



**National
Urban League**

To Be Equal #10

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National Urban League Endorses Common Core State Standards – Part Two: Closing the Achievement Gap

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"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments...It is the very foundation of good citizenship...In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms." Chief Justice Earl Warren, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education

Sixty years after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education ruling ending segregation in America's public schools, separate and unequal is still a pervasive reality. While *de jure*, or legal segregation has been abolished, *de facto*, or the actual practice of segregation, is greater now than it was 40 years ago. Black and Brown students are less likely to share classrooms with white students. We also see separate and unequal levels of expectations and resources in our schools that continue to break down along the color line. The unfortunate result of all of this is a widening achievement gap between the races.

The achievement levels of Black and Brown students, especially those burdened with the economic and social disadvantages of poverty, are falling further and further behind their white peers, even as our entire nation loses ground globally. This is a recipe for economic and social disaster, but it can be avoided if we make closing the achievement gap a national priority, guided by a commitment to a common set of principles. That is a commitment that 45 states and the District of Columbia have made with the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) –that all students will have the same expectations for learning regardless of their zip codes.

In a recent column, I aimed to clear up much of the misinformation that has been used to create confusion and distort the facts around the Common Core State Standards for math and English language arts that are now being implemented in most states. The National Urban League supports this historic reform, largely because it is geared to better prepare all students for college and the jobs of today and tomorrow. Higher standards for every student,

implementation that is resourced equitably, instruction based on real-world problem-solving rather than rote learning, and clear and consistent expectations will also help close the widening achievement gap between races and economic classes. These standards are also benchmarked against international standards.

The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study finds that only 16 percent of Black students are reading at or above grade level compared with 44 percent of white students, a gap of 28 percent. At the same time, the achievement gap between students in the United States and their European and Asian peers is also widening. According to 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, students in 25 other countries are doing better than American students in math, while 16 other countries exceed U.S. achievement levels in reading. In fact, other study data shows that our below average performance in math can be addressed through the Common Core, since CCSS math standards align with what other students are learning around the world. Clearly, we must do better, and implementing the Common Core is an initial step we can take to improve educationally among states and nations. Education is not only the civil rights issue of our times, it is also increasingly the fault line that will determine winners and losers in the global economy.

We will not be able to close the achievement gap if we continue to have different expectations for different students. All students should have access to college and career ready standards, but the Common Core State Standards alone cannot close the achievement gaps in our nation. Achieving equity and excellence in education requires an approach which also includes reducing income inequality and poverty, equalizing public school funding, and supporting greater parental involvement.

We recognize that there have been implementation challenges with CCSS that need to be addressed. We know that the resources, tools and training need to be in place to meet the promise of these standards. Once these implementation wrinkles are ironed out, we believe that over time, a commitment to higher standards for every student will go a long way towards closing the achievement gap.

In a future column, we will share findings from research that the National Urban League recently commissioned on parental perceptions of CCSS. As long as critics unfairly characterize and misrepresent Common Core State Standards, we will continue to work to replace confusion with clarity.

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