Part One

Document source: http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/why-teachers-of-color-quit/282007/

Why Teachers of Color Quit

Low pay and high stress drive black and Latino teachers to leave the profession at higher rates than their white peers.

Amanda Machado Dec 23 2013, 7:31 AM ET

I became a teacher because of where I came from.

I grew up in a middle-class family with immigrant parents from Mexico and Ecuador. When I was four years old, we moved to a predominantly white, upper-class neighborhood in Tampa, Florida to ensure that my siblings and I would attend the best public schools in my district. While studying at these schools gave us great educational opportunities, it also exposed us to significant racism. Teachers placed my brother in English as a Second Language classes, even though he was born in the United States and a native English speaker. Teachers hesitated to place me in advanced classes, stating that "Latinos rarely do well in them" and laughed at my goal of going to Brown University. With little support from teachers and with my family's inexperience with the public education system in this country, I struggled to find the resources I needed to get admitted into top-tier schools. Experiencing these educational inequalities firsthand made me want to solve them. I decided to join Teach for America.

I joined the Bay Area corps after graduating Brown in 2010 and taught ninth-grade English at a charter school outside Oakland. Yet after finishing my two-year commitment, I realized that though my background may have brought me to teaching in the first place, it now had become one of the factors that drove me to quit the profession.

Several recent articles—"Why Do Teachers Quit?," "I Quit for Teach for America," "I Almost Quit Teach for America"—raised reasonable concerns about the difficulties of teaching in predominantly black and Latino, low-income communities: the inadequate training, the poor classroom conditions, the inability to maintain work-life balance. Yet as I read these articles, I realized they still had not discussed some of the specific struggles I encountered as a teacher of color. A 2005 University of Pennsylvania study by Richard Ingersoll found that teachers of color left the profession 24 percent more often than white teachers. According to the National Education Association, "The declining numbers of Black and Hispanic students majoring in education is steeper than the overall decline in education majors" and "Minority teachers leave teaching at higher rates than white teachers do." These statistics made me think about the unique difficulties I and other teachers of color I knew had faced. When discussing teacher turnover, it's important to address these challenges in hopes of finding ways to make more teachers of all backgrounds stay in the profession.

The articles I just cited expressed the difficulty of teaching students when knowing little about their backgrounds. In the piece "I Almost Quit Teach for America," the author wrote about how hard it was for her to teach students when she'd rarely had "meaningful exposure to

anyone outside my social class." She spoke of needing "some way to begin to understand where my students were coming from." In contrast, many teachers of color struggle with knowing too much. Because our backgrounds often parallel those of our students, the issues in our classrooms hit us more personally. This ultimately places an extreme amount of pressure on us to be good teachers immediately, since we know or have experienced ourselves the consequences of an insufficient education. A Latino Teach for America alum in Miami told me: "While teaching, I was acutely conscious of the fact that I wouldn't have obtained the same level of success if my own teachers had not given everything they had to push me to where I needed to be. This intensified the pressure I already felt to do well. "

I knew what happened when our kids failed at school—many of my relatives and friends had failed, and some never recovered. Relatives and friends who had dropped out of school now lived in poverty, became alcoholics, or spiraled into depression. With these pictures in my mind, the job became almost a matter of life and death. With every lesson I planned, I had this big-picture anxiety: I worried that if I did not teach this lesson impeccably, in a way that compelled my students to stay committed to their education in the long-term, my students would inherit the same fates of so many people I knew. I worried that my failure would ultimately become theirs.

The racial identity I shared with my students made me even more sensitive to their struggles, particularly when few other teachers at my school had this same connection. Though 40 percent of students in the American public education system are black and Latino, only 13 percent of teachers nationwide are. In Teach for America specifically, 90 percent of the students corps members teach are black and Latino, while 39 percent of corps members are teachers of color. While this lack of proportional diversity exists in several professions, when your job focuses on leading a mostly black and Latino student population to succeed academically and socially in a predominantly white society, race matters so much more.

To me, racial and social justice was at the core of my work as a teacher. My students' academic progress represented the fate of my racial group, a group I knew had historically been left behind. So at every school meeting, I could only think about how our curriculum and policies ultimately connected to the struggles our students--and I--had faced as people of color. When I administered a standardized test, how did stereotypes threaten affect the confidence of my students? When I talked to our seniors about elite colleges, how could I advise them on socially adjusting to predominantly white, upper-class college campuses? When I translated at parent-teacher conferences with parents who spoke little English, how did the power dynamics play out in a meeting between mostly white teachers and parents who could not actually speak for themselves? When I planned curriculum standards, how would these standards ultimately help my students advocate for themselves or support themselves against the inequalities they faced? I measured my success as a teacher by how well I addressed these issues and accomplished these overarching social justice goals. When I or the teachers around me strayed from explicitly mentioning these very real racial and social realities, I felt that a crucial aspect of our students' education was being left out.

My students also recognized how race affected their education. One student, after getting admitted into Brown, wrote me an email saying, "I'm honestly a bit intimidated by the fact that the majority of students at this college aren't minorities or low-income. I'm worried that I'll feel marginalized and misunderstood because of my background." Students also thought about race during interactions between school staff and students. One black student told me, after I gave him detention for disobedience, "I would listen to you a whole lot more if you were a black lady, like my mother." A Latino student who had failed my English class told me he didn't work hard because "To speak with the people I love, I only need Spanish. English is just for impressing white people." Though these statements had misguided logic, they made it clear that my students thought of how race affected their daily social and educational interactions, and needed guidance in processing these thoughts rationally.

Yet still, many teachers seemed indifferent to discussing these issues at all. When Teach for America organized diversity sessions, many teachers in the corps would skip the sessions or come back telling me, "I am so sick of being forced to talk about this." In one diversity session, so many teachers walked out in the middle of the meeting that corps members all received an email from the Teach for America Bay Area Director asking why so many people had left. A white teacher told me, "All those sessions do is make us all feel uncomfortable." As a person who had spent a large part of my life as a person of color in predominantly white, upper-class spaces feeling uncomfortable, I felt frustrated that other Teach for America teachers did not want to tolerate just a few hours of this discomfort trying to discuss issues that could help the population their position focused on serving.

Financial matters can further alienate teachers of color from coworkers.

Before joining Teach for America, I had prioritized learning about communities of color. I took classes on the history of racial and social hierarchies in our country and their present-day effects. I interacted with low-income black and Latino populations, socially or professionally, and had several conversations about the struggles they faced. These experiences helped me in the classroom: I could use this information, as well as my personal experiences as a person of color, to relate to the lives of my students and motivate them in the ways they needed. Seeing how effective this background knowledge worked in my own classroom, and in other teachers who had put in the same amount of effort, made it more frustrating that others weren't so willing to do the same. I understood that diversity sessions had flaws and did not always produce immediate positive results, but it still seemed that by opposing them entirely, we were all missing a valuable opportunity to become better teachers.

One night, I shared a drink with a fellow Teach for America teacher in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, an area historically with a mostly Latino, lower-income population. Upon learning that I lived in this neighborhood, the teacher told me, "Man, I feel sorry for you. I could never live in such a dirty place. I couldn't even stand the buses around here. I took a taxi." It shocked me that a person teaching students from neighborhoods so similar to the Mission could so easily dismiss it. It shocked me even more when this same person was later chosen to give a speech at an educational fundraiser about his success as a teacher. I have no doubt that he was effective in the classroom in several ways. But yet I had to wonder how he could truly help our students when he could so easily show disdain for the places they came from.

For other teachers of color I knew, cultural insensitivity had more significant consequences on their time in the classroom. A classmate of mine from college—Mexican-American and from a low-income family—told me she quit her job at a New York school because of this issue. The school required its students during the summer to intern at pre-approved programs without pay. A student's mother told administrators that her family could not afford the price of the school's uniforms unless their daughter worked for pay during the summer as a store cashier, instead of interning. My friend spoke to the administration on behalf of this student, explaining how she worked similar part-time summer jobs to support herself in high school. The administrated denied their request. My classmate said,

The administration explicitly told me, "That kind of work just doesn't build character in the way our programs do." I responded, "I may not have had the luxury of having unpaid internships, but I can assure you that the summer jobs I had definitely built character." I was deeply offended by her close-mindedness, and her unwillingness to listen to a different perspective. I realized that my work, ideas, and point of view were not valued by the ones in charge.

