school choice such as vouchers are currently lacking in the state, but there is expected to be debate about the expansion of such measures during the upcoming legislative session.

Overall, although the theories by philosophers such as Dewey and Rawls state that closing the achievement gap is essential, there has been a lack of success. Previous policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind, and Common Core Standards, have not had the expected level of success. Due to a lack of research, stemming from the newness of the Every Student Succeeds Act and Mississippi's version, Mississippi Succeeds, it is unclear what the success of this act looks like.

This thesis will seek analyze the solutions aimed at closing the achievement gap in Mississippi public schools by investigating the following research questions: a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted? c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy? d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap?

Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze solutions aimed at closing the achievement gap in Mississippi public schools. This will be achieved by investigating the following research questions: a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted? c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy? d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap?

To answer question a) I will conduct a series of interviews with key policymakers and school officials in Mississippi who serve as the official spokesperson for their organizations and whose job it is to present the view of the organization to the public. These semi-structured interviews began with officials at Mississippi First which is an organization dedicated to education policy research and advocacy. Following these initial

interviews at Mississippi First, I completed snowball interviews that took place in the Spring of 2019. The people were:

Angela Bass, Deputy Director of Policy for Mississippi First

Sanford Johnson, Deputy Director of Advocacy for Mississippi First

Krystal Cormack, Chairman of the Board at Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board

Mac Curlee, Conservator for the Mississippi Department of Education where he served as Superintendent of Schools for Okolona School District and Aberdeen School District; Former principal of Booneville High School, Pearl High School, Forest High School, Oxford High School, and Tupelo High School

Anthony Goins, Assistant Superintendent of Schools - Clinton Public School District

I asked each of these interviewees about their view of the achievement gap in Mississippi as well as why they think this is a pertinent issue in today's education debates. I also asked them about the solutions that they believe would benefit the achievement gap as a whole. For the group of policymakers at Mississippi First, I asked about their proposed solutions, and for the school districts, I asked about how they see the achievement gap manifest in their districts. I also asked the school districts if any particular policies have benefited the achievement gap in their district specifically. These interviews took place over the phone and were began with general questions about their view of the achievement gap and whether they viewed the gap as a pressing issue. I continued by asking about specific ways that their organization or district is working to close

the gap, what solutions have worked and which have not, and finally how do they view national education policies relative to the gap in Mississippi.

In order to answer question b) I will utilize NAEP data which measures student's success in 4th and 8th mathematics and reading only. This data set shows a breakdown within specific grades of the performance by student subgroups; therefore, using databases, I will build a time series graph for both the United States and the state of Mississippi. I use the No Child Left Behind Act as the starting point of my analysis because this act was the first act in recent history in which the achievement gap became a national priority. In order to understand whether there has been significant change in the achievement gap, I will compare correlations between the time series graph and implementations of national policies such as No Child Left Behind, Common Core Standards, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. I am utilizing 4th and 8th grade data because that is the year in which students are tested, and I chose to analyze math specifically because of a body of research done by Distinguished Professor of Education at UC Irvine that shows that early math skills are a greater predictor of later academic success than early reading skills (Duncan 2011).

To answer question c) by building on both textual analysis of existing policies including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind, the Every Student Succeeds Act as well as the Common Core Initiative, and the collected interviews with key policymakers, I will discuss the debates that have led to the current policy proposal in Mississippi, the Mississippi Succeeds Plan, which differs from other state's

versions of the ESSA. The current state education policy plan, Mississippi Succeeds, is the MS version of the national Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is a strategic plan with the goal of closing the achievement gap.

I will answer question d) by again looking at NAEP data in order to see if there has been any correlation, based on time analysis done in question B, between the time in which policies were implemented and the achievement gap rate in that given year. I will compare the success of past national education policies to see which, if any, has been more successful in decreasing the achievement gap.

Chapter 2: How Real is the Gap?: A Statistical Analysis

Data Source

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, measures the level of proficiency among K-12 students in the United States. NAEP was started in 1969 as a "congressionally mandated project administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)." Data is available for both National and State student groups in Reading and Mathematics which is further broken down by student groups such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and parental education levels. The NAEP assessment is given every two years to 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students. However, NAEP does not report results for particular schools or students so each student across the United States is not tested. Instead, NCES "uses a sampling procedure to ensure that those selected to participate in NAEP will be representative of the geographical, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of schools and students across the nation." In national data, 6,000 to 20,000 students are sampled whereas in state data, 3,000 students in 100 schools in each state are selected for each grade and subject.

NAEP is currently known as the "gold standard" in student assessments because it is the only "common measure of student achievement across the country." While there are two types of data available from NAEP, main NAEP and long-term trend NAEP, I chose to focus on main NAEP data which begins primarily in 1992 because long-term

trend NAEP data does not provide a breakdown by student groups such as race or socioeconomic status. Because NAEP is currently the “common yard stick” used to measure student achievement, it is used to inform policy decisions across the nation because it provides the tools and resources for data analysis.

The test is designed to assess what students should know in a particular grade based upon standards created by the National Assessment Governing Board which is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The Governing Board sets achievement levels for each subject and grade. “NAEP results are then reported as percentages of students performing at or above the Basic, Proficient, and Advanced Levels” on a scale from 0-300. Basic scores are those that fall between 214-248, proficient are 249-282, and advanced are 281-300.

When examining the main NAEP data among the national average and the Mississippi average, I chose to focus on math data specifically. According to Greg Duncan, a national expert on the importance of strong early math skills, studied whether math or reading is a better indicator of success among students. He found that early math skills are one of the best predictors of later success in both math and literacy. Furthermore, math skills have become “a cornerstone of the growing movement among early childhood educators to boost math instruction in preschool through 3rd grade.” The Education Commission of the States has also released data indicating that although in recent years, “state policymakers have emphasized the need to improve children’s reading skills early on because a lack in this essential skill is a strong predictor of low student performance and increased high school dropout rates,” research now shows that “the development of mathematics skills early on may be an even greater predictor of later school success.”

Due to the predicting capability of early mathematics scores, I first analyzed the average scale scores of 4th graders across the nation and in Mississippi specifically. The main NAEP data begins in 1990 with the NAEP data from the original test and continues to 2000 when the new test was first administered and ends in 2017. The NAEP data is available every two years except for from 2000 to 2003 when there was a three year gap due to the administration of both the original and new NAEP test in 2000 which provides two sets of scores for that year. With the data, I first made a data chart and then created a line graph to better display the overall trend in data. In the average scale scores of both national students and the average of MS students, the line trend of both groups mirrors the other with a gap present between the two. This gap present is known as the achievement gap. Both data groups begin in the 1990s with scores below the basic level with an achievement gap of 18 points. However, by the year 2017, the gap has shrunk to 5 points and the average of both groups has reached the basic level. Therefore, MS students are performing, at an average, just below that of the national average.

4th Grade Mathematics

Within the main NAEP data, there is a breakdown among national averages and MS averages by race and socioeconomic background which is portrayed in National School Lunch Program eligibility. The gap among White and Black students at both the national and state level in MS is much larger than the average of all national and average of all MS students. In 1992, the national White and Black achievement gap was at 34 points with White students performing at the basic level and Black students performing at the below basic level. Overtime, the national gap has shrunk to 25 points with both

groups performing at the basic level although White students are 1 point away from proficient. The MS White-Black data is similar in that the trend shows a decreasing gap, although MS's White-Black gap has been consistently lower than the national average beginning at 30 in 1992 and shrinking to 22 in 2017 as compared to 25 nationally. However, while the gap was smaller overall in MS in 1992, all MS students both White and Black were performing below their peers at the national level. White students nationally were scoring 227 points with MS White students scoring 219. Similarly, Black students nationally were performing at 193 points on average and at 189 in MS. However, in 2017, MS Black students have actually begun to perform better than that of their national peers with White students still remaining below their national peers although the gap now sits at only 2 points. The White-Hispanic achievement gap trend is similar to that of the White-Black achievement gap in that the national gap is wider than that of the MS gap with the national gap in 2017 sitting at 19 points and the MS gap sitting at 7 points. Unlike minority Black students though who are performing at lower levels in MS despite a smaller gap, Hispanic students are performing better in MS than nationally.

The socioeconomic achievement gap among 4th grade mathematics students tells a different story than that of the racial achievement gap in comparing the national scores and MS scores. Overall, those eligible for the National School Lunch Program both at the national level and in MS score exactly the same each year with the group overall performing better overtime. The same is true for those that are not eligible for the National School Lunch Program. Therefore, the gap is exactly the same overtime at 25 points. While the students as a whole are performing better, this gap unlike the racial gap is not shrinking at all. When examining the racial achievement gap, MS does better at closing

the racial gap although MS student's overall are performing as a whole more poorly. This means that there is something different about what states like MS are doing for racial minorities. With all students at similar income levels performing better overtime without a shrinking gap, it could be said that current policies are more targeted at racial gaps than socioeconomic gaps because these gaps have not changed in the last 20 years although racial gaps have at both a national and state level. However, in a survey of 1,000 parents Valant and Newark at the Brookings Institute found that "64 percent of respondents said it is "essential" or a "high priority" to close the wealthy-poor gap, while only 36 percent said that about the white-black gap and 31 percent about the white-Hispanic gap."

8th Grade Mathematics

Across all student groups in the 8th grade mathematics data set, the gap is wider than that of 4th grade mathematics students. In the 2017 national average of all students, the average score reached 283 while MS's average score is 271 both of which are at the basic level. These scores have increased from 268 and 246 respectively in 1992. Similarly, the gap has decreased overtime beginning at 22 points and decreasing to 12 points. However, while the average scores overall are much higher at the 8th grade level, the gap is larger.

In examining the racial achievement gap, the same story is true as the overall average scores. Both White, Black, and Hispanic students are performing better overall at the 8th grade level both nationally and in MS, but the gap is larger than the 4th grade group among both White and Black students and White and Hispanic students. The national White-Black gap begins at 40 points for 8th graders as compared to 34 for 4th

graders in 1992. What is seen is that the trend line for all students follows a similar pattern except for that of Hispanic students. Among Hispanic students in MS, they are performing higher or about as high as their national peers which is not true for White or Black students.

The socioeconomic achievement gap among 8th grade mathematics students in MS is exactly the same as that of national and MS 4th grade math students. The only variance in this data set from that of the 4th grade data set is that the national socioeconomic gap for 8th graders is higher than the other 3 groups at 29 points.

The last data set provided for 8th grade math students is parental education levels and their correlation with NAEP scores which is not provided for 4th grade students. There are 4 levels: did not finish high school, graduated high school, some education after high school, and graduated college. Overall the student scores across all 4 parental groups is much higher at the national level than in MS. Overtime though, all 4 parental education level groups at both national and state levels saw an increase in scores overtime until around 2013 when a drop-off in scores occurred. The widest gaps among the 4 groups can be seen between the did not finish high school and graduated high school levels with this gap being much higher in MS than at the national level.

Overall Trends

Across all student groups and grade levels, there has been a positive upward trend in achievement levels although the achievement gap has only shrunk among overall 4th and 8th grade national and MS scores and among all racial groups in 4th and 8th grade. The socioeconomic status gap and the parental education gap, which correlates with the socioeconomic gap, has not changed overtime.

In viewing the line graphs, there is a clear jump in scores at one particular point in time across all grades and all student groups: 2001. 2001 was the year of the enactment of the national No Child Left Behind policy which is largely viewed as an education policy failure. The data however, shows that while No Child Left Behind may not have been significant in closing the gaps, it did largely increase the overall performance of all students, and it did so quickly.

