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## Summary:

In 2015, the Oregon legislature directed the Department of Education to create a plan to improve academic outcomes for African American students. Seven years and \$24 million dollars later, academic achievement has not improved. Shifting from bureaucratic mandates to expanding education options would serve students better.

Word Count: 743

***“The millions of dollars spent on the program appear to have been squandered on programs that have done nothing to improve African-American student achievement.”***

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## Closing the Racial Learning Gap in Schools: Spending Money Is Not Enough

By James Swyter

For years, policymakers in Oregon have wrung their hands over the achievement gap between African-American students and other students. To address this gap, in 2015, the [legislature passed HB 2016](#), which created the “African-American/Black Student Success Plan.” Seven years later, the achievement gap remains, and by some metrics has gotten worse. This failure demonstrates the folly in attempting to legislate student success, rather than expand options for students.

The [Oregon Department of Education website](#) indicates the AABSS is meant to set goals and then implement strategies to increase student success. The advisory committee has set very ambitious objectives: [21 different](#) goals across all age groups from early childhood to college-age. Many of the goals are impossible to measure, such as “build a culturally and linguistically congruent newcomer program for African students.” Others set specific targets, such as, “increase literacy outcomes by 6.8% per year and numeracy outcomes by 6.8% per year.”

The legislature passed the bill with an emergency clause, which should be an indicator that elected officials saw the plan as an urgent matter. However, seven years after the bill was passed, the Department of Education has made little progress. In particular, ODE has not developed a plan to achieve its policy goals. ODE’s website does not identify any plans or strategies. AABSS Plan Coordinator Shelaswau Crier admitted, “The AABSS Plan has yet to be implemented. Presently, ODE leadership is working to develop a framework for implementation of the AABSS.” Crier continued, “I cannot provide a timeframe for implementation at this time,” and, “I do not have any further details on what implementation will look like.”

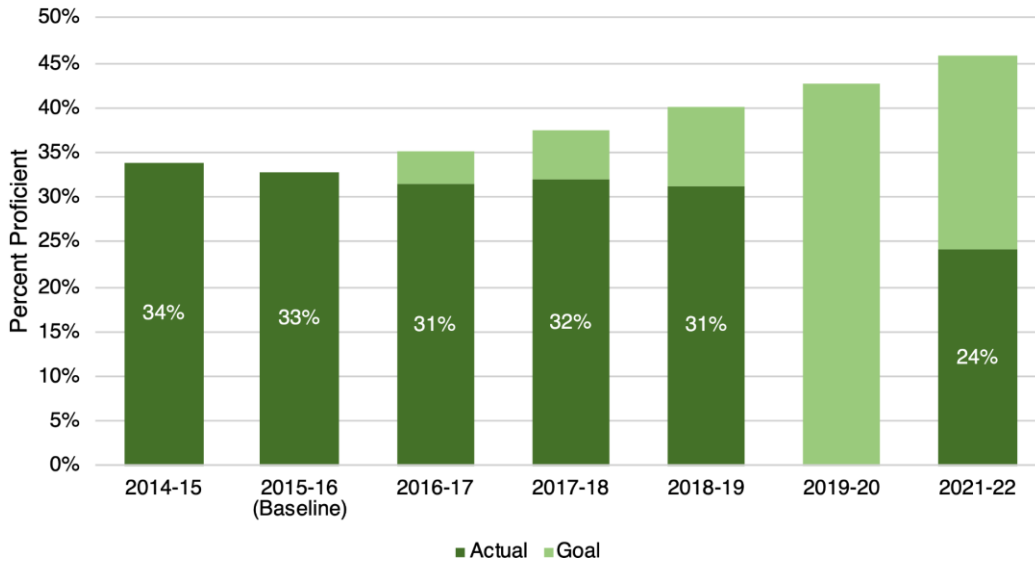
Despite the lack of a plan to achieve its goals, the Department of Education has not waited to give out grant money. From 2019 to 2021, the department disbursed \$10 million dollars to a variety of nonprofits and schools that were supposed to set up programs to support African-American students. From 2021 to 2023, the department is scheduled to give out another \$14 million dollars. The department also gave out grants from 2015 to 2019, although the dollar amounts of those are unclear.

