The Identification Gap: When Just as Good Isn't Enough

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Abstract

Historically, the field of gifted education has failed to identify and serve students within particular populations (Borland, 2005). The failure to identify and serve traditionally underserved high potential students has left many students' talents completely unrecognized and undeveloped. Educational research has demonstrated the existence of achievement gaps. Achievement gaps exist between high and low SES students, between Black and White students, between English learners and native English speakers. Major national focus has been placed on the development of programs and interventions to eliminate the achievement gap. Recently, Plucker and colleagues documented the existence of achievement gaps among high ability students. High ability students from underserved populations often perform at considerably lower levels on most academic outcomes compared to their more advantaged peers, creating excellence gaps (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). The current research study examines extant data to determine whether there exists another gap that further disadvantages traditionally underserved students: an identification gap.

Method

Objective. The goal of the current study was to examine the extent to which traditionally underserved students are under-identified as gifted, using data from two states that have state level mandates to identify and service gifted students.

Research Questions:
1. Are traditionally underserved students proportionally represented within programs for the gifted?
2. If not, to what degree are these students underrepresented in programs for the gifted?
3. Can the under-identification of underserved students be explained by differences in math and reading achievement test scores?

Sample.
- 93,671 students nested within 1,381 schools nested within 193 school districts in State 1
- 69,938 students nested within 1,034 schools in 181 districts in State 2

Procedures. To examine the degree to which students from traditionally underserved groups are under-identified as gifted, we conducted a series of three-level (student-school-district) logistic regression models, where students' identification status at grade 5 was the outcome variable.

Model 1: Predicted gifted identification at grade 5 with student-level demographics

Model 2: Predicted gifted identification at grade 5 with student demographics, student achievement, and school- and district-level covariates

Findings

Figure 1-6. Frequency of high achieving students who were identified as gifted in fifth grade within different demographic groups using the sample data
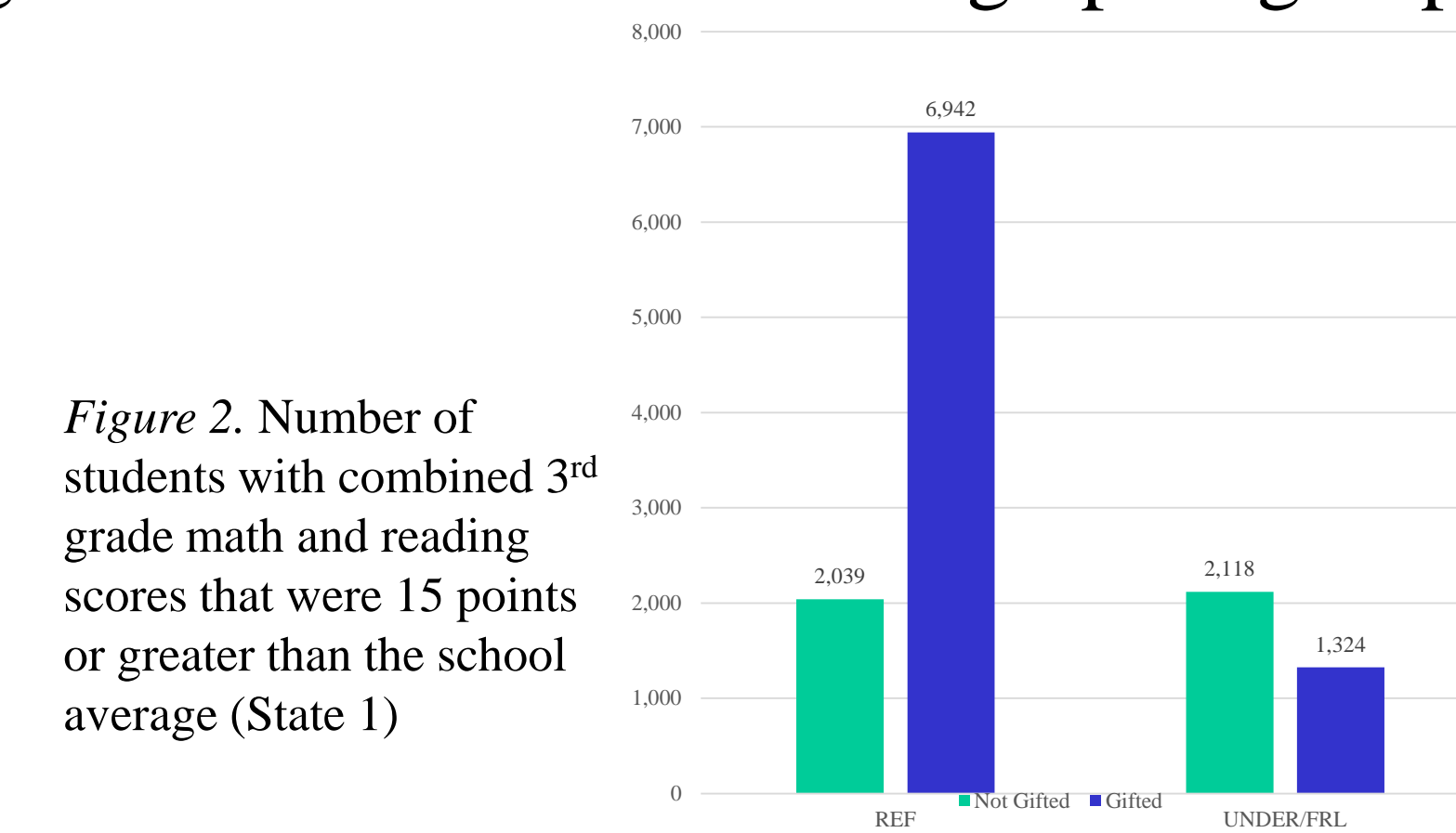

