

"Test them and they shall learn" doesn't appear to be working. Maybe they need more test preparation, or maybe not.

***boston.com* Latinos, blacks lag on MCAS**

Elementary schools fail to boost scores

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | January 19, 2006

Not one Boston elementary school is significantly boosting the scores of black and Hispanic students on the state's English and math tests, renewing concerns that the schools have made no headway in narrowing the achievement gap between those students and whites and Asians, according to a report announced last night.

At only a handful of elementary schools, the performance of black and Hispanic students on one of the state MCAS tests improved in 2005, compared with 2004, said Boston School Department officials, who delivered the report last night at a School Committee meeting.

They added that none had reported progress on English and math measures, said school officials.

The gap in achievement between blacks and Hispanics and other elementary students has not narrowed since the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams were first given in 1998, school officials say.

Boston's lack of progress with African-American and Hispanic students during the tenure of Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant has become a key sticking point at recent community forums, at which parents, educators, and others have described what they want from the next superintendent after Payzant retires.

Overall, MCAS scores have improved during Payzant's tenure, but the report released yesterday highlighted a need to do more to raise the performance of blacks and Hispanics, who make up the majority of the 58,600 students in the school system, school officials and others said.

"This sets the stage for the future," said Theresa Perry, an education and African studies professor at Simmons College and an author of books about the achievement gap. "Unless the achievement gap is eliminated in elementary school, it sets up a two-tiered system in Boston, a system that leads to opportunity for white and Asian kids and limited opportunity for black and Latino students."

Yesterday's report is the second that the school system has done since 2004 in an effort to track the progress of each racial and ethnic subgroup of students, as well as that of special education students and of English-as-a-second-language students. Black and Hispanic students made greater gains districtwide between 2003 and 2004, according to district data.

Schools that have made progress did so by scrutinizing the test data and changing teacher practices, Payzant said. "They're paying attention to it," he said.

The school system measured improvement by judging how much progress students were making toward achieving proficiency on the MCAS tests.

The tests signify that they are performing at their grade level. The federal No Child Left Behind law requires school systems to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, become proficient in reading and math by 2014, as measured by state tests.

In 2005, only about 20 percent of Boston's black and Hispanic fourth-graders scored "proficient" or above on the English MCAS tests, compared with almost 50 percent of their Asian and white peers, according to school system data.

The gap also exists for the percentage of fourth-graders who passed the test with a "needs improvement" score, the minimum requirement; close to 90 percent of white and Asian students passed the English test, compared to about 70 percent of black and Hispanic students. That gap of roughly 20 percentage points has held steady since 1998.

Statewide, 27 percent of blacks and 22 percent of Hispanics scored "proficient" or above on the 2005 fourth-grade English test, compared with 56 percent of white students.

Special education students were the only group districtwide to make significant improvement on the MCAS tests in the last year.

Meanwhile, English-as-a-second-language students showed the least improvement, the report said.

At higher grades, only one high school and one middle school made significant progress in 2005 in raising the scores of all subgroups of students on both state tests, the report said.

"This is a problem that is across all levels of schools," said Barbara Fields, senior officer for equity in the Boston public schools.

The gap in achievement shows in other areas in the school system: Fewer black and Hispanic elementary students are getting into advanced classes that prepare them for the city's exam schools, and more black and Hispanic students drop out of high school.

Fields and other administrators said the school system made closing the achievement gap a priority two years ago. The district has trained principals and teachers on developing high expectations for all students, teaching to different learning styles, and finding connections with students and their families from various cultural backgrounds.

At the Winthrop Elementary School in Dorchester, where 97 percent of students are black or Hispanic, an independent consultant began training teachers last September on developing high expectations of students. Principal Emily Shamieh and teachers met with 75 parents on a Saturday, asking the parents to describe the dreams they had for their children and to discuss ways to overcome the obstacles.

Only 20 percent of black students and 10 percent of Hispanic students at the Winthrop scored "proficient" on the 2005 English MCAS. In math, 7 percent of blacks and 5 percent of Hispanics scored "proficient."

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Self-Discipline May Beat Smarts as Key to Success

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Zoe Bellars and Brad McGann, eighth-graders at Swanson Middle School in Arlington, do their homework faithfully and practice their musical instruments regularly. In a recent delayed gratification experiment, they declined to accept a dollar bill when told they could wait a week and get two dollars.

Those traits might be expected of good students, certainly no big deal. But a study by University of Pennsylvania researchers suggests that self-discipline and self-denial could be a key to saving U.S. schools.

According to a recent article by Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E.P. Seligman in the journal *Psychological Science*, self-discipline is a better predictor of academic success than even IQ.

"Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes," the researchers said. "We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline. . . . We believe that many of America's children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement."

But how, educators, parents and other social scientists want to know, do you measure self-discipline? Duckworth, a former teacher studying for a doctorate in psychology, and Seligman, a psychology professor famous for books such as "Learned Optimism," used an assortment of yardsticks, including questions for the students (including how likely they are to have trouble breaking bad habits, on a 1-to-5 scale), ratings by their teachers and parents and the \$1-now-or-\$2-later test, which the researchers call the Delay Choice Task.

The results: "Highly self-disciplined adolescents outperformed their more impulsive peers on every academic-performance variable, including report card grades, standardized achievement test scores, admission to a competitive high school and attendance. Self-discipline measured in the fall predicted more variance in each of these outcomes than did IQ, and unlike IQ, self-discipline predicted gains in academic performance over the school year."

The study looked at one group of 140 eighth-graders and another group of 164 eighth-graders in a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse magnet school in a Northeast city. The names of the city, the school and the students were not revealed, so this reporter attempted a very small and unscientific version of the Delay Choice Task at Swanson.

Of the 10 eighth-graders approached during their lunch period, eight chose to forgo \$1 right away in exchange for \$2 in a week. The mothers of Zoe and Brad, who both declined the \$1

offer, said they were not surprised by their children's decisions and thought the correlation of self-discipline with academic success made sense.

"I remember when Zoe was in the second grade, they had to do this poster of what they would do with \$1 million," recalled her mother, Arlene Vigoda-Bellars, a former journalist. Her daughter said she would use it to go to Harvard. In preparation for that college competition, Zoe is taking intensified algebra and second-year Spanish, has a voice scholarship at a music school and plays first flute in Swanson's symphonic band.

Bertra McGann, a technical writer married to a Foreign Service officer, said that when Brad was 4, the family lived in Kenya and he was put in a class with older students. "He would come home from school and hand me the flashcards and work on his sight reading -- an extraordinary amount of self-discipline for a 4-year-old," she said. Now 13, Brad plays clarinet and basketball and earned his black belt in tae kwon do by practicing two hours a day, six days a week for two years.

Some experts expressed doubt about the Delay Choice Task. "I'd assume it was some kind of scam, take the buck and run," said Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, a nonprofit group that is critical of over-reliance on testing in U.S. schools. Zoe refused to take the \$2 at the end of the experiment. "I think it is rude to take money from strangers," she said.

Zoe always does her homework the minute she gets home from school at 2:30 p.m. Her friends, however, are not so diligent. During a telephone interview, Zoe noted that several of her friends' "away messages" -- put up on their online instant-messaging systems to explain why they aren't responding -- said they were doing their homework. "It's Sunday night," she said. "I finished mine Friday."

Some educators said schools can teach self-discipline. Rafe Esquith, an award-winning Los Angeles teacher, often tells his low-income fifth-graders about a study that showed that hungry 4-year-olds willing to wait for two marshmallows were more successful years later than those who gobbled up one marshmallow immediately.

Ryan Hill, director of the TEAM Academy Charter School in Newark, N.J., said students at his school, a Knowledge Is Power Program middle school in a low-income neighborhood, are required to stay at school until their homework is done if TV interfered with study the night before. "Over time, they learn to just do their homework before watching TV, delaying gratification, which becomes a habit of self-discipline," Hill said.

Educational psychologist Gerald W. Bracey noted the power of self-discipline in sports, citing tennis star Chris Evert, who triumphed over more talented players because she practiced more.

Martha McCarthy, an education professor at Indiana University, said such habits could be taught in early grades, with methods such as "giving students time to visit with their friends if they have been attentive during a lesson."

Will there be a Self-Discipline Test, the SDT, to replace the SAT? Most experts don't think so. Clever but lazy college applicants could "pretty easily figure out what the right answers

would be to appear self-disciplined," said University of Virginia psychology professor Daniel T. Willingham.

Bruce Poch, vice president and dean of admissions at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., said self-discipline was good but not necessarily the only key to success. Albert Einstein, Poch said, "wasn't the most self-disciplined kid, at least according to his math grades through school."

That hasn't stopped Duckworth, who has two small daughters, from using her findings at home. Her eldest daughter, Amanda, 4, gets only one piece of saved Halloween candy each night after dinner. Asked why, Amanda says slowly and carefully, "It is de-LAY of gra-ti-fi-ca-tion."

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"Give a child a positive self concept and you've given him the world; give a child all the material things in the world with no positive self concept, and you've given him nothing."

Dr. Ugotz DeBuggieWoogie Rhythm