

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Strategies and Practices to Close the Gender-Based Achievement Gap in Florida

A landscape scan for district leadership, classroom teachers,  
student program providers, and education advocates

SEPTEMBER 2023



## About Helios Education Foundation

Helios Education Foundation exists to support postsecondary attainment for low-income and under-represented communities in Arizona and Florida. Driven by our fundamental beliefs of Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership, Helios has invested more than \$300 million in partnerships and initiatives focused on improving education outcomes in the two states we serve.

We take a multi-pronged approach—working across four domains, including performance-based community investments, systemic public policy efforts, research and data, and impact-driven communications—that together support the significant changes required to foster equitable progress across the education continuum.

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WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org).



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## About this Resource

In 2021, the Florida Legislature passed House Bill 7033. The bill tasked the Florida Department of Education to convene a group of stakeholders—the Task Force on Closing the Achievement Gap for Boys—to examine trend data in achievement and identify evidence-based practices for Department consideration. Members of the Task Force included parents, district and school leaders, teachers, school psychologists, nonprofits, and the Florida House of Representatives and Florida Senate members. The Task Force’s work culminated in a final report, with recommendations that included conducting a research study to assess the landscape of gender-based achievement practices.

This resource is a result of research that fulfills the Task Force’s recommendations.





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Strategies and Practices to  
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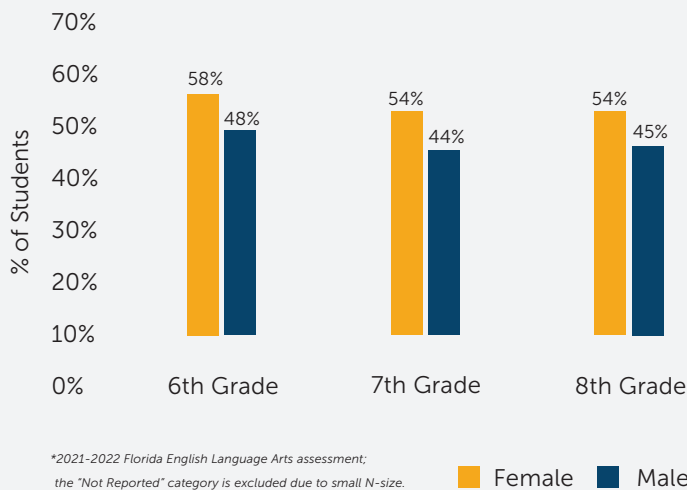


## Introduction

In Florida and across the country, girls typically outperform boys in reading and writing and they graduate from high school at higher rates, according to 2022 data from the [Florida Department of Education](#) and [NAEP](#). The associated achievement gaps—which manifest throughout the elementary, middle, and high school grades—indicate that many fewer boys than girls reach proficiency benchmarks on state summative assessments.

The 2021-2022 Florida English Language Arts middle school assessment, for example, revealed a 10-percentage point gap between the girls (58 percent proficient) and boys (48 percent proficient). The gaps are even wider when a student’s race is considered; just 30 percent of Black boys in grade six scored proficient on the 2021-2022 ELA assessment. Failure to close these gaps will limit opportunities for students and, more broadly, the strength of the Florida workforce in an increasingly complex economy.

### Middle School ELA Proficiency by Gender, 2021-22



This brief highlights findings from a landscape scan, conducted by Helios Education Foundation and WestEd, of the research on evidence-based interventions and promising strategies that can help address gender-based gaps in education and improve student achievement. The scan applied recommendations from the Florida Task Force on Closing the Achievement Gap for Boys to focus on practices that have proven effective for closing the achievement gaps for boys, with a particular emphasis on Black boys. The research team prioritized literature and studies that clearly document patterns of outcomes by gender and race; explore targeted approaches, their implementation, and potential impact; feature third-party evaluations with rigorous designs and outcomes tied to particular practices; or take the form of policy reviews and reports.



## The Gender-Based Achievement Gap in Florida

Gender-based achievement gaps in Florida are present in the elementary school grades (3-5) and continue to manifest through the middle grades and high school.

Data from the 2021-2022 Florida English Language Arts (ELA) assessment for the elementary grades show that girls not only outperform in ELA, but also that the achievement gaps are wider in the older grades. For grade 3, girls outperform boys by six percentage points; by grade 5, that gap is nine percentage points for grade 5. Middle school ELA assessment results from 2021-2022 indicate that girls outperform boys in all three grades (6-8).

