

Overview

While we did not find a standard, general definition for underserved students, we are proposing the following: underserved students are students who do not receive equitable resources in the same manner that other students do and as a consequence are less likely to achieve to high levels of academic performance. Another way of thinking of underserved students is to consider the quality and degree of access they have to programs, services, and resources that offer them the support to succeed in school. In other words, do they show an “achievement gap” as a result of “opportunity gaps” in their educational experience?

Rationale

Underserved students cut across many categories of students who have historically underperformed in the educational system. Among these groups are: students in poverty, immigrant students, students with disabilities, students in rural settings, speakers of languages other than English (English language learners) and highly mobile students. One could also argue that in certain circumstances, male or female students are also being underserved.

Some of these groupings are currently mandated disaggregations under NCLB such that their performance on statewide assessment tests can no longer be “hidden” within average scores across all students. More fundamentally, however, it is important to identify which groups of students are underserved in a particular context in order to identify where the lack of equity is, what creates the inequity, and what needs to be done to redress the inequity.

For each of the underserved populations cited above, there is a body of research that both identifies the problem as well as offers strategies to redress them. We will not go into the body of research for each of these populations; instead we will highlight some of the key questions that may be unique to a particular population or that may cut across these populations but which deserve attention if the inequities are to be addressed.

- Does the “system” (state, district, school) know who their underserved students are and what the inequities are?
- What are the opportunities for access? What are the barriers to access to the services that other students have?
- If access is available, what are the factors that facilitate or hinder success?
- What are the challenges associated with varying concentrations of some of the underserved populations in a district/school? (e.g., ELLs, students with disabilities) When the concentrations are small? When the concentrations are large?
- How well are teachers prepared to address the teaching-learning needs of particular populations of

- underserved students, especially when the child “lives” in several of these categories?
- How well prepared is the educational system to diagnose what the unique needs of particular groups are, alone and in combination? (e.g., the issue of disproportionality – ELLs over- and under-represented in special education; male students, especially male students of color, over-represented in special education; under-representation of ELL students in AP and honors courses)
- How are placement and programmatic decisions made for different underserved groups? What policies guide placement and programmatic decisions?

The definition of underserved students that we have proposed in this brief focuses on factors over which states, districts and schools may have some influence or over which they can take some action.

Resources

- The Center for Instruction, English Language Learner Strand. Available online at www.centeroninstruction.org
- McKinney-Vento Act. Available online at <http://www.serve.org/nche/m-v.php>
- Office of English Language Acquisition, US Department of Education. Available online at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html>
- Office of Migrant Education, US Department of Education. Available online at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osee/ome/index.html>
- The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) . Available online at <http://nabe.org/>
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, US Department of Education. Available online at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html>
- Demmert, William, G. Jr., (2001) Improving Academic Performance among Native American Students: A Review of the Research Literature. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.