Her story made it clear that a lack of cultural awareness from coworkers can make people of color not feel included in their work environments, and ultimately leave.

During my second year as a teacher, our school hosted a professional development session where the staff, for the first time since I began teaching, shared our backgrounds and family histories. The meeting was by far the moment when I felt most comfortable, included, and connected to my coworkers. Until that meeting, I realized I had made so many blanket assumptions of the staff based on our limited interactions. I wondered, if I had assumed these things so easily, what were our much younger and less educated students assuming? How did they perceive our staff at first glance? How much more trust could we gain by disclosing to them, as we did to each other that day, where we came from, how it has affected our daily relationships, and how it has led to who we are today?

Financial matters can further alienate teachers of color from coworkers. Teachers from well-to-do families have the advantage of accepting a low-paying teaching position and still having money available to them through other means. They have the comfort of knowing their families could help them out in the case of an emergency, or satisfy the occasional craving for luxury when they couldn't afford it themselves. Teachers from lower-income backgrounds do not have this same sense of security. Often, we are the ones responsible for supporting our families, instead of the other way around. In Teach for America specifically, 39 percent of their teachers of color received Pell grants in college, meaning their families had incomes roughly below $23,000. I knew several teachers of color who had the responsibility of sending money home or otherwise contributing to paying family expenses.

Also, though some teacher training programs, including Teach for America, allow teachers to defer student loans during a short period of time, afterwards, teachers from low-income backgrounds still have to confront this debt. This makes committing long-term to a salary with little likelihood of ever making more money harder to justify. When I saw teachers from wealthier backgrounds stay in the profession, I had to remind myself that they, through their family or connections, could more easily tolerate a teaching salary knowing they would always have access to a lifestyle my family and I could only aspire to.

That life-long aspiration is the last issue that teachers from lower-income backgrounds struggle with. There is something disheartening about working so hard to honor your family's sacrifices, only to find that your job has not improved your family's situation. Twenty-seven percent of Teach for America teachers of color are the first in their families to earn a college degree. Many more are the first to go to a top-ranked school. To people from our backgrounds, admittance to college is not seen as only an opportunity for intellectual pursuits. It is seen, as my mother always used to tell me, as "a great equalizer," a way of escaping the lower social status and finally gaining the respect or financial success of the upper class.

"By staying in teaching, I was setting myself up to struggle."

As a result, with our academic accomplishments comes pressure to choose a career that proves you have truly "made it." This all makes the lack of prestige and the relatively low financial rewards of teaching particularly demoralizing. According to the National Education Association, the national average starting teacher salary in the 2011-2012 school year was $35,672. Without a financial incentive for a career in social service, it can seem more socially acceptable to only pursue this kind of work temporarily: a short stint of self-sacrifice to prove our altruism, before moving on to something more financially ambitious. An article on the National Education Association's website admitted this when describing reasons for the national shortage of teachers of color: "Salaries are low for teachers compared to salaries for

other professionals, which lowers the prestige and social value of a career in teaching for many potential minority teachers. Secretary Arne Duncan addressed this issue when he called for a $60,000 starting salary in August 2011: "Many bright and committed young people are attracted to teaching, but they are reluctant to enter the field for the long-haul. They see it as low-paying and low-prestige," he said.

My roommate, a Latina graduate of the University of Southern California and a former chemistry teacher for Teach for America, expressed this concern when she left the classroom after her second year to pursue a career as a medical doctor. Her parents had worked their way out of poverty in Mexico through education and obtained scholarships to get Ph.D.'s in chemistry in the United States. She said, "After all that, to become a teacher making $39,000 a year? That feels like failure." Another friend, a black Teach for America alum from an immigrant Haitian family who also left the profession after two years, expressed the same inner conflict saying, "At least for me another consideration was the life I would be giving my kids. By staying in teaching, I was setting myself up to struggle to provide for them in the same things my family struggled to provide for me."

My parents both came to the United States with nothing, worked their way through college. They made sacrifices for my siblings and me to grow up in a middle-class neighborhood and attend the best schools possible. My mother began working as a teacher only after my father lost his job and the family needed more income. During that time, I would see her come home exhausted after 12-hour workdays. She took anxiety medication for the first time in her life to deal with the stress. When I saw myself, with an Ivy League degree that she and my father had worked hard to make possible, in the same profession as her, I felt I had done pretty poor job of repaying them. It didn't seem logical to voluntarily do what she was forced to do, to make her same salary and work her same grueling hours. I wanted to fulfill her wish of a better life, not an equally hard one. I feared that my profession could never truly feel like an improvement. Though I considered teaching an honorable profession where I could give back to my community, after only two years, I felt I needed more to sustain me.

I sent in my resignation later in March. "The physical and emotional commitment that are required to teach well became overwhelming and left little time for me to focus on myself and the other aspects of my life that truly made me happy," I wrote. Though this was true, what I left out was that the overwhelming "emotional commitment" mostly came from the connection of sharing a background with my students. And though my salary was enough to give me a comfortable lifestyle, and save a decent amount of money, it did not make me feel like I had used my education to pursue a career that was reputable, a career that made my family's legacy "better."

When I explained to my students my decision for leaving, many understood. A few even said, "The teachers of color always leave quickly." Others told me, "We actually always wondered why you were here in the first place. After all that work, why aren't you chasing your dreams, instead of ours?" Others said, "If I was in your position, I'd probably leave too." These comments did not comfort me. Instead, they highlighted how even children could recognize that teaching was not a profession to aspire to, and one that people of color, for one reason or another, often abandoned.

I still feel guilty for leaving the classroom. At the end of the year, some students told me, "You are the first Latina I know who went to an Ivy League School." In a letter, one Latina student wrote, "Seeing one of my own succeed and experience all that you have makes me want to do more and accomplish the impossible". These comments will always make me feel like I abandoned something, or worse, failed at being someone who my students so desperately needed.

I do not regret my two years teaching at a charter school and being a part of Teach for America. The issues I have presented are not caused by these organizations. Teach for America has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity: They made it one of their "Core Values." Wendy Kopp, the founder and chair of the board of Teach for America, has said, "While I started out knowing that diversity would be important, over time I've seen firsthand that achieving greater levels of diversity—particularly with respect to race and economic background—is in fact vital to our long-term success." Teach for America has partnered with several organizations working towards recruiting teachers of color to the profession, hosted forums for alumni of colors to connect and meetings where they have shown a willingness to listen to more voices of teachers of color.

The problem lies in the fact that one well-intentioned organization cannot solve the problems that teachers of color face. There's a lot that needs to change to prevent more teachers of color from leaving the profession. Schools and teacher-training programs should create a sense of camaraderie among teachers of color so that they don't feel alone in their work. We need greater emphasis on training cultural awareness so that all teachers and students, regardless of background, feel part of an inclusive community. As a society, we need to make our appreciation for teachers tangible with better salaries, better hours, and more respect. Doing so, college graduates will feel comfortable and secure calling themselves teachers, and will know that their profession is something that can make their families proud.

Part 2

Why Are American Schools Still Segregated?

A new study offers two answers: White people are making up a smaller percentage of the population than they used to, and different races are living in different school districts.

