June 2024

Legislative Report
Achievement Gaps Report

IOWA™

Department of Education

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Legislative Requirement Iowa Code 256.9(45)

Prepare and submit to the chairpersons and ranking members of the Senate and House Education Committees a report on the state's progress toward closing the achievement gap, including student achievement for minority subgroups and a comprehensive summary of state agency and local district activities and practices taken in the past year to close the achievement gap.

Changing Student Demographics

Over the past two decades, there has been a sizeable change in the demographics of students attending Iowa public school districts. Table 1 provides a high-level summary of the number and percentage of students who are students of color and white students over the past two decades. In the current 2023-24 school year, 28.5% of student enrollments are students of color. This compares to 21.7% a decade ago and 12.6% two decades ago. At the same time, the percentage of students who are white has decreased. In the 2004-05 school year, 87.4% of students were white compared to 71.6% in the 2023-24 school year.

Table 1: PK-12 Public School Enrollment

School Year	Students of Color	White	Total Enrollment	Percent of Students of Color	Percent White
2023-24	144,741	363,366	508,107	28.5%	71.5%
2014-15	110,073	396,263	506,336	21.7%	78.3%
2004-05	60,497	417,822	478,319	12.6%	87.4%

Figure 1 provides a trend line of the changes by each race/ethnicity student group over the past twenty years. There have been sizeable increases in the number of Hispanic and Black students over this period. The Pacific Islander and Two or More Races student groups were added in the 2009-10 school year so prior trend data is not available.

Figure 1: Enrollment Trend - Students of Color

Race/Ethnicity	2004-05	2014-15	2023-24
Asian	8,955	11,773	12,605
Black	22,986	27,665	35,452
Hispanic	25,721	50,539	65,926
Two or More Races	0	17,121	25,433
Native American	2,835	1,992	1,618
Pacific Islander	0	983	3,387
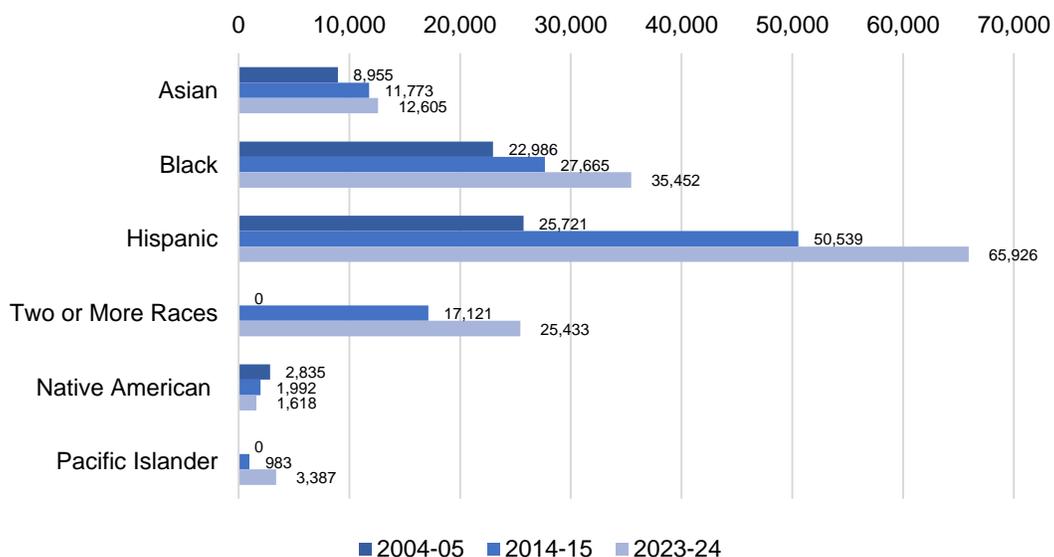
Over the past 10 years, the percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has remained fairly stable. Free or reduced-price lunch eligibility data is used as a proxy for low socioeconomic status in K-12 education. Figure 2 provides a trend line of the percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Interestingly, in the 2023-24 school year the percent of students eligible for reduced price lunch decreased to the lowest level at 4.9% over this period. At the same time, the percent of students eligible for free lunch increased in the past decade to its highest level at 36.9%.

Eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch is determined by household income and the poverty threshold is set by the US Census Bureau. In 2023, the poverty threshold for a family of four was $30,000. Students eligible for free lunch are students whose household income is 130 percent of the poverty threshold while the reduced-price lunch eligibility threshold is 185 percent. The trend in Figure 2 suggests that in the 2023-24 school year there are a larger percentage of students who are living in higher levels of poverty (below 130 percent of the poverty level) than at any other point over the past decade. A family of four would have to make less than $39,000 to be eligible for free lunch in the 2023-24 school year. At the same time, the percentage of students eligible for reduced-price lunch has also declined to its lowest point over this same time period resulting in an overall lower percentage than the prior year. This percentage has remained relatively flat over the past decade.

