

MARCH 2026

BY DR. WILL FLANDERS, PHD

BEYOND RACE

**What Really Drives Wisconsin's
Achievement Gap**





Dr. Will Flanders, Ph.D.

RESEARCH DIRECTOR

✉ Flanders@will-law.org

Executive Summary

Wisconsin continues to lead the nation in the racial achievement gap between white and African American students. According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in fourth grade reading, Wisconsin's 45-point gap is the largest in the country—13 points greater than the next grouping of states such as Louisiana, Michigan, and South Carolina. State-level data from the Forward Exam mirrors these national results, revealing persistent and deep differences in academic proficiency. While many policymakers attribute these gaps to explicit racism, historic discrimination, and systemic inequities, this analysis investigates the extent to which other factors—specifically poverty and disability status—help to explain the relationship between race and academic performance.

An analysis using 2023–24 Forward Exam data finds that a substantial portion of the observed relationship between African American student composition and school-level proficiency is explained by socioeconomic and disability-related factors. Schools with higher percentages of African American students also tend to have significantly higher poverty rates and somewhat higher disability identification rates, both of which are strongly linked to lower academic performance. Additional evidence suggests that family structure and home stability—variables not directly measurable in education datasets—likely also play a significant role in shaping student outcomes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Wisconsin's Achievement Gap Is Uniquely Large

At 45 points on the 2024 NAEP fourth-grade reading assessment, Wisconsin's racial achievement gap far exceeds that of any other state, signaling a deep and persistent educational divide.

2. Poverty Is a Major Mediator

The analysis finds that roughly 42% of the relationship between the share of African American students in a school and academic proficiency is mediated by poverty. This suggests that economic disadvantage is a central driver of Wisconsin's racial achievement gap.

3. Disability Also Mediates

Disability status explains a smaller, but measurable, share of the relationship (about 3.6%),

4. Family Structure & Geography

Wisconsin has among the lowest marriage rates for African Americans in the nation. Policymakers could add to our understanding of the role of family status by requiring school districts to report it along with other state-mandated reporting.

5. The concentration of African American residents in one low-performing city (Milwaukee) also adds about 3.1% to the achievement gap on the Forward Exam.

INTRODUCTION

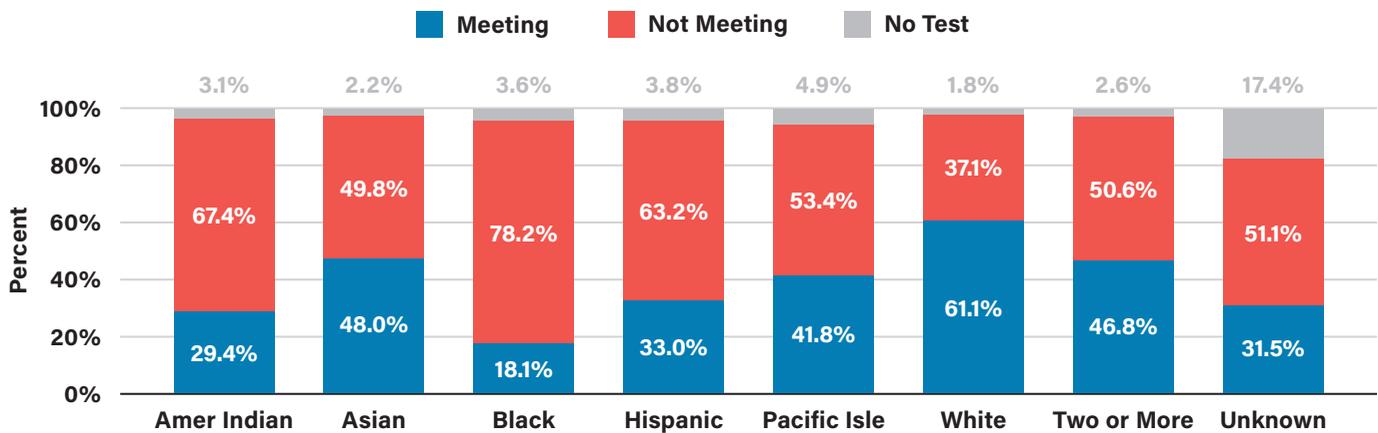
For many years, Wisconsin has had the largest racial achievement gap between white and black students in the country. The ten states with the largest racial achievement gaps in fourth grade reading on the [2024 NAEP](#) are shown below. Wisconsin’s gap is 13 points larger than that of Louisiana, which is tied with several other states for the eighth largest gap.

