Decoding NAEP: Who's "Below Basic" And Why?

February 11, 2025

The Campaign for GRADE-LEVEL READING

Panelists

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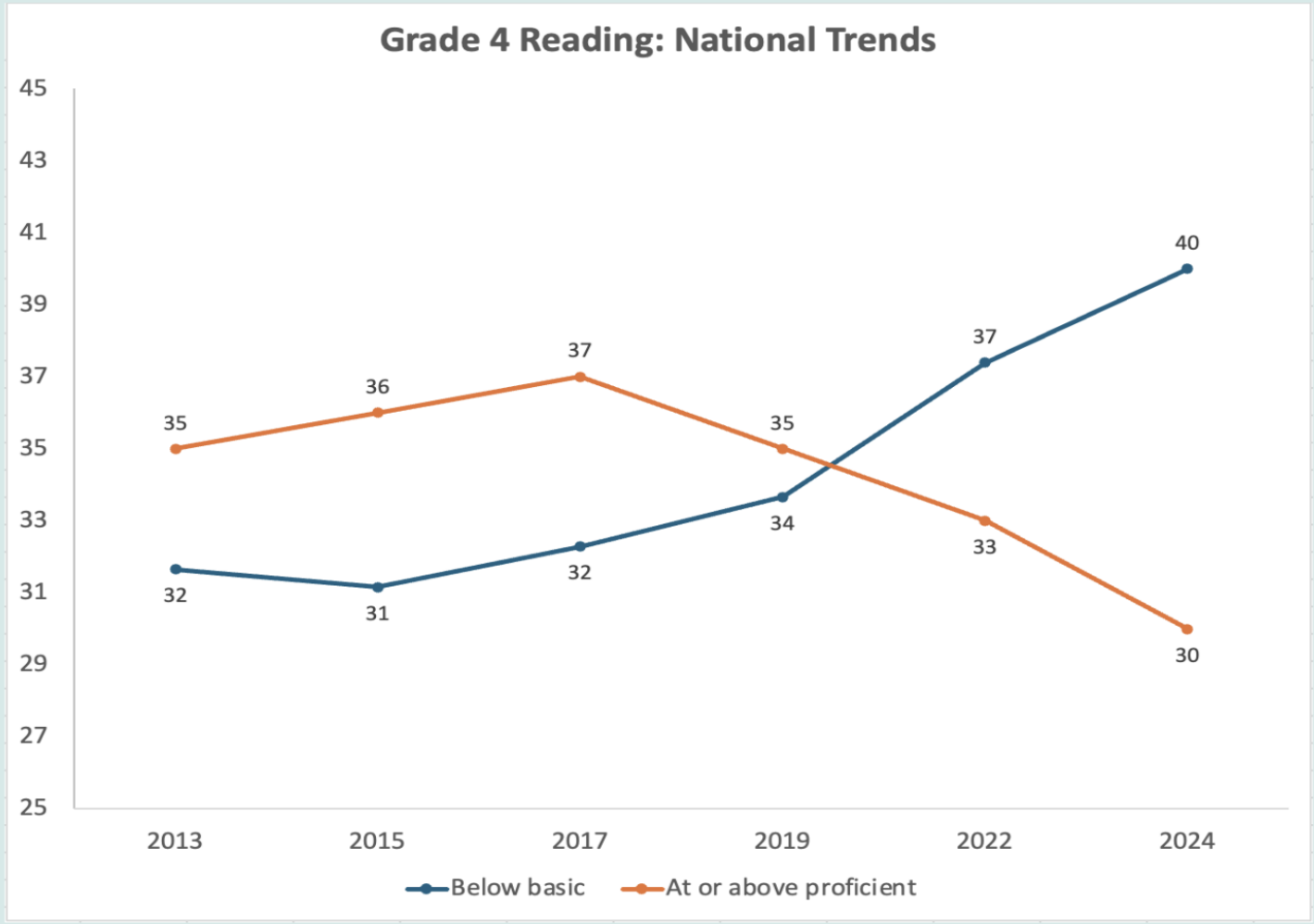
A Widening Gap *(Figure 1)*

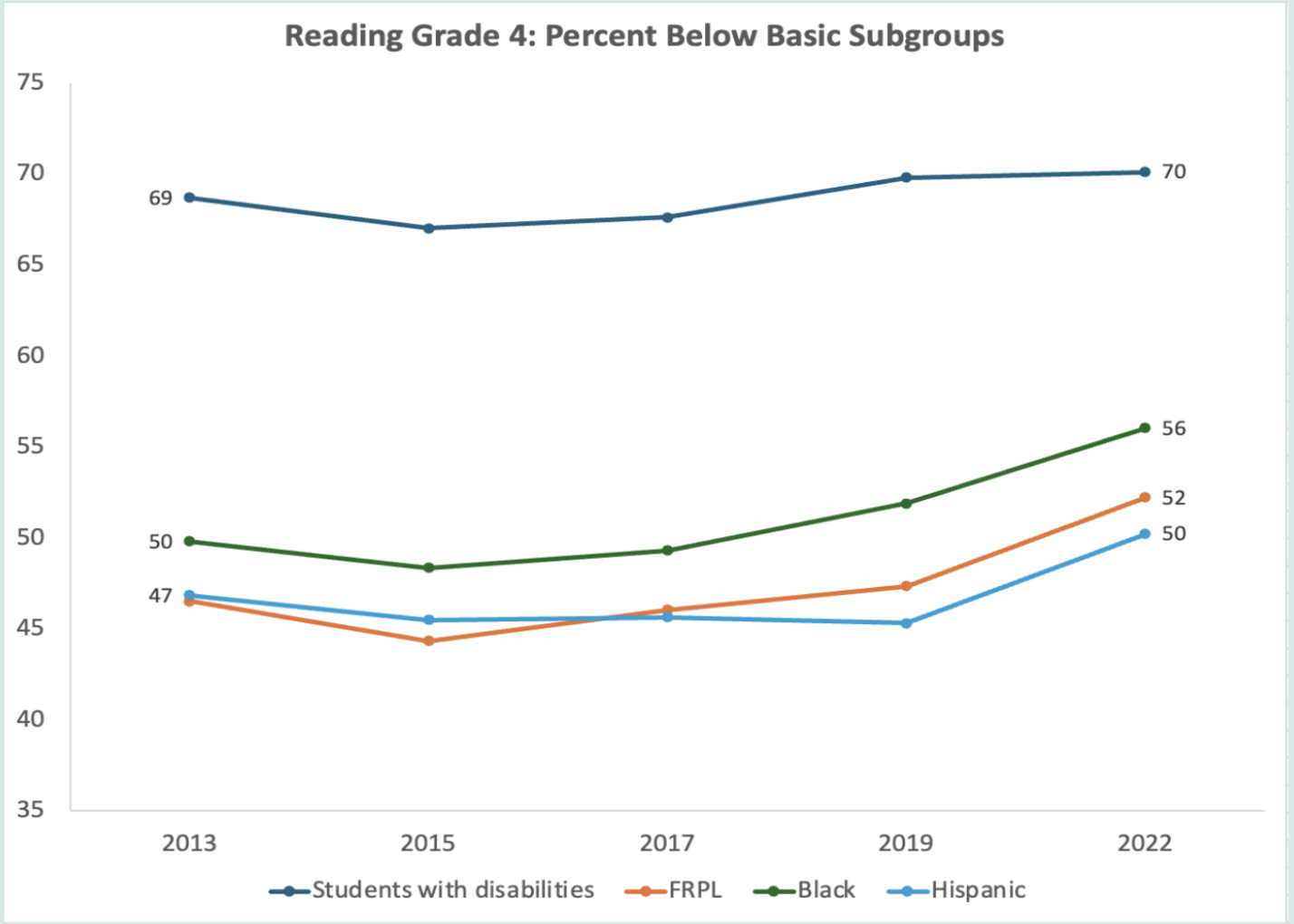
The share of 4th-grade students who have scored "below basic" on the NAEP reading assessment has grown dramatically since before the pandemic. Conversely, the share of high-achieving students who have scored in the "proficient" category has dropped five points since 2019.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

"Below Basic" on the Rise *(Figure 2)*

A decade ago, the share of students who scored "below basic" in the subgroups of free and reduced-price lunch, Black, and Hispanic was below 50 percent. By 2022, all three student subgroups surpassed that threshold.

