

Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty: Racial achievement gaps in Wisconsin explained by poverty and family structure, new report shows

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The News: A new report from the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) examines why Wisconsin has some of the largest academic achievement gaps between Black and white students in the nation—and finds that poverty, family structure, and early literacy explain much of the disparity.

How Bad Is It: Wisconsin's achievement gaps are not just large - they are among the worst in the country. On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Wisconsin posted the largest black-white gap in fourth grade nationwide - exceeding gaps in states like Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. On Wisconsin's most recent Forward Exam, the gap between black and white proficiency in Wisconsin was 43 percentage points.

What We Found: In our report, "[Beyond Race: What Really Drives Wisconsin's Achievement Gap](#)," we found that poverty and family structure are some of the largest drivers of Wisconsin's race achievement gap.

- **Poverty is a Major Mediator:** The analysis finds that roughly 42% of the relationship between the share of Black students in a school and academic proficiency is explained by poverty. This suggests that much of what is often described as a race-based achievement gap is more accurately an income-based gap that disproportionately affects Black students. In Wisconsin, black families are roughly three times as likely to live in poverty as white families. Other factors discussed below are more difficult to quantify, but likely explain

much of the remainder.

- **Disability Status Also Plays a Role:** The analysis also finds that disability identification explains a smaller—but measurable—portion of the achievement gap—about 3.6%. Black students are identified with disabilities at higher rates than their peers, which is associated with lower academic proficiency across student groups.

While poverty and disability account for a substantial share of the achievement gap, other well-documented influences are not directly measurable in school-level data and likely contribute to remaining disparities. These likely include the following factors:

- **Family Structure & Stability: Wisconsin has the lowest rate of married Black adults in the country.** A large body of research shows that students from two-parent households typically benefit from greater parental time, stability, and cognitive stimulation—factors that play a critical role in early learning and long-term academic success.
- **Early Literacy:** Survey data shows a disparity in early childhood literacy efforts; **in Wisconsin, 55% of Black families read to their children fewer than four days per week**, compared to 33% of white families, limiting early exposure to foundational reading skills that are essential for later academic success.

Why This Matters: While many policymakers attribute these gaps solely to systemic inequities, WILL's analysis investigates the extent to which other factors such as poverty, disability status, and family structure to explain the relationship between race and academic performance.

Our Take: WILL Research Director, Will Flanders, stated, "Race itself does not cause low academic achievement. What matters are the underlying factors that our education system too often ignores – poverty, family stability, early literacy and whether schools are using proven approaches to raise achievement. It's time for an honest discussion about poverty and family structure. We also must look to other states with high black student populations and replicate their efforts to address gaps successfully. We hope our findings spark further investigation, debate, and ultimately an education system that works for ALL students."

Now What's Next: Narrowing Wisconsin's achievement gap requires a departure from failed race-based policies. The report calls for a renewed focus on family

stability, early childhood development, and targeted support based on economic needs. Ultimately, success depends on treating students as individuals rather than racial categories.

“Southern States” Now Leading Nation’s Academic Revival: The so called “Southern Surge” is a term created by academic experts and policy makers referring to significant reading and academic gains in Southern states like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee. These states have focused not on irreconcilable problems like “structural racism,” but rather on practical, evidence-based interventions such as early literacy programs, teacher training, and curriculum alignment that can produce measurable gains within a few years.

Read More:

- [Report](#), March 2026
- [The Power of the Success Sequence](#) (AEI)
- [Mississippi’s Reading Revolution](#) (Bush Center)
- [Superintendent Underly sees “culturally responsive teaching” as key to solving achievement gap.](#)
- [Evers \(as Superintendent\) blames “Institutional Racism” for issues in Wisconsin schools.](#)

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