Figure 2: Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Trend*
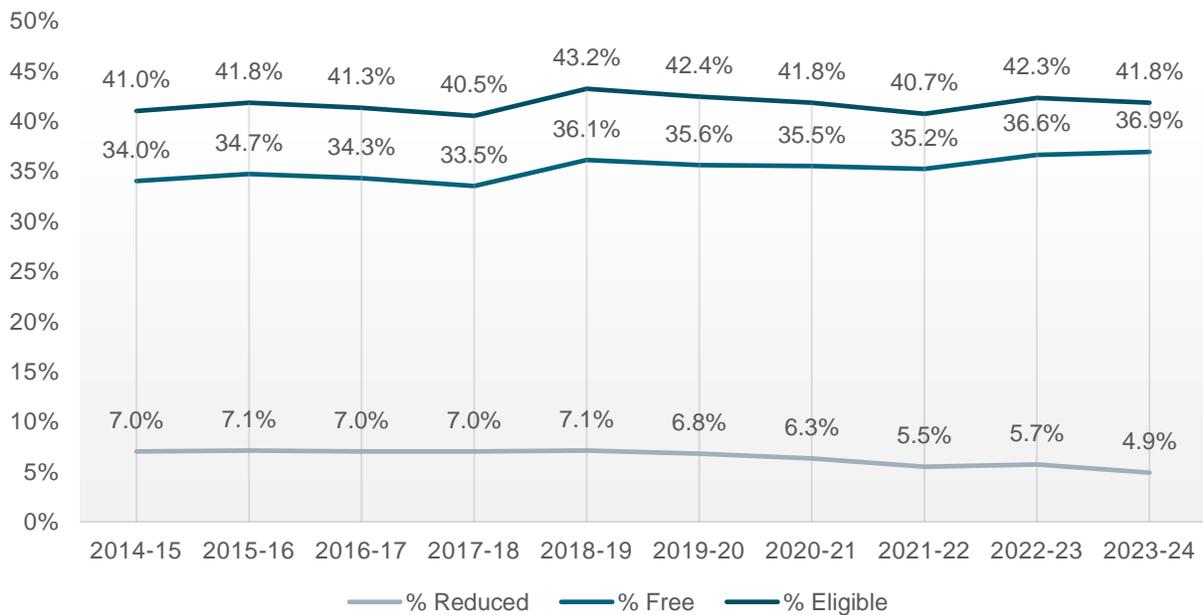
* % Free includes the percent of students whose family income is less than 130 percent of the poverty level.
% Reduced includes the percent of students whose family income is less than 185 percent of the poverty level.
% Eligible is the combination of students who are either eligible for free or reduce-priced lunch.

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Achievement Gaps on Statewide Assessments

This section of the report is broken into two subsections. The first covers the achievement gap by race/ethnicity and the second focuses on students with disabilities, students in poverty and English learners (EL). This section highlights the gap between student groups on the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP). It is important to note that the administration of the ISASP in the 2019-20 school year was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will report if the achievement gap in the percentage of students who score proficient on the ISASP has increased or decreased since prior to the pandemic.

For all of the figures in this section, the square at the top of each line represents the proficiency rate of all students (i.e., the statewide average) and the circle at the bottom is the proficiency rate of the given student group. The number on the side indicates the gap in the percentage of students who are proficient between the given student group and the statewide average. The x-axis represents the grade level.

Achievement Gaps by Race/Ethnicity

Over the past decade, Iowa has seen the largest increases in the Hispanic and Black racial/ethnic student groups. Thus, the focus of these analyses is on achievement gaps between Hispanic students, Black students and the statewide average. The purpose is to highlight differences in performance between the largest and fastest-growing student groups. This does not imply that other student groups do not also have large differences in achievement but given the condensed format of this report, it is not possible to provide an analysis of the gaps between all groups. This analysis uses assessment scores in both mathematics and English language arts (ELA) to report the latest information about the status of the achievement gap.

Achievement Gaps in Math

Figure 3 provides a breakdown in the achievement gap between Hispanic students and the statewide average over the last four administrations of the ISASP between grades 3 to 11. At a high level, the gap in proficiency rates between 2018-19 and 2022-23 increased slightly over this time frame. The average of the gap across all grade levels was 16.3 percentage points in 2018-19 and increased to 17.2 percentage points in 2022-23. This suggests the gap in proficiency for Hispanic students is slightly larger than prior to the pandemic in math.

Figure 3: Math Gap for Hispanic Students
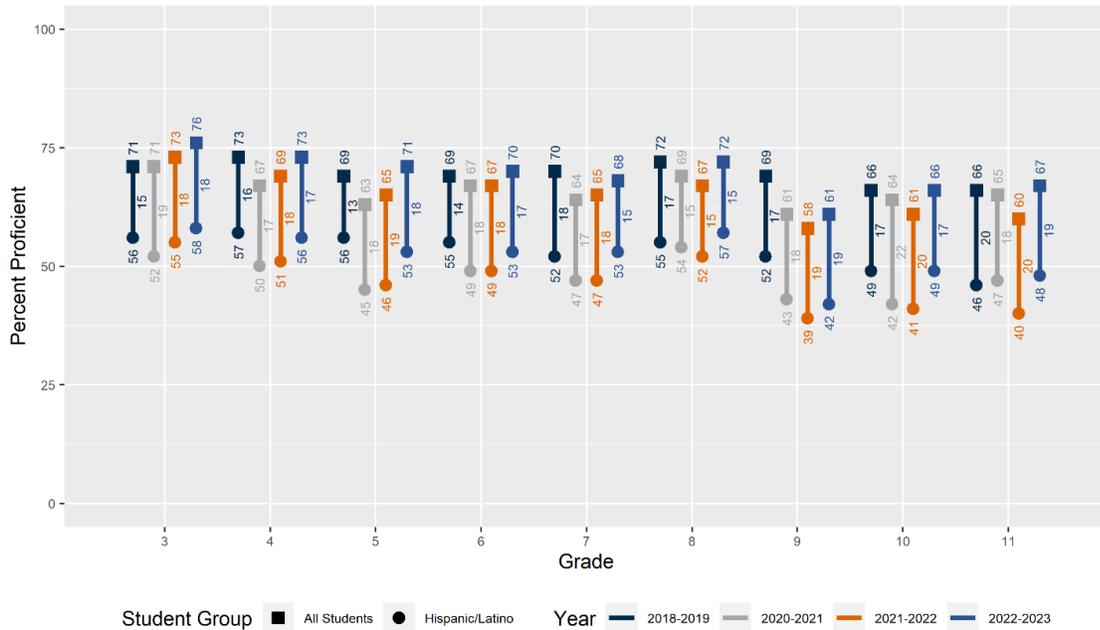
Figure 4 provides a trend in the breakdown in the achievement gap between Black students and the statewide average in math on the ISASP. Across all grade levels, the average gap in proficiency rates was 32.1 percentage points in 2018-19 and decreased slightly to 31.8 percentage points in 2022-23. This suggests the gap between Black students and the statewide average remained about the same prior to and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 4: Math Gap for Black Students
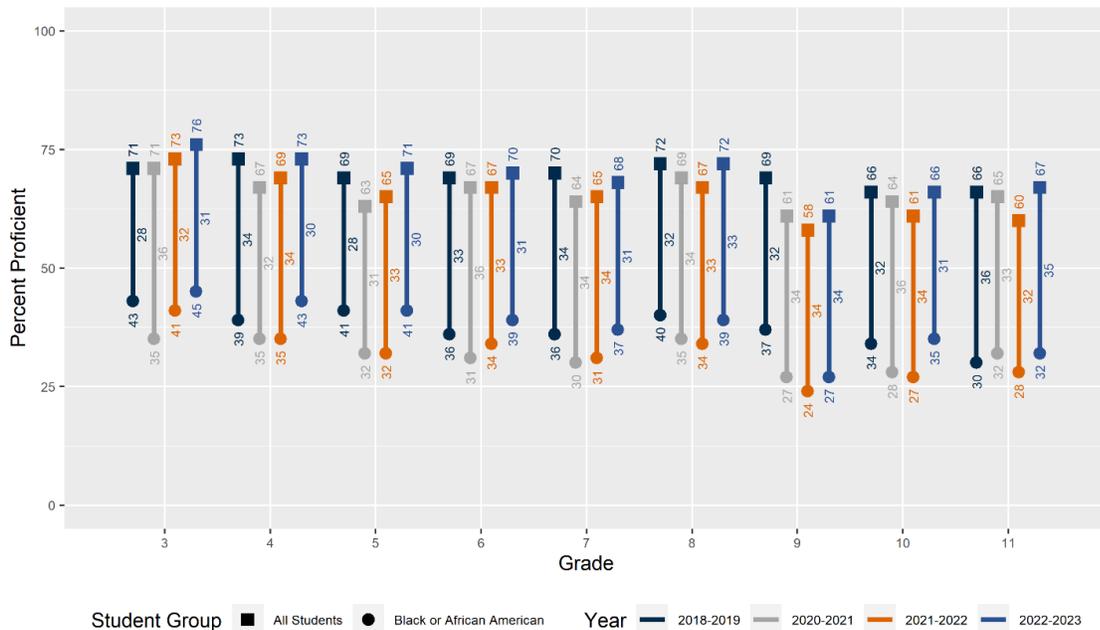
Achievement Gaps in English Language Arts

