Achievement gap still splits white, black students in US

WASHINGTON (AP) - Despite unprecedented efforts to improve minority achievement in the past decade, the gap between black and white students remains frustratingly wide, according to an Education Department report released Tuesday.

There is good news in the report: Reading and math scores are improving for black students in public schools across the country. But because white students are also improving, the disparity between blacks and whites has lessened only slightly.

On average, the gap narrowed by about seven points from 1992 to 2007, so that black students scored about 28 points behind white students on a 500-point scale.

The divide between minority and white students is considered one of the most pressing challenges in public education. Experts say it stems from entrenched factors that hinder learning.

More black children live in poverty, which is linked to an array of problems - low birth weight, exposure to lead poisoning, hunger, too much TV watching, too little talking and reading at home, less involvement by parents and frequent school-changing.

The gap exists even before kids start school. But schools don’t mitigate the problem, said Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, a children’s advocacy group.

“African-American students are less likely than their white counterparts to be taught by teachers who know their subject matter,” Haycock said.

“They are less likely to be exposed to a rich and challenging curriculum,” she said. “And the schools that educate them typically receive less state and local funding than the ones serving mainly white students.”

Scores in reading were especially discouraging. Only three states - New Jersey, Delaware and Florida - narrowed the divide in fourth grade, and no state did so in eighth grade. There was more progress in math among younger kids.

Former Virginia governor recalls struggle to integrate

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - Former Gov. L. Douglas Wilder shared his front-row perspective on history Friday during a conference marking the demise of state-sanctioned school segregation in Virginia.

He told of rubbing shoulders with civil rights giants like Thurgood Marshall and Oliver W. Hill, and how the era inspired not only his pioneering political career but a whole generation of young black men and woman.

“As I’ve said on so many occasions, I would never have been a lawyer but for Brown v. Board of Education,” Wilder said of the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision ending school segregation. “Brown sent me to law school.”

Later, he was astounded as he worked with Marshall, Hill and Spottswood Robinson, another civil rights lawyer, as they led the fight to end Virginia’s stubborn defiance of the decision.

The grandson of slaves, Wilder left a state job as a chemist, went to law school and embarked on a political path that ultimately led to his election in 1989 as the nation’s first African-American governor.

Wilder, 78, spoke at a Capitol conference sponsored by the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. The daylong event brought together political leaders, clergy and former students, now in their 60s, who were faced with locked school buildings when they tried to attend all-white schools. In Virginia, political leaders called their movement to preserve segregated schools “Massive Resistance.”

Wilder said that era left a terrible legacy.

“Massive Resistance may have legally ended in 1959, but the lingering effects of decades of justifying segregation continues,” he said in his characteristic cadence, which involves high-pitched tones for emphasis.

The victims, he said, also included white students whose parents could not afford private or religious schools when public classrooms were shuttered by the threat of integration.

“It’s necessary to look at the total picture or the entirety of the massive effort of denial of rights and to know all of the ramifications,” Wilder said. “The revisionists or the apologists fail to fully mention the full effect of the closing of state-sanctioned school segregation in Virginia.

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The final end of school segregation did not mean equal educational opportunities, either, he said.

Wilder, who attended public schools in Richmond, said some primarily black schools lacked indoor plumbing and had to settle for hand-me-down supplies from majority white schools.

“ ‘What and how do you measure the effects of that?’ he asked.

African-American students, he added, were blessed by committed teachers who “challenged us to be the best in society, and they accepted no excuses.”

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In the coming issues we will look at some of the dollars that are hitting our state and just what they are for (what are the opportunities)...

54th Massachusetts honored on historic battle anniversary

SULLIVANS ISLAND, S.C. (AP) - The 54th Massachusetts regiment is being remembered on the anniversary of their famed Civil War attack on Battery Wagner on South Carolina’s Charleston Harbor.

Saturday is the 146th anniversary of the attack in which the black regiment charged entrenched Confederates in a battle recounted in the movie “Glory.”

Other troops from New England, New York and Pennsylvania also took part in the unsuccessful assault. Historians say there were 1,600 casualties among the 6,000 federal troops.

To mark the anniversary, re-enactors portraying the 54th Massachusetts gather at the Fort Moultrie Visitor Center on Sullivans Island. There’s also a ranger presentation about the battle and scenes from the movie are being shown.