Figure 2. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 15 points or greater than the school average (State 1)
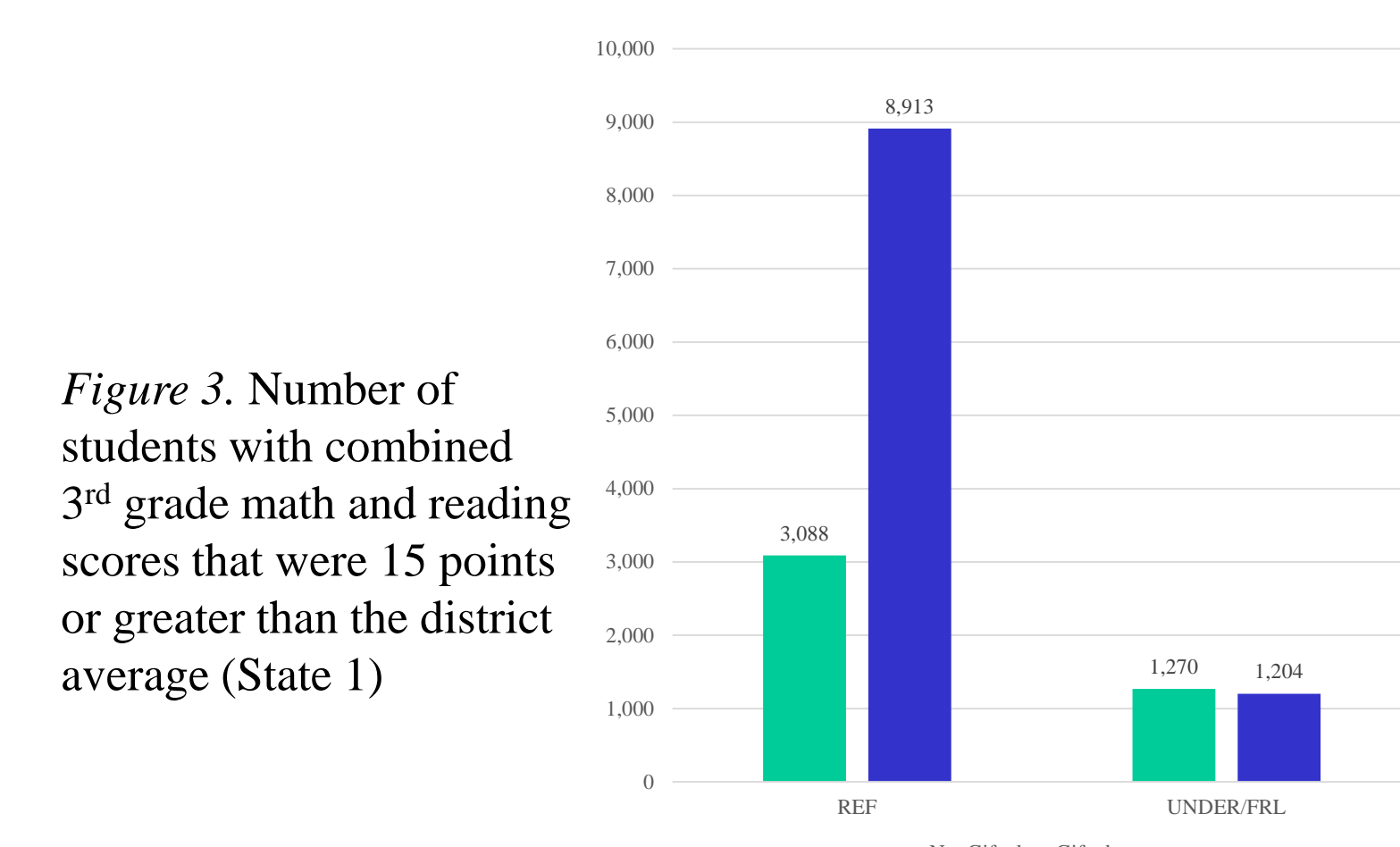
Figure 2. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 180 points or greater than the school average (State 2)