These results don’t show up only on the NAEP, but in state testing as well. Figure 1 is borrowed from DPI’s [Wisedash System](#) and depicts proficiency on the most recent round of the Forward Exam in math and reading for African American and white students.

Table 1.
Fourth Grade Reading Achievement Gap by State

State	Point Gap
Wisconsin	45
Connecticut	42
California	40
Maryland	36
Nebraska	36
Kansas	35
Iowa	34
Louisiana	32
Michigan	32
South Carolina	32

Figure 1. ELA Achievement by Race, 2024 Forward Exam (DPI)



While this achievement gap is very real, the solutions for it are often misplaced; centered on the race of the students themselves. For example, in 2023 Assemblywoman Sheila Stubbs used this achievement gap as part of a pitch for Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs,

“In fact, Wisconsin has.....the lowest level of racial parity in education..... The only way we will close these horrifying gaps in equality is by addressing the structural barriers facing our residents of color. DEI is a critical component of the strategy to combat our grievous racial disparities.”

And Superintendent Underly argued in her [2025 State of Education Address](#) that it is a lack of resources for schools with larger minority populations that is the true issue: *“This is not an achievement gap. It is an opportunity gap. Because when inputs are unequal, it is not the students who have failed — it is the system that has failed them.”*

While both of these concepts may make for interesting sound bites, they actually beg a more critical question: is it something unique to African American students that explains our achievement gaps or is it similar factors to what social science has observed as causing lower achievement across the board—factors such as income and disability rates? In this policy brief, we seek to at least partially answer these important questions.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Poverty

There are other factors that, unfortunately, are associated with student race that ought to be considered when assessing any true role for race in the achievement gap. Chief among these is poverty.

According to [research](#) published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 2015, children from families below the poverty line scored between 4 and 7 points lower on standardized tests on average. [Harms and Ruffin \(2023\)](#) laid out some of the main reasons this well-established result may exist:

“Children living in poverty may experience a plethora of disruptive life events and circumstances—for example, lower-quality prenatal care, economic strain, frequent moves, higher rates of illness, food insecurity, neighborhood violence, malnutrition and greater exposure to pollution and toxins. Children in poverty are also more likely to be exposed to high levels of parental stress, increasing risk for negative parenting practices. Lack of parental resources to buy books and other educational materials may result in a lack of cognitive stimulation in the home, and lack of time for parents to engage in conversation with children may result in lower language exposure.”

While African Americans tend to be living in poverty more than other groups in most every state, Wisconsin ranks in the top ten highest with more than [27% of residents](#) in poverty. A fair assessment of the role race in student achievement should also account for the role poverty plays.