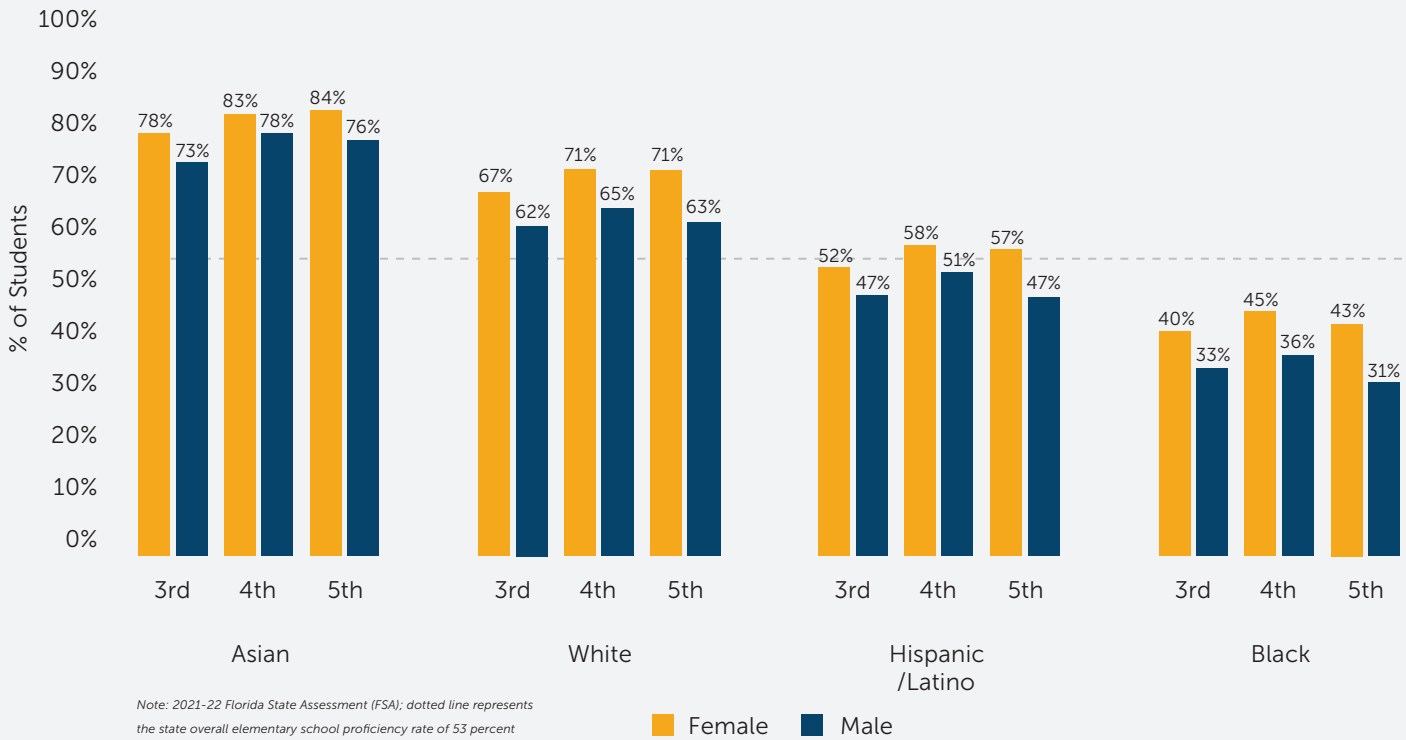
Honoring boys' lived experiences, interests, and voice enables greater engagement and validates students' unique experiences as foundational reference points for learning, discussions, and projects.

Moreover, gender-based achievement gaps are exacerbated when considering race in addition to gender. Florida assessment data for elementary and middle school students (2021-2022) show that within each combination of race and grade girls outperformed boys in ELA by at least five percentage points in grades 3-5 and by at least seven percentage points in grades 6-8.

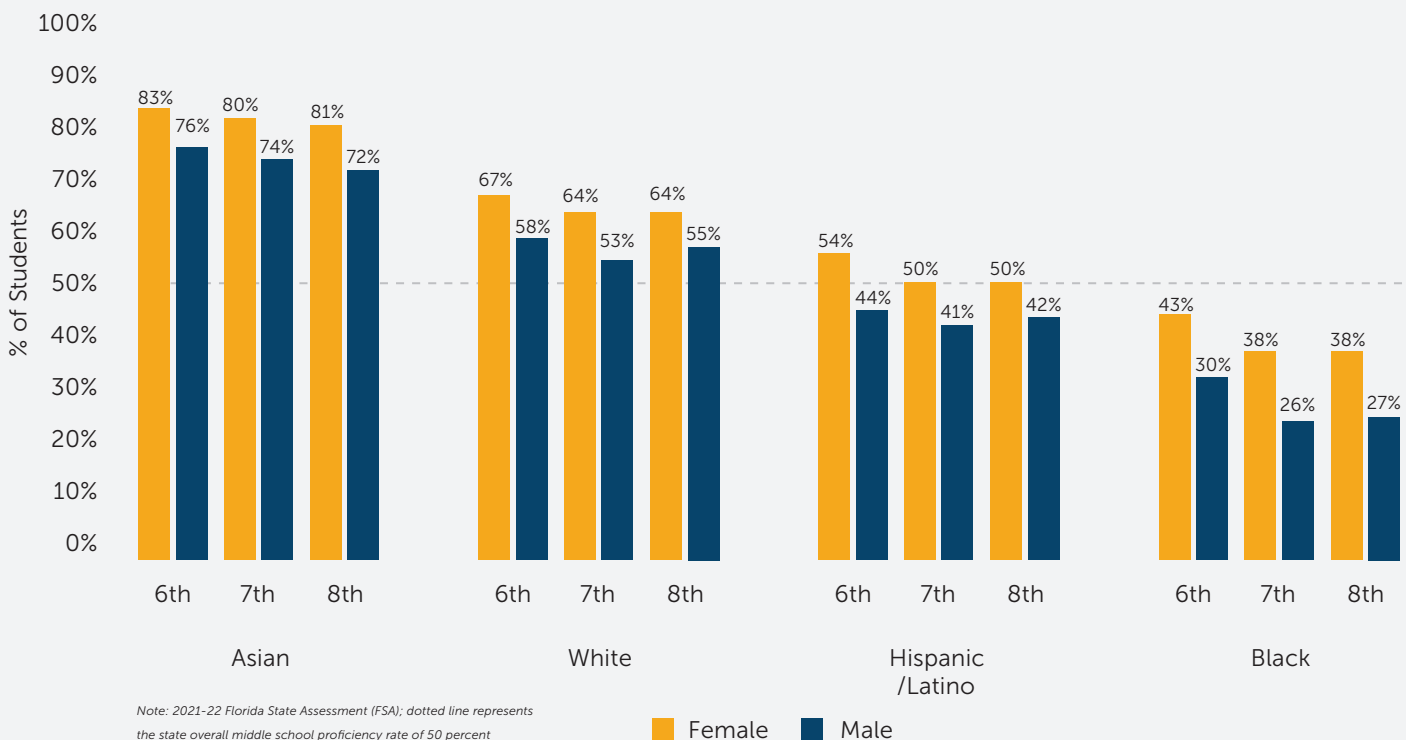
Notably, while more than 50 percent of Asian and White boys achieved ELA proficiency for all middle school grades, fewer than 50 percent of Black boys achieved proficiency.