Figure 3. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 15 points or greater than the district average (State 1)
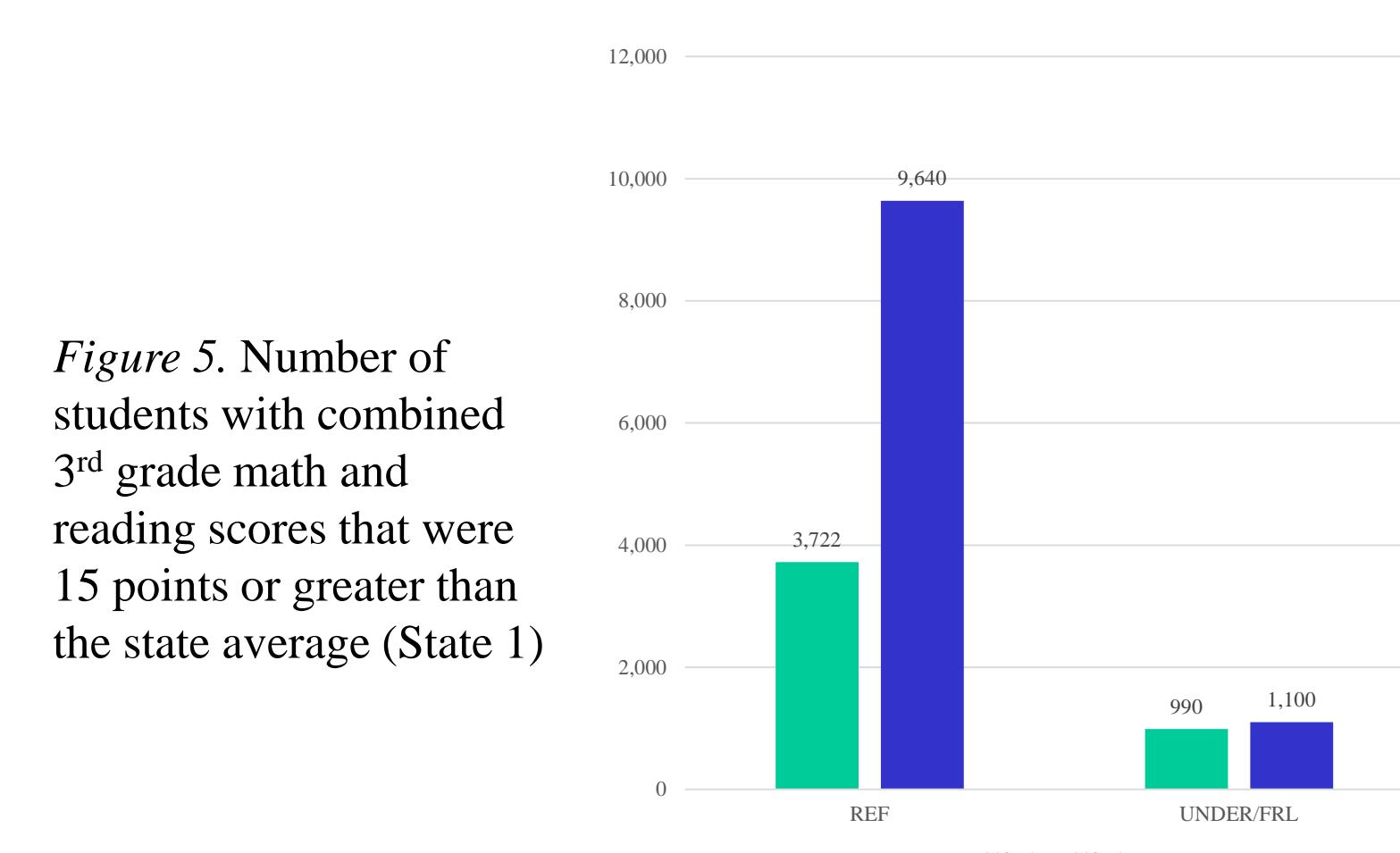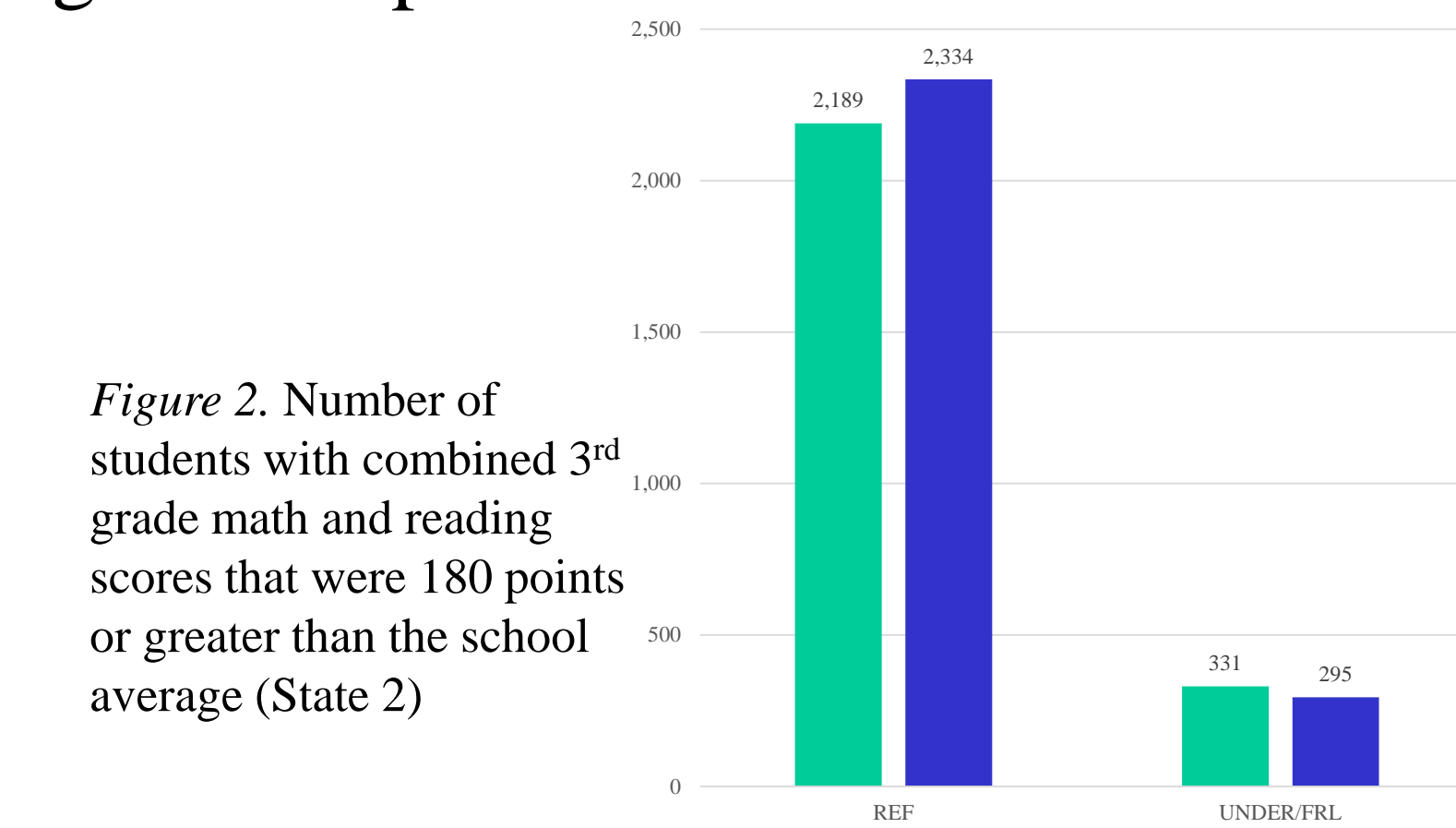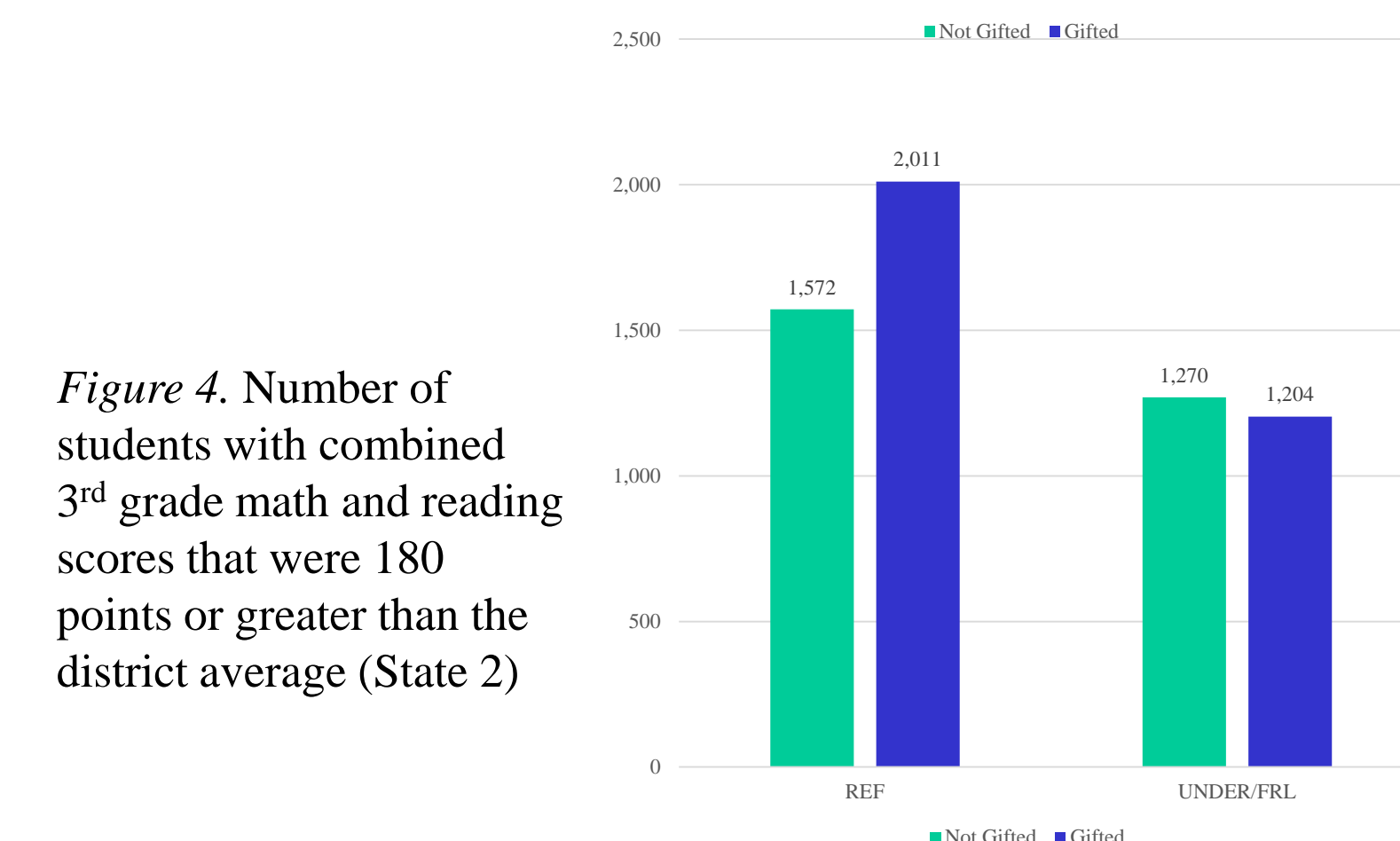
Figure 4. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 180 points or greater than the district average (State 2)

