

Reorganizing the Professional Culture in Wisconsin Schools to Eliminate Racial Achievement Gaps

In this longitudinal study of Wisconsin schools, we examined the impact that schools with a strong professional culture have on the English Language Arts (ELA) and Math achievement of Black, White, and Latinx students.

Methods

First, we measured the change in achievement in all Wisconsin elementary and middle schools for Black, White, and Latinx students from 2015 to 2019. We then examined teacher retention and survey data to identify schools serving Black, White, and Latinx students during the study that were *organized to improve*, with a strong professional culture. Finally, we examined if schools *organized to improve* realized improved achievement results for Black, White, Latinx students. 211 Wisconsin schools had complete data and were included in the study, 67 of which served Black students, 59 served Latinx students, and 102 served White students.

Key Findings

1. **At the start of the study, we found extremely large achievement gaps between Black, White, and Latinx students.** Black student achievement was at or above the state average in only 3 schools regarding ELA, and only 1 school regarding Math. However, White student achievement was at or above the state average in ELA and math in 67 and 58 schools respectively.
2. **Few schools serving Latinx students were *organized to improve*, with a strong professional culture.** Many more were “organized to stagnate”, with a weak professional culture characterized by pervasive teacher turnover, low teacher school commitment, low trust between educators, and infrequent collaboration.
3. **Almost no schools serving Black students were *organized to improve*, with a strong professional culture.**
4. **Student achievement improved considerably in the few schools serving Black and Latinx students that were *organized to improve*, with a strong professional culture.** In some schools, the gap between the achievement for Latinx students and the state average was completely eliminated.
5. **The achievement for White students was unaffected by the strength of a school's professional culture.**

Study Implications

The results of this study suggest much of the large achievement gap between Black, White, and Latinx students is attributable to inequities in the quality of schooling students receive. There are stark differences between the strength of the professional culture in schools serving Black, White, and Latinx students. These differences explain a great deal of why the achievement of Black and Latinx students lags so far behind that of White students. To put it simply, White students attend better schools. Given this, it is clear that the education system in Wisconsin represents a racist institution. However, this study demonstrates the impact that improving school professional culture has on achievement gaps. If more schools serving Black and Latinx students were *organized to improve*, with a strong professional culture, our school system would be more equitable, more anti-racist, and achievement gaps would be reduced.

VISUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN WISCONSIN SCHOOLS

Achievements gaps at the start and end of the study (2016-2019)