## 2021-22 Elementary School ELA Proficiency, by Race and Gender



## 2021-22 Middle School ELA Proficiency, by Race and Gender

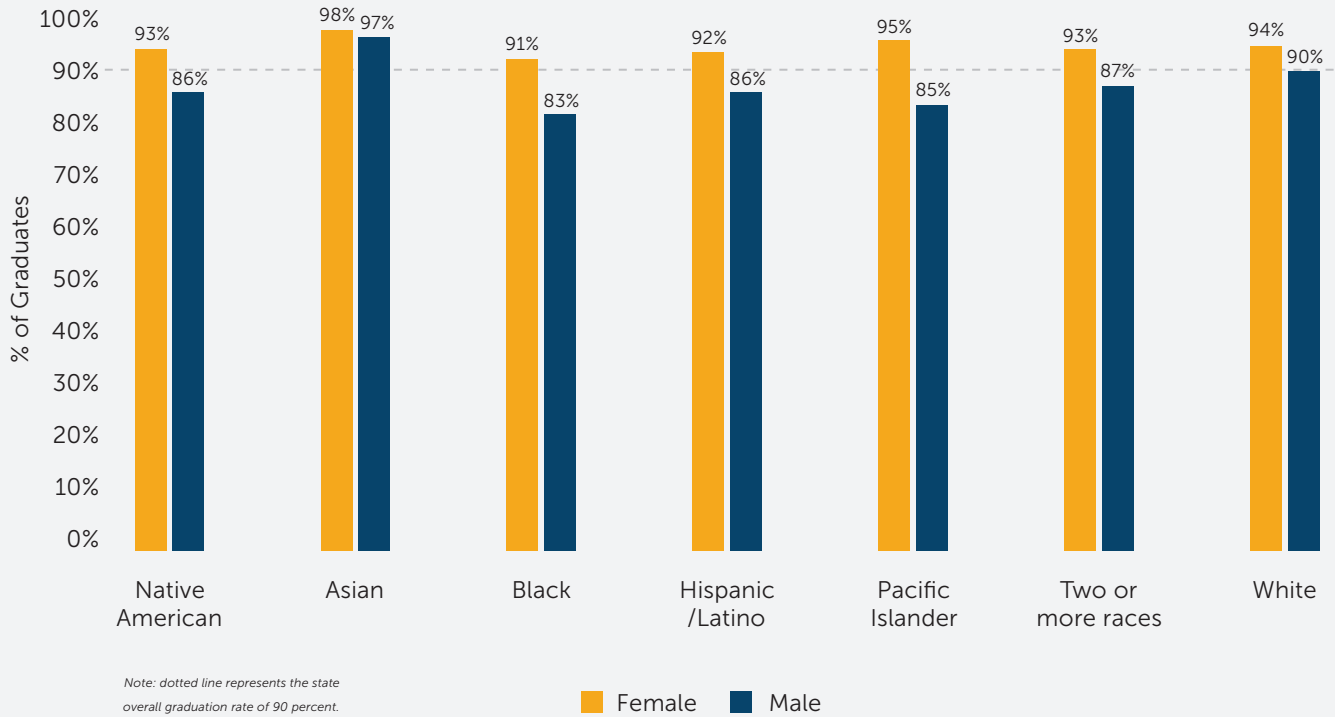






Florida graduation data also reflect gender gaps, exacerbated by race. While 90 percent or higher of female students of all races graduated in 2020-21, along with 97 percent of Asian boys and 90 percent of White boys, less than 90 percent of boys of all other races graduated. Black boys had the lowest graduation rate at 83 percent.

## 2020-21 High School Graduation Rates, by Race and Gender



## Evidence-Based Strategies for Narrowing Gender-Based Achievement Gaps

In the landscape scan of the existing research on gender-based achievement gaps, Helios Education Foundation and WestEd identified and focused on four evidence-based strategies shown to positively impact the overall achievement and success of boys and narrow achievement gaps.

- 1** Provide academic support and classroom environments that acknowledge and accommodate the unique learning and developmental assets, differences, and needs of boys.
- 2** Focus on building positive teacher-student and school-student relationships.
- 3** Offer additional research-based supports that enhance boys' learning, confidence, and opportunities to learn.
- 4** To further tackle the gender gap, leverage student diversity as an asset to support teaching and learning.

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These strategies emphasize the academic and classroom supports that address or leverage boys' unique assets to enhance learning. They also speak to the importance of building positive teacher, school, and student relationships. The research scan focused on identifying evidence-based strategies that help reduce gender-based achievement gaps, especially for Black boys. However, elements of each strategy could support all students' academic success and provide the conditions that can bolster students' overall well-being and success in their schools and communities.

### **Strategy 1: Provide academic support and classroom environments that acknowledge and accommodate the unique learning and developmental assets, differences, and needs of boys.**

Providing academic support and classroom environments that acknowledge and accommodate the unique learning and developmental assets, differences, and needs of boys is beneficial to their academic achievement and engagement.<sup>6,10,18</sup> Student access to content and learning activities that attend to their developmental needs is essential for boys' success in school.<sup>6</sup>

For example, increasing opportunities for boys to move and use their bodies supports their learning.<sup>10,13</sup> To accommodate movement during learning, teachers may integrate simple strategies such as tossing a ball or paper to respond to questions or to share aloud. Teachers may also incorporate changes to desk formations during lessons or create centers with varying learning activities that require timed rotations, so boys have an opportunity to move while learning. This also supports students' varied needs for structure and learning styles. Using varied teaching modalities is shown to increase student engagement and interest.<sup>10,13</sup>

[Pinellas County Schools](#) has made concrete efforts to reduce gender-based achievement gaps. The district has a rubric that outlines evidence-based classroom strategies, such as integrating physical movement into learning, and descriptions of practices to help teachers design intentional learning environments.