Table 1 – 4th Grade Math Average Scale Score, MS vs. National

Year	Average Scale Score, National	Average scale score, MS	Achievement Gap
1990 ¹	213		
1992 ¹	220	202	18
1996 ¹	224	208	16
2000 ¹	228	211	17
2000	226	211	15
2003	235	223	12
2005	238	227	11
2007	240	228	12
2009	240	227	13
2011	241	230	11
2013	242	231	11
2015	240	234	6
2017	240	235	5

● Average Scale Score, National

● Average scale score, MS

**Graph 1 - 4th Grade Math Trends,
National vs. Mississippi**

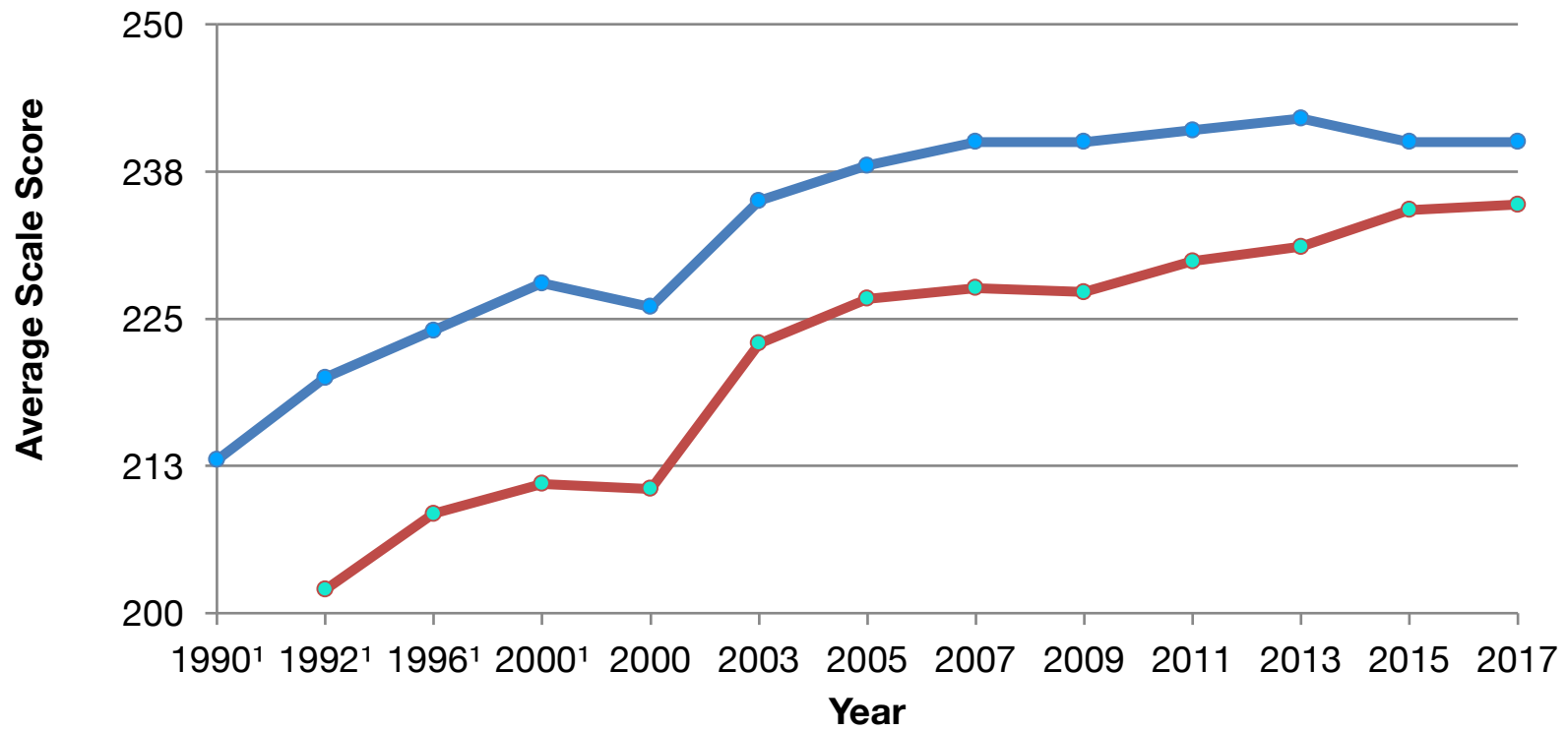
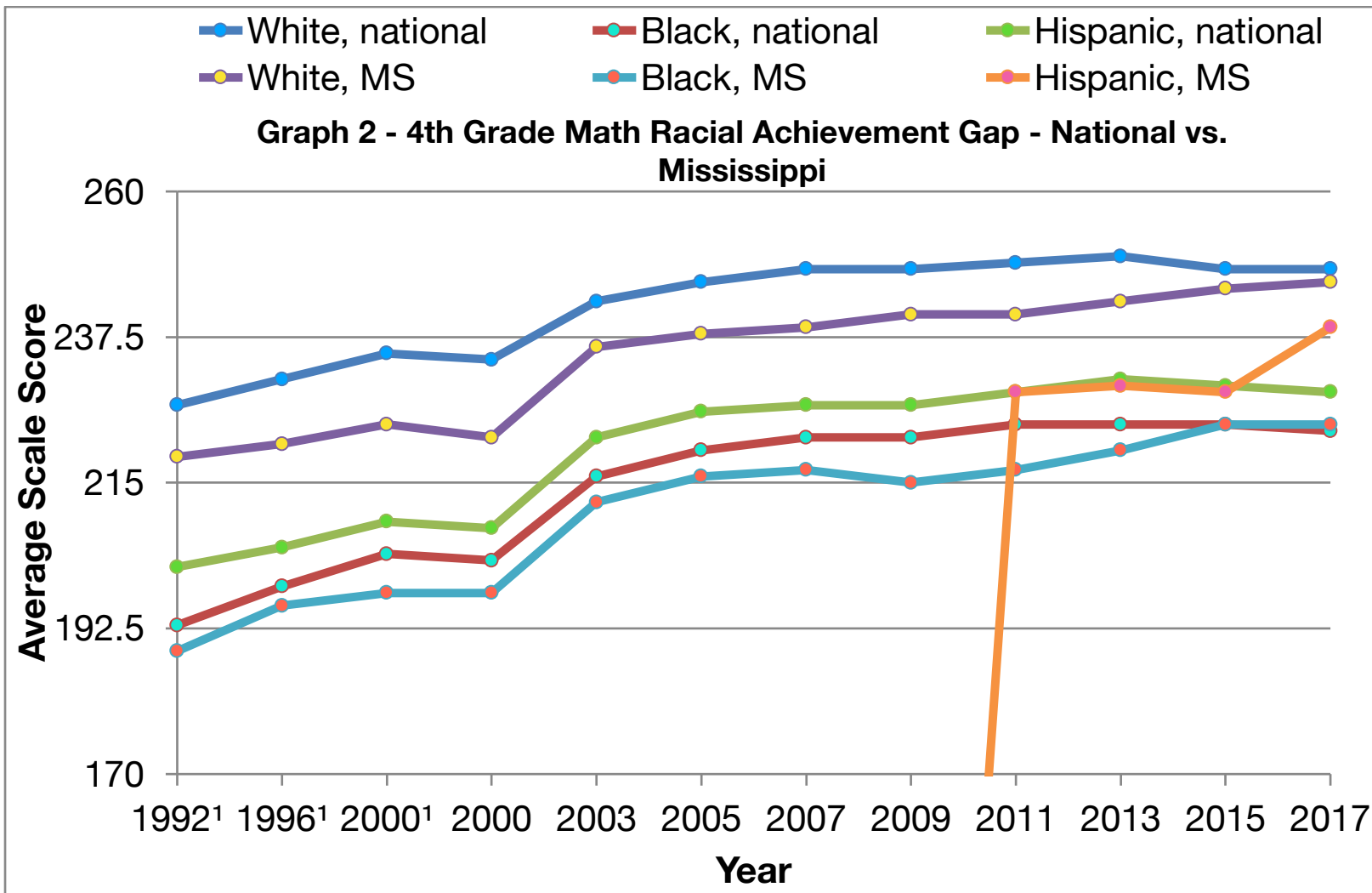


Table 2 - 4th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Racial Subgroup Nationally

Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score	Average scale score	White-Black Achievement Gap	Average scale score	White-Hispanic Achievement Gap
		White, national	Black, national		Hispanic, national	
1992 ¹	National	227	193	34	202	25
1996 ¹	National	231	199	32	205	26
2000 ¹	National	235	204	31	209	26
2000	National	234	203	31	208	26
2003	National	243	216	27	222	21
2005	National	246	220	26	226	20
2007	National	248	222	26	227	21
2009	National	248	222	26	227	21
2011	National	249	224	25	229	20
2013	National	250	224	26	231	19
2015	National	248	224	24	230	18
2017	National	248	223	25	229	19

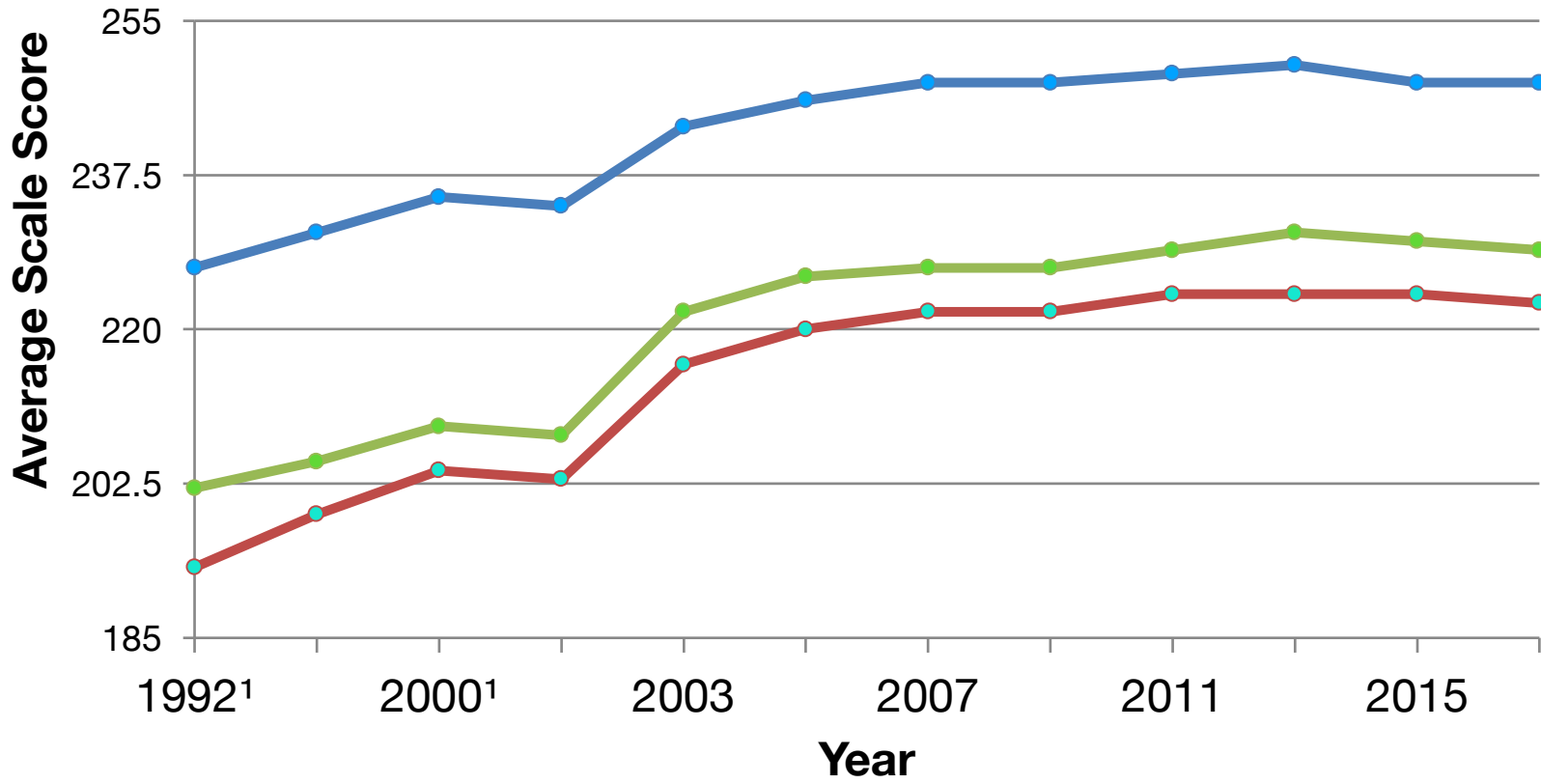
Table 3 - 4th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Racial Subgroup in Mississippi

Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score	Average scale score	White-Black Achievement Gap	Average scale score	White-Hispanic Achievement Gap
		White, MS	Black, MS		Hispanic, MS	
1992 ¹	Mississippi	219	189	30	‡	
1996 ¹	Mississippi	221	196	25	‡	
2000 ¹	Mississippi	224	198	26	‡	
2000	Mississippi	222	198	24	‡	
2003	Mississippi	236	212	24	‡	
2005	Mississippi	238	216	22	‡	
2007	Mississippi	239	217	22	‡	
2009	Mississippi	241	215	26	‡	
2011	Mississippi	241	217	24	229	12
2013	Mississippi	243	220	23	230	13
2015	Mississippi	245	224	21	229	16
2017	Mississippi	246	224	22	239	7

