

# Academic Disparities in California's Central and Imperial Valleys

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

California, known for having the largest economy in the United States, faces significant educational inequities. This report focuses on the racial and ethnic academic disparities in California's Central and Imperial Valleys (CIV). Despite California's overall economic strength, the CIV remains a pocket of severe socio-economic hardship, with marked disparities in educational outcomes that have persisted over time. Using a decade's worth of data on K-12 students, we examine standardized test scores in mathematics and English language arts (ELA), absenteeism, and graduation rates while controlling for student-level demographics and school district characteristics. We find persistent achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups in standardized test scores, absenteeism, and graduation rates despite efforts to address these disparities through state policies and funding. The findings in this report underscore the pressing need for targeted policies and interventions to address these disparities. In addition to threatening affected students' long-term well-being and economic prospects, persistent inequities in California's education system may hinder the state's and nation's future economic growth and result in a significant loss of untapped human potential.

### Key Findings

1. **Persistent Achievement Gaps:** The report reveals significant gaps in standardized test scores in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics between different racial and ethnic groups within the CIV region. Latino, Black, and economically disadvantaged students consistently underperform compared to their non-Hispanic White peers. On average, Hispanic students scored 5 to 6 percentiles lower in ELA and math standardized tests, while Black students scored

nearly 11 percentiles lower than their non-Hispanic White peers. Economically disadvantaged students exhibited similarly pronounced deficits, with their performance lagging behind their more affluent peers. In addition, these academic gaps are present in all grades, but especially in middle and high school, when gaps tend to widen.

2. **Disparities in Absenteeism and Graduation Rates:** The report also highlights disparities in absenteeism and graduation rates, critical indicators of student engagement and success. Hispanic students exhibited a chronic absenteeism rate approximately 1.5 percentage points higher than their non-Hispanic White peers. In the case of Black students, this gap widened to over 3.2 percentage points, highlighting the significant challenge of ensuring equitable access to educational engagement and support. Economically disadvantaged students also showed higher absenteeism rates, exacerbating their substantial academic challenges.

Graduation rates, while improving across all groups, still reflect deep-seated inequities. Hispanic students continue to graduate at slightly lower rates than their non-Hispanic White peers, with economically disadvantaged Hispanic students experiencing wider gaps. Although the overall graduation rate for Black students has improved over time, the findings raise concerns about the quality of education, as these gains have not been matched by corresponding improvements in standardized test scores.

3. **Geographic Concentration of Disparities:** The report documents significant inequities within the CIV region, with the most severe disparities concentrated in the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, and Imperial counties, particularly in ELA and math test scores. These geographic disparities suggest that local factors, including school district resources, community support, and economic conditions, play a significant role in shaping educational outcomes. The geographic analysis further highlights that there are areas where economically disadvantaged Hispanic students experience even larger performance gaps than their non-Hispanic White peers. In some districts, these students score 10 to 15 percentiles lower on standardized tests. Chronic

absenteeism rates are particularly high in eastern counties, such as Fresno and Tulare, where economic challenges are most severe.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Persistent educational inequities in the CIV region demand urgent policy interventions. Despite increased funding and targeted programs over the last several years, the slow pace of progress suggests that current strategies may need to be revised. The report recommends a comprehensive review of educational policies and the adoption of evidence-based interventions specifically designed to meet the needs of these historically marginalized student groups, including:

- **Strategic Funding Allocation:** There is a need for a more strategic allocation of resources, focusing on the most disadvantaged districts within the CIV. This approach should include increasing per-student funding and ensuring that these resources are effectively used to address the specific needs of the most at-risk students.
- **Improving School Attendance:** Interventions aimed at improving school attendance are crucial, as absenteeism is closely linked to academic performance. Programs that address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism, such as economic hardship, health issues, and lack of transportation, could significantly improve educational outcomes.
- **Support for Economically Disadvantaged Students:** Given the strong correlation between economic disadvantage and poor academic performance, the report calls for expanding programs designed to support economically disadvantaged students. This could include after-school tutoring, mentorship initiatives, and free lunch programs.
- **Family-Community-School Partnerships:** Strengthening partnerships between schools, families, and communities is essential to creating supportive learning environments. Engaging families in school initiatives and fostering collaboration with teachers while involving local businesses, non-profits, and community leaders in

educational efforts can provide additional resources and opportunities for students, particularly in marginalized areas.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this report underscore the persistent and substantial disparities in educational outcomes among different racial and ethnic groups in California's Central and Imperial Valleys. These disparities have far-reaching consequences for the individuals directly affected and the broader economy, given the strong link between education, future earnings, health outcomes, and civic participation. Despite allocating billions of dollars in additional funding to schools serving historically marginalized students, the slow improvement across various academic measures suggests that current strategies may be insufficient to address the root causes of these disparities.

