

NEPC Review: Beyond Race: What Really Drives Wisconsin's Achievement Gap (Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, March 2026)



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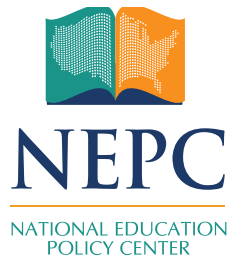
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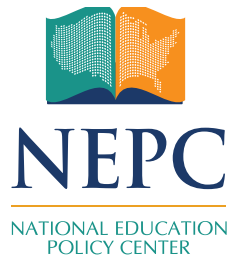
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Summary

A new Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL) report highlights the extreme achievement gap between White and Black students in Wisconsin, particularly in ELA/reading at the elementary school level. The report criticizes education policymakers for their purported misdiagnosis of the problem as *systemic racism*. It argues that factors presented in the report as separate from race, including poverty, disability and family instability, account for the racial disparities and illustrate the need for newer approaches. While the report highlights important issues and offers some simplistic analysis of the influence of poverty and disability, it fails to acknowledge systemic racial inequalities in educational opportunities in schools. It also overlooks racial differences in interactive effects of family and school learning environments. Poverty, disability and family instability are not “beyond race”—they are intertwined with race. Moreover, the report’s promotion of the Science of Reading phonics-based approach alone, based on what is known as the “Mississippi Miracle,” is unwarranted, given that explanations for Mississippi’s huge reading score gains are attributable to a combination of other factors—and that they evaporate by eighth grade. Except for a timely nudge to take another hard look at how to address achievement gaps, policymakers will find the report’s findings and recommendations of little practical value.



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I. Introduction

Achievement gaps among various groups of American students have long been an area of concern. Among those gaps, those between students of color and White students have persisted despite any number of attempts to alleviate them. Such gaps are critical because they function as an important yardstick of progress toward educational and social equity, both of which have implications for the country's future economic and social health. Students who leave schools without foundational skills are ill-prepared for future success in either the workforce or further education.

The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty's (WILL) new report, *Beyond Race: What Really Drives Wisconsin's Achievement Gap*, authored by Will Flanders,¹ focuses on such a concerning gap. National assessments indicate that compared to other states, Wisconsin experiences the largest achievement gap between White and Black students, particularly in elementary ELA/reading. According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Wisconsin's gap is 45-points, 13 points higher than the group of states below it.² State assessments show similar results.

The WILL report offers both an analysis of what is causing Wisconsin's notable gap and suggestions for what policymakers should do about it. It is important to note here, however, that identifying an effective solution to a problem depends upon accurately identifying its causes. Especially in light of the report's potential to influence policy in other states, then, this review offers a detailed analysis of its methods, findings and recommendations to determine to what extent policymakers should consider them reliable.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Criticizing education policymakers for their misdiagnosis of the problem as racism, the report finds that factors beyond race account for a substantial portion of observed disparities, although it acknowledges that correlation is not causation and that many unmeasured factors remain. Specifically, the report finds that the White-Black achievement gap in Wisconsin is attributable largely to poverty (about 42%), and also to disability (about 3.6%). Among other factors, it lists three it finds important: (1) family structure (lower marriage rates), (2) residential segregation, and (3) foundational literacy.

The report concludes that “Wisconsin’s racial achievement gap is both real and alarming, but its roots appear to extend well beyond race alone. In short, having black skin does not cause low achievement, contrary to the current theories of ‘systemic racism’ advanced by policymakers.”³

Additionally, the report makes some policy recommendations based on its findings:

Narrowing Wisconsin’s achievement gap will require addressing the intertwined social and economic challenges that shape educational outcomes long before students enter the classroom. A renewed focus on family stability, early childhood development, and targeted support based on economic status rather than race may offer a more effective path towards narrowing these long-observed gaps. Ultimately, closing the achievement gap will ultimately depend on addressing each student’s individual needs, rather than categorizing and stereotyping students based on race.⁴

Another, more specific recommendation is that policymakers consider adopting what is known as the Science of Reading approach to literacy instruction.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Findings about the influence of poverty and disability are based on original data analyses within the report. Conclusions about the influence of family structure are based on the assertion that single-parent families are known to take a toll on achievement. Details on methodology for the original analyses and their reliability appear below.