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the gap in the proficiency rate of Hispanic and Black students, respectively, and the statewide average in ELA. There was a slight increase in the gap of proficiency rates in the 2022-23 school year for Hispanic students. The average gap in proficiency rate for Hispanic students was 16.3 percentage points in 2018-19 but increased to 16.9 percentage points in 2022-23.

Figure 5: ELA Gap for Hispanic Students

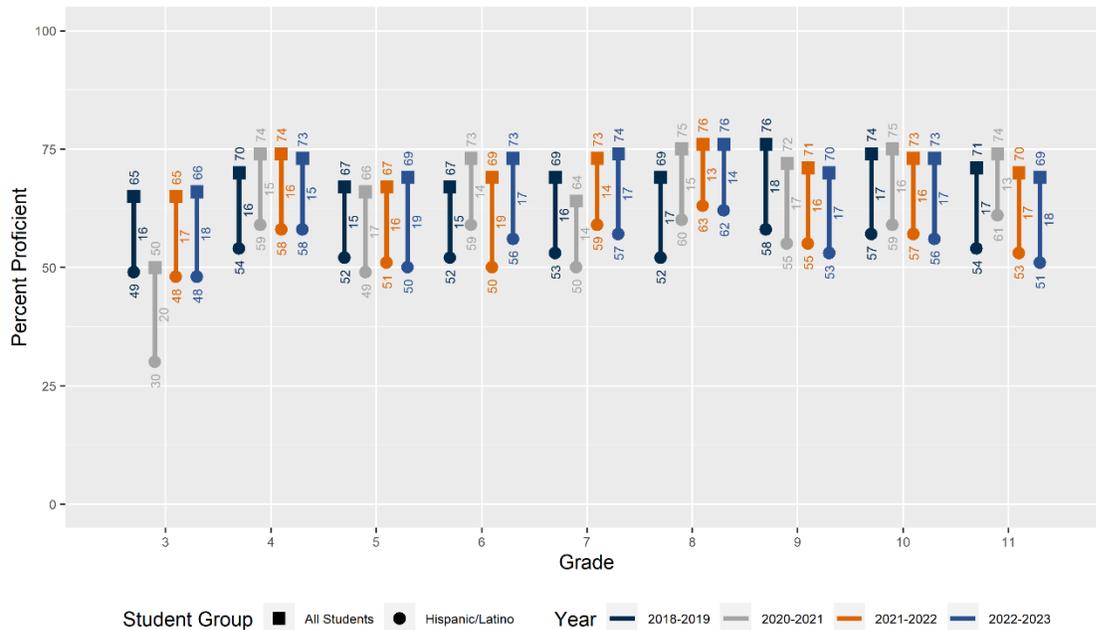Figure 6 provides the gap on the ELA assessment for Black students. Similar to the trend found on the Math assessments, the gap in proficiency rate decreased slightly between Black students and the statewide average. The average gap across all grade levels was 30.2 percentage points in 2018-19 compared to 29.4 in 2022-23. This indicates the proficiency rate gaps have declined to be similar to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 6: ELA Gap for Black Students