[Eleanor Barkhorn](#) Nov 5 2013, 9:16 AM E

Jeremy Fiel grew up going to fairly diverse public schools in Lubbock, Texas. "Some schools had a higher black or Hispanic population," he said. "But there weren't any all-white schools." After graduating college in 2006, he spent three years teaching science in Greenwood, Mississippi. What he saw in Greenwood shocked him.
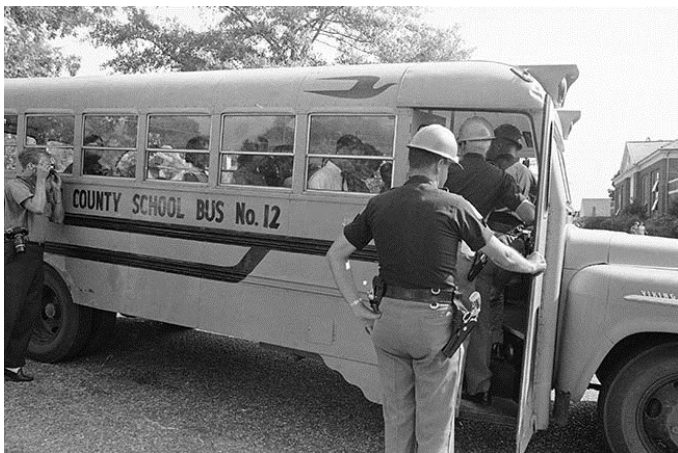
"Segregation there was the most extreme I've ever seen," said Fiel. "There were literally less than five white kids in an entire public school."

Fiel's experience as a teacher inspired him to go to graduate school in sociology to study segregation and inequality in education. Now a Ph.D. candidate at University of Wisconsin–Madison, Fiel [recently published](#) a study in the *American Sociological Review* that suggests the factors driving segregation have increased in scale in the past several decades—and that fixing the problem will require a new set of strategies.

Nearly 60 years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that ordered school districts to desegregate, schools seem to be trending back toward their segregated pasts. In the 1968-69 school year, when the U.S. Department of Education started to enforce *Brown,* about 77 percent of black students and 55 percent of Latino students [attended](#) public schools that were more than half-minority. By the 2009-2010 school year, the picture wasn't much better for black students, and it was far worse for Latinos: 74 percent of black students and 80 percent of Latino students went to schools that were more than half-minority. More than 40 percent of black and Latino students attended schools that were 90 percent to 100 percent minority.

The persistence of segregation is a problem because, today as in the *Brown* era, separate schools are unequal. "Schools of concentrated poverty and segregated minority schools are strongly related to an array of factors that limit educational opportunities and outcomes," [wrote](#) the authors of a 2012 report by the University of California–Los Angeles's Civil Rights Project. "These include less experienced and less qualified teachers, high levels of teacher turnover, less successful peer groups and inadequate facilities and learning materials."

Fiel's study found that one factor that's led to the decline of white students in minority-heavy schools is the fact that white people make up a smaller proportion of the overall student population:

## Figure 2A. Racial Composition, 1993-2010
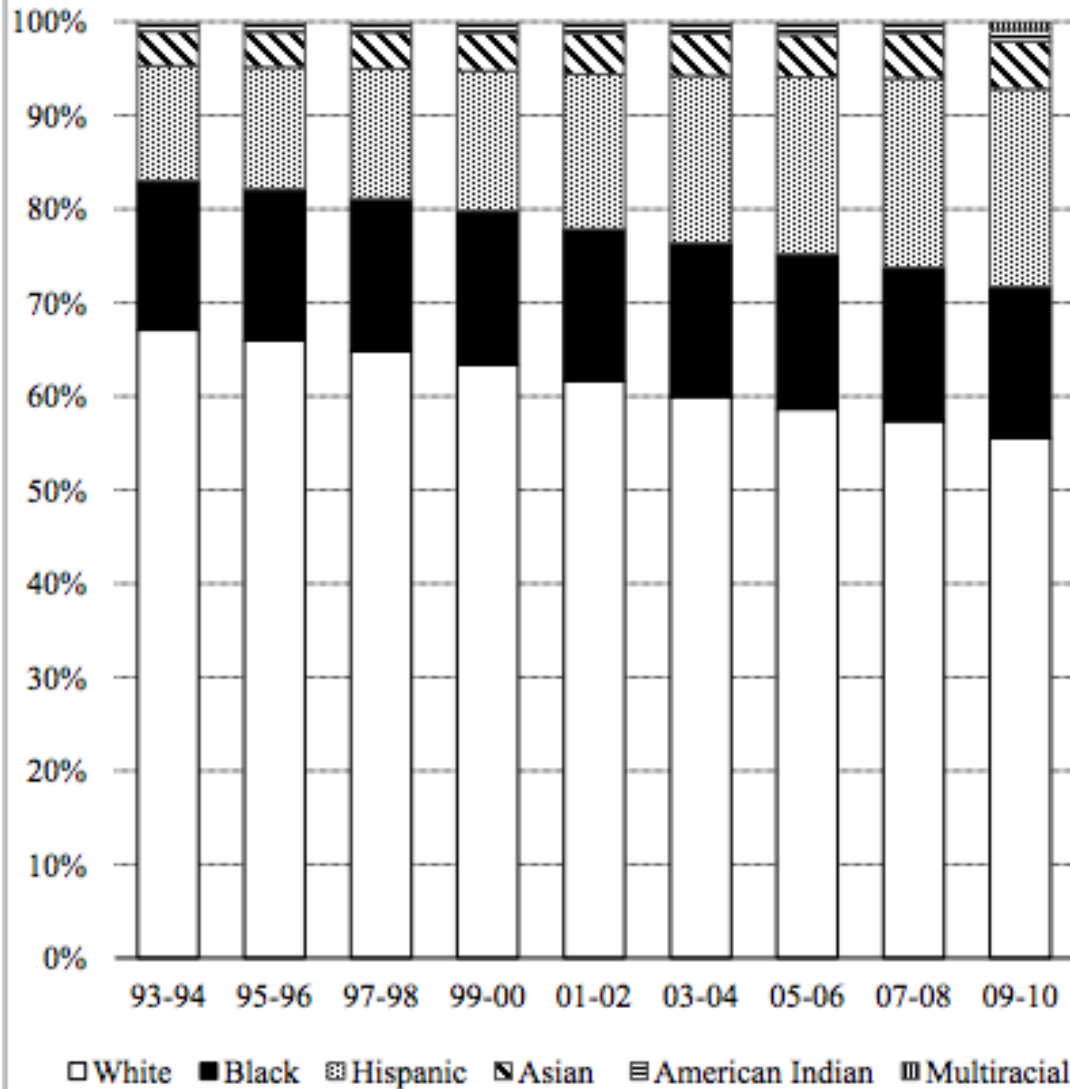
Jeremy E. Fiel, *American Sociological Review*

Whites are nearly a minority in the U.S. population under the age of five, and Census projections predict that by 2043, whites will no longer be the majority of the U.S. population overall. "There's going to be fewer whites in minority schools because there are fewer whites in the population," said Fiel.

Another part of the problem is with desegregation policies themselves. At the time of the *Brown* decision, schools in the same district were vastly unequal to one another, so efforts went toward integrating schools within each district. That made sense to combat segregation as it existed at the time.