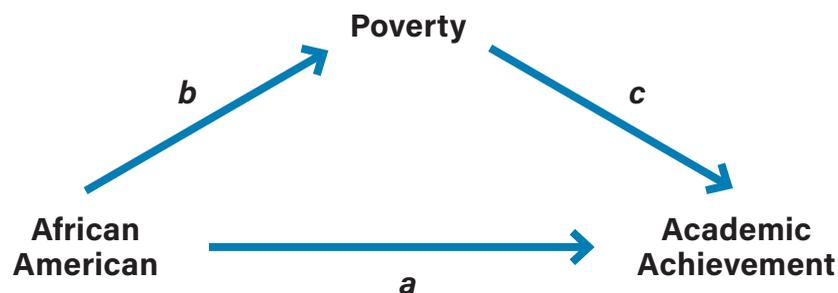
Disability Status

Research [consistently shows](#) that African American students are identified with disabilities at higher rates than their White peers, particularly in subjective categories such as emotional disturbance and intellectual disability. This disproportionate representation has implications for academic achievement, as students receiving special education services often score lower on standardized tests and [have lower graduation rates](#) compared to non-disabled peers. Consequently, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education contributes to broader achievement disparities. The exact causes of these identification patterns are complex, multifaceted, and likely beyond the scope of this paper. But disability status remains a key factor to consider when examining the racial achievement gap.

QUANTIFYING THE ROLE FOR OTHER FACTORS

When two variables are correlated with each other (e.g. African American and Poverty) and also with a third variable (e.g. Academic outcomes), we have what the potential for what is known in social science as "[mediation](#)." Figure 2 depicts with theoretical causal pathways what mediation in this instance might look like. It is important to note that the claim here isn't that being African American causes poverty—merely that these variables are associated with each other in most datasets.

Figure 2.
Mediation Analysis
Example



News reports on the achievement gap focus on path **a** (the direct relationship between being African American and Achievement) and sometimes on **c** (the direct effect of poverty on achievement). But rarely accounted for is path **b**, and the manner in which **b** and **c** together alter the relationship between African American and Achievement. The mediation analysis we will undertake here attempts to do just that—in the context of both poverty and disability.

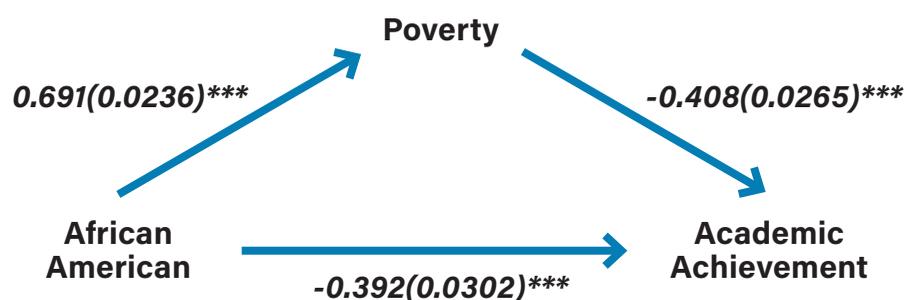
Using the 2023-24 Forward Exam data, we will measure the extent to which poverty and disability rates mediate the relationship between the share of African Americans in a school and Forward Exam English/

Language Arts proficiency. We will also include other factors in the model known to have a relationship to proficiency. These include the grade levels in the school, the share of English Language learners, and the share of Hispanic students. Disability status is included as a control variable in the poverty mediation analysis, and vice-versa in the disability mediation analysis. All of this data is gathered at the school level.

RESULTS

The same chart as in Figure 2 is recreated in Figure 3 with the resulting numbers filled in from the analysis. The direct effect (path **a**) of African American on Academic achievement remains. The interpretation of this pathway is that as the percentage of African American students in a school goes from 0% to 100%, the proficiency rate on the Forward Exam would be expected to decline by 39.2%.

Figure 3.
Mediation of African
American by Poverty



Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

However, there is the “behind the scenes” path to consider as well. A school with 100% African American students would be expected to have poverty rates 69.1% higher than a school with no African American students, and high poverty is in turn correlated with a 40.8% reduction in proficiency rates. All told, approximately 42.1% of the relationship between African American students and achievement is mediated by this path. This suggests it is important to consider the role of poverty when discussing the racial achievement gap in Wisconsin.

What about mediation by disability? These results are depicted in Figure 4. The relationship between African American and disability is still statistically strong, but not as substantively dramatic as with poverty. A school with 100% African American students would be expected to have a disability rate about 7.6% higher than a school with no African American students. The path between disability in achievement is only about half as strong as between poverty and achievement. As a consequence of both “back paths” being weaker, about 3.6% of the relationship between African American students and achievement is mediated through this path.