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The Leader In The Field
Obama chooses Harvard Law grad to head EEOC

WASHINGTON (AP) - President Barack Obama is choosing an NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund lawyer to chair the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The White House announced Obama’s decision to nominate Jacqueline Berrien on Thursday. She has been the fund’s associate director-counsel since September 2004.

The Harvard Law School graduate also has worked for the Ford Foundation’s Peace and Social Justice Program, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In a statement, Obama notes Berrien’s “passion and leadership” and says she will make sure the EEOC lives up to its mission of eliminating discrimination in the workplace.

‘Apprentice’ winner Pinkett may co-star in NJ politics

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) - “Apprentice” winner Randal Pinkett may be auditioning for a different role: New Jersey lieutenant governor.

Pinkett’s name is among those being floated for the No. 2 spot on the Democratic gubernatorial ticket. If chosen from a narrowing list of contenders, Pinkett would apprentice under Gov. Jon Corzine, the incumbent seeking re-election.

Corzine campaign spokesman Patrick McKenna said no decision has been made.

Running mates must be named by July 27.

President Barack Obama is due to campaign with Corzine in New Jersey on Thursday, fueling speculation that he or GOP challenger Chris Christie could announce their picks by then. Christie’s campaign deferred comment.

This is the first New Jersey election to include lieutenant governor candidates. The Legislature created the post in 2005 after the abrupt resignation of Gov. Jim McGreevey in the wake of a gay affair, making New Jersey the 44th state with a second-in-command.

With Corzine dragging in early polls, Pinkett’s name has emerged as an out-of-the-box pick with the potential to energize the crucial African American base. Pinkett is African American.

“Corzine’s preference here indicates how important African American voters are going to be in this election,” said Bridget C. Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University. “Obama and an African American on the ticket gives those African American voters who voted last year a reason to come back out to the polls.

Obama carried all but a fraction of New Jersey’s black vote in the last election.

However, picking Pinkett is not without political risks.

The Rhodes Scholar with five academic degrees has never held elected office. He has no statewide political network and is untested on the campaign trail.

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Even in death, no rest for lynching victim Till

CHICAGO (AP) - When his mother put the battered body of 14-year-old Emmett Till in the ground more than 50 years ago, it was supposed to be the end of a sad saga for the boy whose lynching became a rallying point for the civil rights movement.

But even in death, Till cannot rest. Four years after his body was exhumed as part of an investigation, his original glass-topped casket has been found in a rusty shed at a suburban cemetery where workers are accused of digging up and dumping hundreds of bodies in a scheme to resell the burial plots.

The casket, which was seen by mourners around the world in 1955, was surrounded by garbage and old headstones. When authorities opened it, a family of possums scrambled out.

“There is no rest for Emmett,” Olle Jordan, a cousin, said Monday. “It was turmoil when they exhumed his body, and now we are put in turmoil because we might have to exhume again.”

Till’s current grave site does not appear to be among those disturbed at Burr Oak Cemetery, the historic black burial ground south of Chicago where authorities have charged a manager and three grave diggers with the gruesome reburial scheme. The manager is also suspected of pocketing donations she elicited for a Till memorial museum, though she has not been charged in connection with those allegations.

“Emmett Till is being treated with the same disrespect in death as he was treated in life,” said Jonathan Fine, executive director of the group Preservation Chicago.

In August 1955, Till traveled from Chicago to Mississippi to visit relatives. After he whistled at a white woman outside a market, the woman’s husband and another man snatched him from his bed. His body was found in a river three days later, a cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire. His mouth was crushed, and his left eye was missing, as were most of his teeth.

The two men were acquitted, but the next year they confessed to the killing in a Look magazine article.

Till’s body was exhumed in 2005 as part of a new investigation into his death, as federal authorities sought to dispel long-standing rumors that the body was not Till’s.

Tests confirmed the body was that of Till, and the case was closed after a Mississippi grand jury decided not to return an indictment against any other possible other participants in his killing.

Till was reburied in another casket, as is customary after exhumations, and the original glass-topped coffin was to be saved for a memorial.

Authorities investigating the grave desecration found Till’s first casket beneath a dirty tarp in a dark corner of a cemetery shed.

A Sheridan spokesman said the casket has been moved to a secure room at a suburban sheriff’s facility. He expects it will eventually be returned to the Till family.

Till’s mother chose the original casket so mourners could see her son’s ghastly injuries. Photographs of Till’s body in the coffin published in Jet Magazine became powerful images of the civil rights movement.