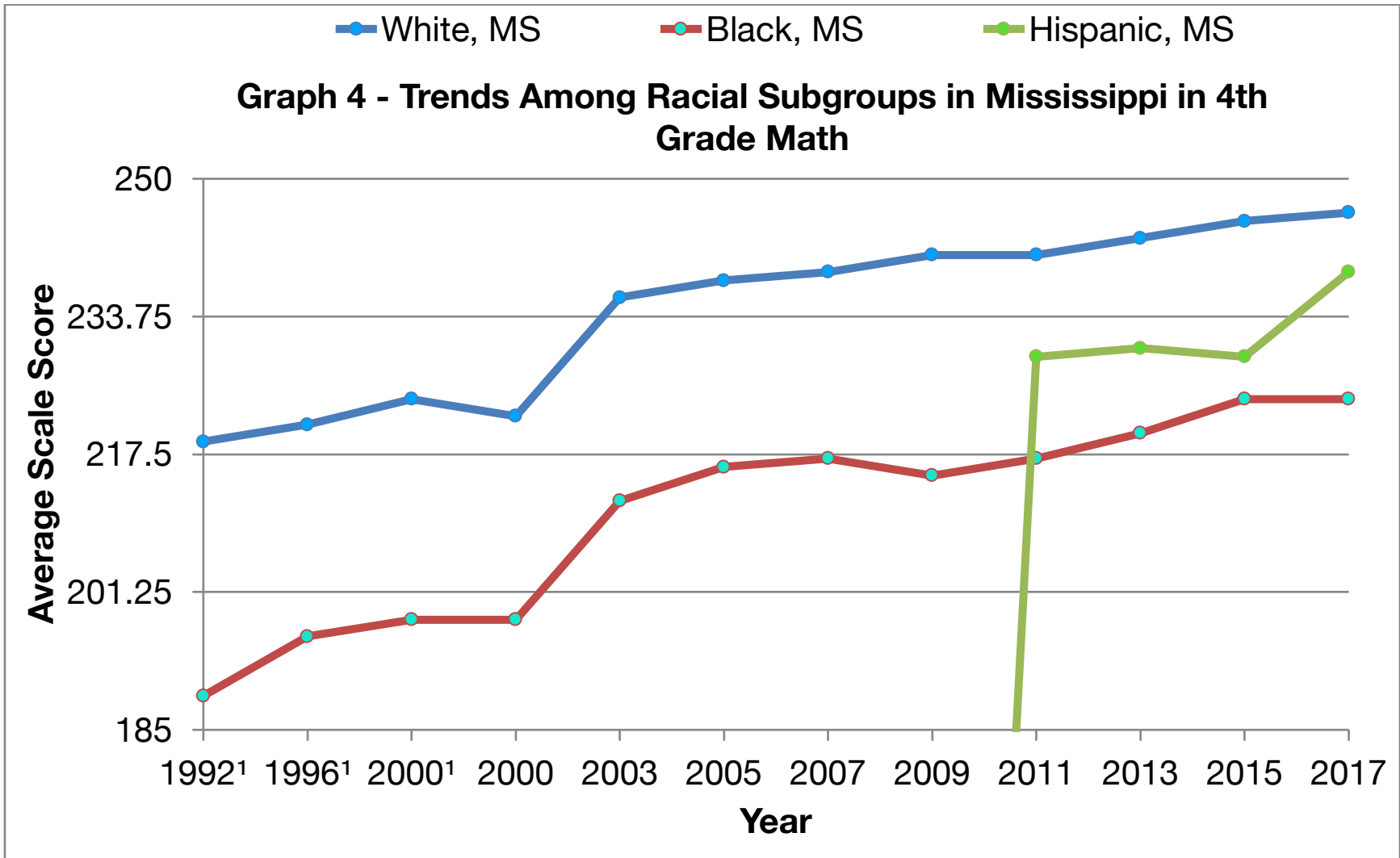


White, national Black, national Hispanic, national

Graph 3 - Trends Among Racial Subgroups Nationally in 4th Grade Math



Graph 4 - Trends Among Racial Subgroups in Mississippi in 4th Grade Math



Black, national

Black, MS

Graph 5 - A Comparison of 4th Grade African American Students Nationally vs. Mississippi

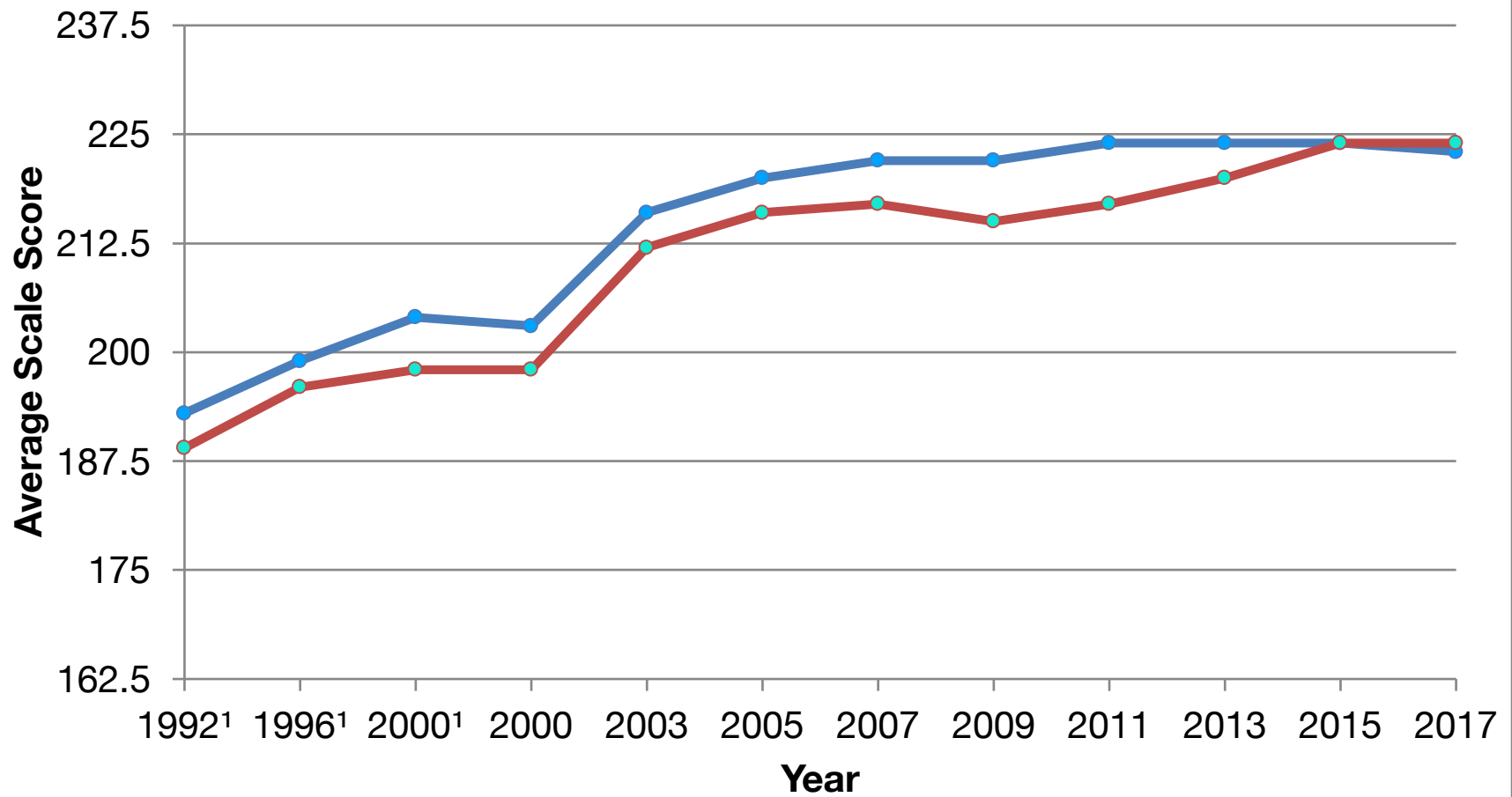


Table 4 - 4th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Socioeconomic Subgroup Nationally

Year	Jurisdiction	National School Lunch Program eligibility, Average scale score nationally	Not eligible, Average scale score nationally	Achievement Gap
1996 ¹	National	207	231	24
2000 ¹	National	210	236	26
2000	National	208	235	27
2003	National	222	244	22
2005	National	225	248	23
2007	National	227	249	22
2009	National	228	250	22
2011	National	229	252	23
2013	National	230	254	24
2015	National	229	253	24
2017	National	228	253	25

Table 5 - 4th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Socioeconomic Subgroup in Mississippi

Year	Jurisdiction	National School Lunch Program eligibility, Average scale score in MS	Not eligible, Average scale score in MS	Achievement Gap
1996 ¹	Mississippi	200	224	24
2000 ¹	Mississippi	202	226	24
2000	Mississippi	202	225	23
2003	Mississippi	216	238	22
2005	Mississippi	221	241	20
2007	Mississippi	222	241	19
2009	Mississippi	221	242	21
2011	Mississippi	224	246	22
2013	Mississippi	226	248	22
2015	Mississippi	229	250	21
2017	Mississippi	229	254	25

- National School Lunch Program eligibility, national
- Not eligible, national
- National School Lunch Program eligibility, MS
- Not eligible, MS

Graph 6 - 4th Grade Math, National vs. MS, Socioeconomic Achievement Gap

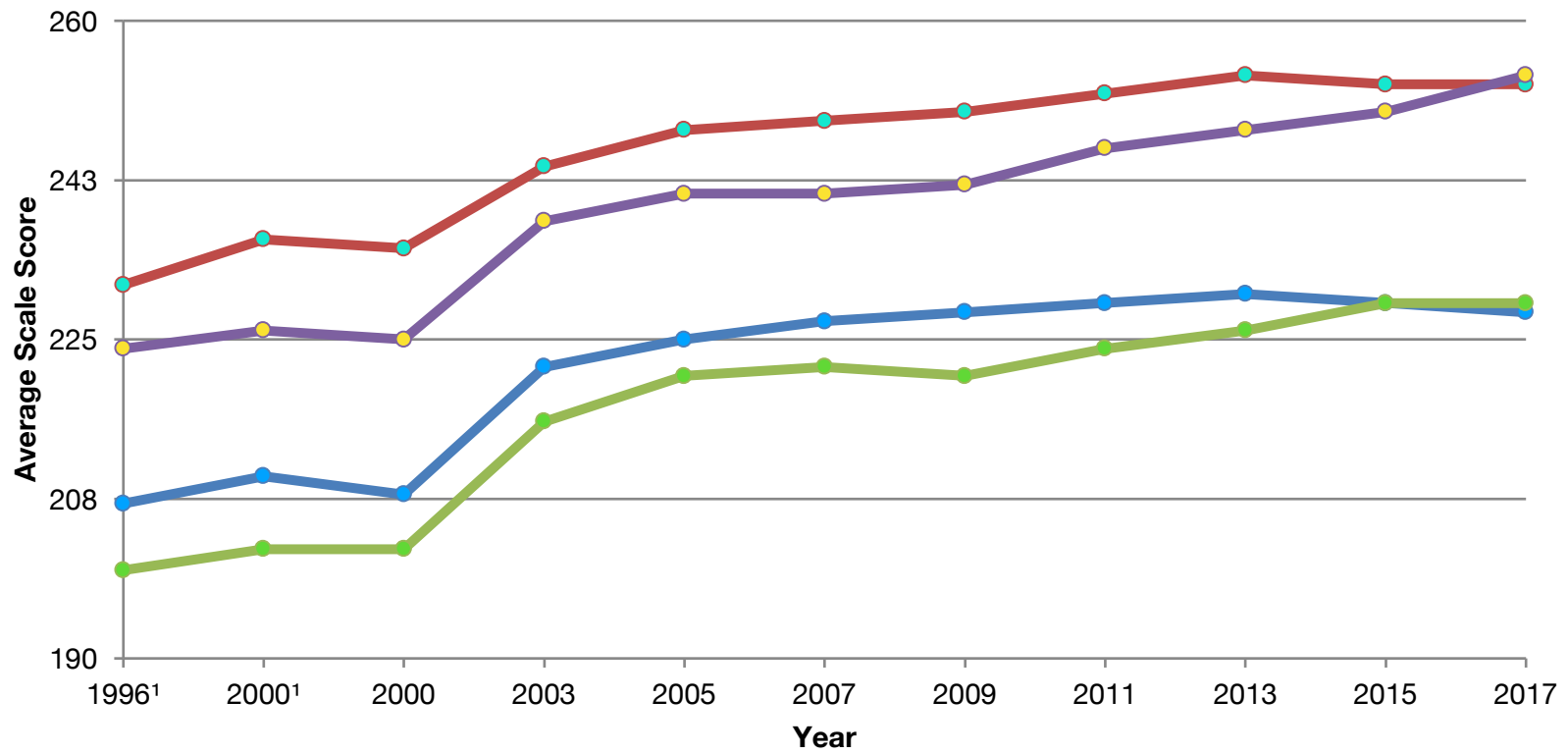


Table 6 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores, MS vs. National

Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score, National	Average scale score, MS	Achievement Gap
1992 ¹	All Students	268	246	22
1996 ¹	All Students	272	250	22
2000 ¹	All Students	275	254	21
2000	All Students	273	254	19
2003	All Students	278	261	17
2005	All Students	279	262	17
2007	All Students	281	265	16
2009	All Students	283	265	18
2011	All Students	284	269	15
2013	All Students	285	271	14
2015	All Students	282	271	11
2017	All Students	283	271	12