Figure 6: ELA Gap for Black Students

Student Group: ■ All Students ● Black or African American
Year: 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, 2022-2023
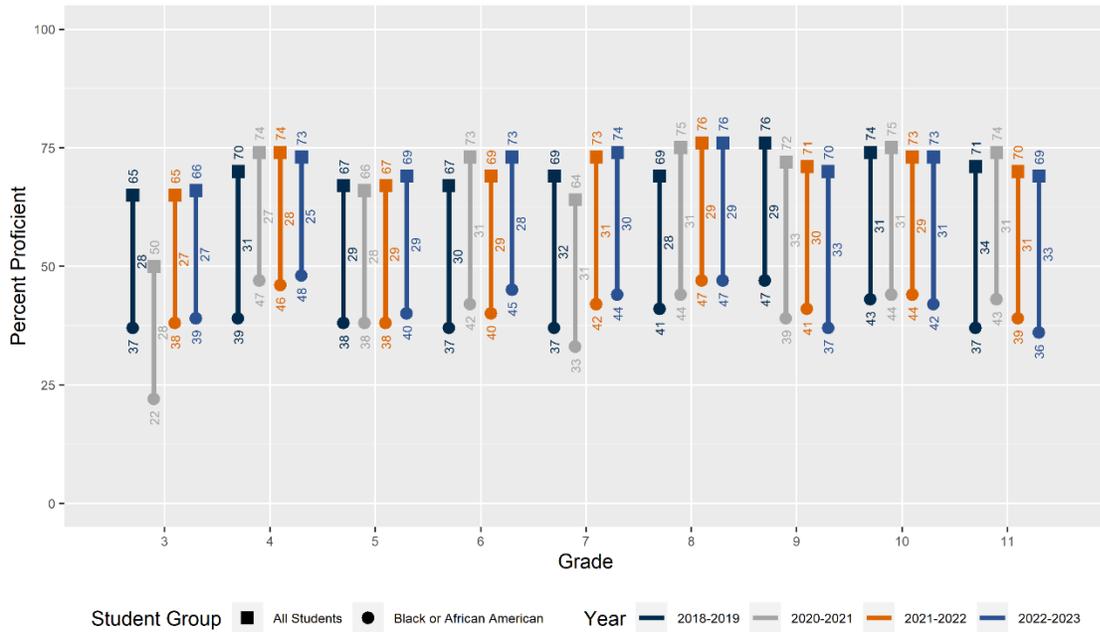
Achievement Gaps by Program Groups

Achievement Gaps in Mathematics

Figure 7 includes the difference in the achievement gap over time between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and the average student on the math assessment. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is used as a proxy for students in poverty.

The achievement gap between 2018-19 and 2022-23 stayed the same. Across all grade levels, the average gap in proficiency rates was 15.7 percentage points in both years. This suggests that the gap did not grow nor did it decrease following the pandemic.

Figure 7: Math Gap for Students Eligible for FRL
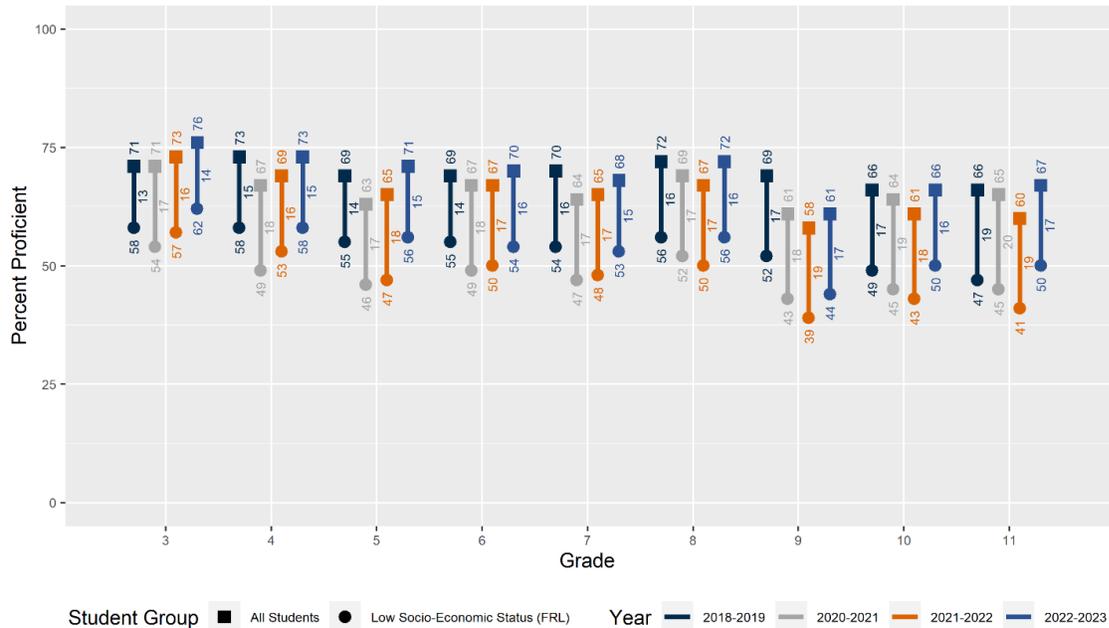
Figure 8 shows the gap in mathematics across all grade levels between students with disabilities and the statewide average. Examining the size of the gap in proficiency rates shows an interesting trend. The gap tends to increase from the lower grade levels to the upper grade levels. For example, the gap in proficiency rates was 33 percentage points in third grade and increases to 50 percentage points in eleventh grade in the 2022-23 school year. This suggests students with disabilities tend to fall further behind as they progress throughout K-12 education in their math performance. It is also possible that the make up of the student group and types of disabilities also shift in the later grades which could also contribute to the increase in the size of gap from lower grade levels.

Across all grade levels, the average gap was 43.4 percentage points in 2018-19 and decreased to 41.6 percentage points in the 2022-23 school year. This is a sizable decrease in the proficiency rate gap for students with disabilities.