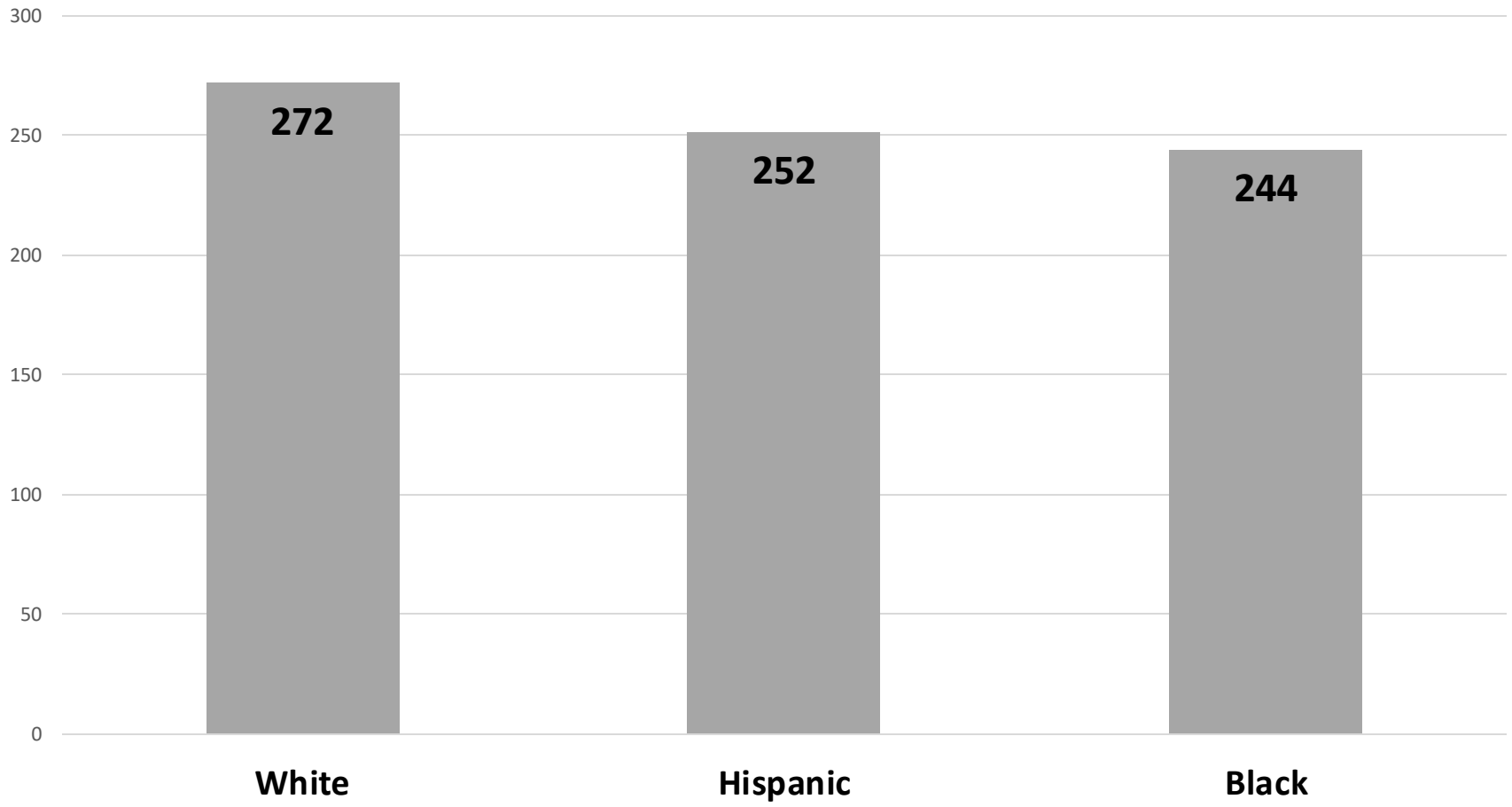


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Focusing on Average Scores Obscures Crucial Achievement Disparities

Average NAEP Scores by **Race/Ethnicity**

(8th Grade Reading)



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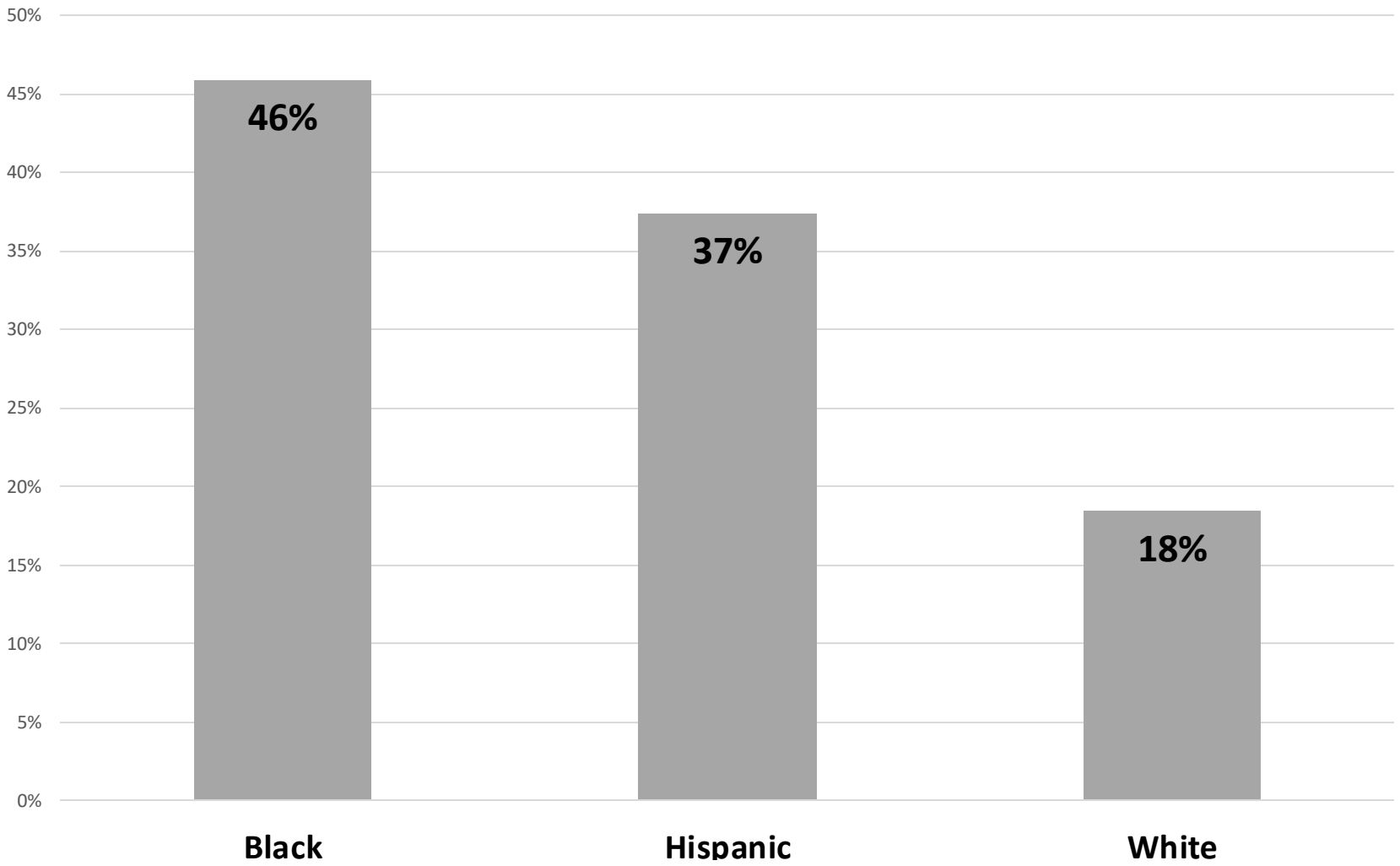
% Scoring ***Below*** *NAEP Basic* by **Race/Ethnicity**

(8th Grade Reading)