**Graph 7 - Overall Trends in 8th Grade Math,
National vs. Mississippi**

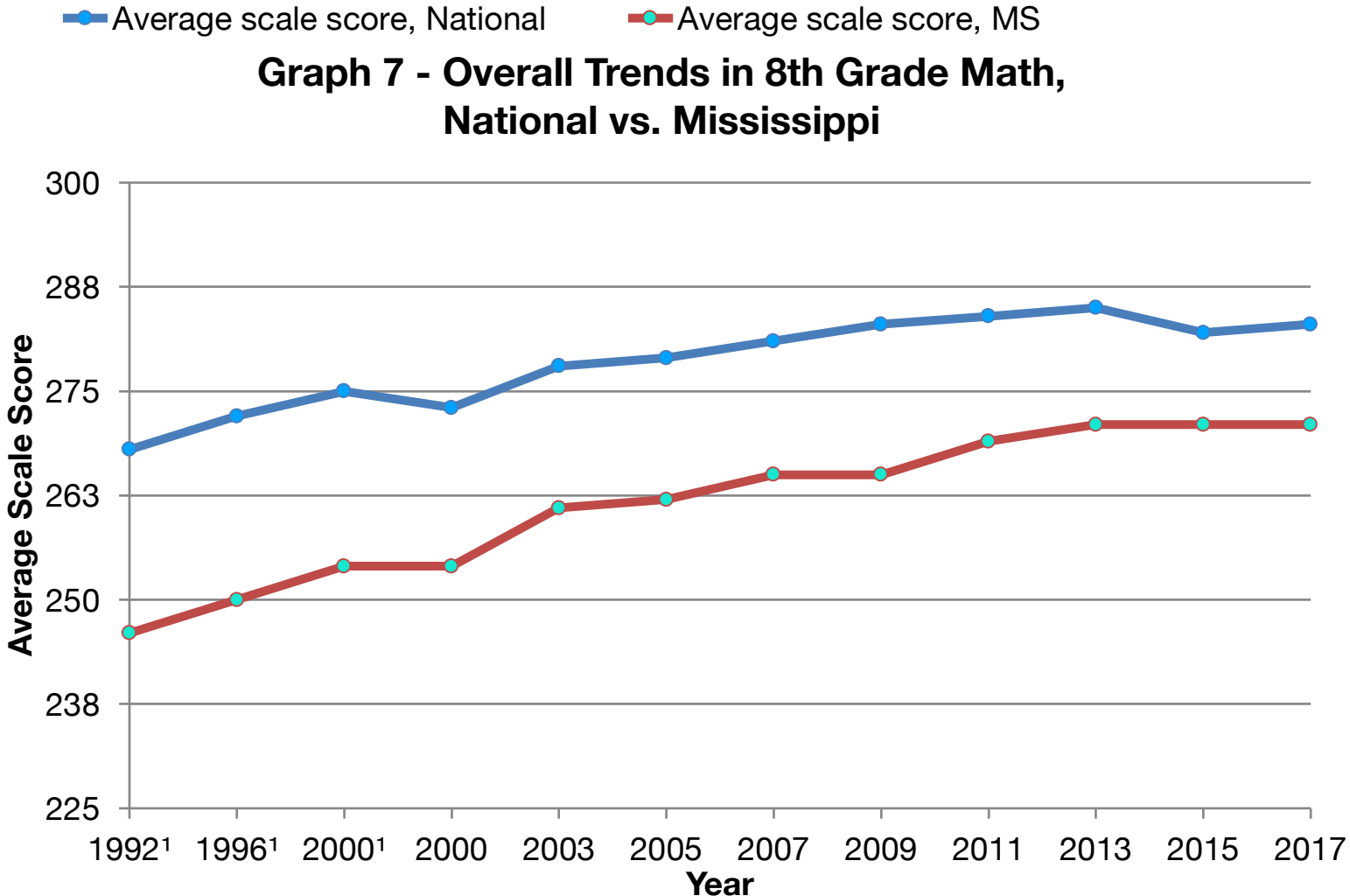


Table 7 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Racial Subgroup Nationally

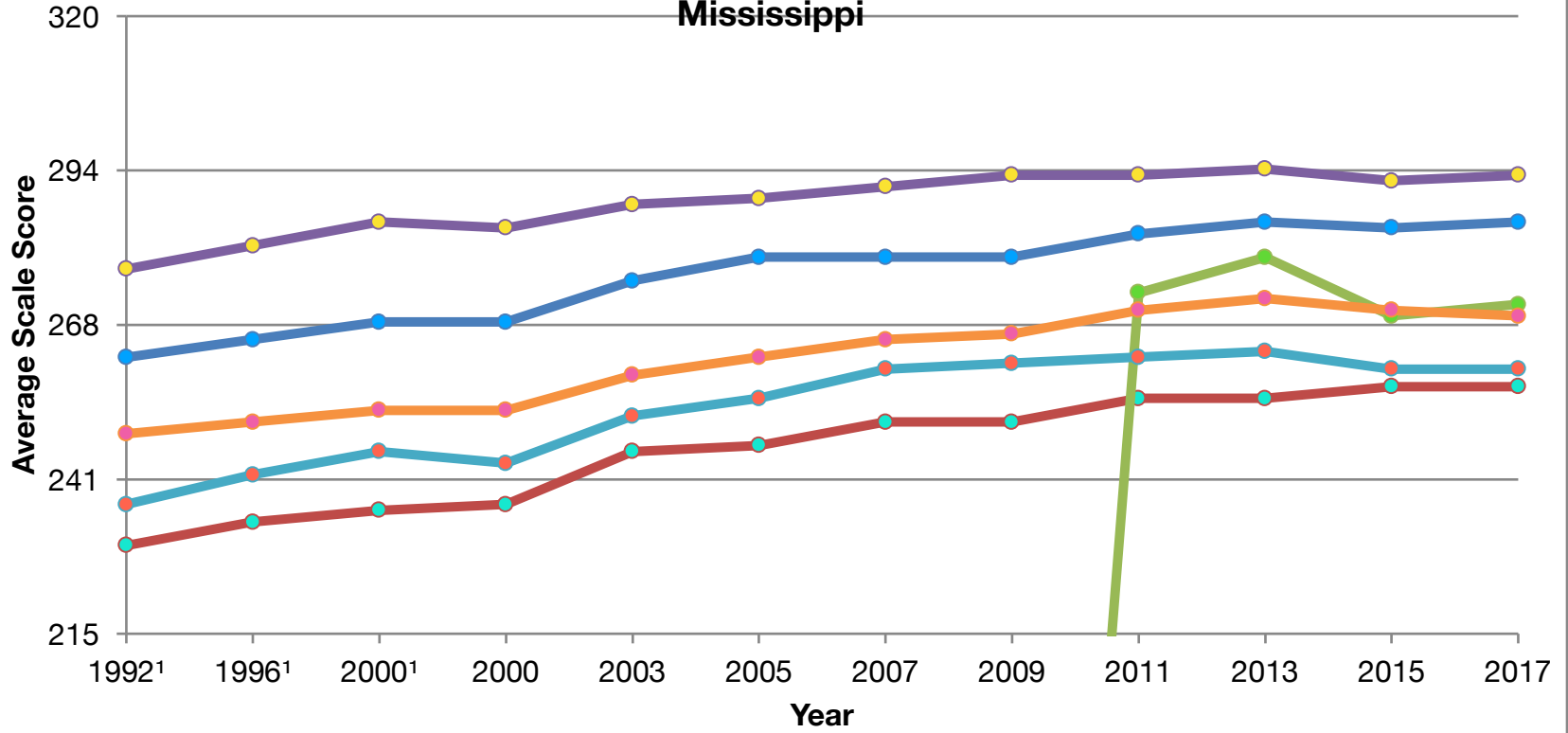
Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score	Average scale score	White-Black Achievement Gap	Average scale score	White-Hispanic Achievement Gap
		White, national	Black, national		Hispanic, national	
1992 ¹	National	277	237	40	249	28
1996 ¹	National	281	242	39	251	30
2000 ¹	National	285	246	39	253	32
2000	National	284	244	40	253	31
2003	National	288	252	36	259	29
2005	National	289	255	34	262	27
2007	National	291	260	31	265	26
2009	National	293	261	32	266	27
2011	National	293	262	31	270	23
2013	National	294	263	31	272	22
2015	National	292	260	32	270	22
2017	National	293	260	33	269	24

Table 8 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Racial Subgroup in Mississippi

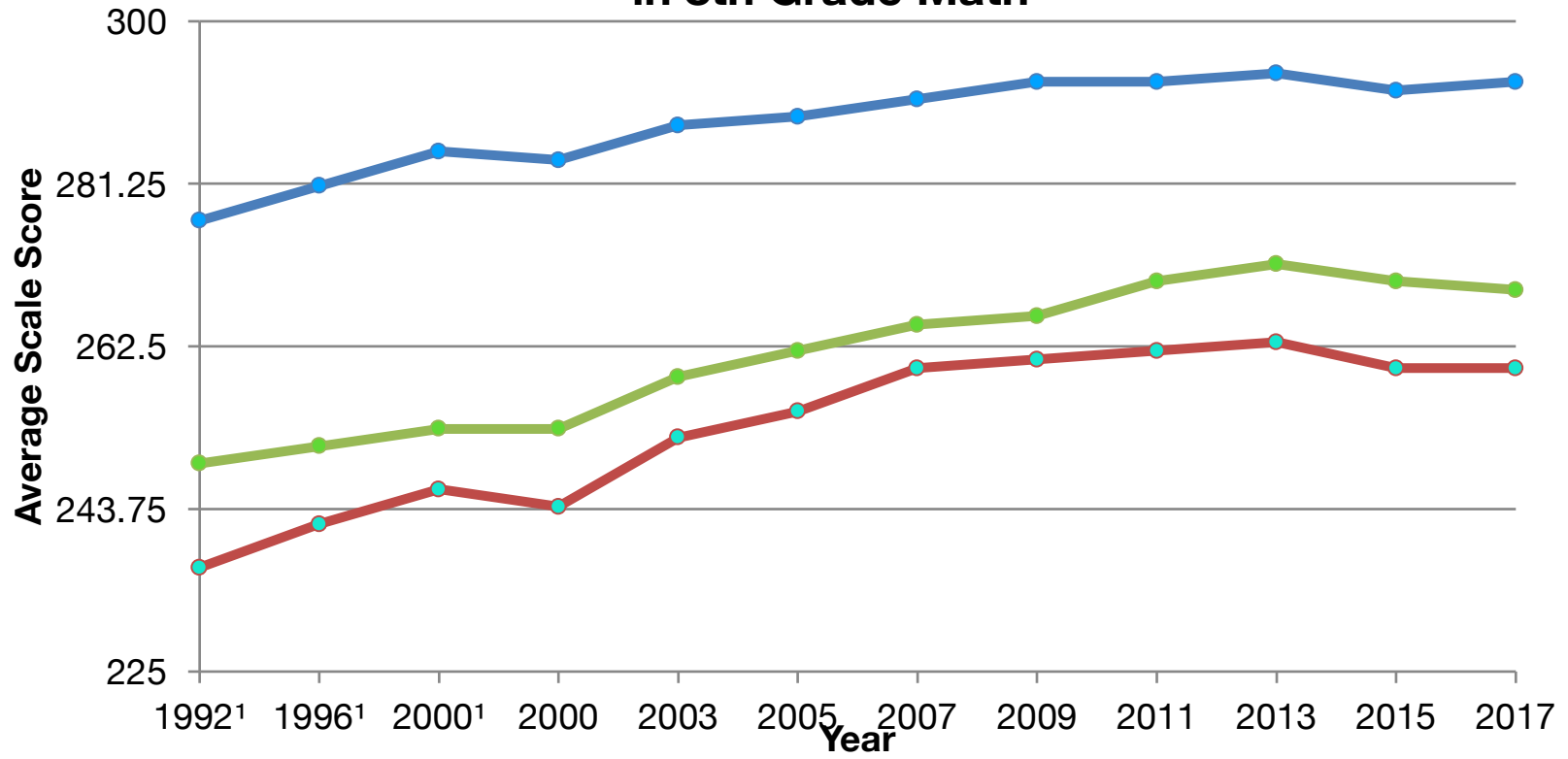
Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score	Average scale score	White-Black Achievement Gap	Average scale score	White-Hispanic Achievement Gap
		White, MS	Black, MS		Hispanic, MS	
1992 ¹	Mississippi	262	230	32	‡	
1996 ¹	Mississippi	265	234	31	‡	
2000 ¹	Mississippi	268	236	32	‡	
2000	Mississippi	268	237	31	‡	
2003	Mississippi	275	246	29	‡	
2005	Mississippi	279	247	32	‡	
2007	Mississippi	279	251	28	‡	
2009	Mississippi	279	251	28	‡	
2011	Mississippi	283	255	28	273	10
2013	Mississippi	285	255	30	279	6
2015	Mississippi	284	257	27	269	15
2017	Mississippi	285	257	28	271	14

● White, MS ● Black, MS ● Hispanic, MS
● White, national ● Black, national ● Hispanic, national

Graph 8 - 8th Grade Math Racial Achievement Gap - National vs. Mississippi



● White, national ● Black, national ● Hispanic, national
**Graph 9 - Trends Among Racial Subgroups Nationally
 in 8th Grade Math**



