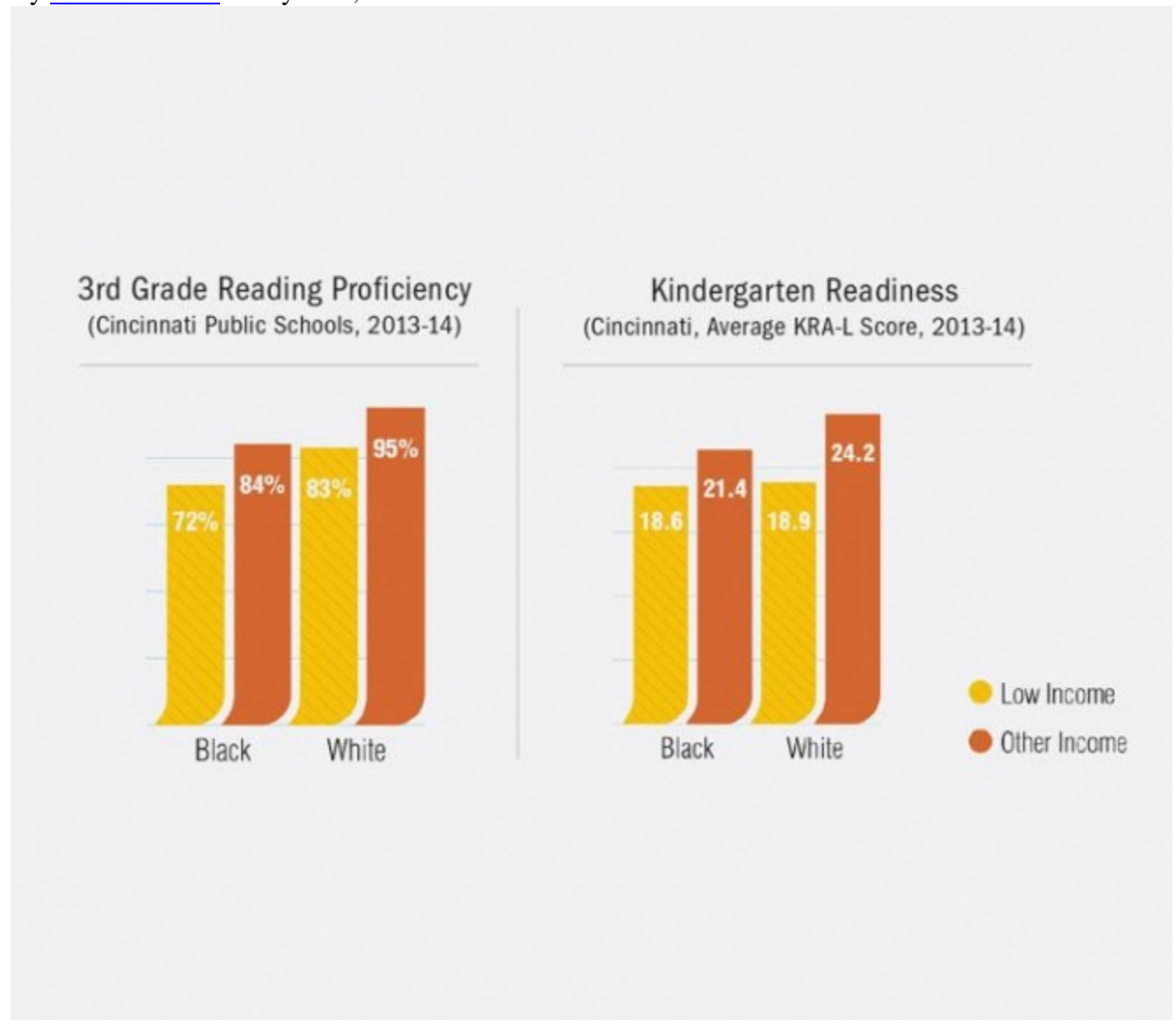


Lessons Learned

Diverse coalition looks to bridge the achievement gap facing disadvantaged and minority students

By [Chris Charlson](#) · May 20th, 2015 · News



Source: Strive Partnership

While most students in Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati's urban core are showing academic improvement in school, newly disaggregated data reveals low-income students lagging significantly behind their counterparts in achieving key educational goals.

The Strive Partnership released its sixth-annual report card last month. The data shows 91 percent of indicators trending upward for students based on eight categories ranging from kindergarten success to

post-secondary education. But one downward trend involves an achievement gap for economically disadvantaged minority students. Averages also remained flat or declined by a few percentage points for achievement on ACT scores and 8th grade math for students across the board.

Leslie Maloney, Strive Partnership executive committee member and program manager of the Haile/U.S. Bank Foundation, says the report card reflects a work in progress.

“We’re making headway,” Maloney says. “We’ve been at this for eight years. When we started we had 54 to 55 percent of the indicators moving in the right direction, and now we have 90 percent. But behind the numbers there are a lot of people who are not seeing improvement, so it’s not time to stop.”

Founded in 2006, the Strive Partnership brings together a diverse group of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky community, business and education leaders dedicated to improving academic success for students in Cincinnati’s urban core. The group is linked to the larger initiative StriveTogether, a national group focused on children’s academic success.