“The young people who later led the civil rights movement were ashamed of Till and I couldn’t go back,” said Mitchell. “Maybe this will lead to something good, to really do something now, really build a mausoleum, put this casket where it belongs,” he said. “There is a lot of history in that, a lot of important history.”

Rev. Sharpton backs Bloomberg foe Thompson for NYC mayor

NEW YORK (AP) - The Rev. Al Sharpton is endorsing Democrat William Thompson Jr. for mayor of New York City.

Thompson is the leading Demo- crat competing to run against bil- ionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a Republican-turned-independent.

The civil rights leader plans to campaign with Thompson over the weekend. Thompson is the city’s comptroller. Even though he’s backing Bloomberg’s challenger, Sharpton has been careful in recent months not to criticize the mayor too harshly.

When Thompson’s office released a report this week showing that black unemployment has surged disproportionately during the recession, Sharpton would not directly blame Bloomberg.

Sharpton said everyone needed to come to the table and work together to solve the economic crisis.
Virginia paper expresses regret for backing Southern segregation

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - A Virginia newspaper expressed regret Thursday for supporting a systematic campaign by the state’s white political leaders to maintain separate public schools for blacks and whites in the 1950s.


The newspaper took the unusual step of promoting the editorial on its front page. The editorial was published on the eve of a conference in Richmond marking the 50th anniversary of the end of Massive Resistance, which was dismantled by a 1959 court ruling.

Massive Resistance was Virginia’s answer to Brown v. Board of Education, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed school segregation. Endorsed at the highest levels of state government and promoted by U.S. Sen. Harry F. Byrd, the policy cut funds to any school that dared to integrate.

“The hour was ignoble,” the editorial says. “Editorials in The News Leader relentlessly championed Massive Resistance and the dubious constitutional arguments justifying its unworthy cause. Although not so intimately engaged, The Times-Dispatch was complicit.”

Former Virginia Gov. L. Douglas Wilder, who in 1989 became the nation’s first black elected governor, said in a telephone interview that he found the editorial wanting.

“Some would say better late than never,” Wilder said. “Others would say why say anything at all if it’s not heartfelt.”

He said the editorial is “an admission they were wrong, and I don’t think anyone questions that,” but he said the newspaper did not fully acknowledge the movement and the damage it caused.

State Sen. Henry L. Marsh III of Richmond said the newspaper’s piece “goes part of the way to being an excellent editorial” but should have gone further. In the 1950s, Marsh was a young civil rights lawyer who worked on one of the desegregation cases that became part of Brown v. Board of Education.

Marsh said the editorial should have mentioned the contributions of civil rights activists Oliver W. Hill and Samuel W. Tucker “and many other whites and blacks who stood up and fought against Massive Resistance.”

He also said that “some people were crushed by Massive Resistance - they were denied an education - and there’s no mention of them. And it fails to call upon the citizens today to undo some of the harm that was done by Massive Resistance. The battle is still ongoing.”

Also ongoing, according to the editorial, is the damage the newspaper inflicted on its own reputation.

“Many remember,” the editorial says. “We understand. Words have consequences.”

Editors Todd Culbertson, editor of the editorial page, said the newspaper has expressed regret in brief passages over the years but had never done so in a full editorial.

“We just thought it was time to say something,” he said.

Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. -- Martin Luther King, Jr.
NEW YORK (AP) - Saying that civil rights leaders from decades past paved the way for his election as the nation’s first black commander in chief, President Barack Obama (pictured with NAACP Chairman Julian Bond) paid homage to the NAACP and advised members that their work remains unfinished.

Obama traced his historic rise to power to the vigor and valor of black civil rights leaders, telling the nation’s oldest civil rights organization Thursday night that their sacrifice “began the journey that has led me here.” He also prodded them to look beyond simply African-American rights as the group celebrated its 100th convention.

“Make no mistake: The pain of discrimination is still felt in America,” the president told the friendly audience that erupted in standing applause and the occasional “Amen” during his remarks.

Rousing his audience, Obama offered his most direct speech on race since winning the White House, a mix of personal reflection and policy promotion. He had worked on the address for about two weeks and revised it until shortly before he spoke, his aides said, underscoring the importance of his message and his audience.

Implicit in his appearance was that he is seeking the backing of the powerful NAACP and its members for his ambitious domestic agenda. He also is careful not to forget a groundswell of black voters who reshaped the electoral map, although they didn’t singularly deliver him to the White House.

Painting himself as the beneficiary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s work, Obama cited historical figures from W.E.B. DuBois to Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr. to Emmet Till to explain how the path to the presidency was cleared by visionaries.