Figure 5. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 15 points or greater than the state average (State 1)
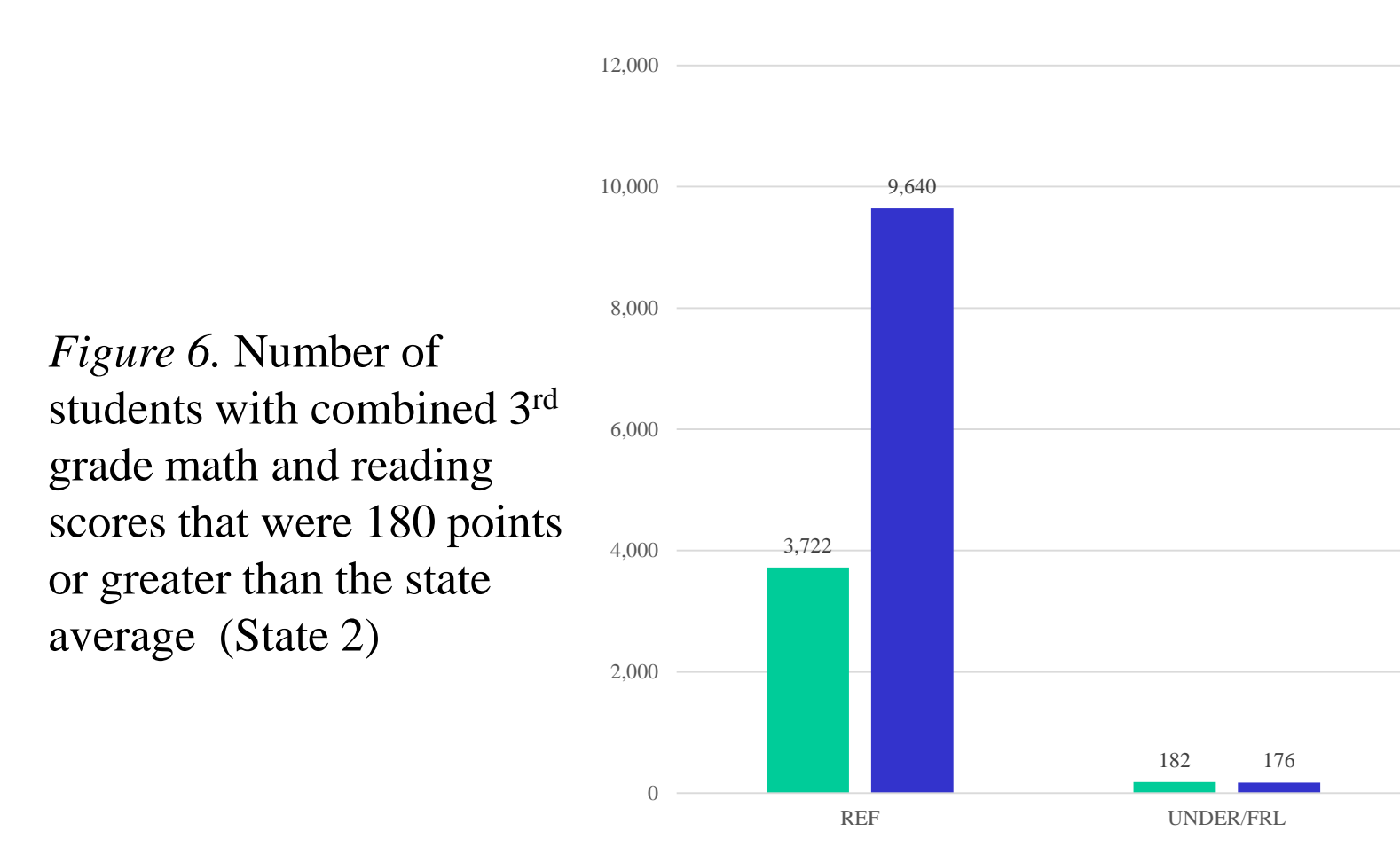
Figure 6. Number of students with combined 3rd grade math and reading scores that were 180 points or greater than the state average (State 2)