Figure 8: Math Gap for Students with Disabilities
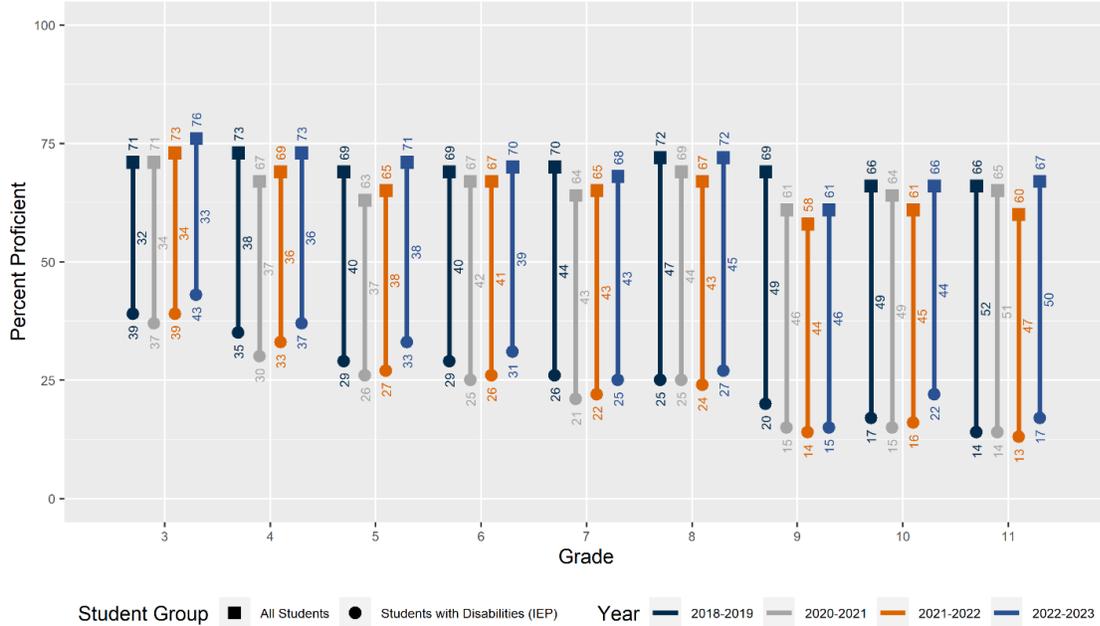
Figure 9 includes the gap in proficiency rates between English learners (EL) and the statewide average. The average difference in proficiency across all grades was 40.9 percentage points in 2018-19 but increased to 45.6 percentage points in 2022-23. This is a notable increase in the proficiency rate gap suggesting the achievement gap has grown for EL students over this period.

Figure 9: Math Gap for English Learners

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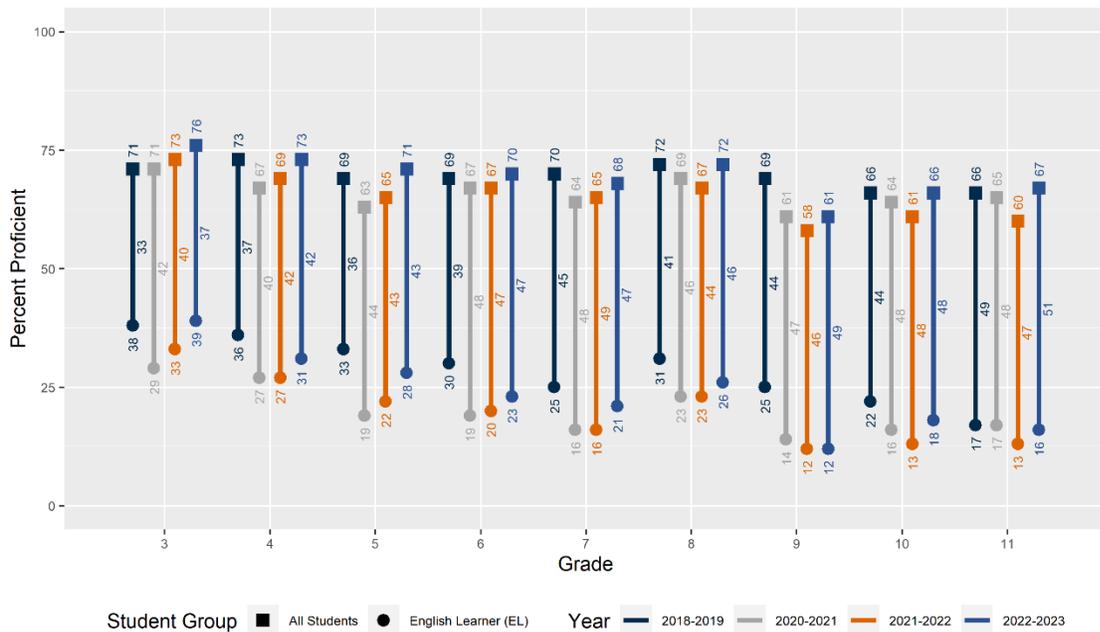
Achievement Gaps in ELA

The ELA achievement gap between students in poverty and average achievement can be found in Figure 10. The difference in proficiency across all grades was 15.1 percentage points in 2018-19 but had a small increase to 15.7 percentage points in 2022-23.

