



The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University

Toward Excellence with Equity

Facts on Achievement Gaps

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Achievement patterns result from a complex combination of historical factors that interact systemically across virtually every institution in the society.

Consequently, to raise achievement levels while narrowing gaps is a daunting challenge.



The contemporary challenge is exacerbated by the fact that population growth is greatest among groups for which academic achievement (i.e., skills) and attainment (i.e., years of schooling) are traditionally the lowest.

Average achievement levels are strikingly higher for white and Asian students than for blacks and Hispanics. This is true at all levels of parental education. Of course, there are low-performing subgroups among whites and Asians as well. They too warrant our collective attention.



The 2010 U.S. Census projects that the US will become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043.

Non-Hispanic whites will remain the largest single group, but no group will be a majority. The non-Hispanic white population is projected to peak in 2024 at 199.6 million and then decline.

Meanwhile, the Hispanic population will more than double, from 53.3 million in 2012 to 128.8 million in 2060. Blacks are expected to increase from 41.2 million to 61.8 million over the same period.

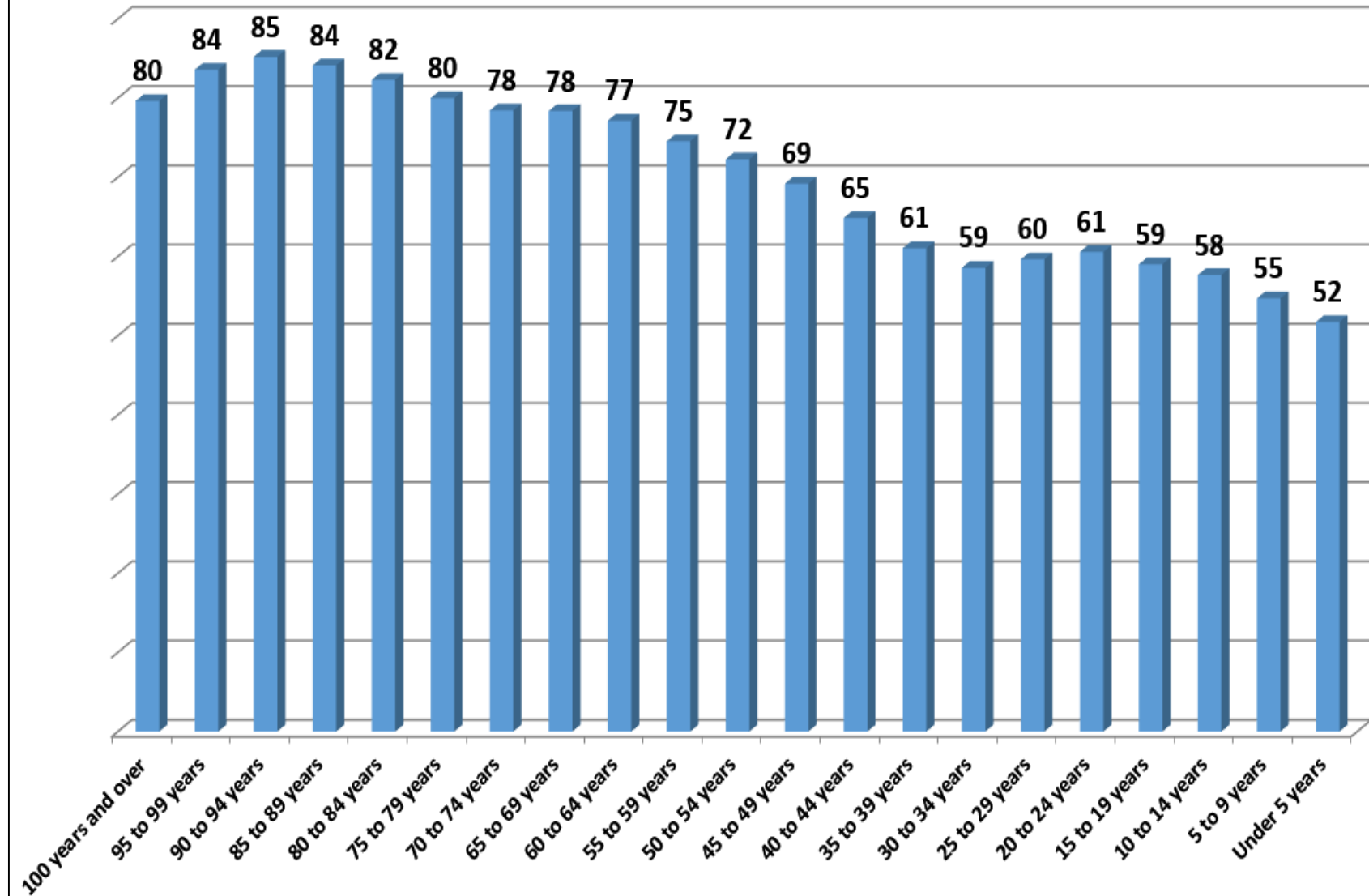


Percentage Non-Hispanic White in the United States Age Distribution in 2009

The majority of babies born in the U.S. are now children of color.

This chart shows the age distribution in 2009 for non-Hispanic whites.

Over 80% of adults ages 80 and over were white in 2009; about half of those ages 5 and below were white ([US Census Bureau](#))



Family resource disparities predict between one-half and two-thirds (occasionally more) of the total racial achievement gap in any given study.

Poverty rates in 2010 were 27.4% for blacks and 26.6% for Hispanics, compared to 9.9% for non-Hispanic whites and 12.1% for Asians ([University of Michigan, National Poverty Center](#)).

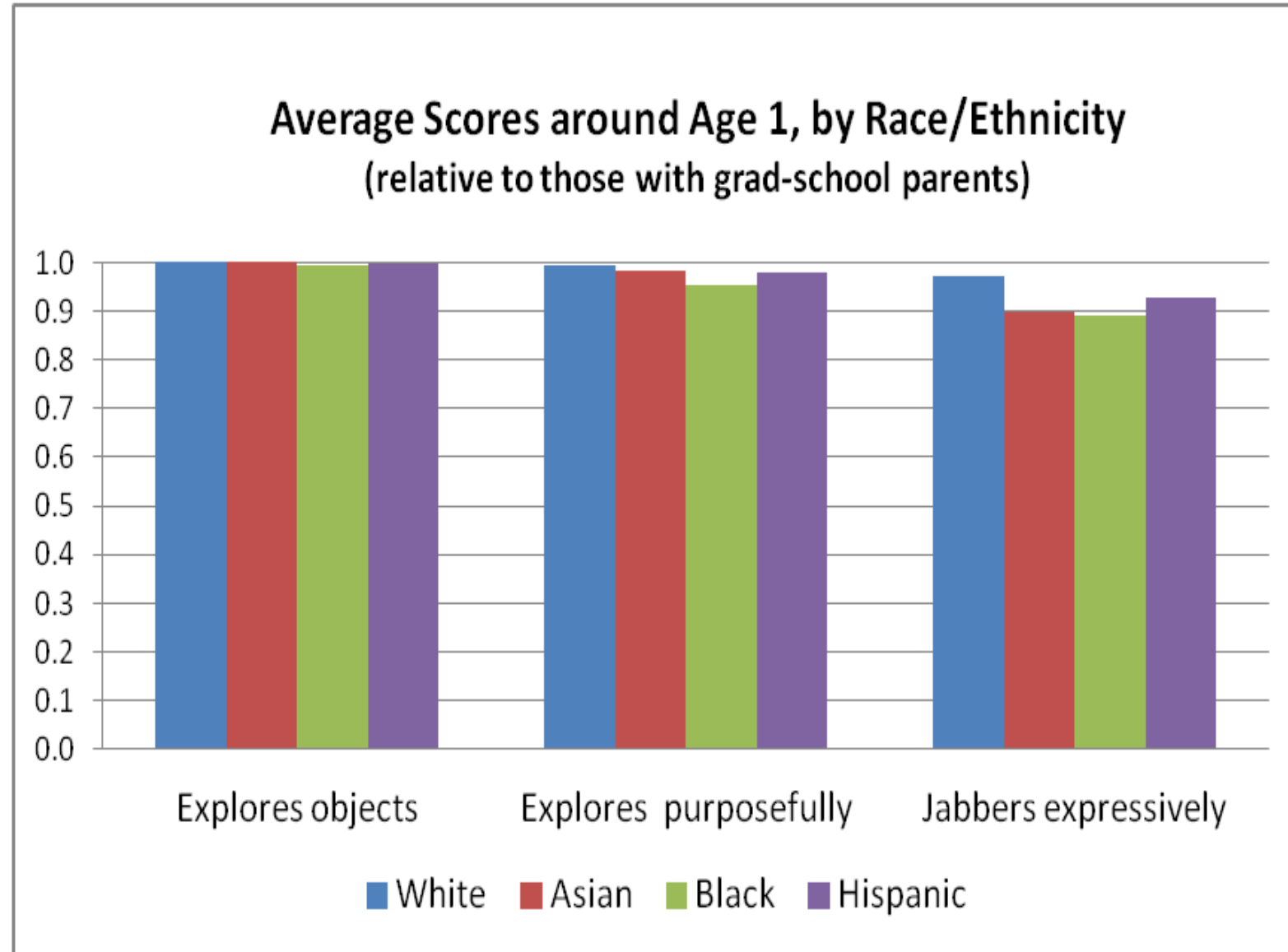
Median family income in 2009 was \$38,409 for Blacks and \$39,730 for Hispanics compared to \$62,545 for whites and \$75,027 for Asians ([US Census Bureau 2012 Statistical Abstract](#)). Achievement gaps are both causes and consequences of these resource disparities.