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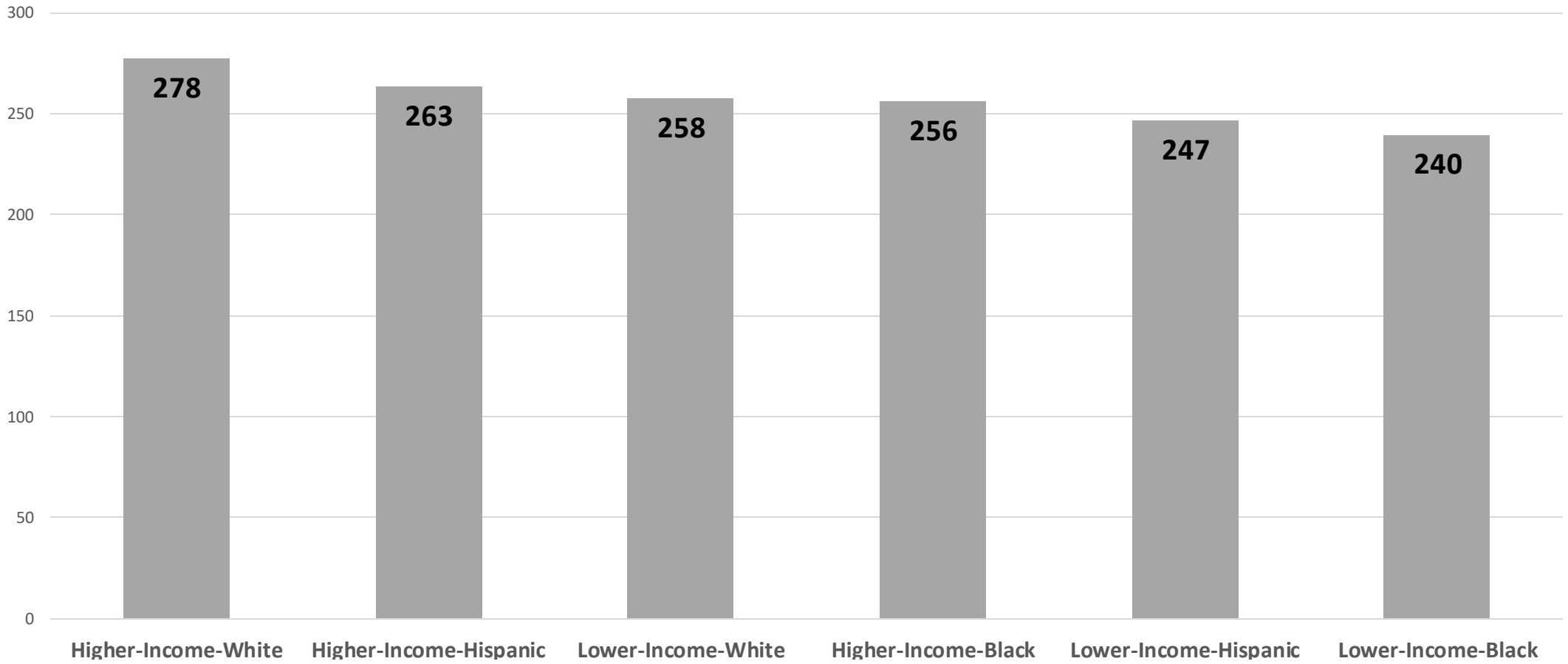
Average Scores by **Race/Ethnicity** *and* **Income**

(8th Grade Reading)



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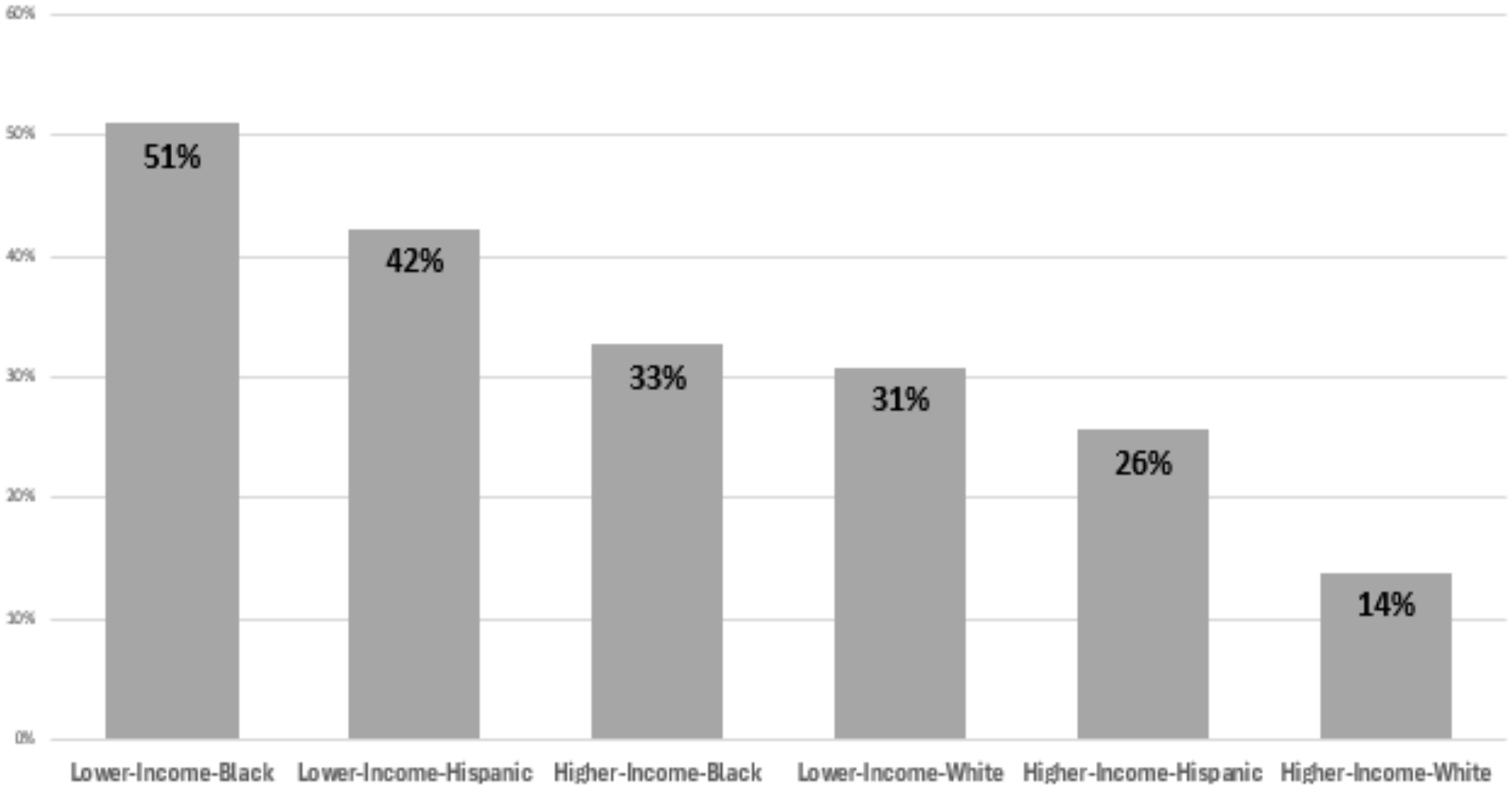
% Scoring ***Below Basic*** by **Race/Ethnicity** *and* **Income**

(8th Grade Reading)