Despite the racial progress exemplified by his own election, Obama said African-Americans must overcome a disproportionate share of struggles, including being more likely to suffer from many diseases and having a higher proportion of children end up in jail.

“They’re very different from the barriers faced by earlier generations. They’re very different from the ones faced when fire hoses and dogs were being turned on young marchers,” Obama said. “But what’s required to overcome today’s barriers is the same as what was needed then. The same commitment. The same sense of urgency.”

Obama expanded his message of equal rights beyond the black communities. He said many Americans still face discrimination and suggested the NAACP - looking to declare a mission for its second century - might embrace a broader mandate in coming years.

Obama’s remarks, steeped in his personal biography as the son of a white mother from Kansas and black father from Kenya, challenged the audience - those in the room and those beyond - to take greater responsibility for their own future.

He urged parents to take a more active role, residents to pay better attention to their schools and students to aspire beyond basketball stars and rappers.

“I want them aspiring to be scientists and engineers, doctors and teachers, not just ballers and rappers,” Obama said. “I want them aspiring to be a Supreme Court justice. I want them aspiring to be president of the United States.”

With that line, Obama drove the hotel ballroom audience to its feet.

Throughout his comments, Obama sought a balance, contending that the government must foster equality but individuals must take charge of their own lives. It was reminiscent of earlier Obama speeches, calling on fathers to help their children and adopting a tone that at times seemed drawn from the pulpit.

“We have to say to our children, ‘Yes, if you’re African-American, the odds of growing up amid crime and gangs are higher. Yes, if you live in a poor neighborhood, you will face challenges that somebody in a wealthy suburb does not have to face,’” Obama said, returning to his tough-love message familiar from his two-year presidential campaign.

“But that’s not a reason to go cut class, that’s not a reason to give up on your education and drop out of school. No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands.”

Today, Obama said, it is not prejudice or discrimination that presents the greatest obstacles for blacks, but rather structural inequities - in areas such as education and health care. Still, he said discrimination persists - and not just for blacks - and chided those who may contend otherwise.
First female presidential helo pilot finishes tour

WASHINGTON (AP) - More history was made at the White House on Thursday when President Barack Obama climbed aboard his helicopter. An all-female crew was waiting to take him to Andrews Air Force Base.

It was Major Jennifer Grieves’ last day in a rotation that made her the first female pilot of Marine One, the presidential helicopter.

To honor Grieves’ achievement, Thursday’s three-person crew was made up of women. Grieves hails from Glendale, Ariz. Her co-pilot, Major Jennifer Marine, is from Palisade, Colo. Sgt. Rachael Sherman, of Traverse City, Mich., was the crew chief.

Obama flew to New Jersey to campaign with Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine. He also was addressing the 100th anniversary convention of the NAACP in New York City.

Blacks are most obese US group, new study finds

ATLANTA (AP) - New health statistics show that nearly 36 percent of black Americans are obese - much more than other major racial or ethnic groups. And that gap exists in most states.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 29 percent of Hispanics and 24 percent of whites are obese. The data comes from national telephone surveys of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

These are the CDC’s first state-by-state obesity rates broken down by race. CDC officials think economic and social differences conspire to drive up rates in some groups.
Arrest has former DC Mayor Barry back in spotlight

WASHINGTON (AP) - For many Washingtonians, it's yet another episode in the long-running drama of former Mayor Marion Barry:

there's the attractive ex-girlfriend, accusations that he stalked other mayor.

Barry became mayor in 1979 and won re-election to two additional four-year terms. During that time, Barry is credited with guaranteeing youths summer jobs and helping people get city government jobs and contracts.

Barry was drawn into the spotlight anew after being arrested by federal prosecutors dropped the misdemeanor stalking charge against him, but the city council last week launched an independent investigation of Barry's contract with Watts-Brightaupt.

"I welcome this inquiry," Barry said. "I have no doubt in my mind that we followed all the procedures."

Watts-Brightaupt herself said she got to know Barry because she was fascinated with him as a political phenomenon.

She said that wherever they went, people would approach Barry and ask him to resolve personal or neighborhood issues. They seemed unaware, Watts-Brightaupt said, that there are city agencies to handle such problems and thought he was the only person they could turn to.

"I was excited to know what keeps Marion Barry getting elected," she told The Associated Press. People vote for him because of name recognition and "because their grandmother told them to," she said.