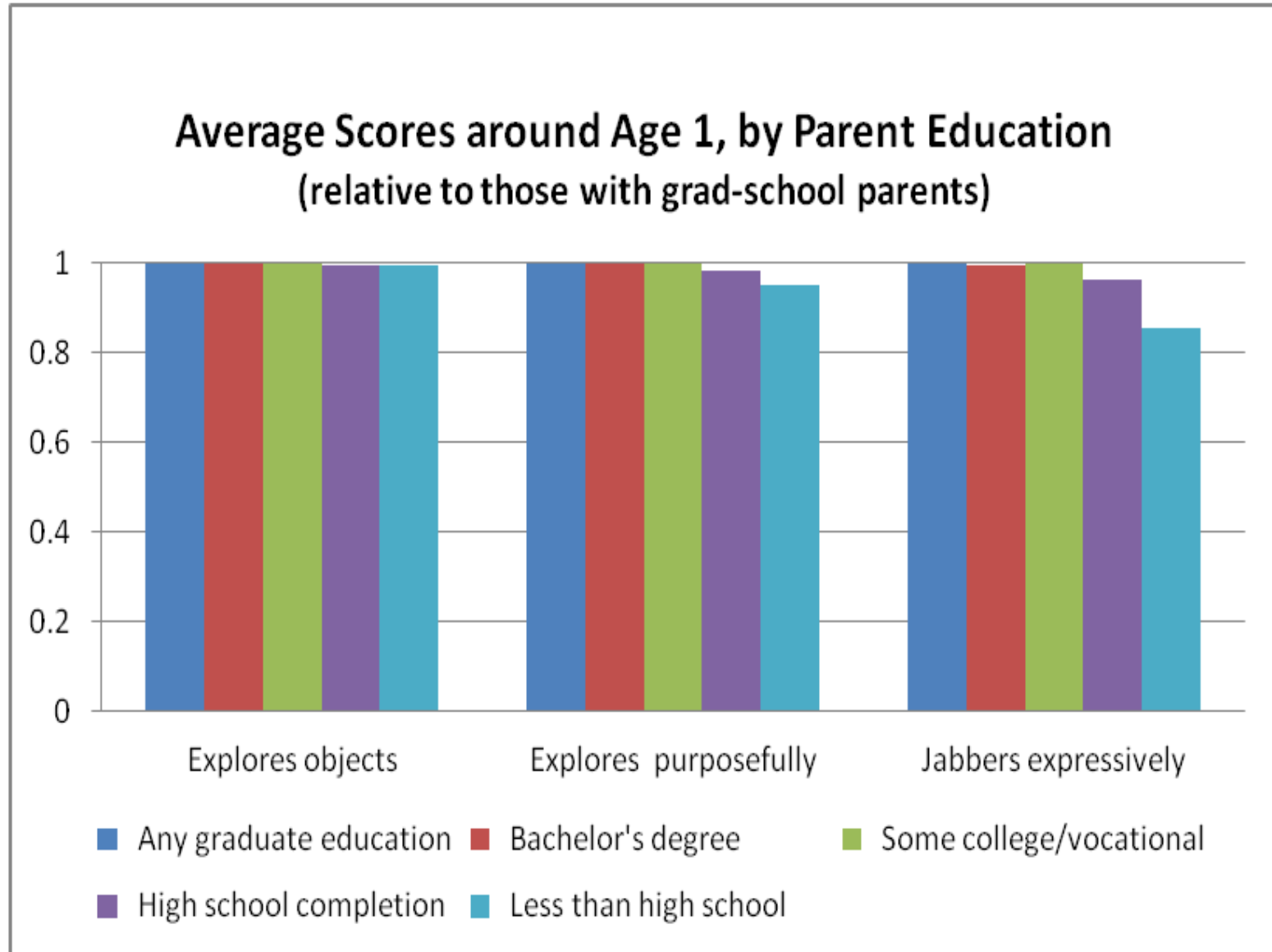
Efforts to achieve excellence with equity need to begin at or before birth and continue at least into early adulthood.