Figure 10: ELA Gap for Students Eligible for FRL
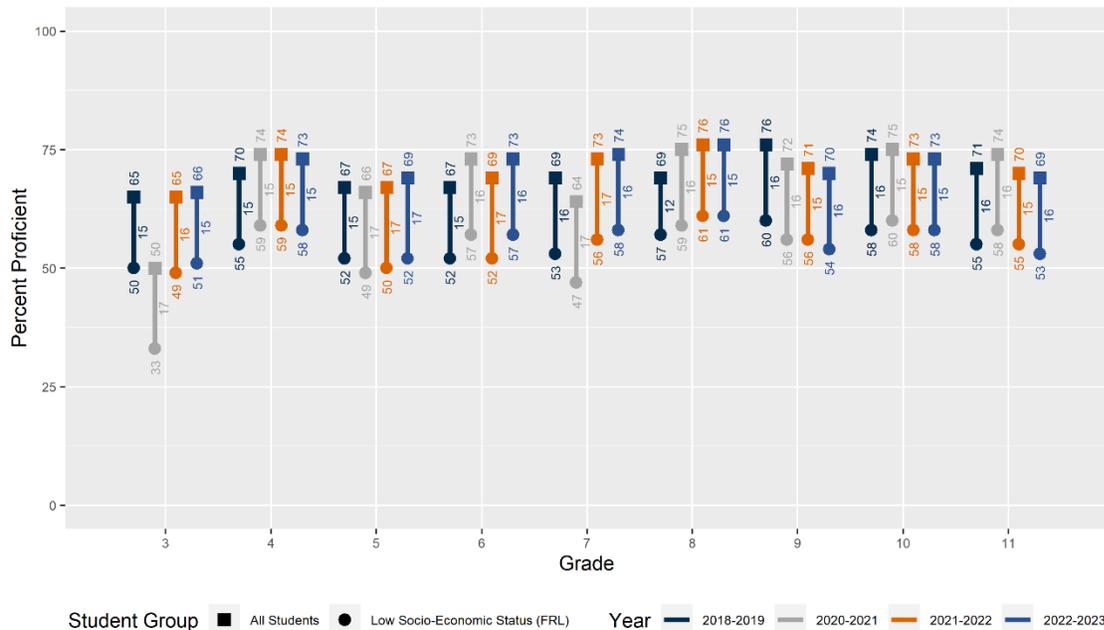
Figure 11 illustrates the gap in proficiency for students with disabilities on the ELA assessment. Across all grade levels, the overall gap decreased between students with disabilities and the statewide average. In 2018-19, the average proficiency rate gap was 47.7 percentage points compared to 46.1 in the 2022-23.

Figure 11: ELA Gap for Students with Disabilities

Figure 11: ELA Gap for Students with Disabilities
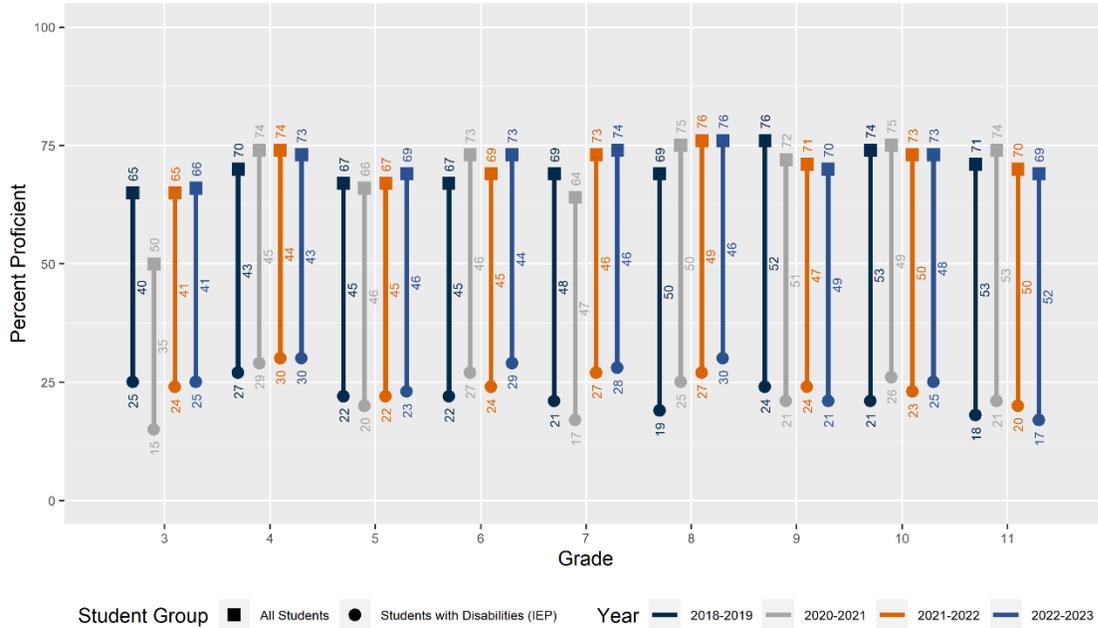
Figure 12 shows the gap in ELA proficiency for EL students compared to the statewide average. The average proficiency rate gap increased between EL students between 2022-23 compared to the 2018-19 school year. Across all grade levels, the gap was 47.4 percentage points in 2018-19 and increased to 52.6 percentage points in 2022-23. This suggests the gap increased in ELA for EL students and has not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 12: ELA Gap for English Learners

Figure 12: ELA Gap for English Learners
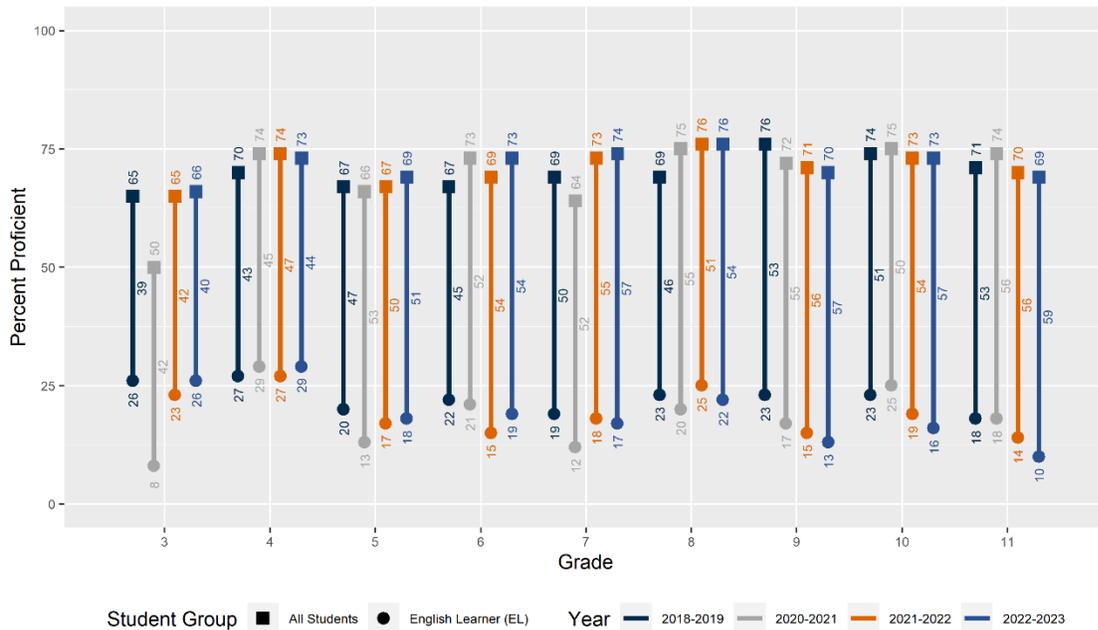
Summarizing Proficiency Gaps

