

## Families hold the key to increasing African American achievement in schools

*In recent decades progress in addressing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps between African American and Latino students and white and Asian American students has been painfully slow. **William Jeynes** has conducted two meta-analyses examining which factors reduce this achievement gap, and the extent to which parental involvement helps African American students perform well in school. He finds that faith and family factors help to reduce the achievement gap by up to 65 percent. Rather than simply pumping billions of dollars into school-based solutions for improving educational outcomes, he argues that politicians need to take a broader minded approach, and consider policies which recognize the importance of family involvement in improving educational outcomes.*



There is no question that over the last half-century and more, the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap has been one of the most pressing debates in American education. Ronald Roach recently **asserted** that, “in the academic and think tank world, pondering achievement gap remedies takes center stage.” Specifically, African American and Latino students trail white and Asian American students in average school outcomes. Progress on reducing the gaps has been agonizingly slow in spite of the fact that the United States has practiced programs of affirmative action, often offered teachers giving instruction in the inner cities 20 percent more than they would make elsewhere, and poured countless billions of additional dollars into urban education. Affirmative action, in particular, gives African Americans and Latinos in particular major advantages over their white counterparts, in terms of gaining entrance into America’s best colleges.

In spite of all of these efforts, racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps have remained largely intractable. The achievement gaps did **narrow** to some extent during the late 1970s and the 1980s. However, the narrowing of the differential in test scores in the 1970s was due to the fact is that test results during this decade were generally slumping badly for American youth of all races and the results of white children were **going down a good deal faster** than for African American students. Although technically the gap declined the answer to bridging the shortfall is not for the scores of other students to decline. Many educators attribute the progress in this area in the 1980s to the President Reagan’s Back to Basics Movement, because research **indicates** that that when disadvantaged children are exposed to the basics, which their more affluent counterparts generally receive in and out of school, academic differences abate.

### Results from meta-analyses provide real hope

The results of two meta-analyses I conducted have provided real hope that the achievement gaps can be substantially reduced. These studies examined 1) what factors best reduce the achievement gap and 2) the extent to which parental involvement helps African American students perform well in school.

The **first** meta-analysis yielded two particularly important results. First, the findings confirmed the results of numerous other studies that indicated that non-school factors have much more of an impact than school variables on bridging racial and socioeconomic differences. Second, the two sets of factors that had the largest impact in bridging differences in scholastic outcomes by race and gender were family-based and faith-based in nature. Moreover, the power of these factors was so great that when highly religious African American, as well as Latino, children who were from two biological parent families, the achievement gap *totally* disappeared. Faith factors *alone* (without considering the family variables) and family factors *alone* (without considering the faith variables) reduced the achievement gap by between 60-65 percent.

The [second](#) meta-analysis indicated that African American parental involvement has a strong relationship with high scholastic outcomes. The extent of parental involvement's influence is roughly one half of a grade point, e.g., the difference between a 3.0 and a 3.5 GPA.

The profound impact that parental engagement has on African American educational outcomes is especially noteworthy, given that the [overwhelming majority](#) of African Americans are raised in a single parent household. The research literature is clear that parental engagement is greatly facilitated when the mother and father are both in the household.

The results of the parental involvement meta-analysis are noteworthy especially because the study specifies the components of family involvement that have the most ameliorative effects on students. Among the aspects of this engagement by mothers and fathers that had the most positive impact on school outcomes were parental expectations, parental style (of raising children), and participation in school activities.



### **A new approach to addressing the achievement gap is needed**

It is patent from the results of the meta-analyses that leaders need to inaugurate a new and much broader approach to alleviating the persistent disparities in educational outcomes by race. For over half a century, the primary initiatives to accomplish this goal have been almost solely educational and economic-based in nature. What we now have is a situation in which educators seek educational solutions, economists employ economic solutions, psychologists utilize psychological approaches, and so forth. Moreover, politicians seriously consider only the economic and educational proposals. The results of the meta-analyses suggest that this insular approach to the achievement gap by academics, politicians, and others is unwise. The findings of these studies indicate that one of the primary reasons why previous attempts to bridge unwanted differences have fallen short is because the focus of these interventions was very narrow. The studies also demonstrate another important reason why past efforts to reduce the gaps have fallen short; these initiatives did not emphasize factors that were actually the most important. Few proposals to reduce scholastic gaps involve strengthening the family and drawing from the empowering that personal faith creates.