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Confederate archives find unlikely Black transcriber

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - When Ariel Brown was offered a chance to transcribe the correspondence of the first family of the Confederacy, the history major with a keen interest in the South seized the opportunity.

Then the student from historically black North Carolina Central University in Durham let her colleagues know she would be doing her research at The Museum of the Confederacy. 

"It was a state of, ‘Oh, wow, what is she doing there?’

Brown, 25, said she understands the reaction from fellow African-Americans who are offended by the Confederacy. 

Undaunted, Brown was one of three N.C. Central graduate students who sorted through 42 boxes of documents related to the family of Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy's lone president. In a museum that began as a memorial to the Confederate cause, this was an assignment tattered with irony. 

The paid intern worked in a second-floor room overlooking the back portico and garden of the former Confederate White House, where Davis led the secessionist slave states during the Civil War.

Museum president and CEO S. Waite Rawls III acknowledges there’s a “gee whiz” element to students from an historically black university working amid the nation’s most extensive collection of Confederate artifacts.

"Normal thought would be, would a black university be in a Confederate museum? That doesn’t make sense," Rawls said of the collaboration. "It’s a great statement, I think, to people who look at everything through a political lens."

Their work, he added, is consistent with the museum’s growing mission to reflect the social history of the Civil War, including the roles of women and African Americans, not just the generals, battles and weapons.

"The door hasn’t always been open to black historians’ work on the Confederacy and the South. The late John Hope Franklin wrote of the bigotry he encountered - in the South and elsewhere - during his distinguished career chronicling African-American history."

Evelyn Jordan Jr., an associate professor at the University of Virginia who has written extensively on the Civil War, recalls being turned away in 1986 by a so-called Southern heritage group in Richmond when he sought to examine its records for a book he was researching.

"There have been African-Americans, myself included, who find aspects of the Confederacy to be of interest," Jordan said. "But the response of some whites is something that has caused me problems in terms of doing research."
Housing complex a cornerstone in New Orleans neighborhood

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Work has begun on a $50-million housing complex in New Orleans’ Central City, a neighborhood that’s the latest focus of efforts by redevelopment officials to clean up blight, attract new businesses and spark a post-Hurricane Katrina revival.

The Muses, a mix of affordable and market-rate apartments and condominiums, is seen as a cornerstone in efforts to bring back the Oreltha Castle Haley Boulevard corridor nearly four years after the storm. The 11-block area, in the days of segregation, was teeming with businesses, many Jewish-owned, that catered to blacks who weren’t openly welcomed in many businesses, including along Canal Street, which essentially remains New Orleans’ Main Street.

The district later fell into disrepair - became what the head of the neighborhood business association calls “a haven for drugs and prostitution” - and today stands dotted with derelict buildings, not far from New Orleans’ downtown, its sports district and street car-lined St. Charles Avenue.

The housing development is perhaps the most obvious sign of the work under way to bring back businesses, residents and new investment.

Chris Dischinger, chief executive of Louisville, Ky.-based co-developer LDG Development, expects the first phase - with 211 rentals - to be finished within a year with the $50 million in financing for it secured. He hopes to close on the second phase, with $10 million for 52 units, by year’s end, but he could not give a timeline or cost projection for a planned third phase that would include condos and commercial space, saying Wednesday that would be driven by the market and demand.

“It’s a great neighborhood; it’s so close to the trolley line and it’s so well located,” he said. “Plus, there’s just such a need for housing still in the New Orleans market.”

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority is making the corridor a focal point of its efforts, planning to move its headquarters there. The Oreltha Boulevard Merchants & Business Association, which currently has just 16 paid members, is working to recruit new businesses. The association’s executive director, Lynnette Colvin, said at least nine new projects are expected to be underway within the next year, including several new restaurants. There are also plans for an interactive civil rights institute.

“Things are starting to happen,” she said. “In two years, what you see here will look so much different.”

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Black Mafia Family member arrested

ATLANTA (AP) - Federal agents say they have arrested a member of the Black Mafia Family, once a nationwide crime organization that ran a violent drug enterprise.

The U.S. Marshals’ Southeast Regional Fugitive Task Force said that Vernon Marcus Coleman (left) was the last of about 150 indicted members of the organization, which once controlled or had a hand in virtually all the cocaine and crack sold in Atlanta, Detroit and Los Angeles.

Coleman was picked up Thursday morning at a north Atlanta apartment. He was indicted more than two years ago on a federal charge of possession with the intent to distribute cocaine.

The others who were indicted have been convicted on drug or weapons charges in various cities.