Graph 10 - Trends Among Racial Subgroups in Mississippi in 8th Grade Math

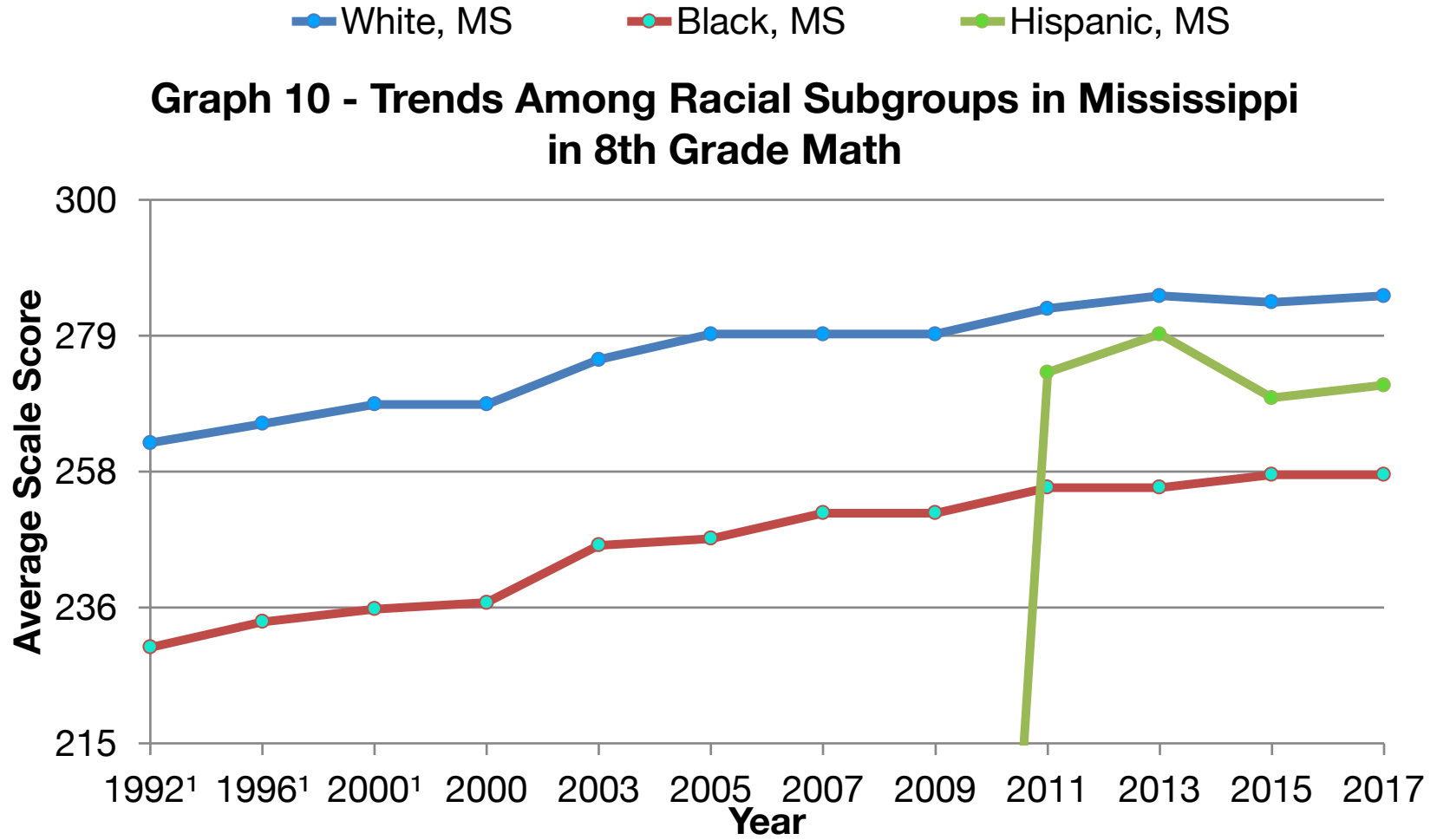


Table 9 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Socioeconomic Subgroup Nationally

Year	Jurisdiction	National School Lunch Program eligibility, Average scale score nationally	Not eligible, Average scale score nationally	Achievement Gap
1996 ¹	National	252	280	28
2000 ¹	National	255	285	30
2000	National	253	283	30
2003	National	259	287	28
2005	National	262	288	26
2007	National	265	291	26
2009	National	266	294	28
2011	National	269	296	27
2013	National	270	297	27
2015	National	268	296	28
2017	National	267	296	29

Table 10 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Socioeconomic Subgroup in Mississippi

Year	Jurisdiction	National School Lunch Program eligibility, Average scale score in MS	Not eligible, Average scale score in MS	Achievement Gap
1996 ¹	Mississippi	239	265	26
2000 ¹	Mississippi	241	267	26
2000	Mississippi	242	267	25
2003	Mississippi	251	275	24
2005	Mississippi	253	279	26
2007	Mississippi	257	280	23
2009	Mississippi	256	283	27
2011	Mississippi	260	288	28
2013	Mississippi	263	288	25
2015	Mississippi	262	291	29
2017	Mississippi	264	289	25

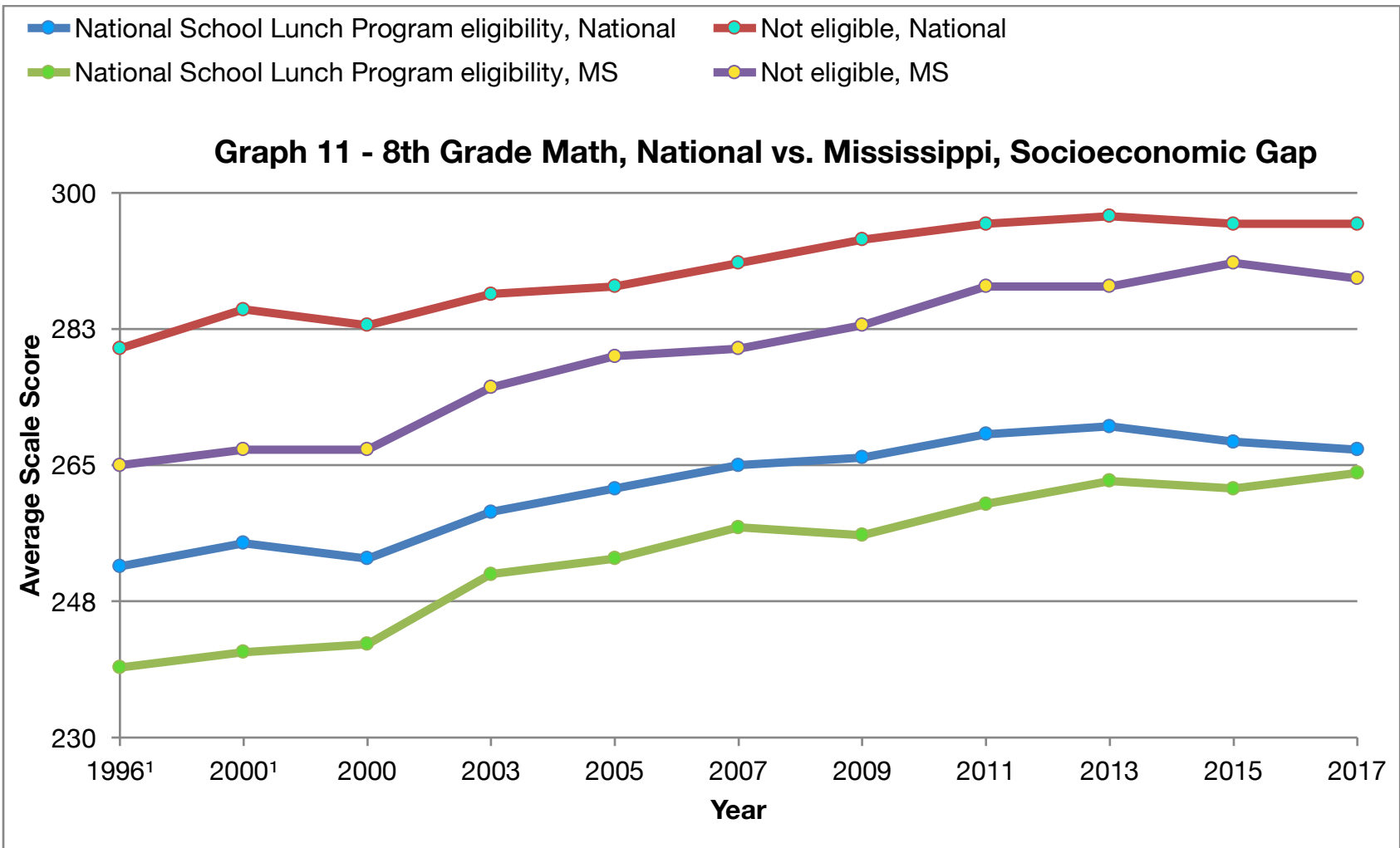


Table 11 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Parental Education Level Nationally

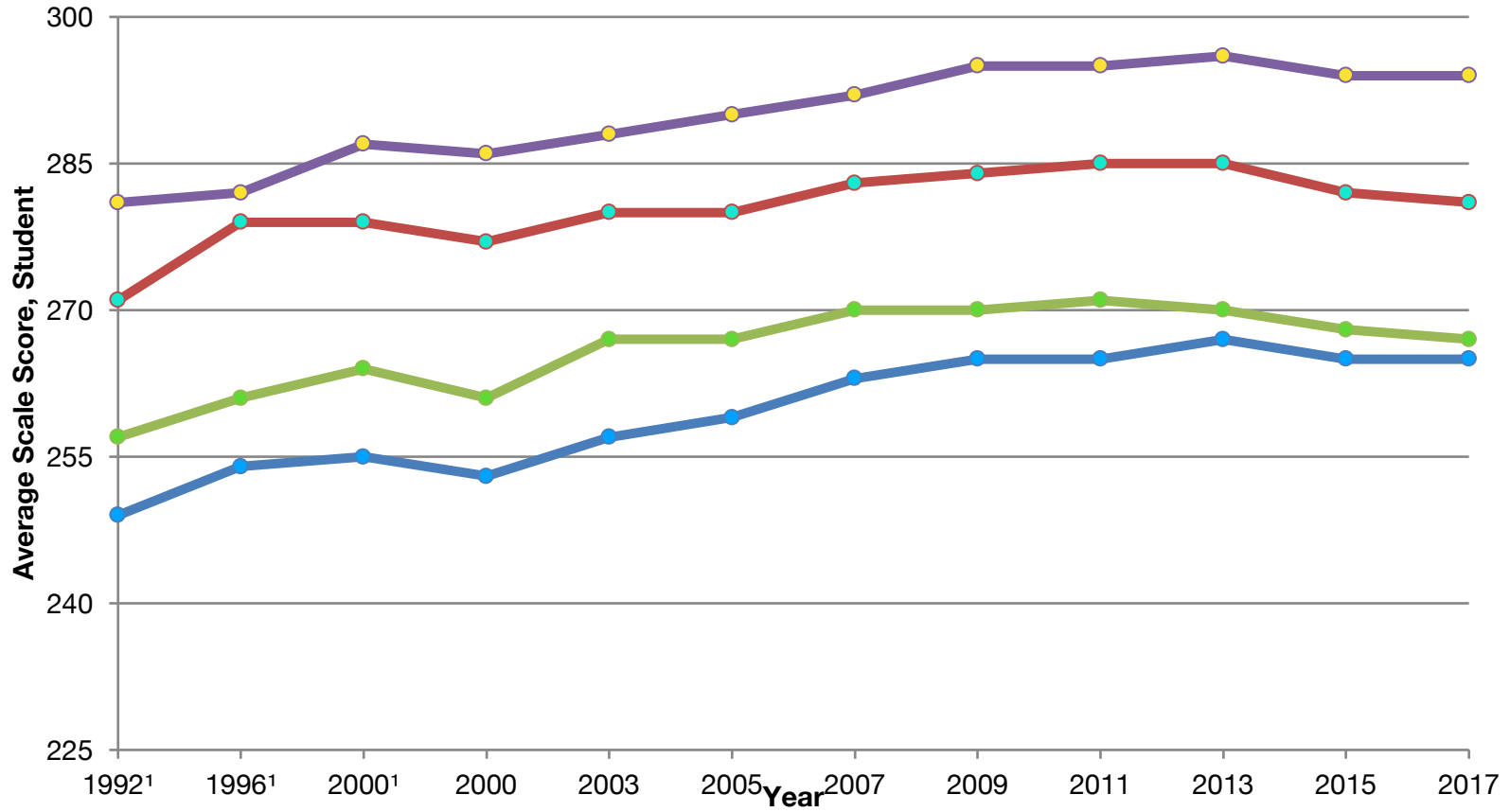
Year		Average scale score	Average scale score	Achievement Gap among some education after high school and graduated high school	Average scale score	Average scale score	Achievement Gap among some education after high school and Graduated College	Achievement Gap among did not finish high school and graduated college
		Did not finish high school	Graduated high school		Some education after high school	Graduated college		
1992 ¹	National	249	257	14	271	281	10	32
1996 ¹	National	254	261	18	279	282	3	28
2000 ¹	National	255	264	15	279	287	8	32
2000	National	253	261	16	277	286	9	33
2003	National	257	267	13	280	288	8	31
2005	National	259	267	13	280	290	10	31
2007	National	263	270	13	283	292	9	29
2009	National	265	270	14	284	295	11	30
2011	National	265	271	14	285	295	10	30
2013	National	267	270	15	285	296	11	29
2015	National	265	268	14	282	294	12	29
2017	National	265	267	14	281	294	13	29