Today, though, Fiel found that racial imbalance tends to exist *between* school districts, rather than *within* them. This chart shows how different factors have contributed to racial isolation over the past decade. Racial imbalance between districts (the black bar) has consistently played the most significant role in nearly all forms of racial isolation:
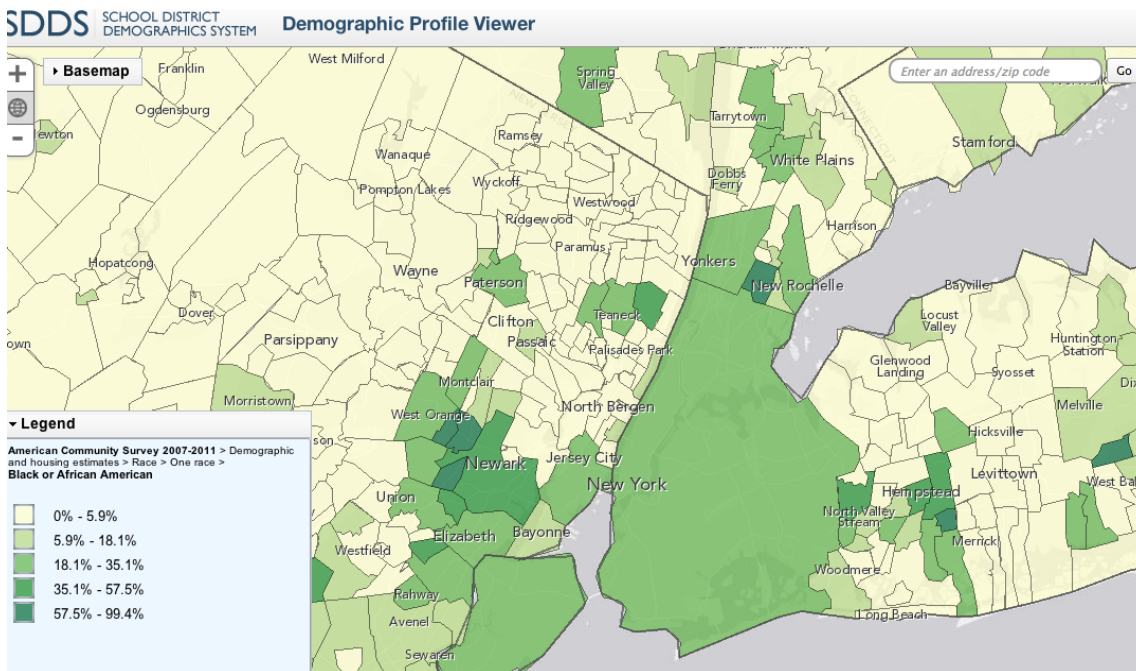
Figure 7. Components of Racial Imbalance's Contribution to Exposure, 1993-2010
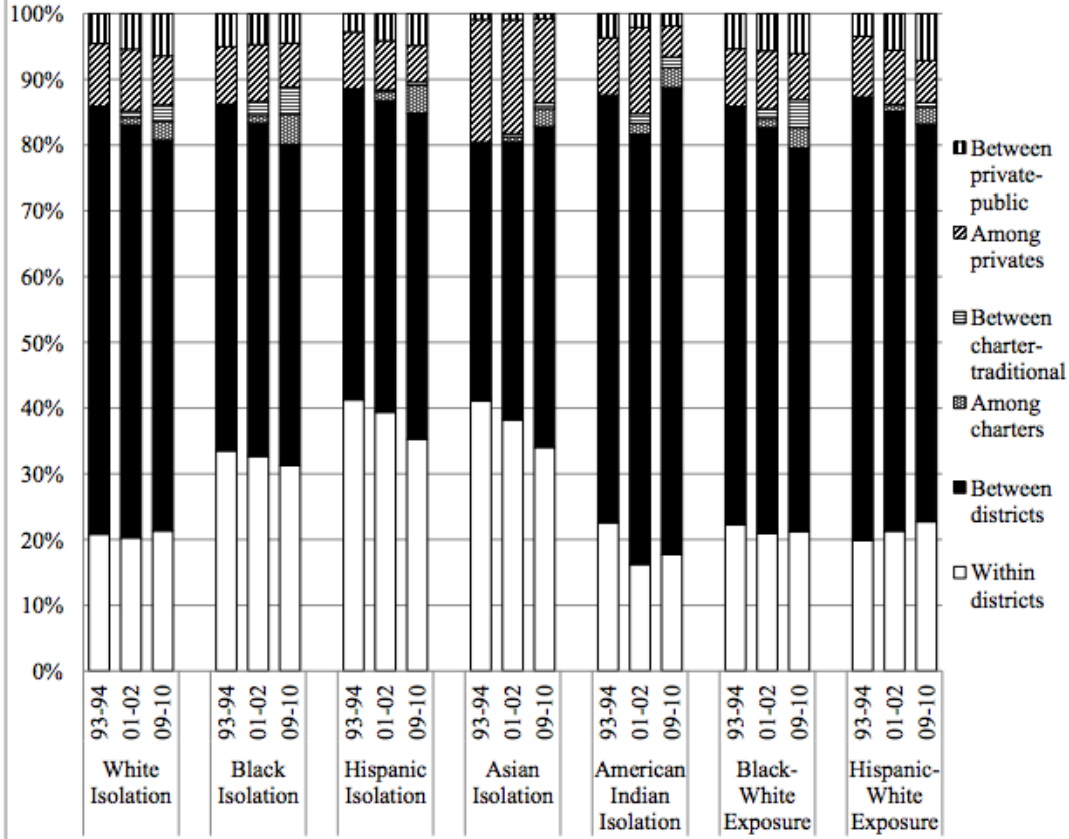
Jeremy E. Fiel, *American Sociological Review*

This map of school districts in and around New York City is a good illustration of this phenomenon:

National Center for Education Statistics

The darker the green, the larger the the black population in the school district. Notice that there are several dark-green (i.e. majority black) districts bordering off-white (i.e. majority white) ones. The Mount Vernon City School District near New Rochelle, for example, has a 62.1 percent black population. On its northern border lies a little off-white dot: the Bronxville Union Free School District, whose population is 0.6 percent black. Student achievement in those districts is similarly divergent: In Mount Vernon, 68 percent of students pass New York State's high-stakes Regents exam; in Bronxville, 100 percent pass. You can see other, similar contrasts near Newark (on the southwestern side of the map) and on Long Island (on the eastern side).

"The biggest barrier to reducing racial isolation...is racial imbalance between school districts in the same metropolitan area/nonmetropolitan county," Fiel wrote in his *American Sociological Review* article.

Inter-district segregation does not come with an easy solution. Creating integrated schools in these areas would require students to travel across district lines—a form of desegregation policy that has been struck down by the Supreme Court.

"We need new policies and new ways of addressing segregation because it's on a much larger scale now," Fiel -said.


Part Three

Report: American Education Isn't Mediocre—It's Deeply Unequal

Students in Massachusetts are doing great compared to their international peers, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Students in Alabama, Mississippi, and D.C., however, are languishing.

Julia Ryan Oct 24 2013, 10:25 AM ET

It's so common to see studies about the United States's lackluster academic performance compared to other countries, it's barely newsworthy anymore. The American education system, the story goes, is mediocre. A new report from the National Center for Educational Statistics complicates that picture a bit. It attempts to rank how individual states compare internationally, and ends up showing a wide gap between the highest-performing states and the lowest: Massachusetts does quite well against other countries, while Mississippi, Alabama, and the District of Columbia do poorly.
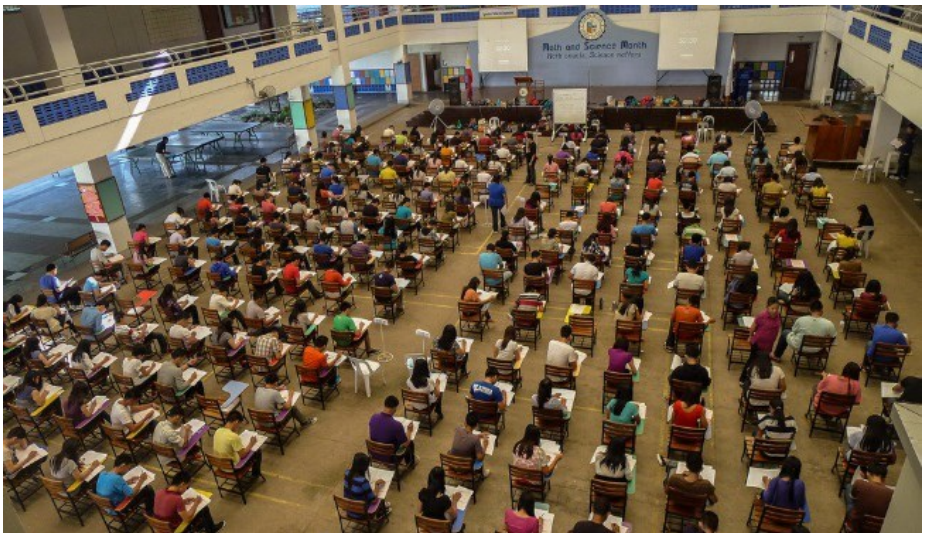

The report evaluates 2011 math and science scores from two sources: the National Assessment of Educational Process, which was administered to eighth graders in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools; and from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which evaluated eighth graders in 38 different countries and 9 "subnational entities" (for example, Quebec and Dubai).