This chart shows skill patterns at age 1 measured as part of the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort.

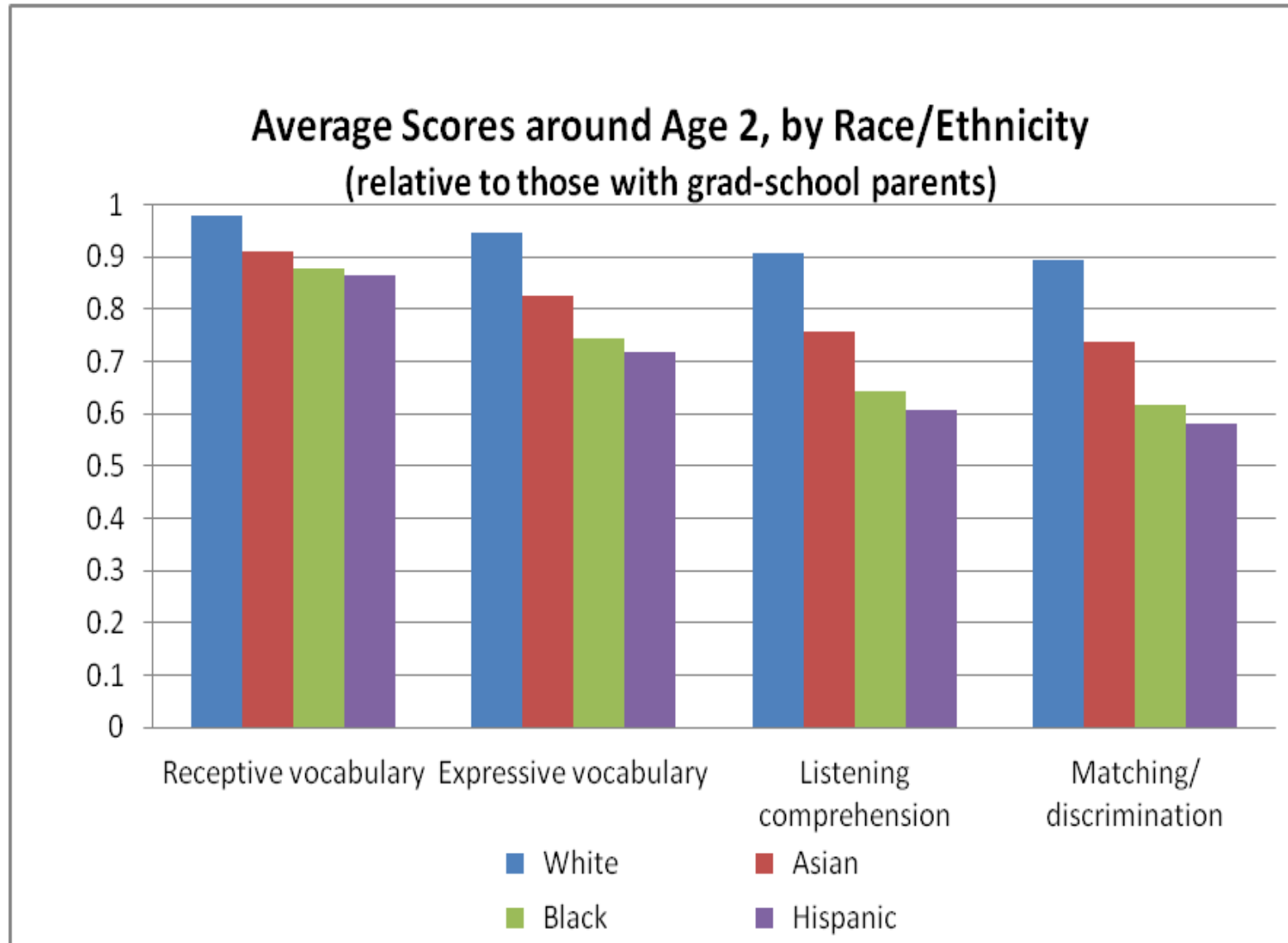
At age one there are virtually no differences between racial groups.



