



# achievementtrap

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How America Is Failing Millions of High-Achieving  
Students from Lower-Income Families

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today in America, there are millions of students who are overcoming challenging socioeconomic circumstances to excel academically. They defy the stereotype that poverty precludes high academic performance and that lower-income and low academic achievement are inextricably linked. They demonstrate that economically disadvantaged children can learn at the highest levels and provide hope to other lower-income students seeking to follow the same path.

Sadly, from the time they enter grade school through their postsecondary education, these students lose more educational ground and excel less frequently than their higher-income peers. Despite this tremendous loss in achievement, these remarkable young people are hidden from public view and absent from public policy debates. Instead of being recognized for their excellence and encouraged to strengthen their achievement, high-achieving lower-income students enter what we call the “achievement trap” — educators, policymakers, and the public assume they can fend for themselves when the facts show otherwise.

Very little is known about high-achieving students from lower-income families — defined in this report as students who score in the top 25 percent on nationally normed standardized tests and whose family incomes (adjusted for family size) are below the national median. We set out to change that fact and to focus public attention on this extraordinary group of students who can help reset our sights from standards of proficiency to standards of excellence.

This report chronicles the experiences of high-achieving lower-income students during elementary school, high school, college, and graduate school. In some respects, our findings are quite hopeful. There are millions of high-achieving lower-income students in urban, suburban, and rural communities all across America; they reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender com-

position of our nation’s schools; they drop out of high school at remarkably low rates; and more than 90 percent of them enter college.

But there is also cause for alarm. There are far fewer lower-income students achieving at the highest levels than there should be, they disproportionately fall out of the high-achieving group during elementary and high school, they rarely rise into the ranks of high achievers during those periods, and, perhaps most disturbingly, far too few ever graduate from college or go on to graduate school. Unless something is done, many more of America’s brightest lower-income students will meet this same educational fate, robbing them of opportunity and our nation of a valuable resource.

This report discusses new and original research on this extraordinary population of students. Our findings come from three federal databases that during the past 20 years have tracked students in elementary and high school, college, and graduate school. The following principal findings about high-achieving lower-income students are important for policymakers, educators, business leaders, the media, and civic leaders to understand and explore as schools, communities, states, and the nation consider ways to ensure that all children succeed:

### WHO THEY ARE

- Overall, about 3.4 million K-12 children residing in households with incomes below the national median rank in the top quartile academically. This population is larger than the individual populations of 21 states.
- More than one million K-12 children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch rank in the top quartile academically.
- When they enter elementary school, high-achieving, lower-income students mirror America both demographically

and geographically. They exist proportionately to the overall first grade population among males and females and within urban, suburban, and rural communities, and are similar to the first grade population in terms of race and ethnicity (African-American, Hispanic, white, and Asian).

### AN UNEQUAL START

- *Starting-line disparities hamstring educational mobility.* Among first-grade students performing in the top academic quartile, only 28 percent are from lower-income families, while 72 percent are from higher-income families.

### LOSING GROUND DURING K-12

- In elementary and high school, *lower-income students neither maintain their status as high achievers nor rise into the ranks of high achievers as frequently as higher-income students.*

- > Only 56 percent of lower-income students maintain their status as high achievers in reading by fifth grade, versus 69 percent of higher-income students.

- > While 25 percent of high-achieving lower-income students fall out of the top academic quartile in math in high school, only 16 percent of high-achieving upper-income students do so.

- > Among those not in the top academic quartile in first grade, *children from families in the upper income half are more than twice as likely as those from lower-income families to rise into the top academic quartile by fifth grade.* The same is true between eighth and twelfth grades.

- High-achieving lower-income students drop out of high school or do not graduate on time at a rate twice that of their higher-income peers (8 percent vs. 4 percent) but still far below the national average (30 percent).

### UNFULFILLED POTENTIAL IN COLLEGE & GRADUATE SCHOOL

- Losses of high-achieving lower-income students and the disparities between them and their higher-income academic peers persist through the college years. While more than nine out of ten high-achieving high school students in both income halves attend college (98 percent of those in the top half and 93 percent of those in the bottom half), high-achieving lower-income students are:

- > Less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their higher-income peers (54 percent versus 78 percent)

- > Less likely to attend the most selective colleges (19 percent versus 29 percent);