Figures 3 to 12 include a lot of information about the status of the achievement gap between various student groups and the statewide average on the ISASP assessment. Figure 13 provides a visual of all of the data that needs to be analyzed to understand the status of the achievement and opportunity gap between student groups. In total, there are 180 data points that need to be considered to get a clear picture of the gap. This includes data that covers two years (i.e., 2018-19 and 2022-23) for the two subjects of ELA and math. Proficiency rates are reported for nine grade levels (i.e., grades three to 11) and five different student groups including Hispanic, Black, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities and English learners.

Figure 13: Combination of Assessment Results

In order to interpret this vast amount of information, Table 2 was created to provide a high-level summary of the gap. Several high-level trends can be found when examining Table 2. First, spring 2023 ISASP results are mixe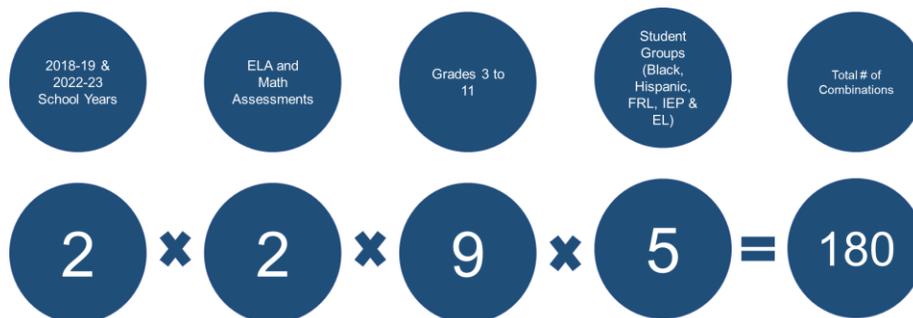d with some gaps between student groups decreasing and others increasing from spring 2019. Second, the overall gap across all student groups appears to have increased and has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Third, the gaps in both math and ELA tended to be in the same direction for each of the student groups included in this analysis. For example, the achievement gap for Black students decreased slightly in both math and ELA. On the other hand, there was a slight increase in the achievement gap for Hispanic students in both subjects. There was a sizeable decrease in the gap for students with disabilities in math and ELA. However, there was a sizeable increase in the gap for EL students. The gap was mixed for students in poverty but was similar to pre-pandemic levels.

Table 2: Achievement Gaps Status Between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023

Student Group	2018-19 Math	2022-23 Math	Direction of Gap Math	2018-19 ELA	2022-23 ELA	Direction of Gap ELA
Black Gap	32.1	31.8	Slight Decrease	30.2	29.4	Slight Decrease
Hispanic Gap	16.3	17.2	Slight Increase	16.3	16.9	Slight Increase
Free or Reduce Price-Lunch Gap	15.7	15.7	Same	15.1	15.7	Slight Increase
Students with Disabilities Gap	43.4	41.6	Sizeable Decrease	47.7	46.1	Sizeable Decrease
English Learners Gap	40.9	45.6	Sizeable Increase	47.4	52.6	Sizeable Increase

Decrease

No change

Increase

Activities to Close the Achievement Gap

Over the past year, the Department has been engaged in several important initiatives that can affect the achievement gap. First, the Department has or is in the process of implementing several initiatives to improve literacy instruction through evidence-based strategies and instruction. Second, the Department has been engaging a broad set of stakeholders in a proposed revision of the state's accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Third, the Department's School Improvement Bureau has been working closely with Schools in Need of Comprehensive support. Below is a summary of these activities.

Science of Reading

The Science of Reading is a vast body of research from multiple fields (i.e., education, linguistics, psychology, neuroscience) and derives from multiple studies that explain how individuals learn to read and the practices most effective in maximizing student literacy outcomes. This body of research informs the "what" and "how" of teaching literacy (reading and writing). It also informs the focus of teacher preparation programs, the instructional materials districts select and the professional learning most likely to impact teaching and learning.

The Department is currently contracting with Lexia Learning to provide LETRS training for 1,100 administrators and 6,000 K-5 and PreK educators in Iowa. The goal of this training is to improve grade-level reading proficiency, and close achievement gaps across the state. This training is based on the Science of Reading.

In addition, during the 2023-2024 academic year, the Department entered into a contract with Sterling Literacy Consulting to support dyslexia and the Science of Reading in Iowa. Sterling Literacy Consulting has supported the development of the dyslexia handbook, provided guidance for diagnostic assessments, and supported the development of the State Literacy Plan. Each of these actions will enhance the State of Iowa's efforts for instruction based on the Science of Reading in our schools.

Recently, the Department has been engaged in the RFP process to identify high quality instructional materials in literacy. In order to be included on this list, literacy program vendors will demonstrate how their program closely aligns to the Science of Reading.