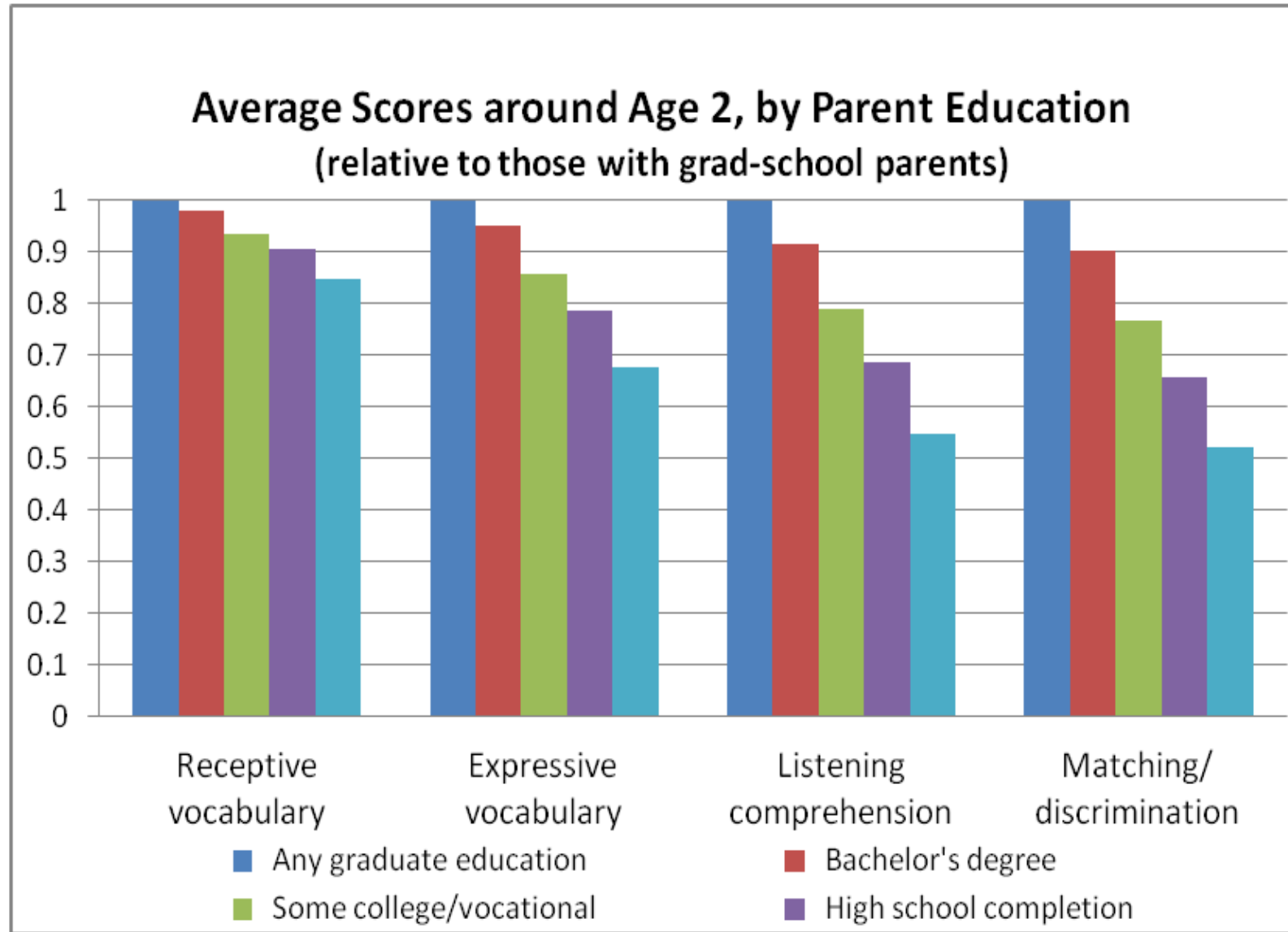
At age 1, there are also virtually no differences based on parent education level.