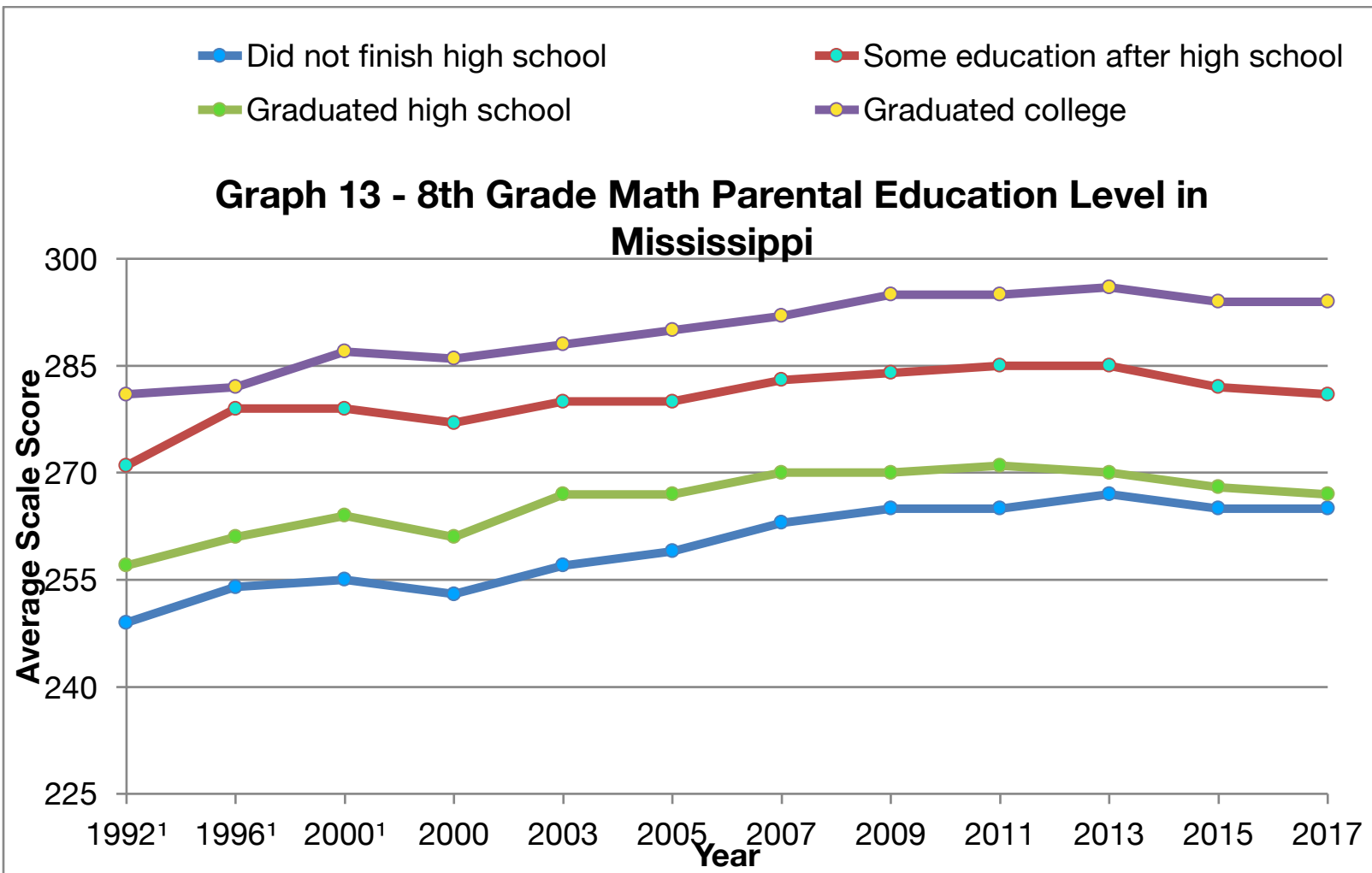
Table 12 - 8th Grade Mathematics Scale Scores by Parental Education Level in Mississippi

Year	Jurisdiction	Average scale score	Average scale score	Achievement Gap among some education after high school and graduated high school	Average scale score	Average scale score	Achievement Gap among some education after high school and Graduated College	Achievement Gap among did not finish high school and graduated college
		Did not finish high school	Graduated high school		Some education after high school	Graduated college		
1992 ¹	Mississippi	235	240	16	256	254	-2	19
1996 ¹	Mississippi	241	244	16	260	257	-3	16
2000 ¹	Mississippi	243	246	15	261	262	1	19
2000	Mississippi	242	246	16	262	263	1	21
2003	Mississippi	253	253	15	268	266	-2	13
2005	Mississippi	254	252	17	269	269	0	15
2007	Mississippi	256	255	17	272	271	-1	15
2009	Mississippi	252	256	17	273	271	-2	19
2011	Mississippi	260	257	19	276	276	0	16
2013	Mississippi	265	259	19	278	279	1	14
2015	Mississippi	258	259	20	279	277	-2	19
2017	Mississippi	263	259	15	274	277	3	14

- Did not finish high school
- Some education after high school
- Graduated high school
- Graduated college

Graph 12 - 8th Grade Math Parental Education Level Nationally





Chapter 3: The View of Policymakers. A Proposal Forward

Introduction

In order to perform a policy analysis on national and state education policies, I first collected the policy text. Next, I conducted interviews with key education figures including policymakers and local school officials in order to answer the research question: Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? These interviews enabled me to understand how these education officials regard each policy and what they believe should be done in the future.

In this chapter, I will analyze the Elementary and Secondary Education Act along with several reauthorizations of this act including No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act. I will also analyze Common Core and Mississippi's version of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Mississippi Succeeds. I will also outline the key findings from my interviews with the following individuals: Angela Bass, Deputy Director of Policy for Mississippi First; Sanford Johnson, Deputy Director of Advocacy for Mississippi First; Krystal Cormack, Chairman of the Board at Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board; Mac Curlee, Conservator for the Mississippi Department of Education where he served as Superintendent of Schools for Okolona School District and Aberdeen School District; Former principal of Booneville High School, Pearl High School, Forest High School, Oxford High School, and Tupelo High School; Anthony Goins, Assistant Superintendent of Schools - Clinton Public School District. For each interview, I asked about

their view of the achievement gap in Mississippi, why they think this is a pertinent issue in today's education debates, and solutions that they believe would benefit the achievement gap as a whole. For the group of policymakers, I asked about their proposed solutions, and for the school districts, I asked about how they see the achievement gap manifest in their districts and whether their districts had been successful in closing the achievement gap. These interviews, combined with my analysis of existing education policies seeks to explain how the policies have worked to close the achievement gap and whether they have been successful in doing so.

Federal Involvement in Education

Beginning with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the federal role in education has expanded while consequentially increasing the complexity of education policy in America. It has been argued though by scholars such as Dewey and Rawls that quality education is so fundamental to society that it affects our success as a democracy. Overtime, both Republicans and Democrats have come to agree that “public education is broken” and “our abysmal public schools threaten not only the performance of our economy but our national security, our very survival as a nation” (Ravitch 2014). Because of this narrative, we have seen national education policies passed such as No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act including Common Core, which sought to “fix” our education crisis. We have also witnessed a movement towards school choice as outlined in President Trump's most recent State of the Union in which he states that “the time has come to pass school choice for America's children.”

Diane Ravitch though argues that public education is not broken nor is it failing or declining. Instead, the trouble is “concentrated poverty and racial segregation,” which leads to the educational achievement gap. While policies have sought improve education overall through high stakes testing, accountability, and standards, the root causes of low school performance remained unaddressed; therefore, no national education policy has been successful at closing the achievement gap. Ravitch, Dewey, and Rawls all illustrate that schools and society are intertwined so ignoring the causes of poor academic performance is detrimental to our society as a whole. As seen in the quantitative chapter, the achievement gap has been narrowing overtime among racial subgroups meaning that some aspects of our national policies has been successful, but other subgroups such as those that are economically disadvantaged, as represented through those eligible for free and reduced school lunch, have seen virtually no success in shrinking the achievement gap. Policies such at Mississippi’s version of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Mississippi Succeeds, has an ambitious plan to close the achievement gap by 2025, but it is unclear whether this policy will be successful at doing so.

Sweeping education reform at the national level began out of a fear that American students were not receiving a quality education in the post-Sputnik world. Beginning in 1957 with the Soviet Union’s first satellite launch and a growing strain on public schools from baby boomers, “people of all political backgrounds agreed that the national interest depended on improving the quality of America’s schools” (Ravitch 1983). Out of this came the National Defense Education Act in 1958 which supported the study of math, science, and foreign language while giving money to school construction projects. It was only on the basis of national security that President Eisenhower felt justified in allowing

the federal government to play a role in supporting education. What began as a quest for national security and limited federal interference in public schools, was quickly overshadowed by the Civil Rights Era and a growing urban slum. The conservation changed from a pursuit of excellence to a pursuit of equality with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

The main goal of the ESEA was to create Title I funding which distributed funds to schools with "a high percentage of students from low-income families" (Paul 2016). The goal was to close the urban or rural gap among those in middle-class suburbia; however, instead of closing gaps by spending funds on low-income students, the national policy goals shifted. What was originally a state and local issue evolved into the federalism issue we see today surrounding federal involvement in funding and policy. As President Johnson stated, this was a move to make education the "number one business of the American people" (Casalaspì 2017). The \$1 billion in aid was designed to make the federal funding formula more equitable for low-income students in a place like Mississippi. For example, Sunflower county in MS and Westchester county have equal numbers of low-income students but under the original formula Westchester received three times the amount of money because of per capita income levels (Casalaspì 2017). As a bill designed to address inequalities in academic performance on the basis of socioeconomics, ESEA fell short as seen in the quantitative data. However, every five years, a new version of the ESEA has been authorized, each with hopes that it will be the legislation that closes the achievement gap.

No Child Left Behind

Following decades of no significant process being made on closing achievement gaps, the most notable reauthorization of ESEA known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2001. President Bush pledged that “no child will be left behind—not one single child” (Ravitch 2000). Prior to his election as President, he named himself the “Education Governor” because of the gains made by Texas students on standardized tests including a shrinking achievement gap and dropout rates. What was not taken into consideration in Texas or in the U.S. during NCLB was that the quality of the test mattered as much as the results. What occurred in Texas during this period is similar to the complaints surrounding NCLB—students received a poorer education because of the emphasis placed on teaching to the test. However, despite the concerns of some, on the heels of 9/11 Congress unanimously reauthorized ESEA as NCLB.

The main emphasis within the act was accountability, but there was little explanation about how to reach it. Overall, states were required to adopt a test with three performance levels (basic, proficient, and advanced) and test all students in grades 3rd - 8th and once in high school. Furthermore, the data from these tests had to be separated by race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, gender, and English language proficiency. The states had to provide a timeline that showed how each student would achieve proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year, and individual schools were required to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for each individual subgroup every year. If a school failed to make AYP for every subgroup, they faced sanctions that increased each first. First, they would be put on notice. Second, they were required to allow students to transfer to

better performing schools and pay for their transportation. Third, they were required to offer free tutoring to low-income students. Fourth, they had to undertake “corrective action” which could include staff and curriculum changes along with a longer school day. Fifth, they had to “restructure” meaning they could convert to a charter school, replace administration and staff, give control to a private management firm or to the state, or they would do “any other major restricting of the school’s governance.” Lastly, all states were required to participate in NAEP (Ravtich 2000).

While, this was the first time that schools nationwide began employing the NAEP test to measure student performance, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* believe that the test has been misused. Instead of using the NAEP test for its “original purpose of measuring what students at various grade levels actually know,” the goal has become “judging what students at various grade levels should know” which is difficult to measure (Harvey and Berliner 2018).

Krystal Cormack stated that the efforts seen due to NAEP testing to measure the achievement gap by demographic groups in order to see who is being served well and who is not “helps us focus on the children who need us the most.” She stated that policies such as No Child Left Behind “resulted in positive strides because of the emphasis on equity and ensuring that all students are served well and that we try to deliver the same standard of education across demographic groups.” During the course of my qualitative interviews, all of my interviewees had the same sentiment that although No Child Left Behind is often viewed as a failure because it did not achieve the ambitious goals of achieving proficiency for every student by 2014, they agree that there was some good that came out of it. Angela Bass, Deputy Director of Policy for Mississippi First said that

although everyone talks about accountability with NCLB, “one of the good things is that it caused MS to measure themselves in a way that revealed some of these gaps—which would not have been done otherwise.” Furthermore, Sanford Johnson, Deputy Director of Advocacy stated that because of NCLB, “we started talking about gaps and getting data, but it left it up to the states to define success.” This meant “we got to set the bar but you got to tell us if we are succeeding,” which lead to disconnect among the state and national levels.

However, as seen in the quantitative data, NAEP scores across all grades and all student subgroups rose during the implementation of NCLB. This could be due to a greater emphasis placed on testing and teaching for the test. It could also be in part due to a realization by states such as MS that something had to be done about the overall gap between our state and other states. It could also be that while initial gains were made following the implementation, these gains did not continue at a steady pace nor did they increase significantly more among one subgroup than another. This means that while all groups did better, the gap did not get smaller. What we see in MS is that scores eventually plateaued around 2005-2007 and no significant progress was made. In a study of 58 elementary teachers in the MS Delta during NCLB, researchers also found that teacher morale and overall school climate were impacted by the new high states testing as well as internal and external pressures (Al-Fadhli and Singh 2010). Al-Faldhli and Singh, much like my interviewees state that “even though the goals of the NCLB Act seem currently unattainable, there is evidence that the educational system is moving in the right direction.”

Common Core Standards and the Race to the Top Initiative

Beginning in the early 2000s as a part of NCLB, states were required to adopt a set of standards that specified what students in grades 3-8 should know as well as a definition of proficiency. However, there was no consistency across states which led to a group of states leaders through the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) creating standardization among standards—now known as the Common Core State Standards which were initially adopted in 2009. These standards are known as the college- and career-readiness standards which Mississippi eventually renamed the Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards. The Mississippi Board of Education adopted these standards in June of 2010 with full implementation set for the 2013-2014 school year. This made us one of 41 states to adopt the standards.