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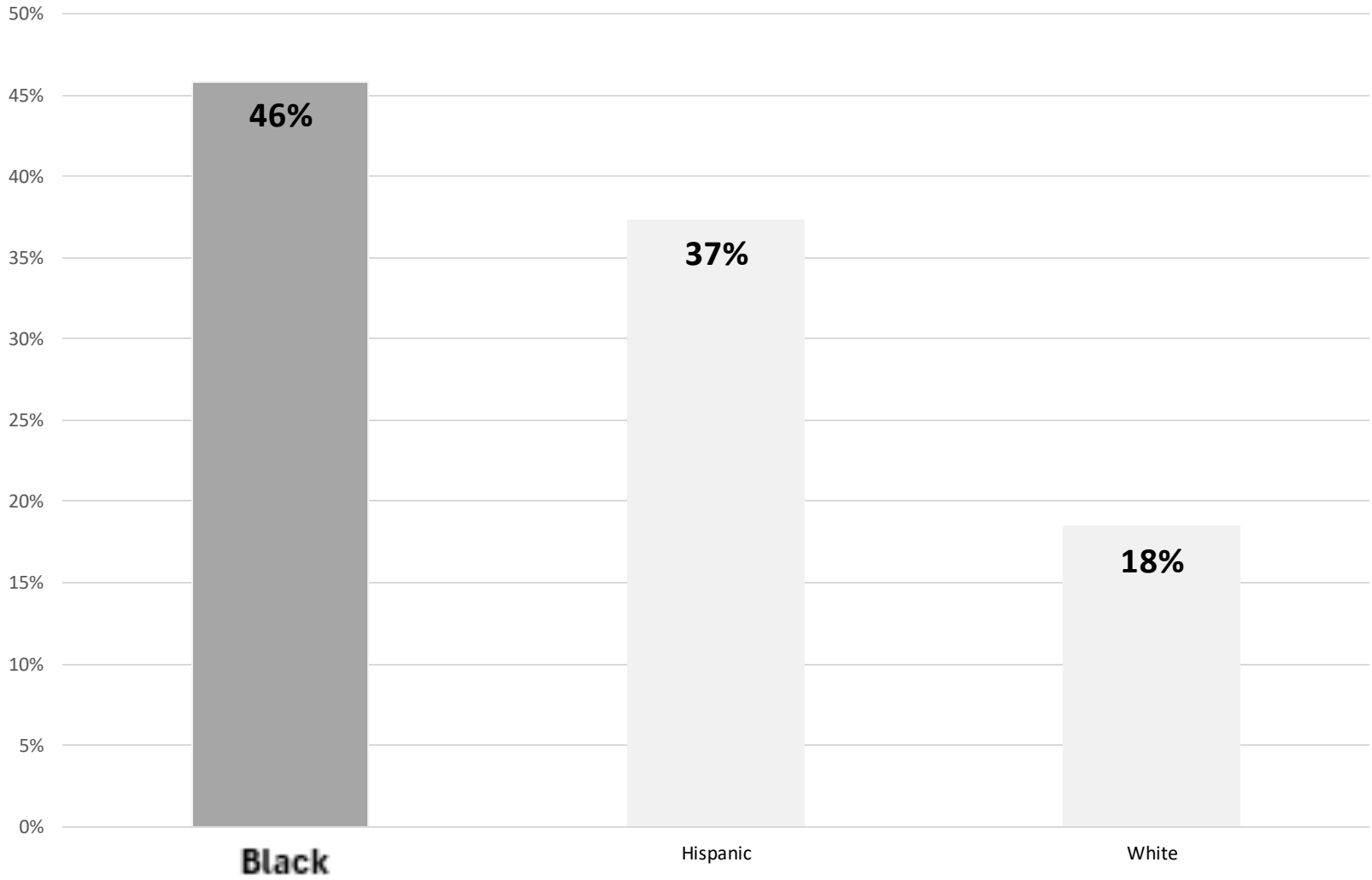
Overly Broad Subgroups Have Obscured Crucial Nuance

% Scoring ***Below*** *NAEP Basic* by **Race/Ethnicity**

(8th Grade Reading)



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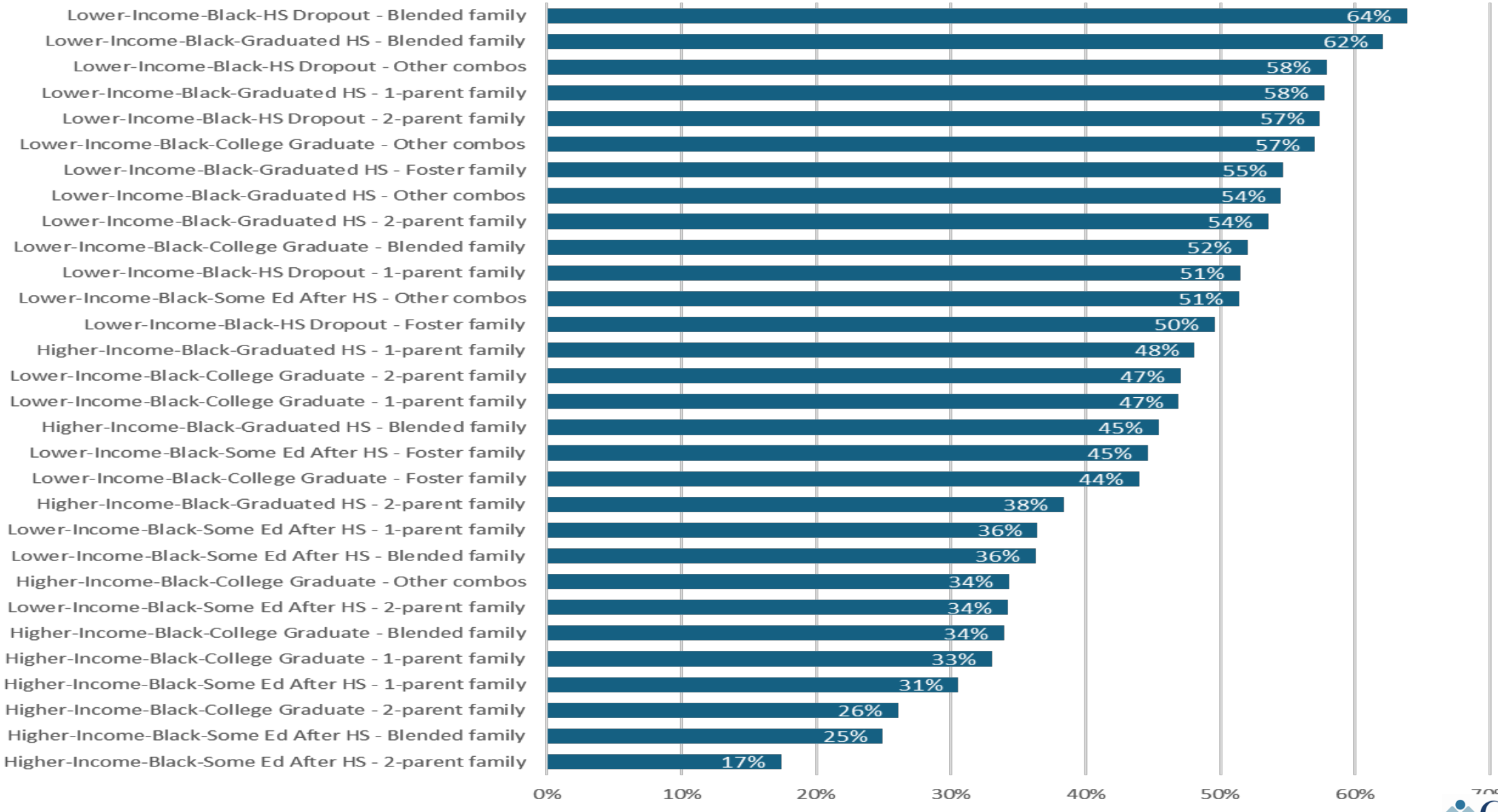
% of **Black** 8th Graders Scoring **Below NAEP Basic**



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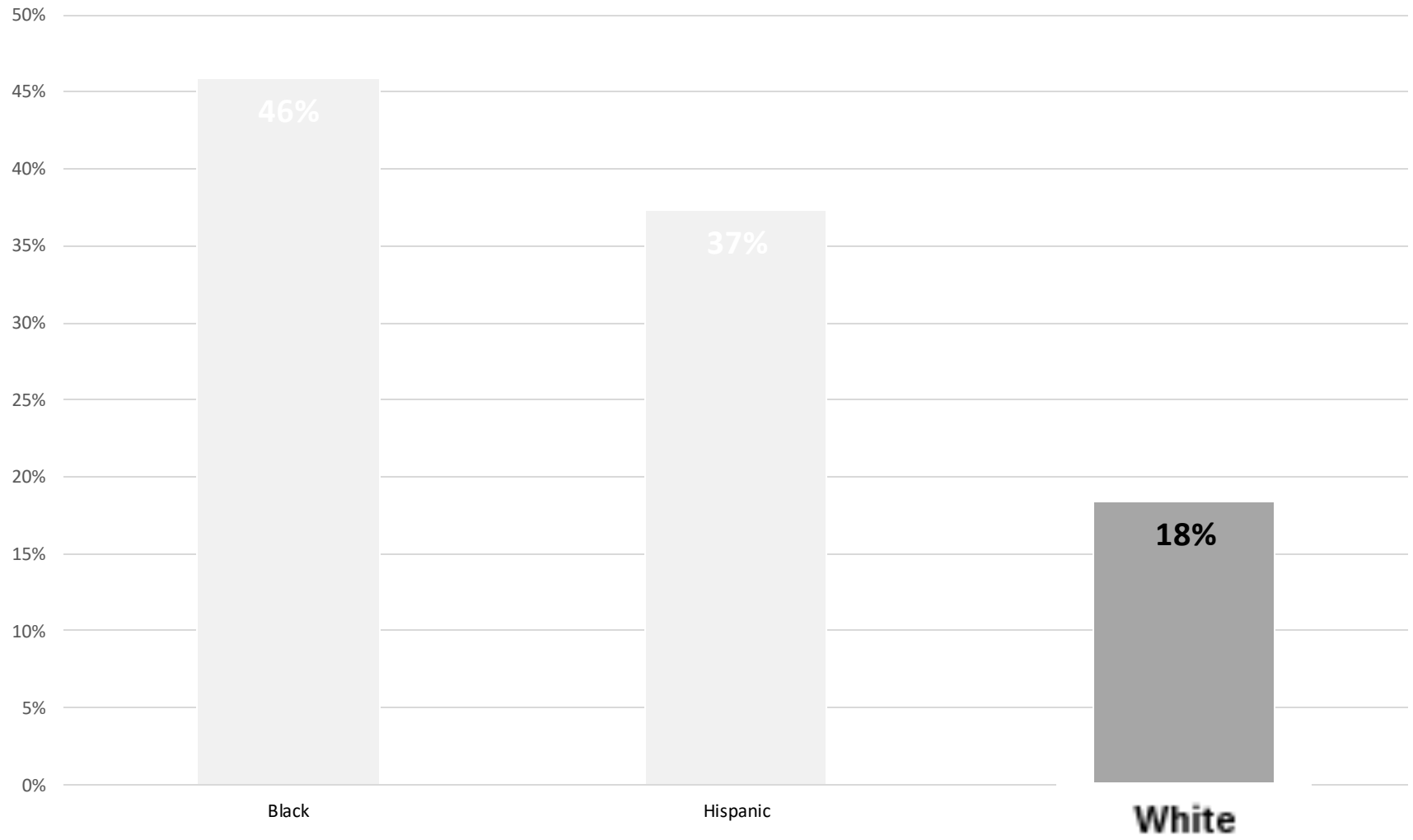
% Scoring ***Below*** *NAEP Basic* by **Race/Ethnicity**