To support its promotion of a Science of Reading approach—one that emphasizes phonics-based early literacy intervention—the report refers to the purported “*Mississippi Miracle*.” That state mandated a phonics approach in its 2013 Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA); subsequently, Mississippi moved from 49th place in 2013 to the 8th place in 2024 among 50 states based on the NAEP fourth-grade reading test scores.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report is not a full-blown, formal research report, and it hardly mentions previous studies relevant to the topic of achievement gaps. Thus, the report's data analyses and interpretations are not well-grounded in the broader literature of educational and social equity. While it does cite a few studies to emphasize the importance of home/family environment, it lacks consideration of the broader historical debate on the relative influence of school vs. family and of other environmental factors—an ongoing debate since the 1966 Coleman report, *The Equality of Educational Opportunities*.⁵ Educational inequity in schools mirrors social inequity, but at the same time, it contributes to those inequities in the larger society. Prior research suggests that it is critical to address a broader range of educational inequities in multiple domains simultaneously.⁶

In addition, in citing family structure as a notable contributing factor, the report's assertion is based only on some statistics about a relatively high rate of unmarried Black adults. Specifically, the report notes:

The rate of married adults in Wisconsin is nearly 3% lower than the next lowest state, Michigan. While we cannot directly quantify the impact here, it is clear that this reality is exerting some negative pull on student test scores in Wisconsin, given what is known from extensive research on this topic.⁷

It is unclear how or why the report finds this conclusion clear, first because so little of this purportedly extensive research is cited, and second because contradictory research exists.

Of three references cited for the claim that unmarried households have a negative effect, one is a 2015 peer-reviewed meta-analysis of a father's influence, while the second is a master's thesis. The third is merely a brief article positing possible explanations for the finding—offering no support for the finding itself. However, contradictory evidence is easily found. For example, a longitudinal trend analysis of state-level NAEP reading and math achievement found that changes in the percentage of children living with single parents were not associated with test scores; it also found that increases in maternal education were associated with improvements in children's test scores during the period of 1990-2011.⁸ Another longitudinal research with national data suggests that most of the achievement variation is due to cross-sectional family background differences and is not a result of marital transitions per se.⁹ And, while family structure itself matters for child development, research has revealed that negative outcomes are not a given, since there are protective factors that can counteract possible negative effects and thereby foster more positive outcomes. Recent peer-reviewed research in this vein noted that “Longitudinal studies have indicated that most youngsters from single parent families develop normally

and only some of them have problems before separation and some develop problems after separation [sic].”¹⁰

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

For data, the report drew upon the NAEP and the Wisconsin Forward Exam. For academic achievement, the report used both national and state assessment data—the NAEP 2024 state assessment results in Grade 4 reading and the Wisconsin 2023-24 Forward Exam ELA proficiency results. These data sources are trustworthy and reliable. However, the NAEP data analysis simply compares state-level aggregate results focusing on the difference between Wisconsin and other states; it provides no direct data analysis based on in-state student-level or school-level achievement data. Wisconsin Forward Exam data does not mention any specific grade level (among Grades 3-8), so it is not clear whether data are from all or only a subset of those grades.

In terms of focal predictors of ELA proficiency at the school level, the report examines two specific variables: (1) poverty and (2) disability status. The report mentions a few other factors included in the model, such as the grade levels in the school, the share of English Language learners, and the share of Hispanic students. However, such demographic or family background variables are not directly relevant to educational intervention; they are not policy-manipulable in that schools and teachers cannot fully control and change them.

For data analysis, the report employs mediation analysis—a statistical method for determining how a specific (third) variable mediates and influences the relationship between two other related variables (predictor and outcome). In this case, the report examines how poverty influences the Black achievement gap and then how disability affects it. The report does appropriately acknowledge that correlation is not causation. However, the selection of poverty as an isolated variable and likely primary influence ignores the significant effects of school environment variables, such as teacher qualifications, class size, available teacher and student supports, and so on. Despite its discussion of other likely if “unmeasurable” influences—family structure, racial concentration, and foundational literacy—the report’s basic approach is overly simplistic, as the figures below demonstrate. Figure 1 illustrates the report’s analytical framework, and Figure 2 a more holistic and complex approach; this involves not only mediation analysis but also moderation analysis—a statistical method for exploring the interactions of multiple variables.

Figure 1. Original (Simple) Analytical Framework for Family Effects as Possible Mediators of Racial Achievement Gaps