Only some states took the TIMMS to create the U.S. score, so for the U.S. states that did not take the TIMSS in 2011, the report used NAEP scores to predict the what the state's TIMSS scores would have been. The researchers then used these predictions to rank the states against the other educational systems tested by TIMSS.

The average TIMSS score is a 500, and the test uses four benchmarks—low, intermediate, high, and advanced—to describe student scores. In math, two-thirds of U.S. states scored above the TIMSS average.

Figure 3-A. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade mathematics for students with average scores higher than the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011
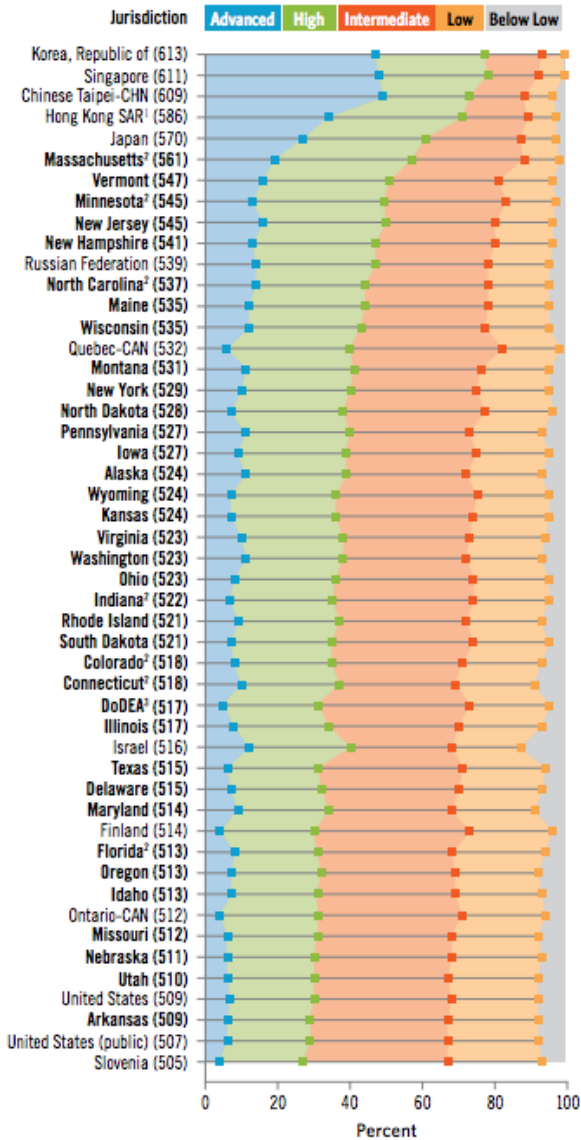
Massachusetts was the highest-scoring state in math, coming in behind four educational systems—Republic of Korea, Singapore, Chinese Taipei, and Hong Kong—and outranking 42 education systems. The lowest-ranking state, Alabama, outperformed only 19 educational systems.

Figure 3-B. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade mathematics for students with average scores not significantly different from the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011
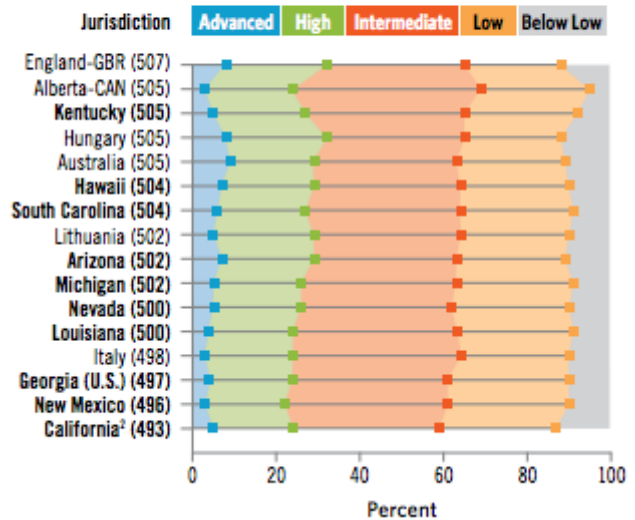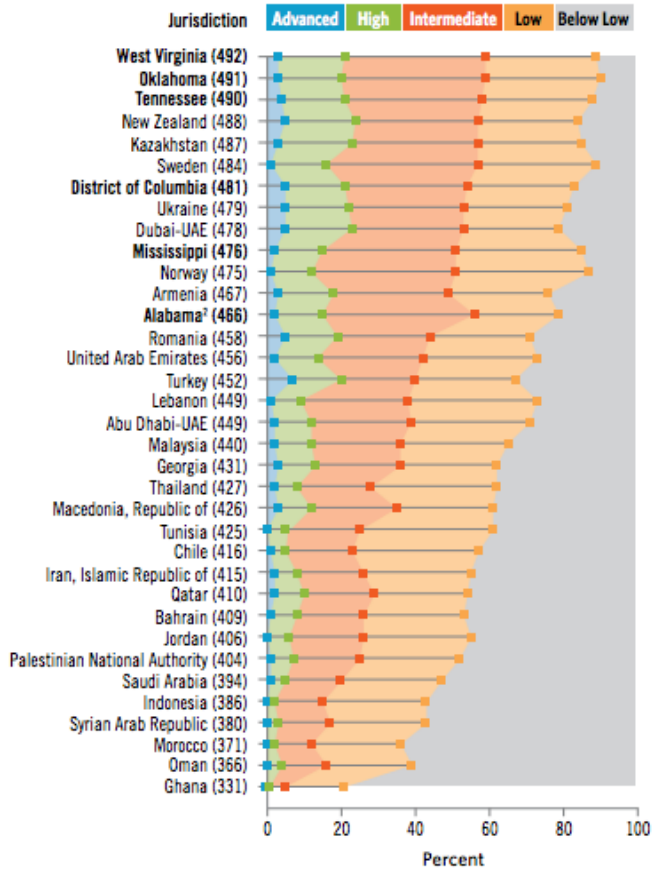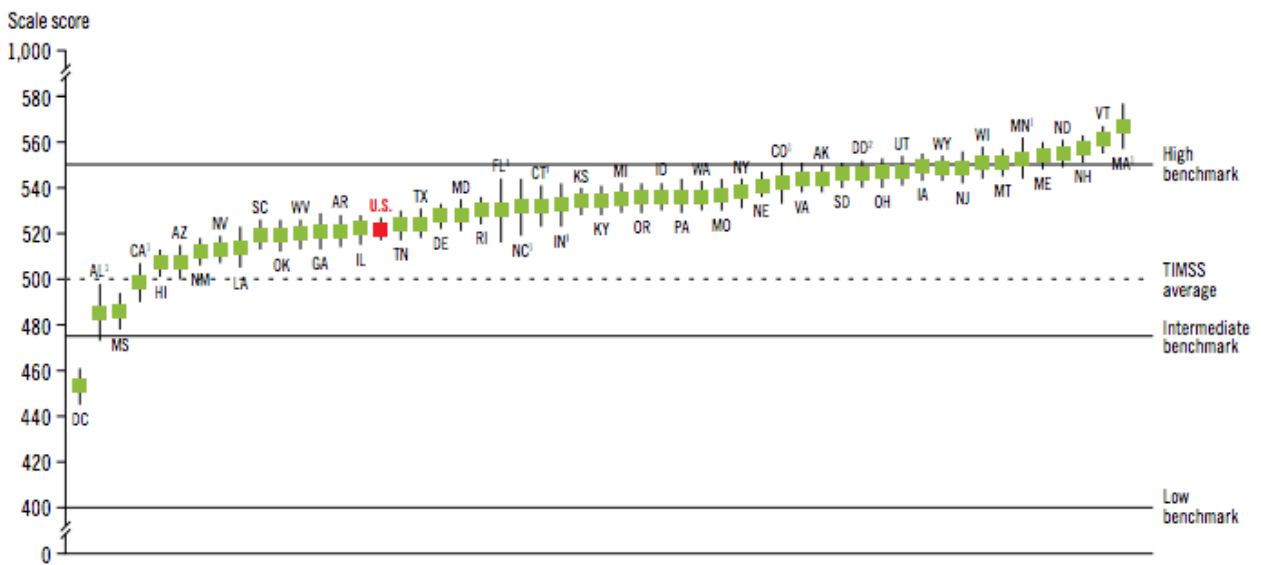
Figure 3-C. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade mathematics for students with average scores lower than the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011