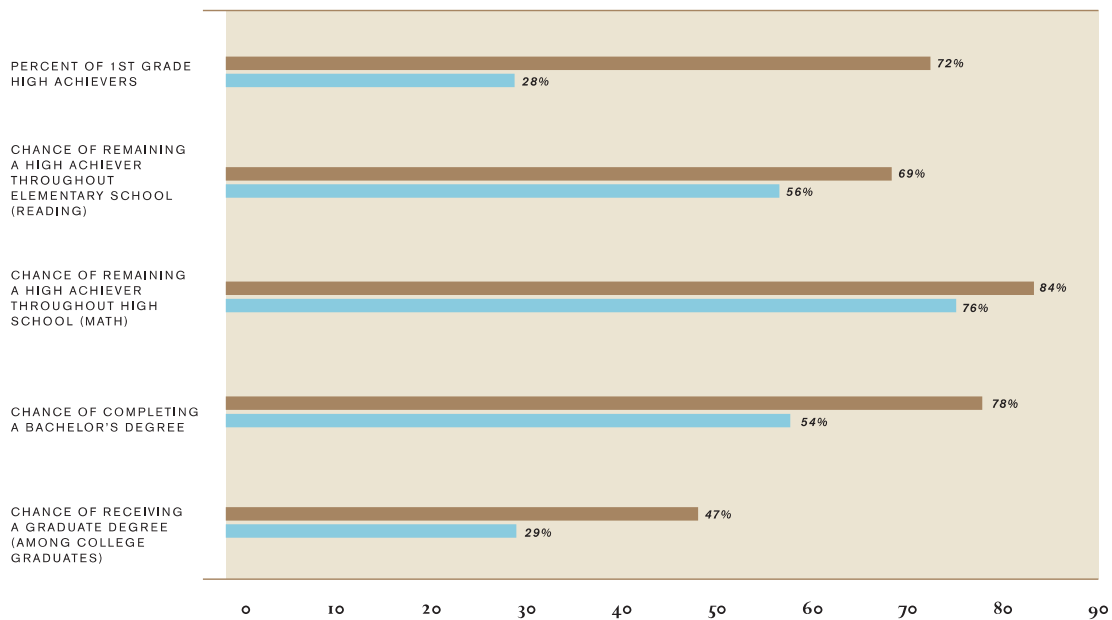
- > More likely to attend the least selective colleges (21 percent versus 14 percent); and

- > Less likely to graduate when they attend the least selective colleges (56 percent versus 83 percent).

- High-achieving lower-income students are much less likely to receive a graduate degree than high-achieving students from the top income half. Specifically, among college graduates, 29 percent of high achievers from lower-income families receive graduate degrees as compared to 47 percent of high achievers from higher-income families.

This pattern of declining educational attainment mirrors the experiences of underachieving students from lower-income families — they start grade school behind their peers, fall back during high school, and complete college and graduate school at lower rates than those from higher-income families. Our nation has understandably focused education policy on low-performing students from lower-income backgrounds. The laudable goals of

**EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AMONG HIGH ACHIEVERS**



■ HIGHER-INCOME    ■ LOWER-INCOME  
**SOURCE:** ECLS-K First Grade Public-Use Child File; ECLS-K Longitudinal Kindergarten-Fifth Grade Public-Use Data File; NELS: 1988-94 Data Files; NELS: 1988-2000 Data Files; Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B: 93.03).

improving basic skills and ensuring minimal proficiency in reading and math remain urgent, unmet, and deserving of unremitting focus. Indeed, our nation will not maintain its promise of equal opportunity at home or its economic position internationally unless we do a better job of educating students who currently fail to attain basic skills.

But this highly visible national struggle to reverse poor achievement among low-income students must be accompanied by a concerted effort to promote high achievement within the same population. The conclusion to be drawn from our research findings is not that high-achieving students from lower-income backgrounds are suffering more than other lower-income students, but that their talents are similarly under-nurtured. Even though lower-income students succeed

at one grade level, we cannot assume that they are subsequently exempt from the struggles facing other lower-income students or that we do not need to pay attention to their continued educational success. Holding on to those faulty assumptions will prevent us from reversing the trend made plain by our findings: we are failing these high-achieving students throughout the educational process.

## NEXT STEPS

The time is at hand for targeting public policies, private resources, and academic research to help these young strivers achieve excellence and rise as high educationally as their individual talents can take them. Toward that end, our nation can take important steps to begin to bring this valuable and vulnerable population of students out of the national shadows:

- > Educators, researchers, and policymakers need to more fully understand why, upon entering grade school, comparatively few lower-income students achieve at high levels and what can be done in early childhood to close this achievement gap.
- > Federal, state, and local education officials should consider ways to broaden the current focus on proficiency standards to include policies and incentives that expand the number of lower-income students achieving at advanced levels.
- > Educators must raise their expectations for lower-income students and implement effective strategies for maintaining and increasing advanced learning within this population.
- > Educators and policymakers must dramatically increase the number of high-achieving lower-income students who complete college and graduate degrees

by expanding their access to funding, information, and entry into the full range of colleges and universities our nation has to offer, including the most selective schools.

- > Local school districts, states, and the federal government need to collect much better data on their high-performing lower-income students and the programs that contribute to their success, and use this information to identify and replicate practices that sustain and improve high levels of performance.

Importantly, as each of these and related efforts unfold, we must consider how advancing policies and practices that assist high-achieving lower-income students can be used to help all students.

The picture painted by this report runs counter to the expectations we have of our educational institutions. As we strive to close the achievement gaps between racial and economic groups, we will not succeed if our highest-performing students from lower-income families continue to slip through the cracks. Our failure to help them fulfill their demonstrated potential has significant implications for the social mobility of America's lower-income families and the strength of our economy and society as a whole. The consequences are 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. By reversing the downward trajectory of their educational achievement, we will not only improve the lives of lower-income high-achievers, but also strengthen our nation by unleashing the potential of literally millions of young people who could be making great contributions to our communities and country.