There are also benefits to integrating boys' interests to make learning more purposeful and relevant.<sup>10,19,25,26</sup> Students thrive when teachers encourage them to use what they learn and know from their homes and communities<sup>10,13,18,25</sup> as valuable resources to inform their reading, writing, and connections with content.<sup>9,10,17,24</sup> Honoring boys' lived experiences, interests, and voice enables greater engagement and validates students' unique experiences as foundational reference points for learning, discussions, and projects.<sup>10,13,18</sup> Teachers can leverage students' knowledge into their instruction to build, connect, and extend curricular content,<sup>25</sup> thus providing all students access to new ideas. For example, teachers could engage students in discussions to build a repository of topics (such as sports or animals) to use in lessons, explanations of new concepts, or topics for writing.



Research indicates that providing opportunities for boys to make choices in what and how they learn develops their sense of independence and ownership over their learning (such as choices in books, projects, or groups).<sup>10,13,18</sup> However, research also emphasizes the importance of providing feedback to students on their work and offering them opportunities to revise and resubmit assignments to improve their work.<sup>5,9,16,17</sup> This process communicates high expectations and confidence in students' abilities to succeed.<sup>5,9,16,17</sup> Constructive feedback helps students understand where and how to improve their work. It is critical to provide opportunities for students to address areas of improvement to enhance their skills and apply them based on constructive guidance. Teachers may offer credit for revising original work, to acknowledge and reward the additional effort. These academic supports and environments that recognize the uniqueness of students can create classroom learning experiences where boys feel safe to take risks in their learning, are encouraged to participate, and feel valued as contributing members of the class—all evidenced-based factors that support positive academic outcomes.

Students thrive when teachers encourage them to use what they learn and know from their homes and communities as valuable resources.

### **Strategy 2: Focus on building positive teacher-student and school-student relationships.**

Numerous research studies have shown that building and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships can positively influence students' academic success and life outcomes. Positive teacher-student relationships often result in access to resources that provide mentorship, network connections, and trusted sources of support. These positive relationships can foster students' connections to their school environment, strengthening students' feelings of belonging and their academic achievement.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, when students feel that they belong in school, there are positive implications for their psychological and physical health such as increased self-esteem, improved memory, and reduced stress.<sup>22</sup>

Research also outlines effective strategies that can help to encourage and foster positive student-teacher relationships. These strategies include confidence-building interventions that affirm students' value. These interventions can bolster students' confidence and have been shown to reduce student suspensions for Black boys.<sup>1,3,4,13,17,19,26</sup> Open and mindful communication with students is at the center of these practices. Eliciting students' voices and listening to their perspectives, for example, can help to inform classroom instructional practices and meaningful learning opportunities tied to real-life contexts. Communicating directly with students using growth-oriented language that conveys high standards also supports positive teacher-student dynamics.<sup>17</sup>

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The evidence also shows that school-level supports can help foster positive student-teacher relationships. These supports can include offering professional learning on building positive relationships between teachers and students, another strategy shown to reduce suspensions for Black boys.<sup>5,8,14,15,16</sup> School leadership can also play a role in consistently monitoring disciplinary office referrals and identifying patterns that emerge relative to boys and Black boys; and use this data to inform policies and supports<sup>21</sup> that invite more positive school-to-student relationships and interactions.

In 2022, [Impact Florida](#) piloted a teacher professional learning approach focused on collecting student experiences to inform math teaching (see "[Solving with Students Cadre](#)"). A statewide learning community of teachers participated in the pilot which yielded positive findings, including improved student experiences and students feeling valued and heard.

### **Strategy 3: Offer additional research-based supports that enhances boys' learning, confidence, and opportunities to learn.**

Evidence demonstrates that recognizing boys' needs for autonomy and leadership<sup>5,10,14,17</sup> supports their learning. Teachers can create opportunities by offering boys choices and creating learning opportunities that support collaboration, competition, and play.<sup>18,24</sup> Choice can vary from books to read, places to read, learning games to engage in, or partners with whom to collaborate. Opportunities to develop autonomy could include offering students' flexible guidelines to demonstrate their learning. For example, project assignments could mention the learning standards to address, the expected length of the assignment, and a rubric against which it will be assessed, but the directions could leave it to students to determine how best to demonstrate what they have learned.

In 2022, the Florida legislature passed a [child welfare bill](#) that included grants to community-based nonprofit organizations to offer mentorship programs for at-risk male students in middle or high school to support their social, emotional, and academic growth.

Moreover, considering boys' unique experiences, particularly Black boys' unique experiences, and showing appreciation for who they are<sup>24,25</sup> contributes to boys' confidence and deepens their opportunities to learn. For example, teachers could offer space for students to share stories about their lived experiences and use them to enhance their lessons. A class environment that gives space for understanding and appreciating others fosters a safe environment where students feel a sense of value and belonging.



The [5000 Role Models of Excellence Project](#) works with schools in Miami-Dade, Pinellas, Duval, and Broward counties to provide boys with supports for promising life paths. The [initiative emphasizes](#) 1) identifying successful community models; 2) providing positive alternatives to negative behaviors; and 3) collective responsibility for preparing youth for challenges.

Teachers can provide curricular supports, supplemental resources, and texts that have positive male images, content, themes, and role models to support positive self-perception and esteem, especially for Black boys.<sup>9,18,24,25</sup> To provide these supports, teachers could offer a variety of texts where students can see themselves as the hero or informational texts where they can learn more about inventors, artists, scientists, and mathematicians that look like them and come from various countries and communities like theirs. Representation matters as students develop their own identities and self-esteem. Research underscores the importance of “seeing yourself”

in affirming ways to build confidence, inspiration, and connect more deeply with texts and content.<sup>9</sup> In addition to offering positive role models in class materials, teachers can invite speakers from the community to enrich a lesson or topic in class. Schools can partner with community organizations that offer mentoring programs, especially for Black boys.