(8th Grade Reading)



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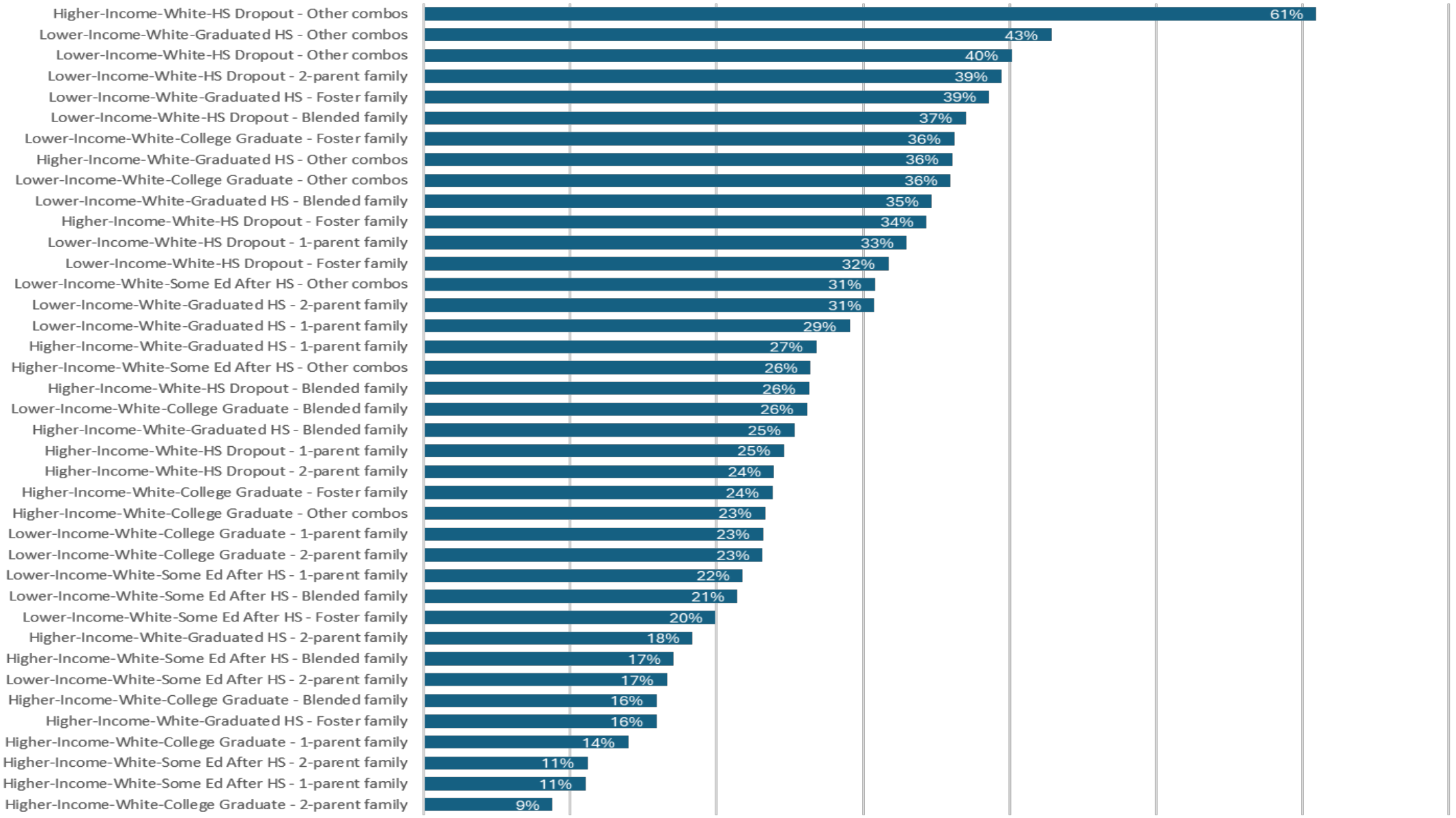
% of **White** 8th Graders Scoring **Below NAEP Basic**



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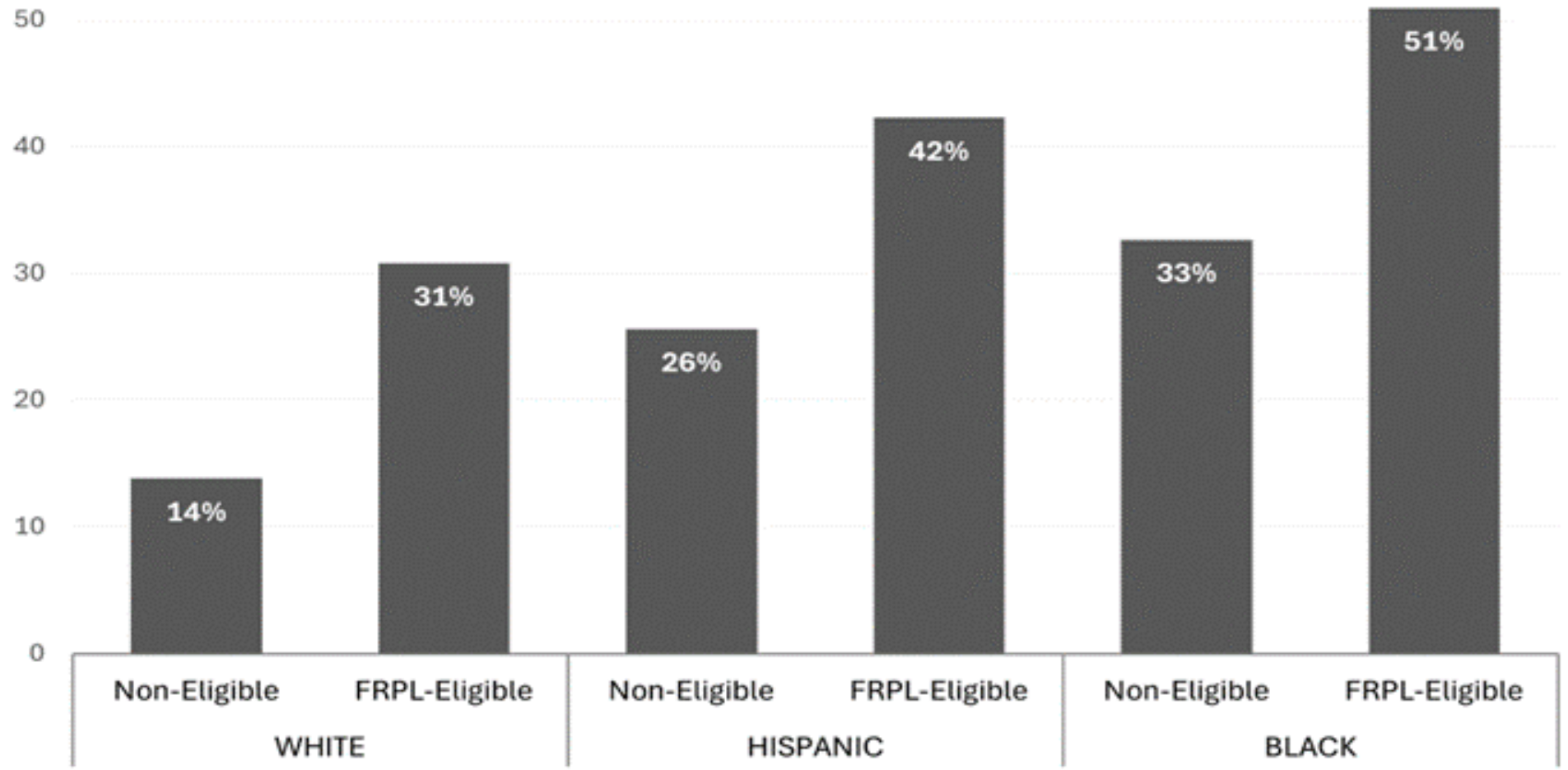
% Scoring ***Below Basic*** by **Race/Ethnicity** *and* **Income**