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the Department completed a review of the Iowa Academic Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. The revision of the standards included enhancements for better alignment to the Science of Reading. This included adding encoding to the foundational skills along with handwriting. The revised standards were presented to the State Board of Education at the May board meeting. The team will be requesting the standards adoption during the June Iowa State Board meeting. Upon adoption, the Department will provide professional development opportunities throughout the summer and into next school year. They will also be presenting at the IRRC Summit in July.

The Department is developing a model Personalized Reading Plan to address HF 2618. This plan includes the components proven effective in the Science of Reading for developing a student's reading and writing abilities.

Building a New Accountability System

The Every Student Succeeds Act focuses on identifying the lowest performing schools and struggling student groups in order to provide funding, tools and support to drive local improvement efforts to address their area of need. To accomplish this task, Iowa needs an accountability system that is more accessible and less technical while at the same time providing a comprehensive picture of student, student group and school performance. This streamlined system needs to include key measures of performance that need focused attention for schools to improve.

ESSA requires states to, at minimum, identify the lowest-performing 5% of schools receiving Title 1, Part A funds for comprehensive support and improvement. Schools with student groups who are low achieving must also be designated for targeted support. Student groups that must be considered include race/ethnicity groups, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities and English learners.

Changes to the accountability system must be data driven to ensure correct identification of schools but also guard against over identification. An accountability system must balance the need to identify schools and students who are struggling with the resources available to implement the changes necessary to see improvement.

In building a new accountability system, leadership at the Department spent considerable time acquiring feedback to inform changes to Iowa's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan. Subsequently, in December 2023 and January 2024, the Iowa Department of Education (IDE) conducted extensive consultation about its proposed changes to the state's ESSA plan. Key leaders from the IDE presented the changes and solicited feedback from a variety of key education stakeholders including:

- Nine regional meetings with superintendents,
- Statewide curriculum director meeting with nearly 400 curriculum and instructional leaders,
- Members of the State Board of Education,
- Executive leadership of major public education associations, and
- AEA executive leadership.

Informed by the consultation sessions, the Department made several updates to the initial plan and again asked for feedback from education stakeholders by conducting a statewide survey. The survey was open for approximately two weeks. A total of 1,446 individuals representing a wide variety of stakeholders responded to the survey. The top four groups of respondents were teachers (35%), parents (26%), school administrators (13%) and district administrators (11%). A detailed summary of the survey results can be found in the redlined version of the ESSA plan.

Overall, this process provided extensive opportunity to hear from the field and the public about the proposed changes to Iowa's accountability system. Specific changes were made as a result of this robust consultation process. Key changes to the accountability framework for schools included in the final plan are:

- Addition of English learners two years after exiting,
- Incorporation of the 5-year graduation rate,
- Updates to how Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools are incorporated into school rating categories,
- Using a criterion-based system to determine school rating categories,
- Inclusion of a chronic absenteeism indicator,
- Changes to the postsecondary readiness indicators,

- Addition of science assessment results,
- Equal weighting of growth and proficiency.

The proposed changes to Iowa's accountability framework have been submitted to the US Department of Education for review. Feedback has been received and the Department is working on final changes to the plan with the intent to receive approval and implement the changes in the 2024-25 school year.

School Improvement Support of CSI Schools

Over the past year, the Department has been working with schools who have been identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) under Iowa's existing accountability framework. Currently, there are 32 CSI schools across the state. All of these schools received an intensive multi-day site visit in the 2023-24 school year by school improvement teams. Additionally, monthly check in meetings are held with district leaders and Department school improvement consultants. The purpose of these regular check in meetings is to ensure school improvement efforts are focused on the identified areas of improvement and ongoing throughout the school year.

In addition to intensive support activities, the Department completed a study to identify factors that positively influence school improvement efforts. The purpose of this study was to gather evidence and success stories from schools who have improved. These evidence-based strategies are the foundation for a set of best practices that can be utilized by other districts in their improvement efforts. The study was conducted by an independent researcher from the Midwest Comprehensive Center which is supported by the U.S. Department of Education.

Thirteen schools that had previously been identified as CSI but had exited this status due to increased performance participated in the study. Through qualitative interviews, nine evidence-based school improvement strategies were identified.

Evidence-based strategies were:

- Having an effective school leader
- Using a growth mindset versus blame
- Using formative and summative data to regularly reflect on student learning
- Providing professional development on new systems and data analysis
- Providing regular time for educators to collaborate
- Promoting positive rapport and trust with students
- Using effective teaching strategies
- Maintaining high expectations for students
- Ensuring a safe and organized school climate

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, there has been sizeable shifts in the demographics of Iowa public school students. The racial/ethnic diversity in public school continues to increase. Students of color now make up over 28 percent of Iowa students. Additionally, over the past decade, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has remained relatively stable. However, the percentage of students who are eligible for reduced-price lunch has decreased, while the percentage of students eligible for free lunch has increased. This suggests that while the overall percentage of Iowa students from an economically disadvantaged background has remained stable, the proportion of students with higher levels of poverty has increased. These

data highlight the challenges to Iowa districts and schools in serving an increasingly diverse student population.

This report shows both areas of strength as well as opportunities for improvement when examining the latest student achievement results. Results on the ISASP were mixed with some student groups seeing increases in the gap, while other student groups had decreases. Examining the gap across all student groups shows an overall increase in the gap and the size of the gaps has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Lastly, the direction of the gaps (i.e., increasing or decreasing) tended to be in the same direction across the subject of math and ELA. In other words, if the gaps were decreasing for a given student group it decreased in both subject areas.

There were two notable focus areas the Department completed in the past year focused on the achievement gap. First, the Department has proposed a set of substantive changes to the accountability framework that will be used to identify schools and student groups that are struggling. In creating this new framework, the Department received significant consultation from a variety of education stakeholders. Second, there were focused efforts to support schools that were identified in need of comprehensive support including site visits and ongoing monitoring. Lastly, the Department engaged an external researcher to identify a rich set of evidenced-based strategies that can be utilized by schools in their school improvement efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps between student groups.