Figure 4.
Mediation of African
American by Disability



Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

UNMEASURABLE FACTOR: INFLUENCES AT HOME

There are a number of factors that may contribute to the racial achievement gap that are not directly measurable in our state's education data. One of those key factors is home stability. Research has shown that students who come from two-parent families are more likely to have academic success than those from other family situations. A particular key here is the presence of a father in the home. A [2015 meta-analysis](#) of research on the presence of a father found statistically significant increases in behavior and academic outcomes. As the family situation becomes more unstable, the risk of depression, anxiety, and dropping out of school entirely increases significantly [according to research](#). While there are likely many reasons for this consistent result, [Robert Pondiscio has noted](#) that one key reason might be the most straightforward: two parents simply have more time to be involved in the care and learning experience of their child than a single parent—often struggling to balance work and parenting responsibilities.

This is relevant here because Wisconsin has the lowest rate of married African American adults of any state in the country according to the [most recent analysis](#) by the Census Bureau. Table 2 displays the states with ten lowest percentages of married African American adults. The rate of married adults in Wisconsin is nearly 3% lower than the next lowest state, Michigan.*

While we cannot directly quantify the impact here, it is clear that this reality is exerting some negative pull on student test scores in Wisconsin given what is known from extensive research on this topic.

* Moreover, academic literature examines how achievement correlates to things family scholarly culture (including the number books in a home), <https://www.copr.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Evans-M.-D.-R..pdf>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049089X18300607> and the number of words heard by a child in the home: <https://brookespublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Meaningful-Differences-Excerpt.pdf> and birth order: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/22/science/22sibling.html>.

Table 2.
Percentage of Married
African American
Adults, 2015-19
(Census Bureau)

State	2015-2019 (percent)
Wisconsin	22.6%
Michigan	25.4%
Illinois	25.8%
Pennsylvania	25.8%
Ohio	27.0%
Missouri	28.2%
Louisiana	28.4%
Indiana	28.9%
Iowa	28.9%
Kentucky	28.9%

UNMEASURABLE FACTOR: CONCENTRATED POPULATION

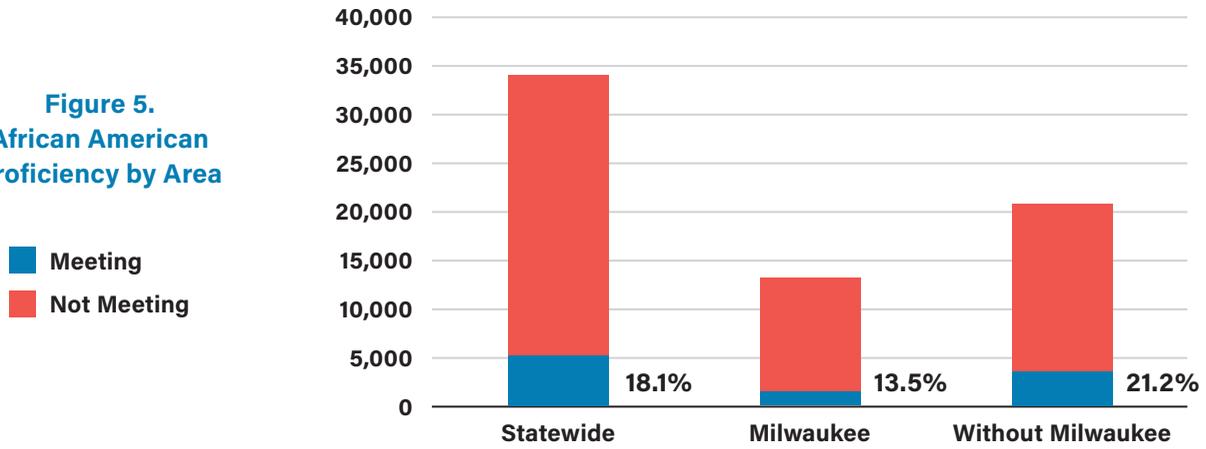
One unique demographic aspect of Wisconsin is just how concentrated the African American population of the state is in a single urban area. Table 3 shows the ten largest districts for the share of the total African American population of the state in Forward Exam grades (3-8). About 50.53% of the African American population attends school in Milwaukee. This is not surprising considering that Wisconsin ranks among the highest *in residential segregation*. Because urban education across the board presents unique challenges, the comparison of a concentrated, urban African American population with a white population that is largely suburban or rural will inevitably exacerbate existing gaps.