(8th Grade Reading)



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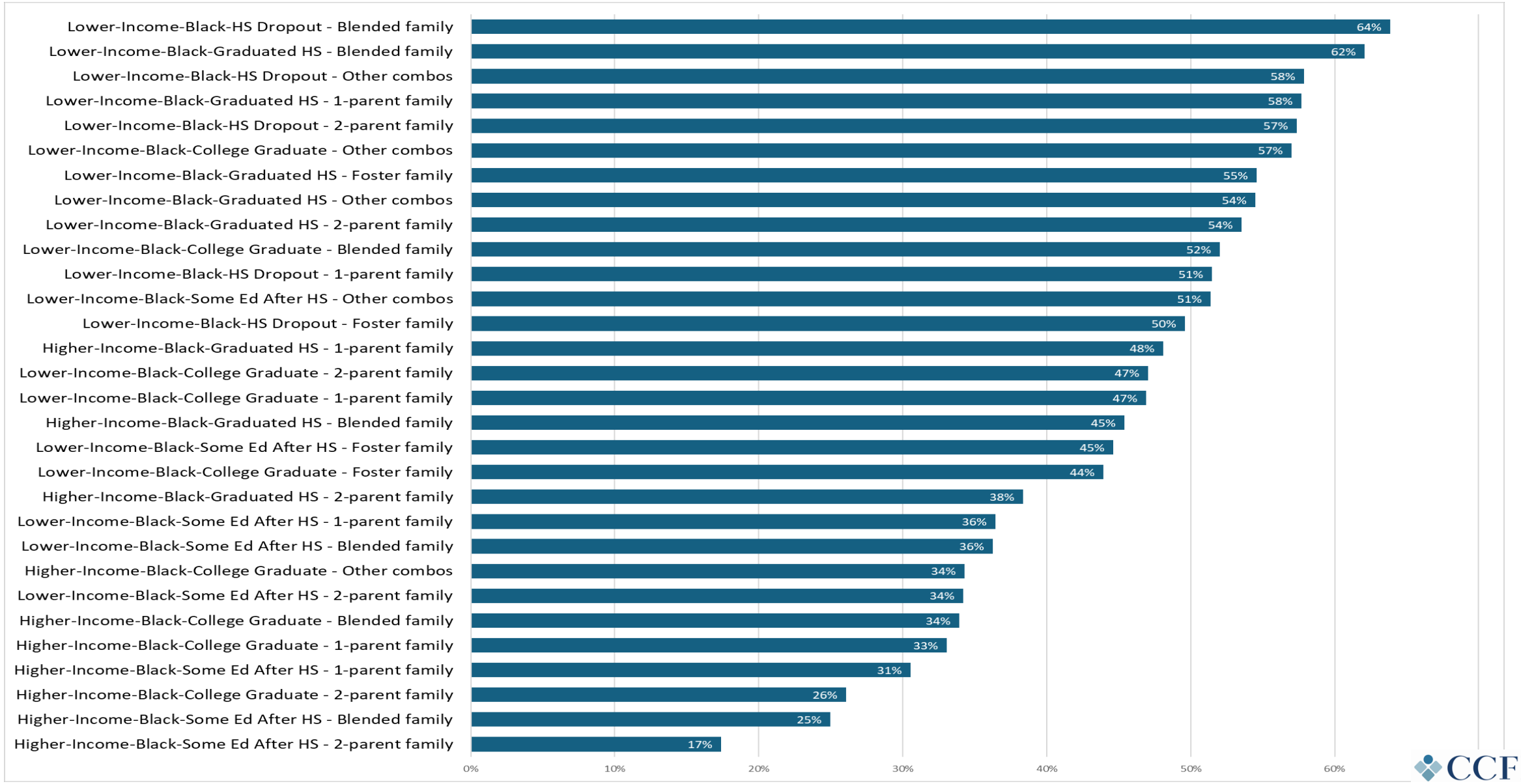
% of **Lower-Income Black** 8th Graders Scoring **Below NAEP Basic**



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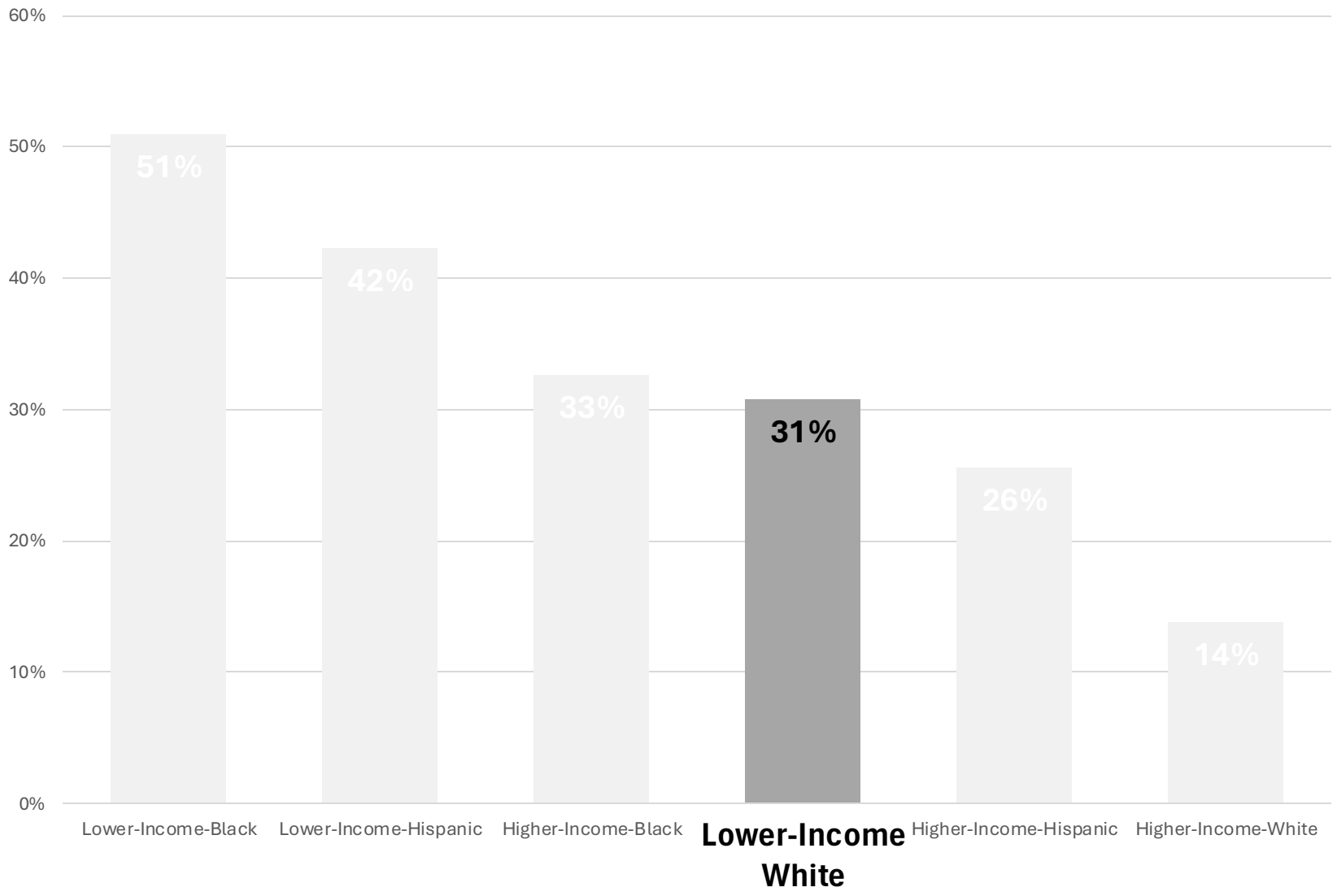
% Scoring ***Below Basic*** by **Race/Ethnicity** *and* **Income**

