



BlackEconomics.org

“Just Don’t Take It!”

Think about it: Knowledge is the most important “thing” in the universe! Christians say that it is the “word.” We say that the “word” is preceded by “thought” and that one must have knowledge to think. No matter what one imagines as being important, one can reverse the thought process one step and conclude that without the correct knowledge about what one thinks is important, then one is likely to make a mess of it. Love, family, sex, are all superseded in importance by knowledge.

How do we get knowledge? Through study, thought, and divine revelation. What is our starting point for knowledge? Usually education. How do we assess our knowledge level? Through testing.

Which brings us to our point of interest: The US Department of Education’s (USDOE’s) administering tests through the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#). The NAEP uses a very sophisticated scheme to develop and administer tests mainly for fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders on reading and mathematics all across the US. The NAEP publishes the results of these assessments at the overall and ethnic (Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, etc.) levels.¹ The NAEP has been performing this work for about 50 years. While there are periods when the Black-White assessment scores draw closer together, Black scores are always below White scores and by a statistically significant margin.

The academic literature reflects a great deal of consternation concerning the persistent gap in Black-White educational assessment scores (termed the “achievement gap”), and much ink has flowed to explain this outcome. Most often, explanations for the gap are placed at the feet of socio-economic differences between the two groups.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a subsidiary of the USDOE, provides plenty of reasons why the gap is persistent in its [Status and Trends](#) publications:² (i) Black students are generally suspended from schools at twice the rate of other groups; (ii) 60 percent of Black students are enrolled in schools where at least 75 percent of total enrollment is by minority students (an indicator of a poorer quality educational environment); (iii) 31 percent of Black students live in poverty; (iv) only 33 percent of Black students live with both parents; (v) only six percent of Black students are enrolled in high school calculus courses (18 percent of White students

¹ Typically, NAEP results are published in the USDOE, National Center for Education Statistic’s *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*.

² The statistics cited here are from the 2018 *Status and Trends* publication.

are enrolled); and (vi) only six percent of Black students are enrolled in Advance Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses (17 percent of White students are enrolled).

Granted: If a student is not in school because of a suspension, then learning cannot occur; one's peers can affect one's ability to learn; being in poverty can affect one's opportunity to learn; and one's living arrangement can affect one's preparedness to learn. However, it is transparent that if certain students are exposed to a more intensive, higher level, and richer learning environment, then they are very likely to learn more than students who are not exposed to such an environment. It is clear, then, that Black students who are not enrolled in high school calculus, AP, or IB courses are likely to learn much less than students who are enrolled in such courses. The resulting lack of knowledge will undoubtedly appear in related test scores.

But it goes deeper than that. How is the decision made to enroll students in high school calculus, AP, or IB courses? Presumably, these are earned opportunities. That is, student must show a certain amount of proficiency in lower-level courses in order to climb to these higher-level courses. On the other hand, students are often recommended to participate in higher-level courses. Why are not more Black students recommended for these higher-level courses?

The broader point is that if one group of students gain access to more intensive, higher-level, and richer learning experiences, then they cannot be compared fairly with students that face a much more unfavorable learning experience.

In one sense, it is favorable that the NCES publishes the NAEP test results—even though they show Black students performing below their White counterparts. On the other hand, test results show some degree of convergence over time, although Black students generally face much poorer learning opportunities and experiences in US schools. Imagine Black students' test results if they enjoyed learning experiences that were parallel to those of White students?

Nevertheless, the NCES' persistent publishing of NAEP results showing Blacks at the bottom casts deep and negative aspersions on Black students and Black people in general in the US and abroad. The only legitimate and acceptable display of such information is that it be accompanied by a display of the structure of the courses in which Black students are enrolled. Whether as a result of "ability" or through "tracking," Black students are enrolled in an inordinate way (compared to White students) in special education, remedial, basic, and average courses. The NCES should publish data on the extent to which Black students receive a much less intensive, lower-level, and poorer learning experience than their White counterparts in US schools, yet still manage to make progress in slowly closing the gap on high-stakes test scores.

Until the USDOE and NAEP agree with the NCES to collect and publish information on the structure of courses enrolled in by Black versus other groups of students, then we urge Black parents to continue withholding their students from taking NAEP tests. Just don't take it!

B.B. Robinson
02/02/20