What critics of Common Core did not realize is that this initiative was never federally led nor was it a set curriculum. Instead, this was a state-led effort that provided “benchmarks for math and English achievement in each state” (Mader 2014). Governor Phil Bryant of MS called Common Core “a failed program” before full implementation began in the state. However, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in D.C. stated that MS’s English standards were “far weaker” than that of Common Core stating they were “mysterious and among the worst in the country.” This transition to Common Core standards moved English in MS away from “worksheets and into more critical thinking” according to the Director of English Language Arts for the MS Department of Education (Mader 2010). Furthermore, Mississippi’s state Superintendent of Education, Carey Wright, said:

“It is a gross mischaracterization to call the standards a ‘failed program’ when Mississippi and other states have yet to give the first test aligned to the standards. The state is still in the implementation phase, and to remove the standards now would be disheartening to the district and school leaders and teachers who have invested time and resources in this effort” (Mader 2010).

The incentive from the federal government to adopt Common Core standards came during the Race to the Top Initiative which was a set of competitive grants in which states received additional points for adopting “college and career ready standards.” In states such as MS, we chose to adopt Common Core Standards in an effort to be more competitive for Race to the Top Grants instead of creating our own standards. States who chose to compete for the Race to the Top grants had to opt-in to the process. Points were awarded for categories such as promoting access to high-quality early learning, turning around low-performing schools, and adopting policies allowing the creation of Charter schools. Mississippi did not compete in the first round and came in 34th of 37 states during the second round. Sanford Johnson stated that although this initiative brought “attention to school reform, MS did not do enough to reach grants.” However, this did lead to “momentum around charter laws in MS.”

While MS did not reach the necessary standards to be competitive for these grants, individual school districts were able to submit applications as well. During the second round of grants in 2013, the Clarksdale Municipal School District in Clarksdale, MS received a \$10,000,000 grant from Race to the Top. Clarksdale grant came from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s decision to “invest a large chunk of the \$120 million in grants in rural America” (McNeil 2014). All five of the district winners were

from the South in rural areas. The overall goal is to “spur personalized learning at the local level.” In Clarksdale, the money was spent to expand their 9th grade academy in order to “remediate students in grades K-8 in reading and mathematics” as well as improvement among professional development. Furthermore, 5th and 6th grade learning academies were created as well as expansion of access to instructional and data coaches (McNeil 2014).

Overall, despite criticism, Mississippi adopted the Common Core standards and districts such as Clarksdale benefited from the Race to the Top grants. Angela Bass stated that because of the federal push to adopt college and career readiness standards in order to be competitive for these grants, “our standards have risen.” Common Core made sure “our standards are comparable to other states.” However, Mississippi students found “under our old standards, students weren’t performing well, but now they are under even harder standards.”

Every Student Succeeds Act and the Mississippi Succeeds Plan

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is known as the Every Student Succeeds Act. This act “restores to each state control over their academic standards. States will be responsible for choosing what academic standards to adopt or develop that are aligned with college entrance requirements and relevant state career and technical education standards” (Alexander 2015). It also officially replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. Under the new authorization, states are required to submit accountability plans, but they are allowed to pick their own goals. However, these goals “have to set an expectation that all groups that are furthest behind close gaps

in achievement and graduation rates” (Klein 2016). States are still required to adopt “challenging” standards, which in our case are still Common Core standards known in the state as the Mississippi College and Career-Readiness Standards. ESSA, like NCLB, requires testing in reading and math for grades 3-8 with requirements to break data into subgroups such as racial and socioeconomic. One of the largest variances from NCLB is the “highly qualified teacher” requirement. The Title II formula which funds teacher quality in rural areas has also been adjusted, a new program called the Teacher and School Leader Innovation Program “provides grants to districts that want to try out performance pay and other teacher-quality improvement measures” (Klein 2016).

Because each state was given flexibility to choose their own accountability standards and goals under ESSA, the Mississippi Succeeds bill was written. This plan, approved by the U.S. Department of Education, has a goal of closing the achievement gap in the state by 2025. The bill also creates an accountability plan, as well as collaborative early childhood programs and assistance for underperforming schools. The plan provides an outline of long term goals, support and intervention measures, as well as an accountability system. The long term goals include: all students are proficient and showing growth in all assessed areas, every student graduates from high school and is ready for college and career, every child has access to a high-quality early childhood program, every school has effective teachers and leaders, every community is effectively using a world-class data system to improve student outcomes, and every school and district is rated “C” or higher. Dr. Carey Wright stated, “All of our long-term goals are aligned to our state’s bold strategic plan to advance student achievement, and those goals apply to each subgroup of students. We have set high expectations for all students, and we have

aggressive annual performance targets divided by subgroup that we will be monitoring annually” (2018). While control has been given back to the state under ESSA, Angela Bass stated that “this could be really great or really bad.” With ESSA, “we can look at growth, but we still don’t look at subgroup growth in terms of the accountability system. However, in terms of the way we hold ourselves accountable for teaching kids [under ESSA], it is positive” (Angela Bass).

Under the Mississippi Succeeds Act, students are tested annually under NAEP and MAAP (Mississippi Academic Assessment Program). The bill acknowledges that historically, MS students still score “near the bottom of many education rankings.” This is in part due to tests such as MAAP creating new rigorous standards and assessments that are more in line with NAEP. However, since 2015, 4th grade math and reading scores in the state have been steadily increasing on NAEP tests. MS Succeeds attributes this to the implementation of the Mississippi College-and Career-Readiness Standards in 2011. While strides were made in 4th grade tests, the same is not true for ACT results which measure “college readiness and student achievement in high school.” In 2016, only 11% of MS students met the national benchmark score in all four subject areas. Overall, MS students scored on average an 18.3 composite score in 2017 as compared to a 20.8 nationally. The largest area of growth in MS though is seen in the graduation rate due to professional development and the creation of multiple pathways for diplomas. The drop-out rate dropped from 16.7% in 2012 to 10.8% in 2017 across the state.

It is clear that MS has made progress in recent decades to improve student performance and statewide standards, but MS Succeeds intends to further these gains through “setting specific targets [that] will enable students to be prepared for college and career.”

By 2025, the goal is to increase proficiency in Language Arts from 32.6% and in Math from 31.1% in 2015-2016 to 70%, and increase the graduation rate from 82.3% to 90%. For the purpose of closing the achievement gap, the first long-term goal of “all students proficient and showing growth in all assessed areas” is most analogous. For the purposes of this specific goal, the MS Succeeds Act requires the implementation of the Literary-Based Promotion Act which focuses on grade-level reading and the continued implementation of the Mississippi College-and Career-Readiness Standards.

Mississippi has made progress under the College-and Career-Readiness Standards, and I believe that students will benefit from a focus on grade level reading, but in combination with all of the goals of MS Succeeds, I am not convinced that the plan does enough and that there is enough commitment from state policymakers to make closing the achievement gap by 2025 an attainable goal.

Proposal

Much like what is seen in MS Succeeds, I do not believe that one policy or one approach will close the achievement gap. Instead, throughout my research and my interviews with those who work in education and education policy, I have come to realize that a combination of things must be done to truly close the gap. First and foremost, once students enter kindergarten, the gap is already present and teachers spend the next 12 years attempting to play catch up with these students who entered what we believe to be an equitable system of public schooling systematically disadvantaged. Second, the current funding formula in MS has to be adjusted to provide more objective funding for the students who need it most. Third, students in our state do not have equal access to high-

quality schools whether that be because of a lack of high-quality teachers and administrators or due to a failure of the public school system in their district as a whole.

I. Access to High Quality Pre-K

According to the Department of Education, a child's "brain capacity develops 90 percent before a child reaches age 5" (2013). This means that those students who do not participate in high-quality preschools have the potential to lag behind peers when entering kindergarten, meaning that the achievement gap begins before students enter the public school system. According to one study by the Center for American Progress, African American and Hispanic children enter public kindergarten 9 to 10 months behind their peers in math and 7 to 12 months in reading. Similarly, low-income students enter 10 to 13 months behind in reading. Across all of my interviews, each stated the importance of not only access to Pre-K but access to high quality Pre-K. Angela Bass stated, "We know that when kids start school ready, they are more likely to stay on grade level, when they don't then they are more likely to fail." Sanford Johnson stated that the work that groups such as Mississippi First are doing to create collaborative programs across the state "has the largest return on investment" in terms of state funding. He said, "the dollars you invest in Pre-K, you don't have to spend on remediation or catching kids up over the next 14 years."

While both Bass and Sanford have worked in a classroom environment, they currently work for Mississippi First. Anthony Goins and Mac Curlee who serve in administration positions in Mississippi districts though, echoed their sentiments. Goins stated that "the achievement gap begins before school and is based on socioeconomics and the home environment." In his Clinton district, they recognize that while "65% of students

that enter Kindergarten attended some type of child care, 35% did not and sat at home. That is a gap right there.” In order to address this achievement gap, Clinton has started more preschool classes, but he wonders, if providing Pre-K classes is the way to level the playing field for those entering Kindergarten, “where is the money?”

Among the Collaborative Pre-K programs in the state, 9 of 10 benchmarks have been met, but only 14 programs exist. Therefore, one of the largest initiatives for Mississippi First is expanding Pre-K programs by pushing the legislature to invest in high-quality Pre-K programs. Krystal Cormack states that expanding access to early childhood programming improves readiness. Currently, only 43% of students in the state attend some form of Pre-K; however, only 36.39% of students are achieving passing scores on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment. This test, measures a student's reading ability and predicts whether students will achieve mastery in the Third Grade. The current passing score is a 530, and the Mississippi average is 502. However, the average for those that attend Pre-K is 539 (Wright 2016). The scores become more dismal among Head Start programs which are specifically targeted at low-income or minority students with average scores at 475. The Early Learning Collaborative Act, which was passed in 2013 to provide \$3 million in funding to start the state's 14 Collaborative Programs, only serves 3% of students in the state. Although, the students in these Collaborative Programs are almost all meeting and exceeding the 530 passing score on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (Guo 2017).

Mississippi's Head Start Programs, which currently serve 52% low-income students and 80% African American students, fall “significantly behind the threshold” of quality standards set forth by the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett

and Friedman-Krauss 2016). Therefore, the issue becomes not just creating Pre-K programs, but creating high-quality Pre-K programs. The Center for American Progress found that access and “participation in a high-quality early childhood education program can enhance children’s development, reduce achievement gaps at kindergarten entry, and even have long-term benefits for children’s school trajectories” (Friedman-Krauss, Barnett, Nores 2016). For Mississippi students, access to high-quality Pre-K would allow children who are historically disadvantaged because of race or socioeconomic status to enter Kindergarten at the same levels as their peers. This would mean that schools and teachers do not have to spend the next 13 years catching up these children which saves both time and resources. Furthermore, it allows children to reach benchmarks that were previously unattainable because of a predisposition for lower success levels due to their socioeconomic status and/or race.

II. Individualized Support for Students

While groups such as Mississippi First are working to create more Collaborative Programs which would increase access to high-quality Pre-K across the state, there are students already in our public school system in Mississippi in grades K-12 who did not attend a Pre-K program or a high-quality Pre-K program. The question then becomes what are we doing for those students? For those students, I would argue that the individual districts and schools need a targeted approach much like the one seen in the Clinton School District. For every failing school district in the state of Mississippi, the student population is majority African American. However, the Clinton School District, which is 52% African American, is the only majority minority district in the state with an A rating (Mannie 2017). While some may argue that with a poverty rate that is half that of the

statewide average, the data might not tell the whole story, I would argue that this level of achievement among a majority minority district is a success. Previous Superintendent Tim Martin stated, “In my opinion, the way to close those gaps is not to focus specifically on the gap, but to make sure you have high standards and high expectations. You don't want to (close the gap) by having white students score less; you want your minority students to rise and score at the same level. It's not closed in one year; it's student by student, family by family working together to stay successful.” Current Superintendent Goins also stated that “Clinton tries to make gains for all students and doesn't look at race or gender.” Instead they “focus on each individual student that might need additional support to be successful.”

In Clinton, data for individual students is constantly being monitored and if a student is not making gains, they receive intensive interventions as early as Kindergarten. Goins stated that “if you give any kid additional support they need to be successful, great things will happen.” In Clinton, this has equated to a decrease in the achievement gap among every subgroup, because they begin to address the root of the issue for each child. For example, if a child is dyslexic or if a child is an English-language learner, they are placed with a therapist or interventionist who can address each child's unique situation. For children who begin in the district are often caught up by the time they enter Elementary School. However, with a low poverty rate and the 6th largest income level in the state, Clinton, much like other places in Mississippi has the ability to provide these resources to students. In low-income areas though, this is not the case.