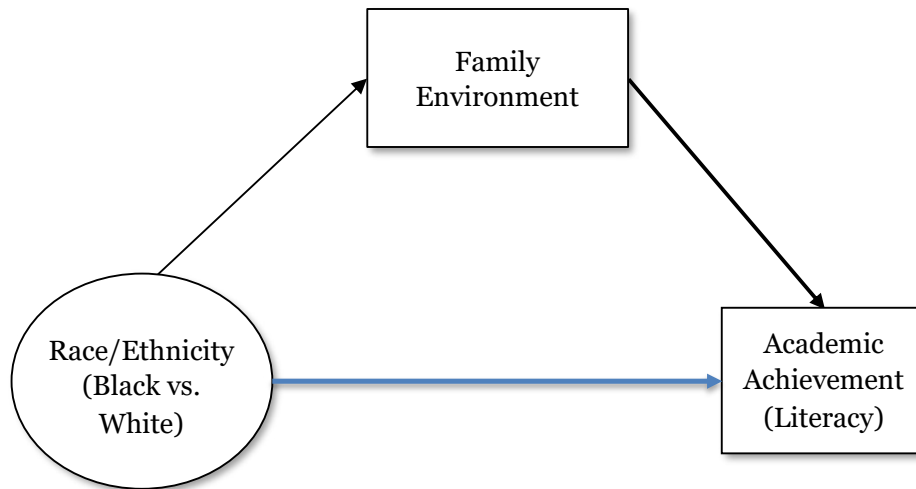
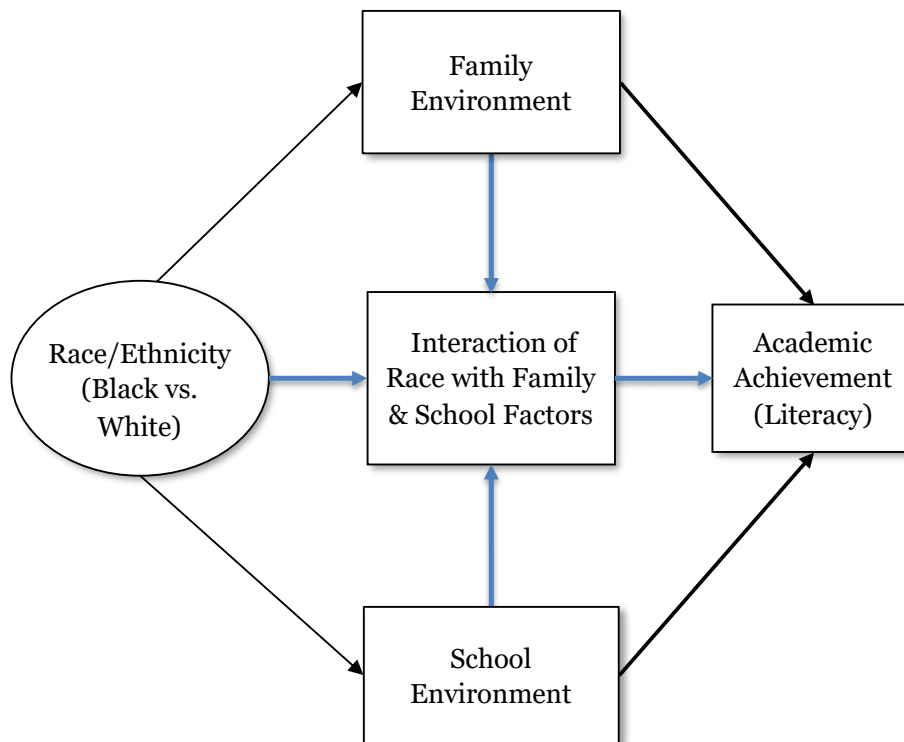


Figure 2. Alternative (Complex) Analytical Framework for Investigating Family and School Joint Effects as Possible Mediators and Moderators of Racial Achievement Gaps



As Figure 2 illustrates, any single variable is subject to a wide range of other contextual factors—including widely varying elements of the school environment. Although we cannot verify and determine all the different causes of reading achievement gaps

among Black students in Wisconsin (or any other state) in the absence of a randomized policy experiment, attention to elements of the school environment generates an alternative perspective on the sources of Black achievement gap. More specifically, if NAEP data had been analyzed from this more complex framework, findings would have been very different. The following section offers such a more detailed analysis.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Black families in Wisconsin face significant economic disparities, with Black families being over five times more likely to live in poverty than White families—the second-highest rate in the U.S.¹¹ Further, an estimated 44% of Black American families are headed by single mothers, with a high concentration in Milwaukee. A majority of Black children are raised in single-parent homes experiencing challenges with child care, housing instability, and food insecurity. These high rates of poverty and single-parent households are linked to systemic factors, including disparities in education, employment, and housing. Unfortunately, this chain of poverty → poor education and health care → low employment → poor housing and segregation → poverty may generate a vicious cycle of systemic inequality over generations.