However, by age 2, the racial gaps are very apparent. Early life experiences play key roles in generating these differences.

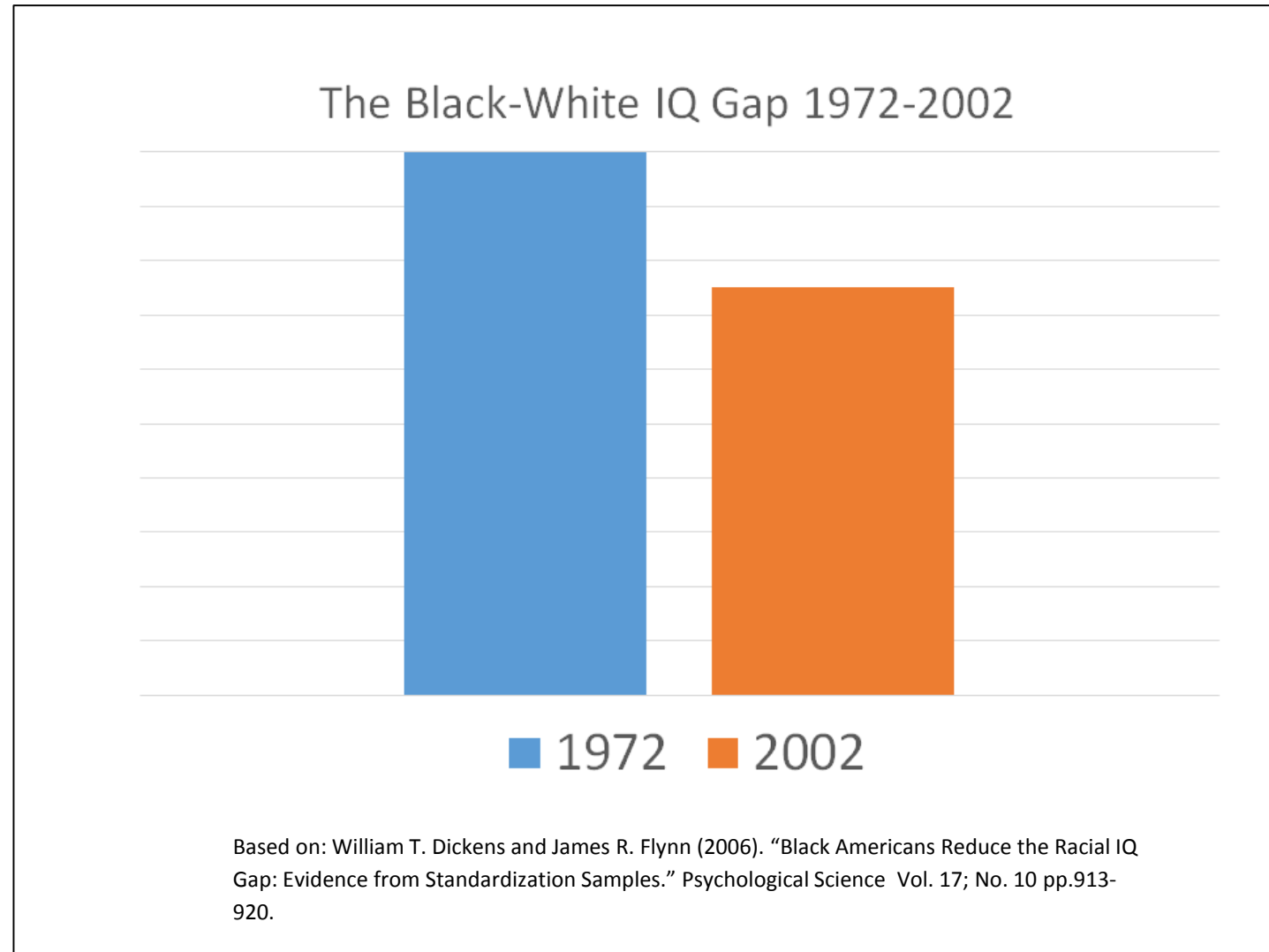


By age 2, gaps are also very apparent by parent education level. Again, early life experiences play key roles in generating these differences.