#### **Strategy 4: To further tackle the gender gap, leverage student diversity as an asset to support teaching and learning.**

While gender provides a critical lens for assessing the achievement gap and developing support interventions, understanding how gender interacts with other essential student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity and income status, can provide a deeper insight into the factors contributing to the gender achievement gap. Leveraging these aspects of student diversity and students’ unique experiences can help better tailor teaching and learning styles for boys, especially Black boys, who experience the most notable interactions when breaking down achievement data by gender and race/ethnicity.

Providing teachers with training and support can extend teachers’ understanding of students’ unique lived experiences.<sup>3,5,9</sup> Understanding these unique lived experiences can deepen teacher-student relationships and student learning. The more teachers understand the uniqueness of their students, the better equipped they are to curate engaging learning experiences. This can also help teachers support students in accessing new or challenging concepts by grounding these concepts within students’ familiar experiences.<sup>3,5,9</sup>

Professional development that promotes assets-based framing and mindsets helps teachers understand how to best support and encourage students, especially Black boys.<sup>5,9,24,25</sup> Asset-based framing recognizes the strengths that all students bring into the classroom based on their previous experiences and existing knowledge. In recognizing their assets, teachers establish learning environments and interactions that support and encourage students.<sup>7</sup>

[Orange County Public Schools](#) has a department dedicated to [parent and family engagement](#). The department’s activities include staff professional learning, parent workshops, and opportunities to build and foster community and family relationships.

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Asset-based framing also recognizes the wealth of knowledge and support that comes from students' networks beyond the school environment. Research highlights the importance of engaging student's families and communities as partners to support and strengthen students' growth and development in school.<sup>9,17,24</sup> Two-way communication between teachers and families builds trusting relationships between home and school and supports parental involvement in student learning.<sup>11,27</sup> When families are partners in learning, students are more likely to succeed. Engaging families as partners includes collaborating to develop shared goals for students and tracking their progress together.<sup>2,12,23,28</sup>

Community partners can also provide supports, such as out-of-school programming, that can improve students' personal and academic growth.<sup>17</sup> Nurturing networks that support students, both inside and outside of school, strengthens their support system and motivation when learning and achieving.<sup>12,23,28</sup>

Asset-based framing recognizes the strengths that all students bring into the classroom based on their previous experiences and existing knowledge.







## Actions To Support Closing Gender-Based Gaps

The evidence-based strategies highlighted in this brief include approaches that build from students' unique needs and assets and enhance positive teacher, student, and school relationships. These strategies support students and address external, often systemic, barriers that contribute to gender-based achievement gaps, especially for Black boys. These strategies are effective because they focus on students' assets, support students' opportunities to learn, and foster the conditions for growth and development. There are several actions that leaders at the state, local, and school levels can engage in to support closing achievement gaps. Collectively, these efforts can help identify the root causes of achievement gaps and the effectiveness of strategies to close those gaps. Using multiple evidence-based strategies and mobilizing support across all levels of the system will help ensure a systemic, intentional, and sustainable effort to ensure all students have the opportunities and supports to achieve.



### State level

Provide funding opportunities, policies, professional learning, and other supports to encourage the use of evidence-based strategies to address performance gaps related to gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Request reports that disaggregate data by gender, as well as by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, to understand the interaction between student characteristics. Highlight, support, and incentivize schools and districts to set goals to and demonstrate gains in lessening the gender disparities in achievement.



### Local level

Provide training to teachers to support their use of evidence-based strategies to address performance gaps such as strategies to support positive classroom environments.

Assess the success of evidence-based strategies in the local context. Showcase schools that are narrowing or eliminating gender-based achievement gaps.

Review and act on disaggregated data by student groups, examined across the district and in each school. Develop, share, and use tools and templates to help identify needs, standardize processes, and monitor efforts at the district and school levels.



### School level

Provide support to teachers as they try out evidence-based strategies to address achievement gaps in their classrooms. Provide opportunities for teachers to support and learn from each other.

Review and act on disaggregated data by student groups at the grade and classroom levels. Create a sense of community where both teachers and students can engage with data for learning and growth.

Focus on building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

# What Florida Districts, Schools, and Programs Are Doing to Close Gender-Based Achievement Gaps

A selection of initiatives and programs across the state exemplify how Florida school districts and programs are putting research into practice for students' benefit. The descriptions in this section demonstrate how Florida educators are implementing evidence-based strategies, practices, and programs to reduce gender-based achievement gaps, especially for boys and Black boys. Based on interviews with districts and programs, these examples provide details regarding strategies and their implementation at the local level. They also identify conditions of success and challenges, lessons learned, and considerations for implementation and scale.

## [Pinellas County Schools](#)

### [Impact Florida](#)

### [Gentlemen's Quest](#)

### [Jacksonville Public Education Fund](#)





## Pinellas County Schools: Supporting and Acknowledging Boys' Unique Learning and Developmental Assets, Differences, and Needs

**"[I am] responsive to the learners in front of me and I develop a classroom environment and instructional way of teaching that is responsive to [students] and works for them—not for me. Great pedagogy is responsive pedagogy."**

Pinellas County Schools is the eighth largest public school district in Florida serving over 96,000 students in Pinellas County, Florida. Pinellas' graduation rate ranks among the top for Florida's 10 largest school districts. In recent years the district has achieved historically high graduation rates for Black and Latino students.

The Pinellas Education Foundation released a white paper in 2013-14 and held a series of symposiums raising awareness of the disparity in reading achievement between boys and girls. The following year, the Foundation created the Gender Achievement Gap Committee, now known as the Closing the Gap Committee. The committee includes key business and school district leaders. In partnership with the Pinellas Education Foundation, Pinellas County Schools launched the Closing the Gap initiative to assist teachers and schools in the implementation of brain-based, gender-specific, teaching methods to support student achievement and close the gender-based achievement gap. As part of the effort, six Pinellas elementary schools were awarded small grants from the Foundation to identify and target notable gaps related to boys' achievement and engagement (such as participation in class discussions). The number of participating schools has since grown to 14 as the district expands its efforts to close achievement gaps.