Model Based Graphs

Figure 7-8. Model predicted probabilities of being identified as gifted for reference students vs. students who are from underserved racial/ethnic groups and are free lunch eligible, controlling for school and district characteristics, achievement, and EL status
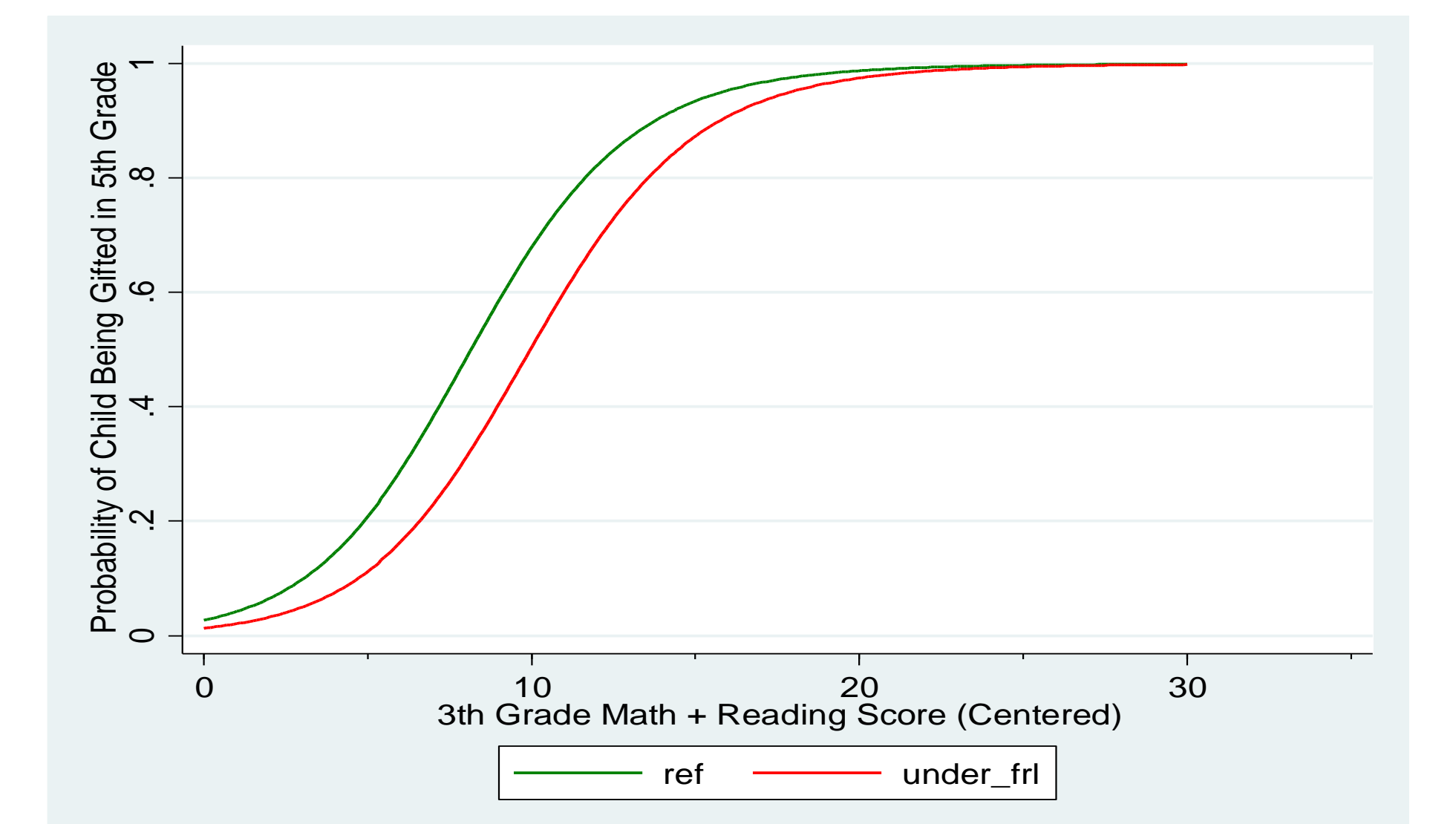