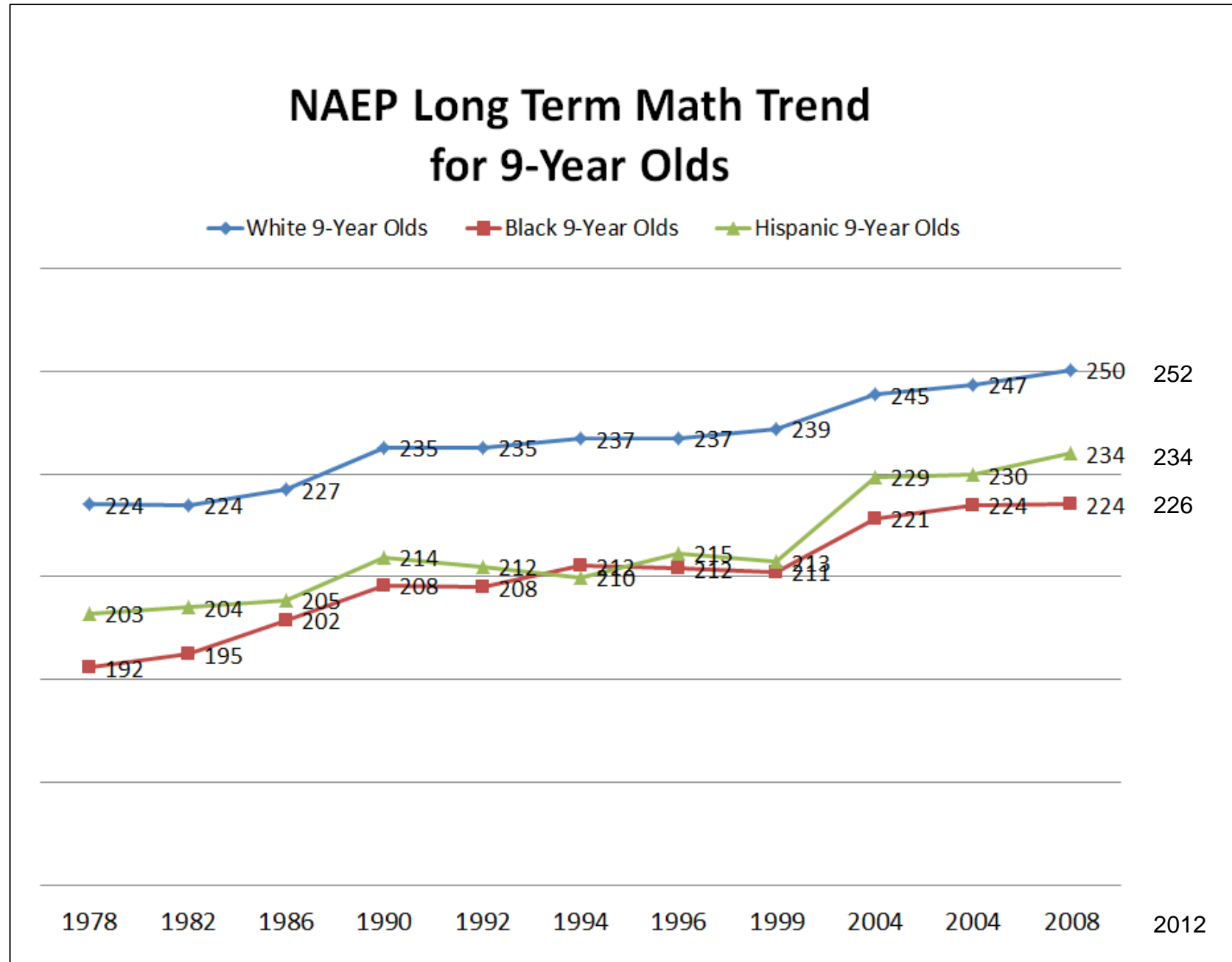


Despite these very early disparities, we know that raising scores and narrowing gaps is possible.

The black-white IQ gap narrowed by more than 25% between 1972 and 2002.