Therefore, the report is right in tackling socioeconomic problems beyond race. However, it fails to acknowledge systemic racial inequalities in educational opportunities in schools, which are closely intertwined with the inequalities of family environment. Instead, the report simply cites the so-called Mississippi Miracle to suggest Wisconsin might want to consider a phonics-based approach to reading instruction. This recommendation is unreliable because structured, phonics-based instruction alone did not produce the vaunted results: A strict third-grade reading gate policy significantly influenced them. That is, retaining the lowest-performing third-grade students would have created the illusion of test score gains at Grade 4: “If you throw the lowest-ranking 10% out of a statistical pool, the remaining pool inevitably looks better.”¹² Further, the gains in Mississippi’s fourth-grade scores had vanished by the eighth grade, and the state’s NAEP eighth-grade reading score rankings stay at the bottom rank.¹³

Given the interplay of family and school environment inequalities, any simplified solution is misleading. While the Science of Reading movement itself can be helpful, the devil is in the details—a supporting environment. Experience has shown there is no magic bullet: High-stakes test score gains often are a result of gaming the system (for example, narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and/or holding back low-performing students from testing).¹⁴ It is worth noting that intensive training and in-school, on-the-ground support were provided for K-3 teachers in Mississippi, and literacy coaches were deployed to low-performing schools where early screening and intervention may have helped prevent at-risk students from failing.

Although it is impossible to fully identify and disentangle the sources of achievement gaps, to demonstrate the complexity of the achievement gap issue, I have analyzed selected family and school environment variables using data from the 2024 NAEP Grade 4 reading assessment data in Wisconsin. Consistent with expectations in the report, Table 1 below shows that compared to White counterparts, Black students experience higher rates of economic disadvantage (82% vs. 31%) and disability status (20% vs. 15%). They also experience lower rates of living with a father (57% vs. 89%) and reading out of school time (33% vs. 42%). However, the relationship between family environment disparities and the reading achievement gap is not always consistent for White and Black students. For example, living with a father is positively associated with reading achievement for Whites, but it does not appear to affect test scores for Black students; Black students who lived with their father scored even slightly lower than their peers who did not live with father (181 points vs. 185 points on NAEP reading test scale). Table 1 also shows racial disparities in school/teacher environment quality, with asterisks calling attention to statistically significant discrepancies. Black students experience lower rates of access to teachers with permanent certificates (95% vs. 75%), reading specialists/literacy coaches for students with disabilities (89% vs. 49%), and teacher availability (87% vs. 68%). In addition, a higher rate of students lack prerequisite skills, creating a barrier to teaching and learning (33% vs. 42%). Moreover, Black students also tend to experience relatively stronger learning losses from school/teacher environmental disparities. For example, the NAEP reading test score gap by the disparity of students' prerequisite knowledge/skills (teacher-reported) was relatively larger among Black students (188 – 169 = 19 points) than White students (226 – 217 = 9 points). In other words, Black students whose reading teachers reported the lack of students' learning readiness as a major teaching obstacle ('a lot' as opposed to 'some' response) were further left behind in their reading performance than White students whose reading teachers reported the same problem. This type of potential interaction between race and teaching/learning environment factors deserves moderation analysis as visually presented in Figure 2.

Table 1. White vs. Black Percentages and Average Scores in 2024 NAEP Wisconsin Grade 4 Reading Assessment by Selected Variables (Subgroups) of Student, Family and School Environment Characteristics

		White		Black	
		Percentage	Average Score	Percentage	Average Score
Economically Disadvantaged status	Yes	31	208	82*	176*
	No	69	231	17*	198*
Disability status	Yes	15	191	20*	149*
	No	85	230	80*	187*
Living with father	No	11	215	43*	185*
	Yes	89	227	57*	181*
Reading out of school time	Less than 30 minutes a day	30	218	39*	178*
	30 minutes a day	42	230	33*	190*
Teacher Qualification (Type of Certificate)	Permanent	95	224	75*	NA
	Temporary or working toward	5	179	23*	NA
Reading specialists/literacy coaches available for students with disabilities	Yes	89	224	49*	187*
	No	11	229	51*	176*
Teacher being available when students need them (student-reported)	Exactly or quite a bit	87	229	68*	189*
	A little bit or not at all	13	214	32*	183*
Teaching limited by students lacking prerequisite knowledge/skills (teacher-reported)	some	63	226	47*	188*
	A lot	28	217	37*	169*

Note. Asterisk indicates statistical significance ($p < .05$) of Black gap relative to White counterpart as the reference group. For the sake of focused contrast, only selected response categories appear here. NA: NAEP reporting standard not met.

Source: NCES NAEP data explorer (<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing>)

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report helps bring attention to the significant academic achievement gap between Wisconsin's White and Black students, particularly with respect to literacy among younger students. The report correctly indicates that Wisconsin has the largest Black-White reading achievement gap among all states and that some socioeconomic and cultural factors influence the racial achievement gap. Despite these merits, however, the report lacks supporting empirical research evidence based on a solid literature review and rigorous data analysis. It reinforces the deficit mindset about single-parent families, ignoring research evidence on Black students' resilience, which can promote achievement despite adversity.

Overall, the report offers overly simplistic analyses and recommendations in response to highly complex, systemic challenges. Thus, policymakers and other stakeholders would be well advised to take this report with a grain of salt, though it is an apt reminder that the problem demands serious attention and multifaceted, evidence-based solutions.

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