Pinellas County Schools grounds these efforts in research-based instructional practices and classroom structures. Given the research related to boys' need to move during learning, teachers intentionally incorporate movement such as creative transitions between learning tasks. Teachers also set up cooperative structures that encourage social interaction while learning—all of which promotes greater engagement and classroom participation. In addition, teachers use classroom structures to encourage discussion to engage boys' voices, allow them to share thoughts and opinion, and promote collaboration. These structures include strategic arrangement of desks, deliberate location of supporting posters, accessible and clearly visible directions, and clear, concise, consistent norms and expectations. The district recognizes the uniqueness of each student and encourages teachers to use strategies from brain-based research to meet students' unique needs. For example, based on research that suggests boys may require more processing time (yet they also appreciate clear time guidelines) many teachers use timers during class tasks and activities.

The district also offers a Gender Differentiated Instruction (GDI) micro-credentialing program. It is a multi-year training program that focuses on gender equity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and brain-friendly strategies and structures to close achievement gaps. The micro-credential program focuses on changing instructional and/or learning environment practices to support differentiated instruction.

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### ALIGNED PROGRAM AND DISTRICT STRATEGIES

Pinellas County Schools intentionally collects data to identify gaps (e.g., gender and racial achievement gaps) and uses the data to make data-informed decisions around resources, programming, and initiatives. District leaders also consider evidence-based strategies and brain-based research to support instructional practices and foster classroom engagement.

The district engages in periodic classroom walkthroughs as a source of data. Pinellas leaders use a gender-focused classroom walkthrough tool. Modified to reflect and capture best practices aligned with the district's Five Key Ideas, this tool documents explicit and observable strategies, classroom environment aspects, and responsive pedagogical practices. The tool is designed to capture school efforts to narrow gender gaps, provide relevant feedback that promotes reflective discussion, and drive efforts to narrow achievement gaps.



Increase opportunities for students to move and use their bodies to support learning.



Integrate students' interests to make learning more purposeful.



Promote what students learn and know from their homes and communities as resources to inform their work and their connections with content.

Annual Showcase School Visits highlight a school within the district that has demonstrated evidence of narrowing, or eliminating, gender-based achievement gaps in literacy. This opportunity gives the highlighted school an opportunity to showcase their journey and share effective systems, strategies, and efforts while providing other school teams an opportunity for peer learning. This full-day experience offers planning time for school teams to discuss what they can take back and implement at their own schools. Teams are then tasked to create action plans which allow district staff to support their efforts throughout the school year.

The district also engages in other efforts to improve literacy outcomes and reduce gender gaps in reading achievement and engagement. For example, the district has created a Gender Gap Implementation Rubric to support educators' use of strategies that create positive classroom learning environments that support the unique learning needs of boys. Strategies in the rubric promote physiological development (e.g., physical movement and kinesthetic learning); student-teacher relationship building; classroom libraries with diverse topics; and students' "voice and choice." The district's annual Boys Read Book Battle aims to get boys engaged in reading through an exciting gameshow-like competition. Teams from several schools within the district are challenged to read six books of varying topics of interest. Upon conclusion, teams of boys compete against each other's teams to answer reading comprehension questions relative to each book. Every student receives a certificate, and the top 10 teams compete in person.



The team receives a pizza party, and each member receives a medal and a book in preparation for the next year's Book Battle. Although the teams compete to win a large travelling trophy with the winning team's name on it and bragging rights, Pinellas added that, ". . . [t]he real benefit is in the celebration of children... celebrating kids for who they are . . . [At] the Boys Book Battle you see boys, including boys of color, engaged in reading, and competing around books and high fiving each other! There's a sense of self-worth that [is] being celebrated here."

#### PROGRAM SELF-REPORTED SUCCESS

##### **Pinellas County Schools reports positive student gains from these efforts, including:**

- Narrowing the achievement gap for boys, including Black boys
- Higher academic achievement for both boys and girls
- Increased enrollment in advanced courses for boys, including boys of color
- Increased graduation rates for boys and boys of color
- Increased student sense of belonging

#### TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

##### **If you lead a school or district program, what can you take away from this program, or potentially implement at the local level to support student success?**

- Showcase schools that are narrowing or eliminating gender-based achievement gaps, and offer support for other school teams to visit, engage, discuss, and action plan.
- Intentionally build and foster learning environments where boys' interests and experiences are welcomed and respected.
- Consistently monitor data to identify gender and racial achievement gaps and make intentional data-informed decisions that meet students' distinct needs. Use Implementation Rubrics, Action Plan Templates, and Walkthrough tools to standardize processes, identify focal areas, and monitor efforts.
- Consider and apply evidence-based and brain-based strategies that have been shown to strategically address achievement gaps, especially for boys and boys of color.
- Account for student uniqueness as an instructional lens and asset that leads to more equitable access to content, participation, belongingness, and other opportunities to learn within classrooms.

#### **Impact Florida: Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships for Students' Success**

**" . . . our work is called solving *with* students and that 'with' part is really important . . . actually working with your students to improve the classroom is key."**

Impact Florida is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on improving classroom instruction and supporting educators with recognizing, implementing, and scaling effective teaching practices for the benefit of all learners. The organization works to bolster teaching and learning opportunities through a variety of different formats, such as providing teachers with platforms to connect, offering coaching around data use and high-quality instruction, guiding short-to-long-term professional development on a wide variety of subjects, and advocating for policy

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change at the state level that supports teacher ownership in their change in practice. As part of its Districts for Impact initiative, the organization brings together district leadership and academic teams to coalesce around building positive student impacts and catalyzing system change.

