



EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE
Communications & Public Affairs
Princeton, New Jersey 08541-0001

ETS Contact: Tom Ewing
+1 (609) 683-2899
mediacontacts@ets.org

Report: Family Factors Critical to Closing Achievement Gap

Princeton, N.J. (Oct. 29, 2007) – Gaps in the critical home conditions and experiences of young children mirror achievement gaps that begin early in life and persist through high school, according to a new report from ETS. The report has been endorsed by the National Urban League and both organizations call on leaders and policymakers to improve not only schools, but also home and family conditions, to help all students succeed.

The Family: America's Smallest School examines the family and home experiences that influence children's learning. Factors include single parent families, poverty and resources, parents talking and reading to children, quality day care, and parental involvement in school. The report was written by Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley of ETS's Policy Information Center. It includes a preface and endorsement by Marc H. Morial, president of the National Urban League.

"When parents, teachers and schools work together to support learning, students do better in school and stay in school longer," says Barton. "Our analysis shows that factors like single-parent families, parents reading to children, hours spent watching television and school absences, when combined, account for about two-thirds of the large differences among states in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores."

Findings in the report show that:

- Thirty-two percent of U.S. children live in single-parent homes, up from 23% in 1980.
- Thirty-three percent of children live in families in which no parent has a full-time, year-round job.
- By age 4, children of professional families hear 35 million more words than children of parents on welfare.
- Half of the nation's two-year-olds are in some kind of regular day care. Seventy-five percent are in center-based day care rated of medium- or low-quality.
- A comparison of eighth-graders in 45 countries found that U.S. students spend less time reading books for enjoyment—and more time watching television and videos—than students in many other countries.

"It's understandable that education reform efforts would focus on improving schools," says Coley. "In the broader arena of public policy, however, we will have to go far beyond this focus if we hope to significantly improve student learning and reduce the achievement gap. If we are to improve America's academic standing within the global community, and close our all-too-persistent achievement gaps, we must help assure nurturing home environments and supportive, encouraging family lives for all students."

Other highlights from the report include:

- Forty-four percent of births to women under 30 are out-of-wedlock.
- Nationally, 11 percent of all households are "food insecure." The rate for female-headed households is triple the rate for married families.
- Sixty-two percent of high SES kindergartners are read to every day by their parents, compared to 36 percent of kindergartners from low SES groups.
- One in five students misses three days or more of school a month. The United States ranked 25th of 45 countries in students' school attendance.

"The important educational role of parents is often overlooked in our local, state, and national discussions about raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps," notes Marc H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League, former president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and former mayor of New Orleans. "This report supports the League's Blueprint for Economic Equality - the Opportunity for Children to Thrive. In this guiding principle, we assert that every child in America deserves to live a life free of poverty that includes a safe home environment, adequate nutrition, and affordable quality health care. We further assert that every child in America deserves a quality education that will prepare them to compete in an increasingly global marketplace."

Download the full report, "The Family: America's Smallest School," for free at www.ets.org/familyreport. Purchase copies for \$15 (prepaid) by writing to the Policy Information Center, ETS, MS 19-R, Rosedale Road, Princeton, NJ 08541-0001; by calling (609) 734-5949; or by sending an e-mail to pic@ets.org.

About ETS

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