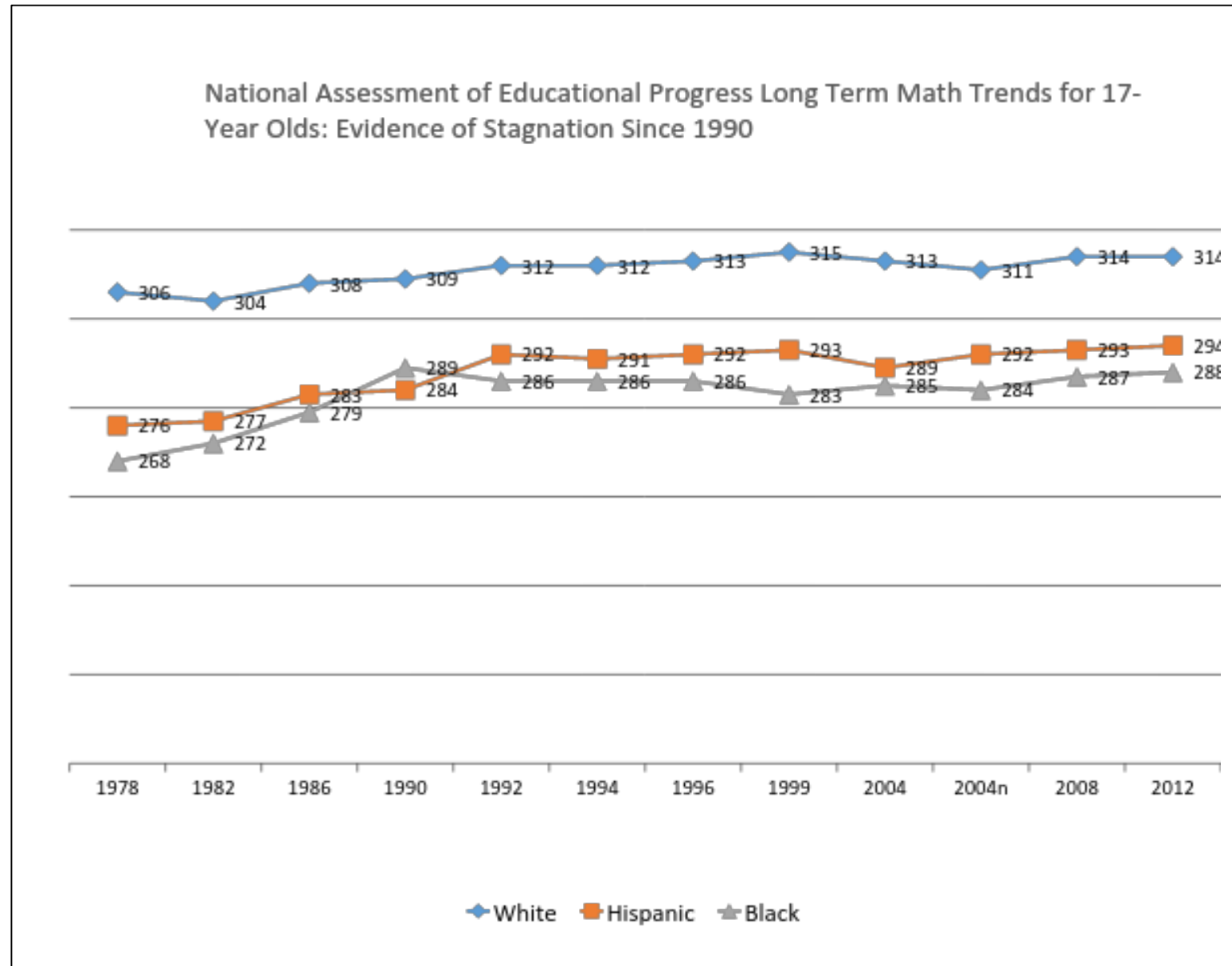
On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend Assessment, both 9- and 13-year-olds have achieved progress across all groups since the 1970s even as gaps between groups have narrowed.



Among 17-year olds, NAEP shows that whites have made some progress in math since the early 1970s but none in reading.

Black and Hispanic 17-year olds narrowed the gap with whites during the 1970s and 1980s, but their progress stopped abruptly around 1990.

Work remains to understand why and what can be done.



Even for white students, the U.S. lags behind other industrialized nations on international comparisons of student achievement such as the [Programme of International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#) and [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study \(TIMSS\)](#).

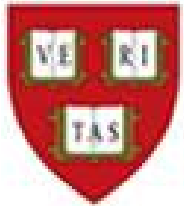
These gaps are costly for the nation; they weaken our social fabric while imposing economic costs in real expenditures and lost productivity.



The bottom line is that troubling gaps remain. They begin very early in life and our population is growing most rapidly among the lowest achieving groups.

Still, we have learned that progress is possible. Patterns have changed over time. We can make a difference.





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