Table 3.
Districts with Share of Total

District Name	Share of Total AA Student Population
Milwaukee	50.53%
Madison Metropolitan	7.10%
Racine Unified	5.91%
Kenosha	3.92%
Green Bay Area Public	2.47%
Wauwatosa	1.77%
Beloit	1.68%
Sun Prairie Area	1.62%
Brown Deer	1.38%
West Allis-West Milwaukee	1.28%

Figure 5 shows the count and percentage of African American students meeting expectations statewide, in Milwaukee, and with Milwaukee excluded on the 2024-25 Forward Exam. While significant gaps still exist, the poor performance in Milwaukee drags down statewide African American proficiency by about 3.1%—and other urban population concentration no doubt plays a similar role to a lesser extent.

Figure 5.
African American
Proficiency by Area



UNMEASURABLE FACTOR: FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY

African American students are less likely than students from other groups to have parents that engage in activities known to help students armed with the core skills for reading. For example, both nationally and in Wisconsin, [survey data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) shows that African American families are less likely to read to their kids under the age of 6 at home than white or Hispanic parents. The data from Wisconsin for the most recent year available (2020) is shown below.

Table 4.
Percent of Families Reading
to Young Children at Home
by Race, Wisconsin 2020

Race	% Reading to Kids <4 days per week
White	33%
Hispanic	45%
Black	55%

A lack of these foundational skills impacts not only reading proficiency, but also success in other areas as well. For instance, a 2018 study of science literacy found that a 10-question battery on foundational literacy significantly accounts for the achievement gap between white and African American students.

“Catching students up” on these foundational schools may be a key to solving the achievement gap, and Mississippi may provide evidence that it can work. Much has been made in recent years of the “Mississippi Miracle.” A state that has been bottom-of-the-barrel in education since data has been collected has seen its reading results increase dramatically through the implementation of the “Science of Reading.” As [WILL explained in earlier work](#), the Science of Reading focuses on building core reading skills that focuses on the explicit and systematic teaching of foundational skills, like phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, that strong readers rely on. As a state with a [plurality-African American](#) public school student population, what works there could be instructive for other states dealing with a racial achievement gap.

Conclusion

Wisconsin’s racial achievement gap is both real and alarming, but its roots appear to extend well beyond race alone. In short, having black skin does not cause low achievement, contrary to the current theories of “systemic racism” advanced by policymakers. The evidence presented here shows that poverty and disability rates account for a substantial portion of the observed disparities, and that family instability is likely an additional cause. Narrowing Wisconsin’s achievement gap will require addressing the intertwined social and economic challenges that shape educational outcomes long before students enter the classroom. A renewed focus on family stability, early childhood development, and targeted support based on economic status rather than race may offer a more effective path towards narrowing these long-observed gaps. Ultimately, closing the achievement gap will ultimately depend on addressing each student’s individual needs, rather than categorizing and stereotyping students based on race.



will-law.org
414-727-9455

330 East Kilbourn Ave. | Suite 725
Milwaukee, WI 53202


@WILawLiberty

WILL is funded by private donors and foundations. WILL does not accept government funds or contributions that could influence the litigation we choose to pursue or the outcomes of our research.

Will you consider becoming a partner in WILL's work today? Donate to WILL at:

will-law.org/donate

WILL is a tax-exempt, nonprofit, public charity as defined by Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and gifts to WILL are tax deductible.