Districts For Impact teams operate around learning cadres (a time-limited, problem of practice-specific learning network). Past cadres have focused on Professional Learning, Data Impact, COVID Recovery, High-Quality Instructional Materials, and a cadre called the Five Conditions. The Five Conditions that Inform Great Teaching is a framework the organization developed that elevates the system-level conditions that can influence and improve student engagement and learning. These conditions underscore a shared vision of “great teaching,” using high-quality instructional materials (e.g., academically rigorous), effective professional learning, empowered leaders who can scale great teaching, and effective data use for continuous improvement.

A key component of Impact Florida’s learning cadre for teachers, which is grounded in the Five Conditions that Support Great Teaching, is the organization’s “Solving with Students Cadre.” Piloted with 50 teachers in 16 Florida school districts in Spring 2022 and expanded in the 2022-23 academic year, Solving with Students focuses on building positive teacher-student relationships through understanding students’ experiences in math classes, allowing their voices to inform classroom, instructional, and learning improvements. Secondary mathematics teachers administer a free student survey with their students about four times over the school year. The survey asks students their perspectives on topics such as classroom community, feedback for growth, and student voice. The questions offer students the opportunity to provide feedback on agency, whether they feel their ideas are listened to and taken seriously, or if they feel their suggestions are implemented for class improvements.

Teachers also receive coaching around the survey data to help align findings with learning goals for their students. While not part of the district’s formal professional learning strategy, Solving with Students serves as a great complement to district training, allowing teachers to take the initiative to share and discuss survey findings with students to nurture positive teacher-student engagement.

### ALIGNED PROGRAM STRATEGIES

The strategies used in Impact Florida’s “Solving with Students” cadre focus on teachers engaging with and understanding their students’ experiences in their math classes. Teachers come to the professional learning experience open to improving the experience of students in their classrooms, which can impact student academic performance. Research has shown that students who respond positively about their classroom experience on the Elevate survey are more than twice as likely to earn a B or higher than those who do not.





The survey allows them to query students on conditions of learning such as the classroom community, learning goals and teaching, and whether they feel seen and heard. The survey findings help to identify areas for improvement and provide research-based practices to enhance the student experience.

By eliciting students' voices, the teachers participating in Solving with Students engage in and build positive student-teacher relationships. The work also serves to open productive conversations and provides opportunities for connections (e.g., teachers to students and to other teachers). Most importantly, the work is authentic because it incorporates teachers' own classroom data and students' voices in ways that help to identify and understand larger teaching and learning issues that they can address with targeted interventions and supports.

✔ Offer professional learning supports and strategies to build and maintain positive relations between teachers and students.

✔ Use interventions that affirm and bolster students' self-value and confidence, self-perception, and self-esteem.

✔ Communicate directly with students using growth-oriented language that conveys high standards and supports positive teacher-student dynamics.

✔ Integrate students' interests to make learning more purposeful and relevant.

#### PROGRAM SELF-REPORTED SUCCESSES

### Impact Florida reports positive student and teacher gains from the first implementation of the Solving with Students Cadre, including:

- A 13-percentage point increase over time in student survey responses measuring teacher caring and a 12-point increase measuring classroom experiences with "meaningful work" such as connections to real-life.
- An 11-percentage point increase over time in student survey responses indicating that students feel comfortable sharing thoughts and opinions in class, and a 9-percentage point increase in students feeling that their ideas are taken seriously.
- In a pre-post survey, 98 percent of teachers participating in the first cohort of "Solving with Students" indicated that the program led to "permanent and substantive changes" to their practices.

#### TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

### If you lead a school or district program, what can you take away from this program, or potentially implement at the local level to support student success?

- Cultivate teacher buy-in for eliciting student voice.
- In addition to required professional learning experiences, consider the value of creating opt-in opportunities for teachers to improve their practice.
- Ensure that teachers are open to hearing and learning from students to foster student relationships and classroom improvements.
- Prepare teachers for a process of discovery, including listening to students and cultivating the capacity to accept feedback.
- Create a sense of community where both teachers and students can engage with data for learning and growth.

## Gentlemen's Quest: Enhancing Boys' Learning, Confidence, and Opportunities to Learn

**"We often tell [our Black male students] that they have a voice and need to use it. We have been socialized to not share emotions, thoughts, etc. [but this is a] safe space to share."**

Gentlemen's Quest of Tampa is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring the success of Black male students. The program explicitly aims to build up participants' sense of self-esteem and accountability by providing them with community and mentorship, as well as incentives and supports to encourage success in their school environments. Originally created as an in-school program at a high-needs school to address discipline issues among Black male students, Gentlemen's Quest was expanded into a standalone organization in 2018. It currently serves the entire Hillsborough School District in Florida.

Gentlemen's Quest serves Black male students through three major initiatives: 1) Community-based program; 2) Site-based program, and 3) STEM Quest. For the community-based program, a cohort of 25 students meet weekly for academic support and a guest speaker. Each student has a success coach and creates an individualized plan for success aligned with goals put forth by the organization. Programming includes a mixture of academics and recreation. Students participating must demonstrate hardship (e.g., academic, disciplinary, trauma), and there is no cost for accepted students to participate in the program. There is also a high standard of accountability placed on remaining in the program, such as a contract to maintain grades and avoid disciplinary infractions at school.

School site-based programs follow a similar model to the community-based programs. Students receive weekly sessions for tutoring, essential life skills, and opportunities for hands-on experiential learning. They also receive support and academic advice from mentors. Although originally created for high school, the programming and its materials can be modified for middle or elementary school. STEM Quest is a summer program focusing on project-based STEM experiences for Black male students. It relies on heavy involvement from local industry, as well as coaching staff from Gentlemen's Quest to ensure that every student finishes successfully.



### ALIGNED PROGRAM STRATEGIES

Gentlemen's Quest aspires to bring in examples of what Black success looks like and incorporates mentors and role models into programming. Key strategies support participants with goal setting and exposure to various career goals.