(8th Grade Reading)



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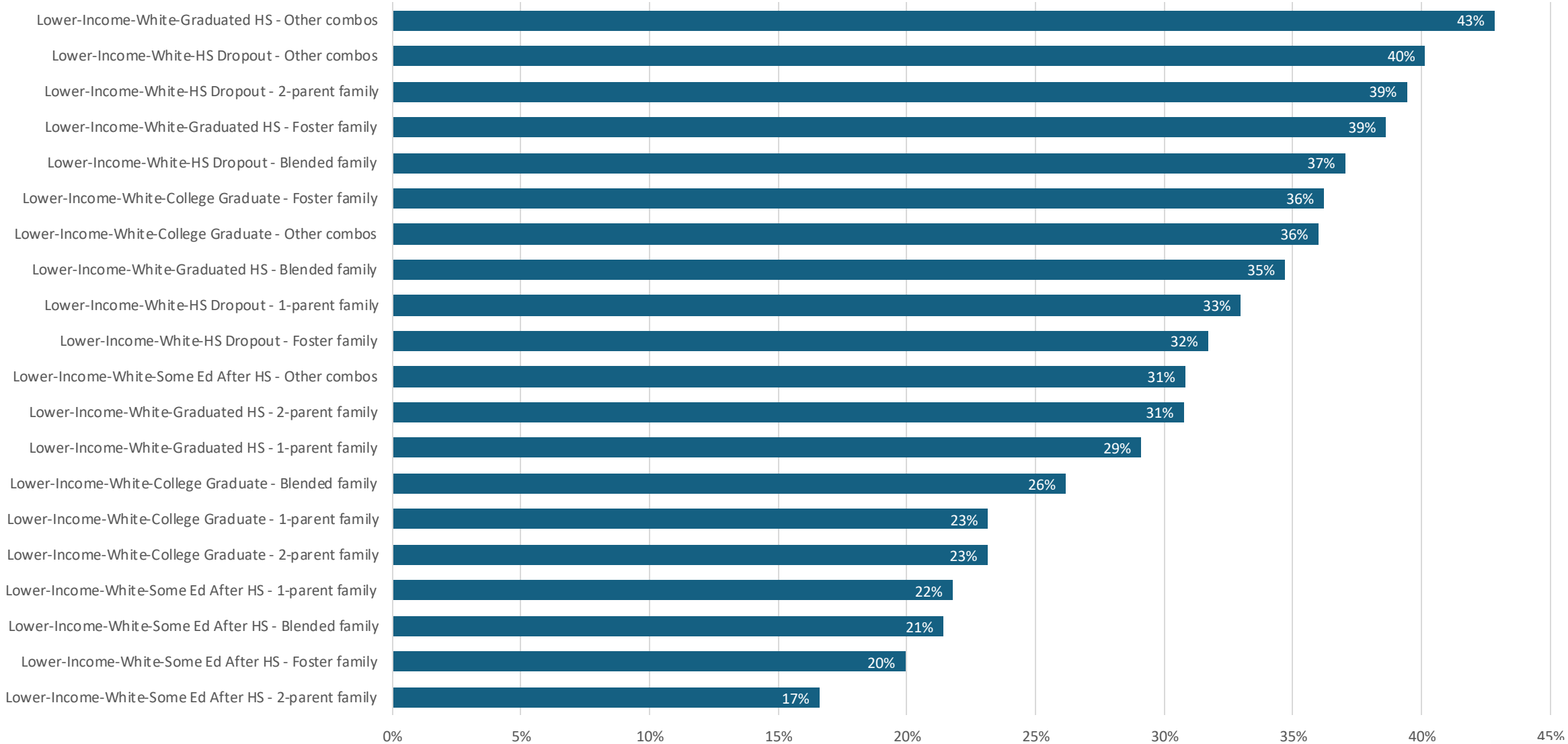
% of **Lower-Income White** 8th Graders Scoring **Below NAEP Basic**



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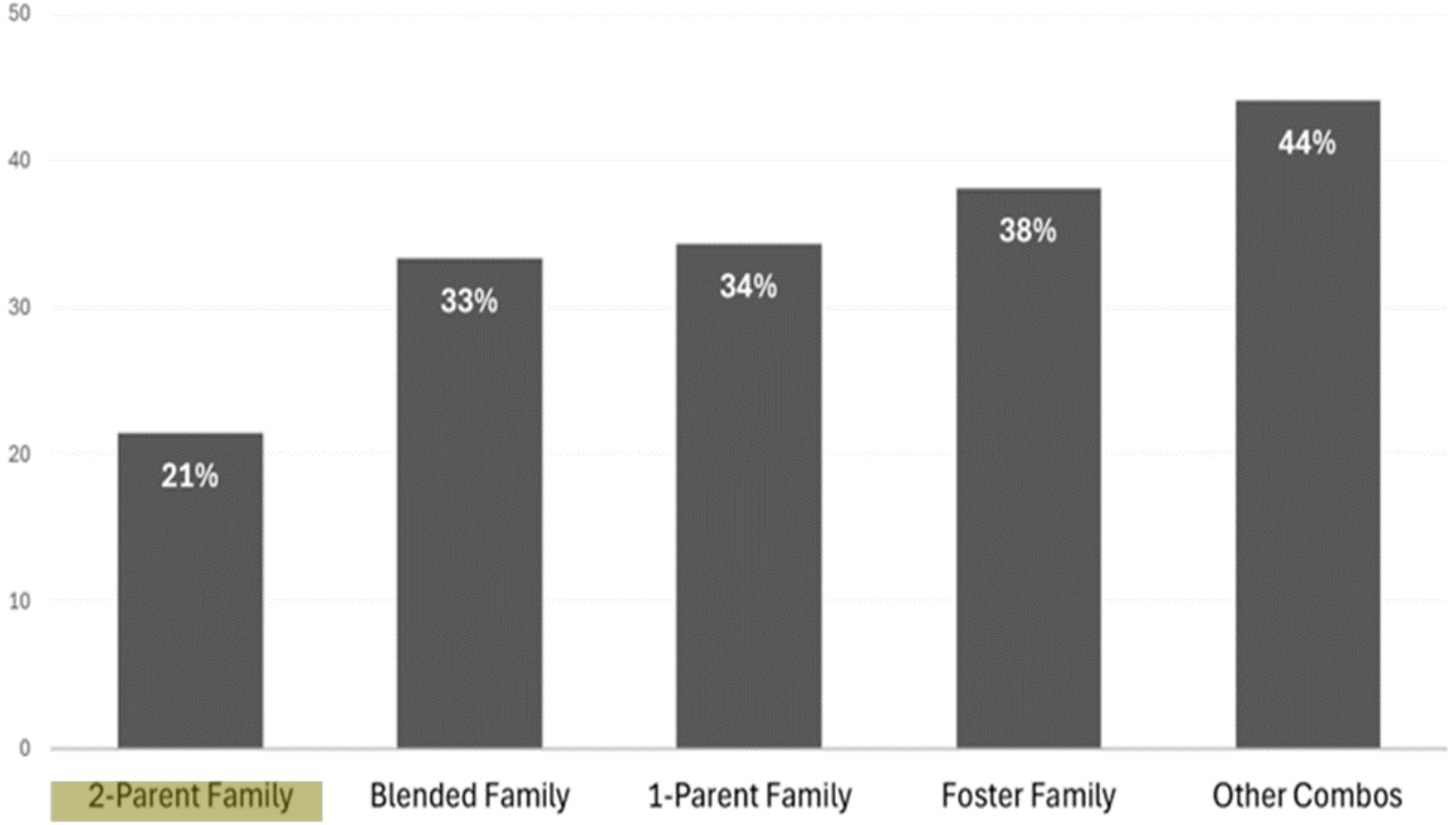
% Scoring ***Below Basic*** by **Family Structure**

(8th Grade Reading)



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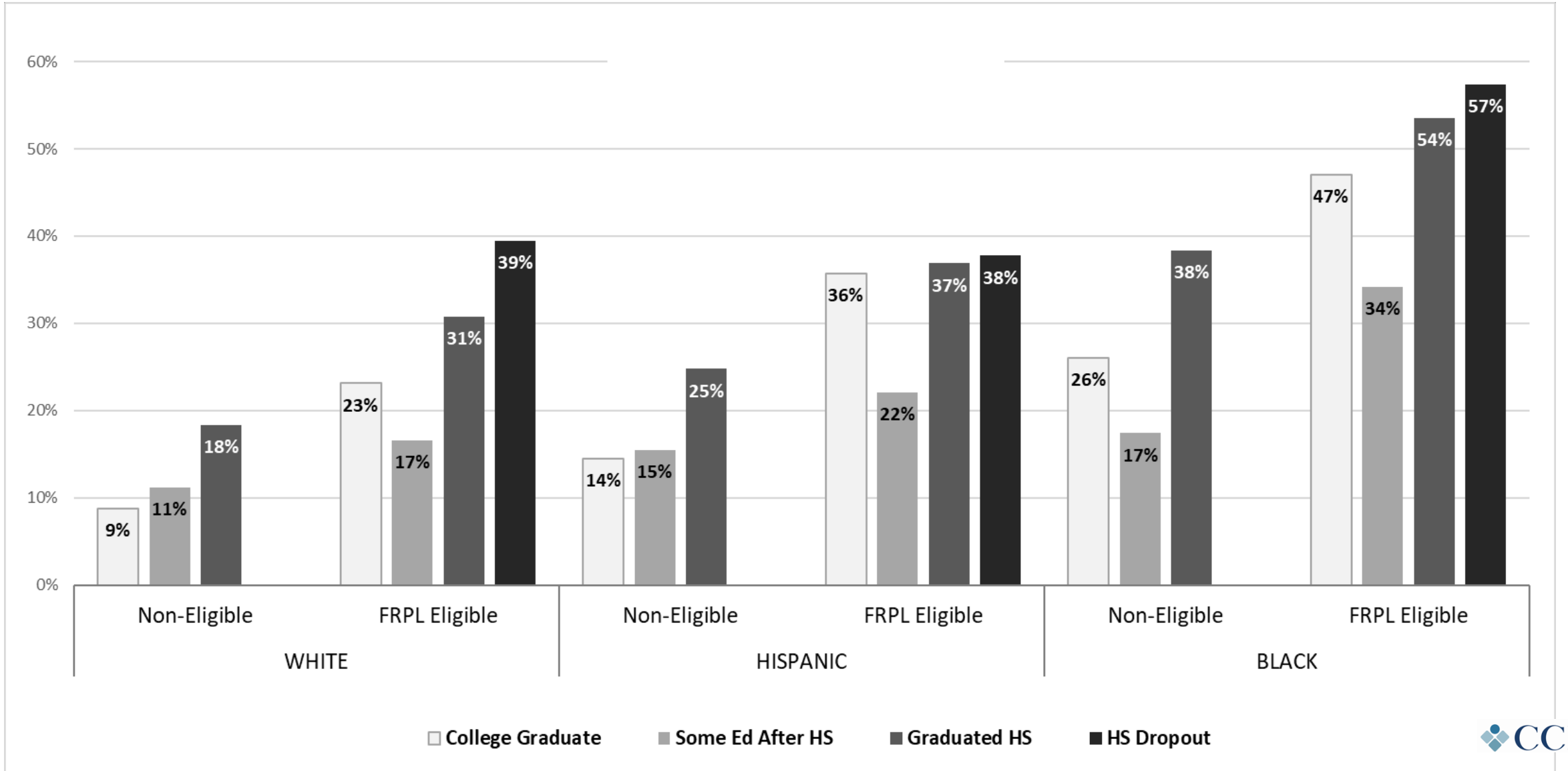
% Children in **Two-Parent Families** Who Score Below Basic by ***Race/Ethnicity***, ***FRPL Eligibility***, and ***Maternal Education***



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Summary

- Very large proportions of children in *all* subgroups are failing to achieve at even NAEP Basic levels
- Using a broader range of family characteristics reveals great heterogeneity *within* the conventionally-emphasized subgroups defined by race/ethnicity and family income
- The main “risk factors” associated with children’s low education performance become increasingly unclear as additional family characteristics are included in the picture

These data underscore how little we know about what matters to children's academic—and life—success

Key Takeaway:
We Need New Strategies

A major cause of schools' ongoing failure to raise persistently low achievement is our inadequate understanding of:

- Which children are most at risk
- And why

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English Learner and/or Multilingual Learner

- An English Learner (EL) is defined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as an individual or student aged 3-21 who was not born in the United States, or whose native language is not English, and who is in enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school. Additionally, under this definition a Native American or Alaska Native student may also be an EL if they come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on their level of English language proficiency, or whose native language is a language other than English.
- A multilingual learner (ML) refers to a student who can read, write, listen, and speak in more than one language at various levels of proficiency.
- Many states refer to ELs as defined in the ESEA as MLs. However, It is important to note that although an EL may fall under the definition of a ML, not all MLs are formally identified as ELs.

https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/multilingual-learners

49.2 Million

Overall Student Enrollment

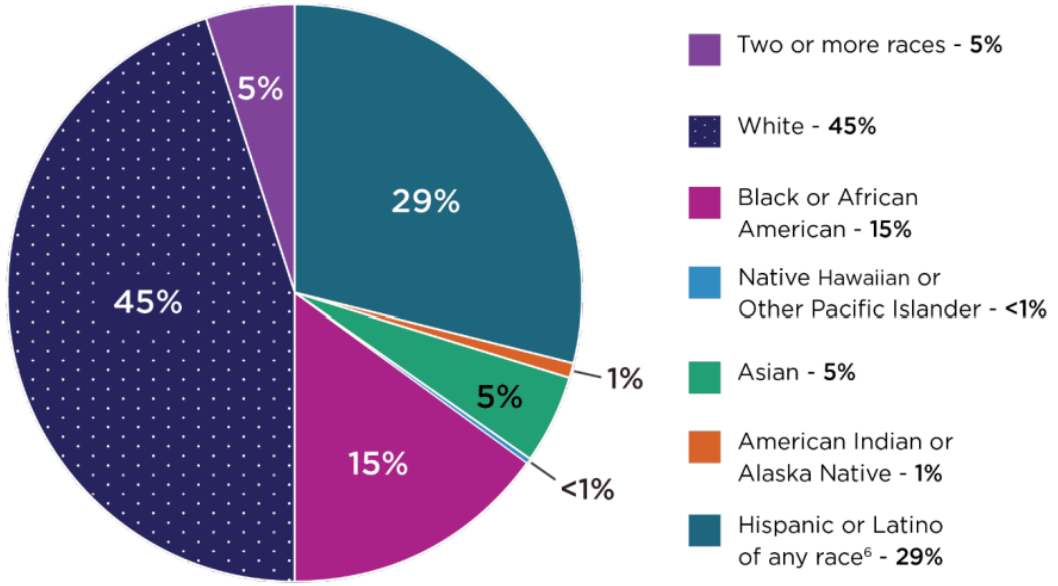
5.2 Million

EL Student Enrollment

ENGLISH LEARNER* STUDENT ENROLLMENT

There were 5.2 million English Learner (EL) students enrolled in the nation's public schools during the 2020-21 school year. EL students accounted for **11% of total preschool through grade 12 enrollment**.

Student enrollment by race/ethnicity[45]



| https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/

Questions to Consider

- Who are our students?
- What does the data tell us specific to their strengths and areas of growth?
- Why might measures based on scientific understanding of bilingual language acquisition also be important?
- Who needs to know all of it?
- How do we share the responsibility?

Deficit Based to Asset Based Thinking

- Prioritize the opportunities not the challenges
- “Language is an *ASSETT*”
- ***Limited English Language Proficiency*** does not equal illiteracy
- English learners and Multilingual learners are a vastly diverse group who come to school with rich language, culture, experiences and funds of knowledge
- English learners/Multilingual learners have:
  - broader and deeper vocabulary, are better communicators and problem-solvers
  - better memory, attention, and multitasking skills
  - are more culturally aware/sensitive, increased empathy development
  - access and opportunity to high demand, high paying and skilled jobs
- Like all students, they can achieve

Upcoming GLR Learning Tuesdays Webinars

GLR LEARNING TUESDAYS, LEARNING LOSS RECOVERY CHALLENGE
Decoding NAEP: Attendance Matters
Tuesday, February 18, 3–4:30 p.m. ET/12–1:30 p.m. PT

GLR LEARNING TUESDAYS, LEARNING LOSS RECOVERY CHALLENGE
Decoding NAEP: Different Contexts, Different Results?
Tuesday, February 25, 3–4:30 p.m. ET/12–1:30 p.m. PT

GLR LEARNING TUESDAYS, LEARNING LOSS RECOVERY CHALLENGE
For-Profit Child Care: Implications, Challenges and Opportunities
Tuesday, March 4, 3–4:30 p.m. ET/12–1:30 p.m. PT

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GLR Learning Tuesdays

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