In science, 47 states scored above the TIMMS average:

Figure 4. Average scores and confidence intervals in TIMSS eighth-grade science, by state: 2011

[1] Validation state.
[2] Department of Defense Education Activity (overseas and domestic schools).
NOTE: Validation states are those U.S. states that participated in the 2011 TIMSS assessment at the state level. Results for validation states and the United States (U.S.) are based on actual results from the TIMSS science assessment, while the results for the other states are predicted results. The results for all states and the United States include public schools only.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Science Assessment; and International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 2011.
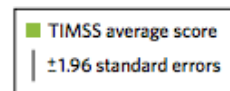
Figure 6-A. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade science for students with average scores higher than the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011
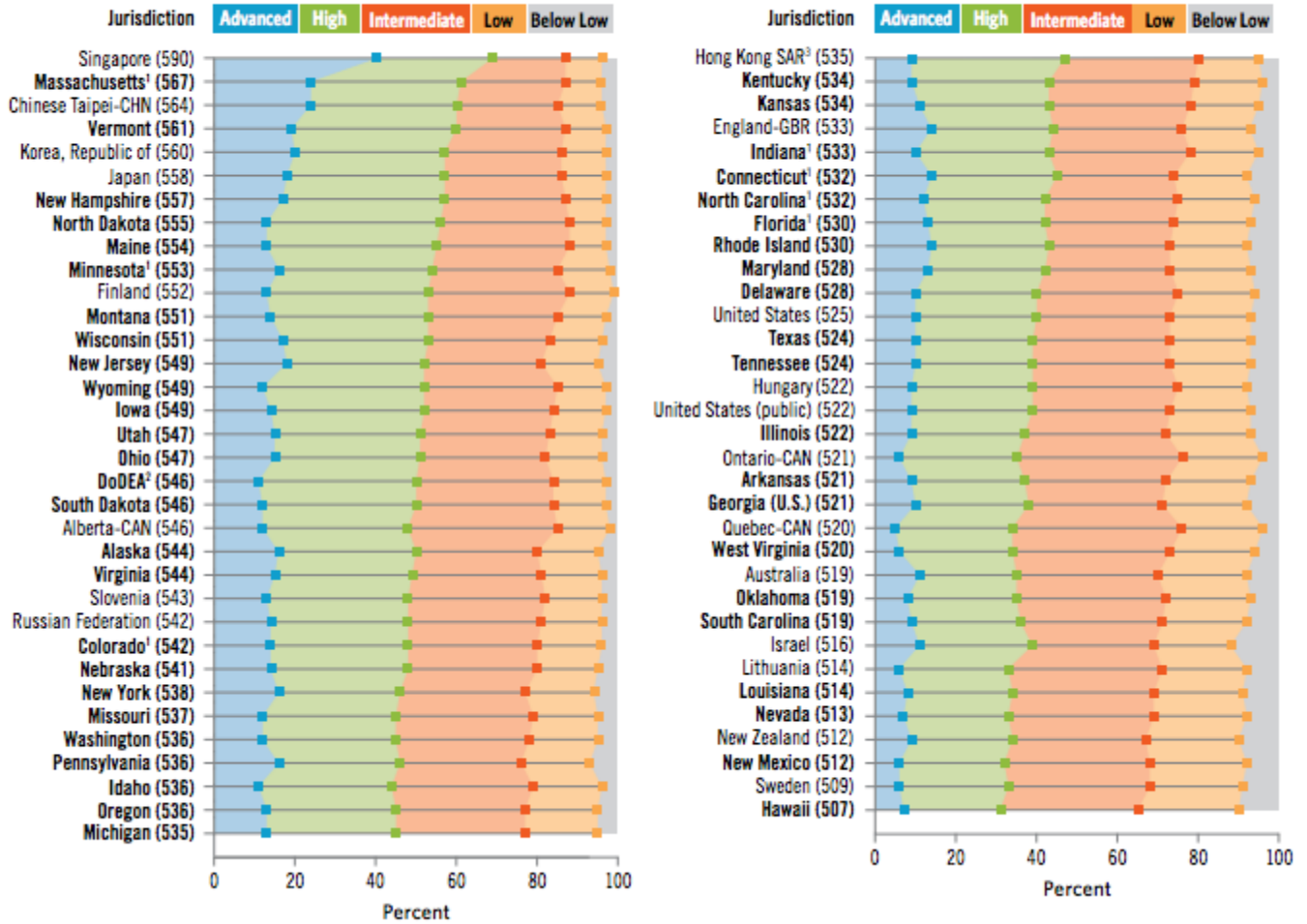
Massachusetts and Vermont outperformed 43 educational systems, while the District of Columbia ranked above only 14 educational systems. Singapore was the only education system to outrank all U.S. states.

Figure 6-B. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade science for students with average scores not significantly different from the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011
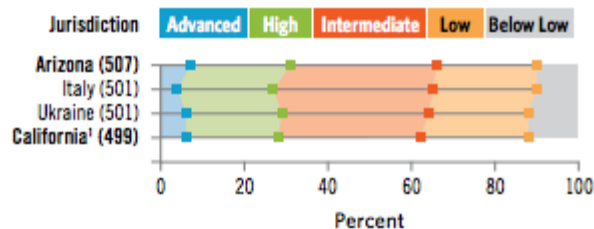
Figure 6-C. Benchmark-level results in TIMSS eighth-grade science for students with average scores lower than the TIMSS average, by jurisdiction: 2011
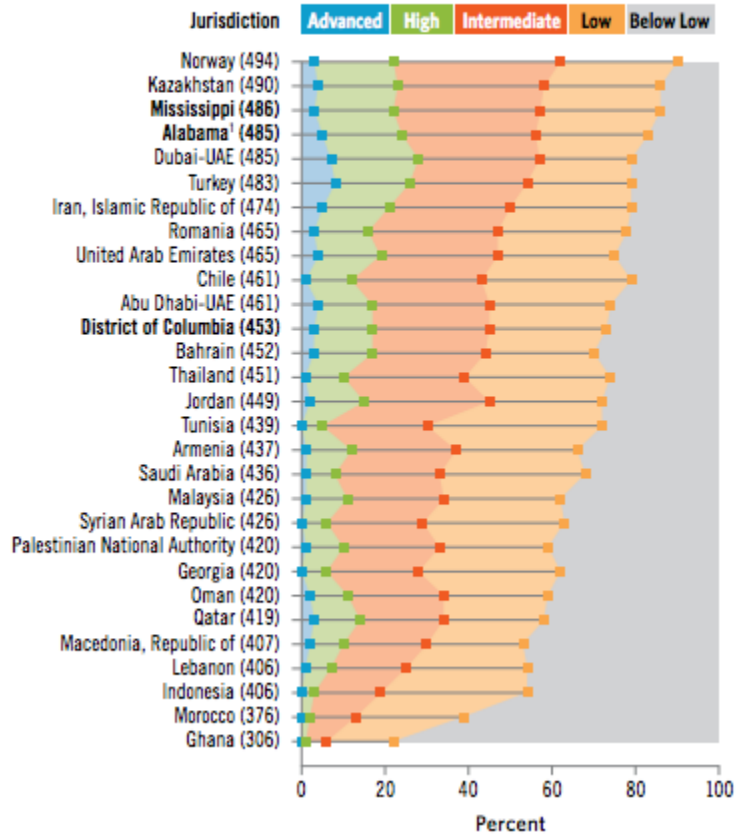
Figure 1. Average scores and confidence intervals in TIMSS eighth-grade mathematics, by state: 2011
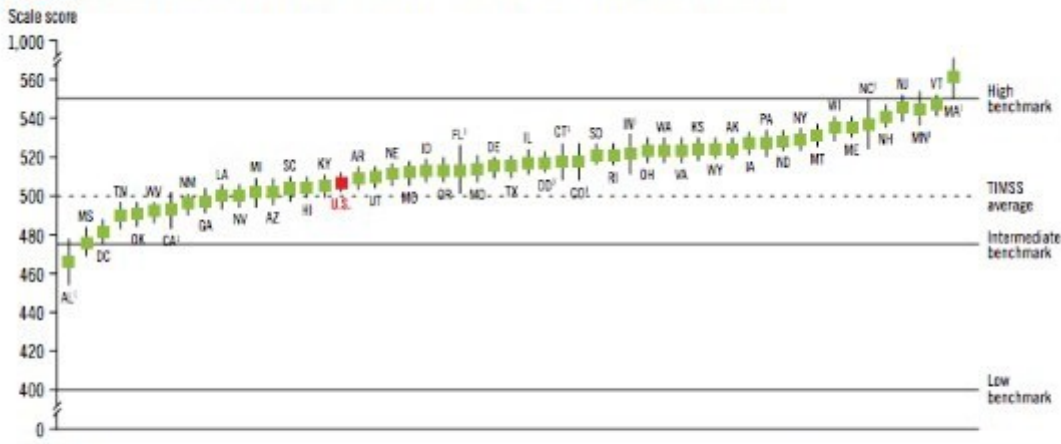
¹ Validation state.
² Department of Defense Education Activity (overseas and domestic schools).
NOTE: Validation states are those U.S. states that participated in the 2011 TIMSS assessment at the state level. Results for validation states and the United States (U.S.) are based on actual results from the TIMSS mathematics assessment, while the results for the other states are predicted results. The results for all states and the United States include public schools only.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Mathematics Assessment; and International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 2011.

