

Testimony of
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House Committee on Education and Labor

Regarding findings from

*Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High
Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families*

A Report by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises
with original research by Westat

September 10, 2007

Good morning, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and other distinguished members of the committee.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss a population previously ignored in federal education policy and underserved in our nation's schools: the 3.4 million American students who are overcoming challenging socioeconomic circumstances to excel academically.

Today, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises are releasing this report, *Achievement Trap*, which contains new and original research regarding the educational experiences of high achieving, lower-income students from first grade through graduate school.

Our research comes from 20 years of longitudinal data from three federal databases. It examines the experiences of students who perform in the top quartile on nationally standardized academic assessments and are from families in the bottom half of the national income.

We are here today to discuss our findings in the context of No Child Left Behind reauthorization, in particular because they relate to an important concept being considered by this committee – whether federal law should measure and hold schools accountable for the academic growth of every student, including those performing at advanced levels.

We view as essential two provisions in the draft bill:

- That schools should be held accountable for the number of lower-income students achieving not just proficiency but also at advanced levels and
- That schools should be held accountable for the number of lower-income students who pass international baccalaureate and advanced placement exams.

A brief summary of four of our key research findings will demonstrate why we view such measures as so important.

First, there are lots of these extraordinary students across America.

- There are 3.4 million students in our nation's K-12 schools today scoring in the top academic quartile even though they are from families earning below the national median.
- This population is greater than the individual population of 21 states.
- More than a million of these students are free and reduced-lunch eligible.
- In other words, what happens to high-achieving lower-income students is a substantial education policy issue.

Second, these students are everywhere and reflect the diversity of America.

- They are in urban, suburban, and rural communities in numbers proportionate to the overall population.
- They are black and white, Hispanic and Asian, and boys and girls in numbers that are proportionate to the overall racial and ethnic population in America.
- In other words, what happens to high-achieving lower-income students is not an interest-group issue; it is about all of us.

Third, high-achieving lower-income students disproportionately fall out of the high-achieving group during both elementary and high school. Specifically, we found that

- Nearly half of the lower-income students who achieved reading scores in the top quartile in first grade fell out of the top quartile in reading by fifth grade.
- In high school, one quarter of the lower-income students who had top-quartile math scores in eighth grade fell out of the top academic quartile by twelfth grade.
- In both cases, upper-income students maintained their places in the top quartile of achievement at significantly higher rates than lower-income students.

And finally, lower income kids with high potential rarely rise into the top quartile of achievement. Specifically, we found that

- Only between 4% and 7% of students from lower-income families rise into the top academic quartile during elementary school and high school.
- By contrast, children from families in the upper income half are at least twice as likely to rise into the top academic quartile during both elementary school and high school.

These findings make clear that we are squandering talent throughout K-12 education.

Tanner Mathison, a student from rural Oregon who has been a part of the Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program, recently described one reason that may be happening:

"There are a ton of smart, low-income students in this country who don't have someone to speak for them - no one to get them access to the programs and enrichment they need," Tanner says. "In modern society we tend to associate monetary gains with success, and sadly, with this paradigm, we often fail to recognize that academic talent can rest within lower-income students."

The needs of high potential and high-achieving students like Tanner should not be pitted against the educational needs of students who achieve below proficient levels.

We must close the proficiency gap if our nation is to achieve its promise of equal opportunity at home and maintain its economic position internationally.

But, this struggle to reverse under-achievement among low-income students must be accompanied by a concerted effort to promote high achievement within the same population.

Simply put, lower-income students achieving at advanced levels are not exempt from the struggles facing other lower-income students.

Holding on to that faulty assumption will prevent us from reversing the trend made plain by our findings: we are failing these high-achieving students throughout the educational process.

This failure is especially severe in a society in which the gap between rich and poor is growing and in an economy that increasingly rewards highly-skilled and highly-educated workers.

We are therefore encouraged by the effort of this committee to consider ways to broaden the current focus on proficiency standards in NCLB, and to establish policies and incentives that expand the number of lower-income students who achieve at advanced levels.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for allowing me to testify.