In lieu of new data, Maloney says the organization will design strategies to help close the achievement gap for children from low-income families. She says Strive will team with other organizations like United Way to focus on a multigenerational approach, working both with children in the classroom and their parents at home to help break the cycle of poverty. Maloney refers to child poverty in Cincinnati as one of the city’s dark, hidden secrets.

“Child poverty is the second highest in the country — it’s over 50 percent, second only to Detroit,” she says. “We want folks to come together and help build some additional strategies around helping people get out of poverty or to helping to create social mobility, because we know education is a key component of that, but it’s not the only one. We’re not exactly sure what that looks like, but I think people are coming together to start that conversation.”

Strive Partnership Executive Director Greg Landsman emphasizes the connection between poverty and inequality in the education system. One proven method of elevating students’ achievement is to provide two years of quality preschool prior to kindergarten, an option often not available for low-income families.

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Preschool teaches children valuable basics such as shapes, letters and colors, as well as emotional skills about how to collaborate with others and follow instructions. Landsman says of those kids who enter kindergarten unprepared, only half ever completely catch up to their peers.

“And then we’ve lost half of them, and of that remaining half, some of them are reading on grade level, but they sort of struggle,” he says. “If you’re not reading on grade level by the end of third grade and poor, you’re 13 times more likely to drop out. And if you’re poor and you live in a high-poverty neighborhood, which is the case for most poor kids, you’re 17 times more likely to drop out of school.”

Next year, Strive will be instrumental in putting the Preschool Promise on the ballot. The initiative will mandate two years of quality preschool be made available to all children, including those living in poverty. Strive is currently in the process of forming a coalition of more than 30 business, community and education leaders to help vet a plan before taking it to voters. Landsman says they’ll be examining the most practical and cost-effective options to ensure voter buy-in.

“There are a lot of kids and families being left out and that has huge implications on us morally, economically, and it’s going to require a collective approach to end these inequities and make sure

everyone gets to participate,” he says.

In order to spread the word, faith-based coalition AMOS Project will be conducting a grassroots campaign to educate voters on the value of the Preschool Promise. AMOS Project Executive Director Troy Jackson says the coalition is rallying behind this essential strategy.

“AMOS believes that quality preschool that engages families and provides opportunity for every 3- and 4-year-old in our city is a vital strategy for attacking our 53-percent childhood poverty rate,” Jackson says. “We’re working to bring the power of faith and neighborhoods to help shape the design, funding and implementation of universal preschool for the well-being of our families and our entire region.”

While one proven method of closing the gap is preschool preparedness, other factors play into educational success, such as cultural competency, Landsman says. The 30-page report card contains a surfeit of data embedded into inspirational stories of success, including that of Glenn O. Swing Elementary School in Covington, a school in which all students perform at an equal level regardless of race or income.

“They’ve invested in a support team of individuals who help triage all behavioral issues so that teachers can teach and kids can stay in school,” Landsman says. “They haven’t suspended or expelled a student in maybe five years. So there’s a counselor, a behavioral therapist, after-school specialists, a resource coordinator and a family engagement coordinator — and they collectively as a team work to help every kid get the social and emotional support they need to stay in school and in classrooms and to be in a position to learn.”

Alvin Garrison, superintendent of Covington Independent Schools, says they’re incorporating the successes of Glenn O. Swing Elementary, as well as other schools in the district, to create a professional learning community, modeling and implementing methods that work. He emphasizes the district’s commitment to each student and bringing them up to speed regardless of education level.

“I think there are gaps there [with poverty] but with each child, we try teach them appropriately while we have them,” Garrison says. “And then for those kids who aren’t catching on, regardless of their background, we look at opportunities to provide them more time to learn.”

Glenn O. Swing Elementary moved from the 32nd percentile to the 99th percentile in elementary schools in Kentucky based on improved measured performance. Principal Scott Alter refers to their 360-method of education as a wraparound approach, addressing the needs of students both in the classroom and at home. He says they only suspend students when absolutely necessary, instead addressing the root cause of a problem either with a counselor or a behavior coach before a situation escalates. Alter credits the dedication of teachers and staff at the school for helping students achieve their full potential.

“We have very high expectations for our kids, every single one of them, and our teachers and our students know that,” Alter says. “It’s taken quite a few years to get the right staff who have that kind of patience, determination and high expectations, who are willing to fight that battle to make sure that every kid understands.”

Even with their success, Alter explains Glenn O. Swing Elementary staff is working harder than ever to maintain momentum. That ideology transcends to the Preschool Promise — if it passes, it’s just a beginning, Landsman says.

There are still major shortfalls that need to be addressed, including stagnant or declining ACT and math scores. To remain viable as a city, Landsman says we must increase our numbers in terms of college or equivalent education among a population in which less than half the adults in Cincinnati, Covington and Newport possess a post-secondary degree.

“We probably need to get more focused on not just graduating kids, but making sure that they are ready

to succeed when they get to college,” Landsman says. “I would expect us to spend much more time and energy on this particular outcome during the course of the next couple of years.” ©

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