Part Four

When Minority Students Attend Elite Private Schools

Many parents of color send their children to exclusive, predominantly white schools in an attempt to give their kids a "ticket to upward mobility." But these well-resourced institutions can fall short at nurturing minority students emotionally and intellectually.

Judith Ohikuare Dec 17 2013, 9:23 AM ET

Dalton is a prestigious, decades-old, K-12 prep school on New York City's Upper East Side that filters its students into the best universities in the country. In 2010, *Forbes* reported that 31 percent of its students matriculated into MIT, Stanford, or an Ivy League institution. Former students include Anderson Cooper, Claire Danes, and Ralph Lauren's daughter Dylan. Even imaginary people make sure their families are present for parent-teacher conferences. For years, however, Dalton was largely inaccessible to minority and lower-income students. Maintaining its reputation as a top-tier place of learning did not require administrators to extend invitations to those groups.

When Idris Brewster and his friend Seun Summers entered kindergarten at Dalton in the late 1990s, they were one of the few students of color in their class. Idris and Seun's parents believed that getting into Dalton was the first step to a life filled with accomplishments.

"Students that came out of independent schools were well-prepared on the level of networking, internships, job and school opportunities—you name it—and we were offered great financial-aid incentives," Michèle Stephenson, Idris's mother, told me. "We thought this intensive, intellectually stimulating institution would open doors for Idris and take him anywhere he wanted to go."

Fourteen years later, Idris's parents have released *American Promise*, a documentary that records the boys' personal and academic experiences from kindergarten through senior year of high school. The film reveals a hard truth about being a student of color at an elite school: Simply being admitted doesn't guarantee a smooth or successful educational journey.

At the beginning of *American Promise*, the boys' parents are filled with hope about their sons' new school. As the film progresses, though, they become less certain of Dalton's ability to improve their sons' lives. They realize that, as Michèle phrases it, Dalton's "ticket to upward mobility" often came at a cost to their kids' success and self-esteem. "We understood that this was a school that the '1 percent' sent their children to," Michèle says,

"but not having grown up in that environment, neither of us understood the extent to which the social and emotional sides of our child's development would be at stake."

Dalton's school building (Wikimedia Commons)

When I entered sixth grade at the single-sex Chapin School in 2000, I was the second black girl out of nearly 60 students and one of few working-class students in my year. I'd prepared for Chapin by going through a program called Prep for Prep, a nonprofit organization that filters low-income minority students into New York City independent schools. (Idris' parents consulted with another program, Early Steps, which does similar work for kindergarten-aged students.) My peers from similar circumstances were a half-black, half-Puerto Rican girl from Queens who had started in first grade, and a Bronx-born girl of Guyanese descent that started at Chapin the year before. My parents had high hopes for my time there and believed the school would provide a more stable and nurturing environment than many public schools we could opt for.

My first few years at Chapin didn't involve culture shock as much as cultural disillusionment. Everyone was incredibly friendly (almost alarmingly so for my public-school disposition), but I was clearly a novelty. We were all New Yorkers—native ones. I found it hard to understand how such well-traveled people knew so little about their own city. I had never in my life been touched and asked with such stark curiosity how I got my hair to just "stay that way" or, even years later in high school, what a "borough was." I usually laughed, but was often as horrified as they were when I'd say that I was going home alone on the train. To them, it seemed callous that my parents would allow me to do so; I thought it was bizarre that many of them needed a babysitter just to travel a few bus stops.

Idris and I started our respective journeys at a pivotal point on the timeline of minority enrollment in independent schools, as schools started to try for more than simple numeric representation. According to Myra McGovern, senior director of public information for the National Association of Independent Schools, more independent schools are becoming invested in how diverse environments should *feel*, rather than only concentrating on what they should look like. Likewise, more parents of color are discovering alternatives to public school that seem stable in the face of rapidly transforming neighborhoods and school systems.

"Initially, in the 1960s and '70s there was a greater push to just integrate and assimilate," McGovern says. "It wasn't until the late '70s and '80s that diversity became less about numbers, and more about having a community that was inclusive and drew strength from the diversity of the student body."

Today's parents have grown up in a more diverse country than the previous one, she adds, and are specifically seeking out communities for their children that are similarly diverse.

I'd argue, though, that parents of color aren't compelled by "diversity" as much as they are by reality. Independent school administrators may be invested in preparing white students for an increasingly multicultural future (or multicultural present, since children of color now outnumber non-Hispanic white children). But

parents of color like the families in *American Promise* are more concerned with ensuring their kids' success in the still predominantly white spaces of the present. The job market is obviously strained for everyone, however, it continues to be remarkably stratified by race. Rather than waiting for their kids to deal with that reality in adulthood, many minority parents would prefer that their children get a head start when they are young thinking, as Seun's mother Stacy does in one scene of *American Promise*: "I want Seun to be comfortable around white folks because at this point, *I* am not comfortable around white folks."

See the the trailer for *American Promise*

The cultural transition into the independent school setting can be just as difficult for adults as it is for their children. Until fairly recently, the perception of independent schools as cold, elitist, and inaccessible hindered administrators' ability to attract capable, non-traditional families. At best, recruiters seemed to be shadowy benefactors that plucked bright, dirt-smudged waifs from their humble origins and placed them in stately institutions where children might, in the style of *Great Expectations*, become less "common." (You can almost hear the croaking echo of some horrible schoolteacher shouting "Play! Play!" at a poor brown child.) Administrators tended to reach out to social and professional networks that already mirrored the backgrounds of the existing student bodies, almost exclusively courting, for example, children at prohibitively expensive nursery schools.

In recent years, though, Dalton has done more than many schools in its arena to extend itself beyond the old parameters. It made headlines in 2011 after announcing that 47 percent of the incoming kindergarten class that year was comprised of students of color: 24 percent multiracial, 11 percent black and Asian each, and one percent Hispanic—compared to a New York City independent school average of 29 percent total. Alumna and head of school Ellen Stein says that when *American Promise* started, her school was at the "very early stages of our efforts to be an intentionally diverse" place that mirrored the variety of New York. She defines "diversity" as not only racial and economic, but also religious, geographic, professional, and by style. Administrators have fulfilled these expectations by reaching out to a variety of nursery schools in the city—rather than focusing on well-established favorites—as well as contact an array of churches and afterschool programs.