It appears much of the time and money spent on the AABSS plan has been wasted. Rather than achieving its goals of improving language arts and math proficiency among African-American students, proficiency scores have remained

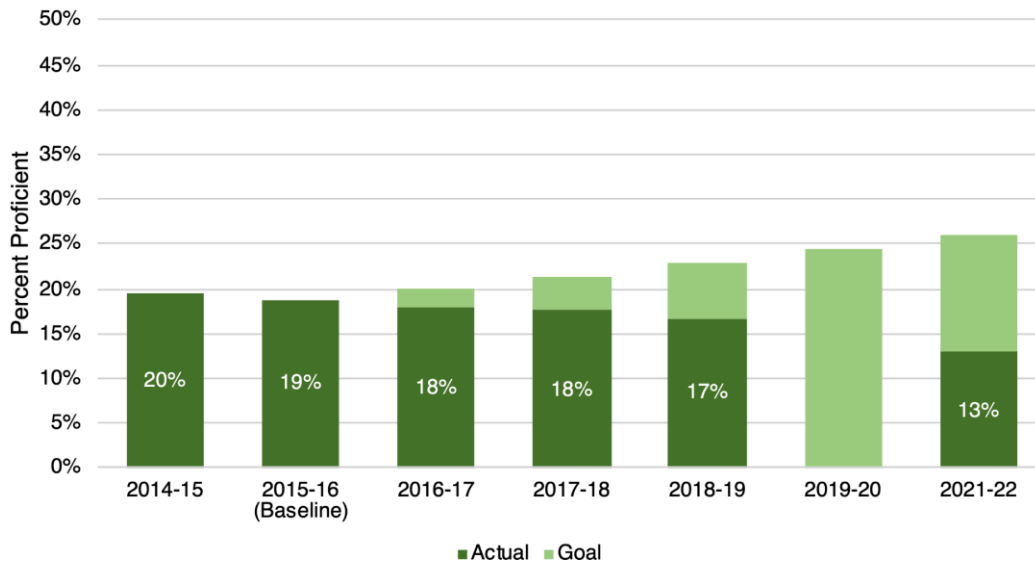


unchanged throughout the first years of the program and dropped sharply during the pandemic, as shown in the figures below.

English/Language Arts, African-American, All Grades



Math, African-American, All Grades



If the AABSS program were on track to achieve its proficiency goals, 46% percent of African-American students would be proficient in language arts and 26% would be proficient in math. Instead, the most recent data indicate that less than a quarter are proficient in language arts, and about one-in-eight are proficient in math.

Oregon’s African-American/Black Student Success Plan has not succeeded in improving student achievement, despite the urgency of assisting African-American students academically. The ODE bureaucracy has had nearly seven years to set goals and develop a program to meet those goals, but has yet to develop a plan. The millions of dollars spent on the program appear to have been squandered on programs that have done nothing to improve African-American student achievement. In the next session, the legislature should end the AABSS and enact legislation that will make a meaningful improvement in students’ educational outcomes, such as the following:

*“The ODE bureaucracy has had nearly seven years to set goals and develop a program to meet those goals, but has yet to develop a plan.”*

1. Expand interdistrict transfer policies so parents can choose among public options. This would create incentives for schools to respond to families' needs and concerns, and reward public schools that achieve better outcomes.
2. Support Oregon's thriving public charter schools by raising the legislative cap on charter enrollment, currently 3% of students in each district. Removing the cap would allow successful and popular charters to meet demonstrated student demand.
3. Assure a "money-back guarantee" for Oregon parents. State-level education funding is allocated per child and paid directly to district schools, regardless of student outcomes or parent satisfaction. A portion of this funding should be converted to portable accounts for students to use where they learn best. This would empower parents to find the right fit for their children to succeed.

Shifting from top-down, time-consuming, and expensive bureaucratic mandates to expanding options for parents would empower students and promote improvement in Oregon schools. Thirty-two states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have enacted student-centric educational choice programs. Oregon should join them, so families can match their children's needs and goals with educational environments that will serve them well.

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