III. Equitable Funding Formula

Mac Curlee who has served in districts such as Tupelo, Oxford, Okolona, and Aberdeen stated districts such as “Tupelo and Oxford had resources that Aberdeen could only dream about having.” This was in part due to high unemployment and less industry being present in Aberdeen. What Mr. Curlee did at schools such as Aberdeen that lacked resources was similar to what Clinton does. He identified students who were not meeting benchmarks and began devoting resources to those students, especially in grades K-3. He stated, “teachers would carefully analyze the data and develop interventions to counter the deficits observed in the students. Time would be reorganized for students in the non-proficient category.” For Aberdeen, “a considerable amount of time during the school day was devoted to reading.” Further, “The district’s promotion and retention policy was restructured so that principals had more decision-making authority to retain students. Social promotion ended, and the student’s proficiency level in reading, language, and math determined the grade advancement. During [his] last couple of years in Aberdeen, class sizes in the elementary school (PreK-3) were reduced and more assistant teachers were employed.” By the time Curlee left this district, it was in the top ten in terms of Third Grade Gate scores and was only a few schools with a 100% passage rate.

It is true that Aberdeen does not have the same level of resources as Clinton or Tupelo, but there are districts far poorer than Aberdeen that do not have the ability to reduce class sizes, hire more teachers, or provide interventionists for students. This is the reason why the state funding formula needs to be adjusted. Angela Bass stated that “we need more focused interventions and remediation for these children” which will only occur with a shift in resources to the kids who need it most. Currently there is a 5% weight for kids in poverty, but this is a “not enough.” She stated, “at the state level, we

aren't allocating resources in a way that makes sense." However, she acknowledges that when funding comes up in the legislature it is usually a call to "fully fund education." What we need though is "look at how funds are allocated and ask if that makes sense." Currently there is a 27% rule which is a loophole that provides a bonus for districts who have the property taxes to pay more money which leads to a wide disparity among districts with lower property tax levels. Sanford Johnson agreed that the current funding formula is inequitable and it "benefits rich school districts at the expense of poorer school districts. For districts such as Tupelo, the tax base is so good that they are able to make up the gaps in school funding." In rural areas though, "they survive on state funding and there is no tax base to make up that funding. This has to be taken into account." Johnson acknowledges that reallocating funding does not mean taking it away from some students, instead he agrees that both low income students, low performing students, and conversely those in gifted programs deserve the funding they need, whatever that level be, in order to be successful. I would argue that this approach makes sense especially for districts outside of urban areas. Coming from the Tupelo Public School District, I agree that we have resources to make up what state funding does not cover, but other districts are not afforded that ability. I would argue that it makes sense to reallocate funds to those districts which will give them the ability to provide targeted interventions to students already within the public school system who are not reaching benchmarks.

IV. High-Quality Teacher Attraction and Retention

Finally, as a state, much like with Pre-K programs, we need to focus on the quality of our public schools. One issue surrounding the quality of education for

some students is due to a lack of high-quality college graduates entering the teaching profession. From Krystal Cormack's perspective, having worked with Teach for America, she agrees that while organizations such as TFA have made a positive impact on lessening the teacher shortage in the state, "we need to explore ways to encourage young people to stay here in our state and serve while we also actively recruit other potential teachers to join us in the work of serving all children." However, she also acknowledges that we have to "ensure the effectiveness of the individuals in front of our children every day because they make the biggest difference in closing the gap." This requires a focus on the quality of teachers already in Mississippi school districts. As Cormack stated, "bills don't close gaps but people can."

Mac Curlee believes that the way to address the issue of high quality teachers is to focus on professional development. He stated, "if students were to score better on state assessments and perform better in the classrooms, the teachers had to become better at their 'craft'." For the Aberdeen district this meant that more time was devoted to professional development "in house". In the Tupelo district, due to higher levels of resources, this meant sending teachers to ME, FL, CA, and TX to learn about topics such as Advanced Placement and the effects of poverty in education. Sanford Johnson also addressed the topic of leadership in MS districts saying that "it's hard to recruit and retain teaching talent if there is not good leadership talent." For this issue, he argues that there are "decisions that happen at the school level that need to be made at the school level, and we need to give them that autonomy." He said, "give them school boards that focus on development and policy and lunch and buses (overall operations) and allow the principal autonomy to make decisions at the individual school level."

Johnson also acknowledged that when discussing “access to high quality schools, it usually turns into a war over charter schools and high quality district schools, but we need both.” Currently in Mississippi, there are only 5 charter schools with 3 more in the approval process. The focus needs to be two-fold according to Mississippi First, “Make sure we are expanding access, make sure we are holding high standards.” Overall though, he acknowledges that we just need schools that perform better. For the state, that may mean that we get to a point where if “schools are not achieving desired results, we may have to close schools that do not perform well.”

Conclusion

I believe that access to high-quality Pre-K and high-quality K-12 schools along with a reallocation of the current funding formula will have a positive impact on closing the achievement gap. When asking my interviewees if they thought the achievement gap would ever be closed in our state, Bass and Johnson agreed that they thought it could close with Goins stated that the only way he sees the gap ever closing is if one group stops growing and another continues. I would have to agree that I think there are solutions that will work to bring all students in the state to the proficient level, but I do not believe that the achievement gap will ever disappear until the root causes are addressed. As seen in the quantitative data, the racial achievement gap is closing in our state, but the socioeconomic gap is not. According to Diane Ravitch, “We have made genuine progress in narrowing the achievement gaps, but they will remain large if we do nothing about the causes of the gaps. If white achievement had stood still, the achievement gap would be closed by now, but of course white achievement has also improved, so the gap

remains large” (2014). She argues that the achievement gap is not actually an achievement gap after all but an opportunity gap.

In evaluating the national education policies enacted since 1965, I would agree with Goins that although I do not agree with everything, there is some good that came out of these policies. Curlee acknowledges this more directly by saying, “since the inception of NCLB and Common Core, which has been replaced with the Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards, gains have been observed at the state level. Graduation rates have improved and that’s probably a significant indicator because it tells us that more students are becoming more proficient on the state assessments in all grades and are progressing through the elementary schools, middle schools, and exiting high school. What bothers me about NCLB and Common Core is that the federal government has usurped so much more governance over education than what was once reserved for the states. An inordinate amount of time is being devoted to completing federal reports and complying with federal guidelines in order to secure federal dollars; time that could be better devoted in other areas within the districts and schools.” I think that another significant win that came out of national education policies is that we now have data based on subgroups so we can track the achievement of these subgroups. Furthermore, for states like Mississippi, we now have higher achievement standards overall. I would argue that these measures taken have improved the success of Mississippi’s public education system as a whole, but subgroups such as those that are economically disadvantaged have been left behind.

Therefore, I believe that my proposal would make strides to improve the achievement levels of both under and over performing students in the state, but no education policy will ever be able to address the issue of poverty which I believe, from my quantitative and qualitative research, is the largest inhibitor of student success in the state of Mississippi. The achievement gap, like Diane Ravitch stated, actually begins as an opportunity gap when children are born. This gap is present between groups that are able to attend high quality Pre-K programs and those that are not. It is present when students attend districts that lack quality teachers and an equitable funding formula in order to provide these disadvantaged students with individualized interventions. This gap follows students throughout their time in public schools and it affects graduation rates, job acquisition rates, and it contributes to the cycle of poverty in low-income areas. While I believe that my proposal will be beneficial to students who have been historically disadvantaged as seen in the achievement gap, it will never close the gap. The gap will remain until the opportunity gap ceases to exist. While no education policy will ever be able to solve the issue of poverty, I do believe that providing students from low-income and minority populations with the tools to succeed can help to bring them out of poverty. This is why I believe that providing students and schools with high-quality teachers, funding, and opportunities is important, and it is why so many education policymakers continue to fight for issues such as Pre-K for all and an equitable funding formula.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to investigate how the state of Mississippi has attempted to close the achievement gap based on Rawls and Dewey's view of democracy by examining the solutions proposed by national education policies, local policy organizations, and school districts. Throughout the thesis I asked the following questions:

a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap? b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted? c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy? d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap?

a) Why is the achievement gap part of policy debates in Mississippi and how have individual school districts and policymakers responded to the gap?

This thesis began with a theoretical explanation of why education is essential to democracy. Dewey argues that education provides the foundation for self-fulfillment and the pursuit of happiness and that because we are democratic society is should also provide equality. Even though education in America has evolved into a right since the first compulsory school law in 1852, Dewey and Rawls both acknowledge that education, like wealth, is not equal. This lack of equality in education leads to a gap known as the achievement gap between groups of students based on race and socioeconomic status.

b) How is the gap measured and what are the trends since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act was adopted?

Following the theoretical chapter, I utilized NAEP data known as the Nation's Report Card data in order to create a time-series analysis graph comparing subgroups historically exhibiting an achievement gap in grades 4th and 8th in Math. This data is known as the "gold standard" of testing because it provides a breakdown of scores by subgroups. This graph allowed me to see the trends of the achievement gap overtime from either the implementation of No Child Left Behind or the first available data for each subgroup, whichever is earliest. In addition to looking at overall trends, these graphs allowed me to see if there was a correlation between the data and the dates of implementation for major education policies. What I found is that in both 4th and 8th grade scale scores for the state of Mississippi as a whole, students are performing better overtime and the gap is shrinking between MS and their national peers. This closing of the gap is seen more in 4th grade than in 8th with the 4th grade gap shrinking from 18 points in 1992 to 5 points in 2017. In 8th grade the gap has shrunk from 22 to 12.

In terms of racial subgroups, minority Mississippi students in the 4th grade are now performing better than their national peers, and white students are the only subgroup not outperforming their national counterparts. Furthermore, the national white-black gap is currently at 25 points while the MS white-black gap is

at 22 points. The same is true for the white-Hispanic gap which is 19 points nationally and only 7 in MS. The same narrative is true among 8th grade students except that the national average for black students is at 260 and the MS average is currently 257 so MS students are slightly behind although the gaps among white-black students are smaller in MS than in the nation as a whole. The most interesting subgroup was the socioeconomic subgroup represented by those eligible or those not eligible for free and reduced school lunch. Both those eligible and those not eligible overtime in MS and in the nation are performing better on average, the gap has not closed. In fact, the gap is actually 1 point higher in 2017 than it was in 1996 among both socioeconomic groups both nationally and in MS in the 4th and 8th grade except for in Mississippi 8th graders where the gap decreased by 1 point. This time series analysis makes it easy to see that the achievement gap among some subgroups is closing and it is possible that national education policies have been successful in aiding in this success. However, no education policy thus far has been able to make an impact on the socioeconomic gap, which I would argue is a clear representation of the opportunity gap. However, while progress has been made among some subgroups, the gap still remains in each.

c) How are achievement gap debates reflected in the current policy?

Beginning in 1965, in an effort to provide additional resources for low-income students, the federal government became involved in education. This was the first time that the federal government recognized that a gap was present

among groups of students. In order to understand the impact of federal involvement in education on the gaps, I completed a policy analysis beginning in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act continuing through to the most recent authorization of the act with the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Mississippi version, Mississippi Succeeds. Coupled with the policy analysis, I completed interviews with key policymakers and education figures in the state to understand their view of the gaps, the current state of education in MS, and what proposals they have for the state education system or what strategies they have seen work in particular districts or the state as a whole. Overall, there were some themes consistent among all interviewees including a need for high-quality teachers, more access to high-quality Pre-K, and a more equitable funding formula for schools districts that allows districts to provide additional resources for underperforming students. In reference to national education policies, each interviewee agreed that although they do not agree with every aspect of national policies, they were beneficial in increasing accountability and standards for Mississippi. These policies also brought the gaps to the forefront of education policy debates and provided us with data on these subgroups for the first time.

d) Have any of the past national education policies been effective in decreasing the achievement gap?

Overall, it is clear that national policies have been beneficial in increasing the overall success of students in Mississippi as a whole in comparison to their national peers as well as raising the scale scores of racial minority subgroups which

resulted in a decreasing gap. However, no progress has been made in terms of the socioeconomic subgroups. This is why the opportunity gap persists in public schools. This gap is present at birth and is perpetuated by a lack of opportunities such as access to Pre-K programs as well as resources because of the inequitable funding formula. Therefore, I propose that all students should be granted access to Pre-K programs which help to bring students from low-income families to the performance level of their peers. I also believe that these students should have access to high-quality K-12 schools which requires a higher standard for teachers and a more equitable funding formula which would reallocate funds to students and schools that need it most. I believe that these measures will help to continue to close the gap among certain subgroups, and I believe that it could be beneficial in closing the opportunity gap, but the opportunity gap exists because of poverty and no education policy will alleviate poverty.

In his book, "Equality and Achievement in Education," James Coleman describes Rawls' view of education. He states that in order to create an equitable education system, all outside forces that impact a child's education such as socioeconomic status would have to be removed (Coleman 1990). However, this is unattainable which is why Rawls places an emphasis on solutions that would work to alleviate the achievement gap once a child enters public education. In this manner, it is clear that poverty and other outside forces will not be eliminated nor will one single education policy proposal "close" the achievement gap. Krystal Cormack stated, "If we put our efforts, resources and combined talents together, it is possible to close the gap. However, this effort requires innovation, resources,

money, talented people, dedicated families etc. Everyone has to do their part.”

For Mississippi that means a commitment to dedicate resources to Pre-K programs, student support, attraction of high-quality teachers, and a reallocation of the funding formula. In the eyes of Dewey, equality in education is essential to democracy such that all students are provided “an equitable opportunity to receive and take” in order to succeed and reach their full potential (Dewey 1916).

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