Admittedly, one of the reasons why America's leaders have emphasized pumping billions of dollars into improving African American educational outcomes and other school-based solutions is that these options are probably the

easiest to implement. However, one can also argue that these are the most superficial of the various options. There is a certain degree of irony to the fact that although the family and personal faith are clearly often sources of strength for countless people, they have gone largely unutilized in efforts to improve African American (and Latino) school outcomes.

### **Actions that are key to improving African American achievement**

If one combines the results of the two meta-analyses, there are several specific recommendations that America's leaders and institutions need to apply.

First, leaders and especially educators need to humbly acknowledge that not only is parental involvement important, but also that home-based subtle aspects of parental participation are more important than some of the more overt aspects. There needs to be a broader acknowledgement of a research trend that has been in place for at least half a century, i.e., that home factors have much more of an impact of educational outcomes than school factors. In a [study](#) organized by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development of 27 nations, it was found that 72 percent of African American children are raised in single-parent families. This compares to a mere 14.9 percent among the nation's studies and 25 percent in the United States. The 72 percent figure was by far the [highest](#) of any ethnic group in the study and is likely the highest of any group in the world. To dismiss these facts as irrelevant in terms of affecting African American educational outcomes is specious logic.

The fact that the vast majority of African Americans are raised in single parent families is a disadvantage that is so vast, that it is almost impossible to compensate for through other means. Unless Americans understand this fact and take action to try to strengthen African American families, it is going to be extremely unlikely that African American academic achievement is ever going to equal that of Asian Americans and whites. Naturally, families themselves must take responsibility for their own choices and actions. Nevertheless, there are some clear common sense actions that people in the United States could take that would greatly strengthen African American families. Schools and American society, as a whole, can emphasize the importance of parental involvement, especially the more subtle aspects that are practiced at home. Teachers can also do a much better job than they are of informing parents about the components of family engagement that have the greatest positive impact on children. In addition, politicians should pass legislation that will reduce the family dissolution rate and raise the marriage rate. Promising legislative initiatives would include passing laws that waive marriage license fees when couples obtain premarital counseling and requiring a waiting period for divorce if the reasons are relatively minor and there are also children in the home.

Second, school officials, the media, and American society, as a whole, need to stop belittling people of faith. The reality is that surveys indicate that of all American ethnic groups, African Americans are [most likely to define themselves](#) as being religious. To many African Americans, then, their religious faith is a great source of strength, a sense of purpose, and motivation. Educators who make demeaning comments about people of faith inadvertently can contribute to the achievement gap, by disparaging a source of strength for so many African Americans.

Third, Americans, particularly leaders generally and educators, need to approach the achievement gap from much more of an interdisciplinary and open-minded perspective. It is both naïve and illogical to believe that just school and economic-based interventions will be sufficient to turn the tide of underperforming students. In addition to educational and monetary factors, there are psychological, sociological, religious, family, interpersonal, and philosophical variables that indubitably impede higher achievement. If policy on this issue continues to propound insular proposals, one should not be surprised if there continue to be narrow results. Undertaking this broader and more open-minded approach will not be easy, given that at so many levels of US society, individuals are encouraged to specialize rather than work across disciplines. For example, even professors who serve at the same university are often unaware of what each other are doing.

### **The achievement gap is too important an issue to not act on the evidence**

The results of the meta-analyses are clear. Family and faith factors are important to consider and act upon, if one is to see a contraction of the achievement gap. Sadly, heretofore many leaders have dismissed faith and family variables as not primary ones. However, the results of the meta-analyses are undeniable. The extent to which a child experiences a stable family and a sense of purpose has a dramatic impact on how they do in school. It is time to more fully acknowledge this reality and act accordingly.

*This article is based on the paper, 'A Meta-Analysis: The Relationship Between Parental Involvement and African American School Outcomes' in the Journal of Black Studies.*

Featured image credit: [Matt\\_Weibo](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1XXKRLS>

---

## About the author

**William Jeynes** – *California State University, Long Beach*

William Jeynes is a Professor of Education at California State University, Long Beach, and a Senior Fellow, at the Witherspoon Institute, Princeton, NJ. His research interests cover a wide range of issues that include education, psychology, economics, history, religion, and sociology. His multidisciplinary approach has helped enable him to develop special relationships with the US and Korean governments. He has done a considerable amount of quantitative and qualitative research on how to bridge the achievement gap, parental involvement, religious commitment, historical trends, school choice, family structure, religious schools, discrimination, bullying, reading instruction, and public policy. He has written for the White House and for both the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP