An Equal Chance

By Lani Guinier;  Lani Guinier is the author of "Lift Every Voice: Turning a Civil Rights Setback Into a New Vision of Social Justice."

Now that the results are in, some opponents of affirmative action are having second thoughts. One year after California passed a referendum banning the use of race and ethnicity in public college admissions, the number of blacks, Hispanics and American Indians admitted to the University of California's two top campuses has dropped precipitously, leading to concern about the resegregation of higher education.

But while the news from California is dismaying, a different, more encouraging story is being written in Texas, a state with political leaders who see diversity as a rich resource that benefits everyone, not only people of color.

Last year, a Federal court outlawed consideration of race in higher-education admissions in Texas. At the time, the state had been using high school grades and Scholastic Assessment Test scores along with affirmative action criteria to decide admissions.

After the ruling, a panel of professors and community activists joined a group of Hispanic and black lawmakers to persuade the State Legislature to adopt what has come to be called the 10 percent plan.

This eliminated the use of S.A.T. scores for Texas students in the top 10 percent of their high school class and automatically admitted them to the two most selective public schools, the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A & M University.

At first, some critics objected that S.A.T. scores were indispensable measures of future success. But, as the advisory group of professors and activists pointed out, the best way to predict how a student will do in college is by measuring classroom performance in high school. This was borne out when achievement tests administered to the thousands of minority students admitted through the program showed that only a handful needed remedial education.

So far the Texas plan has produced many winners. As of March of this year, 7 percent more black and 21 percent more Mexican-American applicants were eligible for enrollment under this system than under the old affirmative action guidelines. And access to public education has increased for white high school graduates in rural parts of Texas -- students who also tend not to do well on the S.A.T. and so had been refused admission to the most competitive public colleges under the old system.

No wonder a number of moderate white legislators joined the coalition in supporting the plan. As State Representative Irma Rangel pointed out, the 10 percent plan
treats all groups equally, giving them "the respect they deserve." Similarly, when Gov. George Bush, a Republican, signed the bill, he declared, "We want all our students in Texas to have a fair shot at achieving their dreams, and this legislation gives them that fair shot."

Texas officials recognize that there is more to be done beyond rethinking college admissions policy. They have also formulated new ideas for improving primary schools. Schools and districts are now required to report test scores, attendance and dropout rates by race, ethnicity and economic standing. Each school is then rated according to the performance of the various ethnic and economic groups. This means more attention is paid to every student, and the entire class benefits.

As a result, black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students are closing the achievement gap. On a national math test given in 1996, Texas fourth graders in various categories -- white, black and poor students -- all ranked first in the country. By contrast, California, where politicians have demonized issues of race, education and immigration, saw its fourth graders, including white students, finish near the bottom, ahead of those in only two other states.

Texas's innovative approaches, and its less polarized environment, are helping to shift an increasingly narrow debate over affirmative action into a wider public discussion on education. This also sends the message that access and diversity are not the enemy of excellence.