Figure 7. Probability of being identified as gifted after controlling for achievement in State 1.
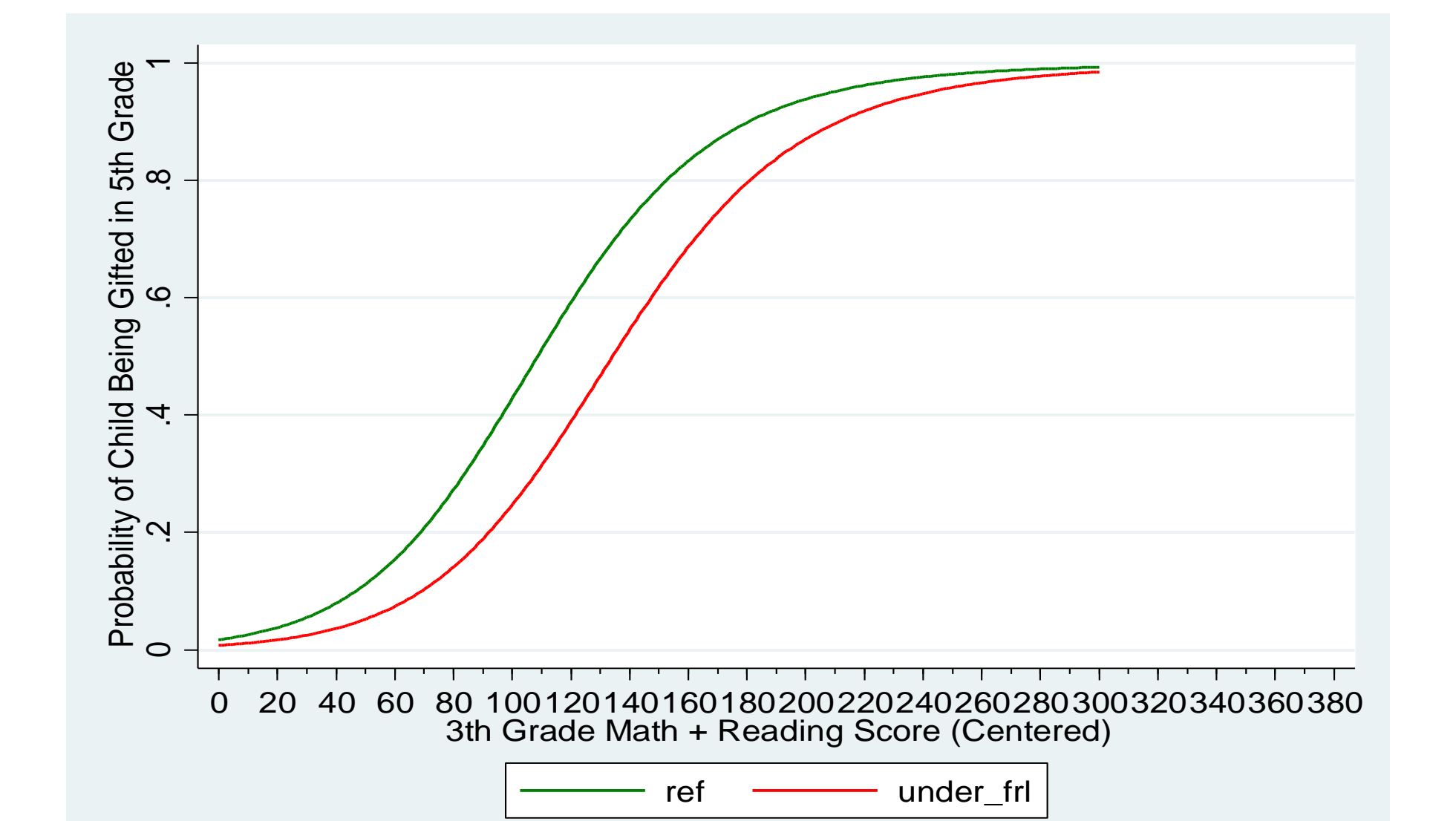

Figure 8. Probability of being identified as gifted after controlling for achievement in State 2.

Results and Conclusion

Results:
- Prior to controlling for achievement or for any school or district variables, such as the percentage of gifted students or the percentage of free lunch students in the school or district, reference students (White students who did not receive free/reduced price lunch and were not English learners) were far more likely to be identified as gifted than Black students, English learners (EL), and students receiving free lunch.
- Even after controlling for students' 3rd grade math and reading achievement test scores as well as each of the student characteristics, school and district SES school and district reading and math achievement, and the percentage of gifted students in the school and district, students are less likely to be identified as gifted if they are Black or Latino, if they receive free or reduced lunch, or if they have ever been classified as English learners.

Conclusion:
- These results demonstrate a disturbing trend: Minority, low SES, and EL students who achieve at equally high levels are not equally likely to be identified as gifted, a phenomenon we call "the identification gap."
- Our findings may help to explain why the proportion of underserved high achieving students decreases as they progress through school. When these high achieving students are not provided with appropriate opportunities to thrive and to develop their abilities, their ability to keep pace with their more advantaged peers is even less likely.