The program also holds a high benchmark for participant engagement and accountability. It engages students' families by offering monthly classes for parents (e.g., how to read report cards, how to apply to college) and a college readiness class. The community-based program requires commitment signatures from the students and the parents before inviting students to participate. In addition to the community and industry involvement in the summer STEM Quest programming, there is also a showcase at the end for elected officials, families, and community members.

✓ Recognizing students' need for autonomy and leadership.

✓ Providing positive male images to support positive identity formation and self-esteem

✓ Allowing opportunities for collaboration, competition, and play

✓ Engaging students' families and community members as extended networks to support and strengthen their growth and development

✓ Considering Black male students' identities and showing appreciation of who they are

### PROGRAM SELF-REPORTED SUCCESSES

#### **Gentleman's Quest reports program and participant achievements, including:**

- 100 percent rate for participant acceptance to college, trade school, or other postsecondary pursuits.
- 100 percent completion rate each summer for STEM Quest.
- Immediate participant improvement in disciplinary outcomes.
- Participants created and published a book of poetry entitled *I Am a Young Black Man* that was featured in the National Poetry Museum in DC.

### TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

#### **If you lead a school or district program, what can you take away from this program, or potentially implement at the local level to support student success?**

- Create weekly peer groups for Black male students facilitated by a Black male teacher if possible.
- Bring Black male community members and industry professionals into schools and assemblies as guest speakers to share their stories as well as topics such as goal setting.
- Actively involve family members in students' school lives by offering meetings/ workshops to discuss how to read report cards, how to prepare students for college, etc.
- Seek collaborative project-based learning opportunities tied to practical field experiences.

## Jacksonville Public Education Fund (JPEF): Leverage Student Diversity as an Asset to Support Teaching and Learning

**“We want our own Black and Latino boys to become interested in education and see it as [a way] that they can make a huge contribution to society.”**

The Jacksonville Public Education Fund (JPEF) describes their organization as an independent “think-and-do-tank” that uses evidence-based decision-making to address the opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color. The 1000 by 2025 initiative is a community-wide partnership including JPEF, Duval County Public Schools and the University of North Florida to increase the number of Black and Latino male teachers in Duval County.

The 1000 by 2025 initiative sprang from data showing a disparity between the demographics of students and teachers in Duval County, particularly for Black and Latino boys. In 2021, 56 percent of students identified as Black or Latino, while only 6 percent of teachers identified as Black or Latino males. At the student level, JPEF is concerned with the overrepresentation in disciplinary infractions for male students of color, as well as gaps in achievement and opportunity. In accordance with research, JPEF sees these issues as linked to a lack of diversity in the teaching workforce and related lack of understanding and appreciation of the lived experiences of students of color. In addition to the low numbers of male teachers of color employed within the district, surveys and focus groups with these teachers revealed that they often reported feeling unwelcome, unsupported, and undervalued, and this has been discouraging their persistence in the field. 1000 by 2025 consists of two interrelated initiatives, both with the long-term goal of increasing Black and Latino male students’ academic achievement.

The first initiative focuses on recruiting and retaining 1,000 Black and Latino male teachers of color through the creation of a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful environment including intentional supports to practice. The second initiative is a “grow your own” pipeline that in its first phases includes understanding and improving Black and Latino male students’ perceptions of the teaching profession and connecting students with resources to set them on the path toward teaching. In the long term, 1000 by 2025 is intended to foster opportunities for teachers (and through them, students) to bring their authentic selves into the classroom.



Provide training and supports to extend teachers’ understanding of students’ unique lived experiences.



Provide professional development that promotes asset-based framing and mindsets to understand how to best support and encourage students, particularly Black male students.



### ALIGNED PROGRAM STRATEGIES

JPEF's focus on teacher recruitment and retention is aligned with research that exposure to well-trained Black and Latino male teachers has the potential to counteract negative racial stereotypes for students and teachers. JPEF intentionally seeks to foster greater teacher diversity in the district, improved relationships in schools, and improved student belonging and well-being. The initiative also seeks to improve Black and Latino male teachers' perceptions of community and preparation for effectively teaching students. JPEF and partners have offered as much support as possible to reduce barriers to teachers of color entering and remaining in the profession, so that they can in turn support and encourage students of color. JPEF facilitated public sessions between the superintendent and community members focused around questions specific to the funding and support of teachers. They have paid some teachers to be coaches for other colleagues, have spent time interviewing and surveying current teachers, and have created affinity groups for teachers of color. JPEF offers several supplemental optional professional development opportunities around best practices for teaching students of color. Lastly, the organization is working to help teachers attain certification through financial assistance with certification costs and creation of a guide to certification via multiple entrance points.

To support the "grow your own" portion of the initiative, JPEF are planning a Youth Participatory Action Research study to understand Black and Latino male students' perceptions about school and the teaching profession.

### PROGRAM SELF-REPORTED SUCCESSES

#### **JPEF reports program and participant achievements, including:**

- Built interest for and the conditions to create positions for teachers of color to lead on-the-ground efforts (recruitment and checking in with teachers) for the initiative.
- Successfully advocated for the collection and dissemination of more robust data around teacher diversity and teacher morale.
- Created affinity groups and an annual survey that have allowed teachers of color to express their experiences more honestly within the district.
- Successfully developed and implemented targeted marketing strategies with paid Black and Latino male teacher influencers to help rebrand the profession.
- Advocated for and achieved an increase in the property tax rate to address low teacher pay.
- Created the [teachduval.com](http://teachduval.com) website which provides detailed information on entering the teaching profession from a variety of pathways (e.g., four-year, alternative, career changers) and available support for incoming teachers, in one accessible place.

## TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

### **If you lead a school or district program, what can you take away from this program, or potentially implement at the local level to support student success?**

- Create affinity groups for Black and Latino male teachers and students to foster connections, community, and ultimately success within the educational system.
- Hire designated staff members of color to lead recruitment and support efforts among Black and Latino male teachers.
- Provide coaching via peers and more seasoned teachers of color to help grow teachers' professional skills.
- Offer supplemental professional development around strategies to support students of color.







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