Lisa Waller, the head of upper school, adds that the parents of African-American children have executed a "tremendous sweep in terms of reaching out to their peers and neighbors," and have helped to plan popular, longstanding events have that allowed families to get a better sense of life at Dalton. Staff turnover is much less frequent than student turnover, and some parents might wish for more diversity among faculty, but Waller says the school has changed its routines to allow for better communication. For example, pushing events later in the evening means longer days for people who work in the school but, unlike morning meetings, "guarantees the broadest amount of participation" for members of the parent body who need to be at work earlier in the day, or need more time to arrange childcare.

Still, until fairly recently, minority children who entered independent schools weren't engaging with already-diverse environments as much as creating diversity simply by being present. In the sixth grade, when another student told me to "run like the KKK was chasing" me to get a good time on the mile-run fitness test, I had to choose between exploding at her, trying to educate her (one 12-year-old to another), or finding someplace calm inside myself so that I could walk away. I walked away—and I hated myself for it. But I also understood that for many of my peers who had gone to the school for years, I was one of the first, unquestionably racially distinct people their age that they had interacted with on a daily basis. My parents or outside friends wouldn't be there to help me through it, even if they wanted to be, and I didn't trust my teachers and advisors to address these issues honestly and directly without catering to the other girls (many of whom who seemed naïve, even to me), or their parents (who paid full tuition).

Ronnette, who attended Packer Collegiate, a co-ed K-12 school in Brooklyn, told me she also walked away when a white student told her to "go back to Darfur" in seventh or eighth grade. Although Ronnette was dubbed the "Queen of Diversity" for writing about her experiences in the school newspaper, she says that she "didn't necessarily want to be the advocate or 'martyr'" she was portrayed to be. "I would much rather have kept a low profile and been a friend or mentor to younger Prep and minority kids," she explains. "But for me, my frustration was making sure I did the work in the classroom rather than being upset about percentages."

Entering Packer at as a teenager with outlets to alternative environments made Ronnette's transition somewhat easier, as it did for me. When he is young, Idris plays basketball at a Harlem league but is called a "white boy" by peers, and called out for code-switching—changing the way he speaks and the vernacular he uses—by his parents. But Ronnette and I had deeper, more extensive relationships with peers outside of Packer and Chapin. After all, we had attended elementary and middle school elsewhere.

The difference age makes is evident in Ronnette's immediate family; her sister attended Packer from kindergarten through fifth grade "until the school started to scapegoat her blackness"—blaming academic or social difficulties to her race. Ronnette attributes this to her sister's age. "Lower schools struggle because one, the age group doesn't have the vocabulary to express themselves and, two, the administrators are scared to offend."

Educational psychologist Pamela Brown calls this the [Pollyanna Effect](): "the tendency for schools to wrap their messages so nicely that you don't hear their actual concerns, [throwing] many parents of color for a loop." The effect is a series of miscommunications, misperceptions, and omissions. For example, a parent is "invited," as Brown calls it, to meet with a teacher about their child's difficulty in some area. "Trained to have a strengths-based approached to supporting children" rooted in "sensitivity and care," the teacher goes on and on about all of the good things so effusively that the parent has no idea what is wrong. Then a breakdown occurs: The teacher assumes the parent has understood the message and will do what needs to be done; thinking the coast is clear, the parent or guardian changes nothing about their child's routine; the student's work or place at the school suffers until some, more drastic, action is necessary; the parent or guardian and teachers blame each other.

From Ronnette's standpoint, situations like these occur because schools lack experience relating to young, minority children and their families. "It seemed that once the diversity numbers were up, it was enough to just have children of color there but not nurture them," she says. "A lot of the 'lifer' kids of color in my sister's grade that year transferred out. That's not the kids being unable to handle the schoolwork—that's the school not being able to handle the diversity they think they want. It sucks because my mom struggles to reconcile the [overall] positive experience that I had, and the struggles my sister went through at the same place."

Arguing that the independent-school experience is much less alienating for low-income and/or minority students when they are older is an awkward stance. (After all, I don't believe kids should remain segregated until puberty.) What is more feasible is for administrators to very thoroughly explain the culture of the school to incoming parents of color, and for parents of color to internalize those messages and not simply jump at the best financial aid package or best-name school. *Every* school will have small class sizes, attentive teachers, and provide personalized college recommendations when the time comes. But not every school will wrestle with the same books in English class, or have a strong focus on the arts, or top-level sports teams. Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson realized this nuance in time for their second son to attend Brooklyn Friends, an independent Quaker school closer to home with what they say has a "slightly different philosophy and student-and-parent body makeup."

Sitra, a friend of mine and fellow Chapin alum, learned about the challenges of attending an independent school from a young age, as well as the variability of schools within the system. She graduated from the Grace Church School in eighth grade before going to Chapin for high school. Sitra hails from East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and

entered Grace in pre-kindergarten when she was four years old. The school accepted several church employees' children and helped to devise suitable financial aid packages for them, so Sitra was acquainted with one other boy whose father worked with on the custodial staff with her own.

"If I was white I'd be better off," Idris says to his parents. "Isn't that true?"

Overall, Sitra's time at Grace was positive (in fact, after we became friends at Chapin, her [Phoebe-esque](#) phrase, "At Grace, things were so different…" was a familiar refrain), but she occasionally felt singled out or overlooked in ways that were subtly tied to her background. In kindergarten, Sitra told a teacher that she knew how to read, and was "completely brushed off"—but a white student who made the same pronouncement was supported and encouraged. Eventually, another teacher realized the other's error and told Sitra that she would get to read to the entire class. Even at four years old, Sitra knew what had happened.

"I have hated that teacher ever since," she told me, laughing a little. "I knew that I was getting to have this fun experience because someone had screwed up."

Seun and Idris also pick up on the ways that they are different from their peers, and it affects their self-esteem. Seun tries to brush the brown out of his gums so that they will be "pink" like those of his white friends. Idris is penalized for getting into a fight with a white student he says he did not start—then penalized again for "lying" about it.

"If I was white I'd be better off," Idris says to his parents. "Isn't that true?" From behind the camera, Joe and Michèle are speechless.

Like the boys in *American Promise*, Sitra struggled with her identity at Grace, wanting "badly" to fit in when she was young, but also wanting to have her experience reflected in the curriculum in some way. "We studied immigration in third grade and did a mock Ellis Island, but it was all about white people who immigrated to the United States—or people who count as white now, like Eastern Europeans and the Irish," she recalls. "Looking at my parents who are also immigrants but from the West Indies, it was like, 'What do you mean by immigration, and why don't we talk about that'?"

A change finally came in sixth grade when an English teacher assigned *The House on Mango Street*. The book takes place in a different city, Chicago, but the protagonist, Esperanza, is also from a working-class, immigrant family. Sitra read the book excitedly, feeling like she understood the story "on so many levels."

"In some ways, it seemed like her story could be my story," she says. "And that was a turning point for me. I didn't have to be silent about who I am, or ashamed to be different, because there are people who *do* talk about their differences and are accepted into society. We were reading one of their books in English class."

Leaving Grace for Chapin was difficult. There wasn't necessarily more racial diversity at Sitra's first school, but there was "definitely more" socioeconomic diversity at the time. For one thing, because of its location in the East Village, Grace students were present during the gentrification of the Bowery and the Lower East Side. Parents that sent their kids to Grace were also "super-duper wealthy," but many of them were artists and a bit more liberal, so they taught their kids about inequality.

"I knew that Chapin would be different because of the neighborhood and the type of people that sent their kids there," Sitra explained. "But I just couldn't imagine that people would want to keep their kids so sheltered from everything beyond the Upper East Side."

Seun in a scene from *American Promise* (Alfredo Alcantara)

In *American Promise*, one Dalton administrator claims that the independent school experience presents a "greater cultural disconnect [for] African-American boys" than it does for African-American girls. Lisa Waller addressed the remark saying, "I don't know that that comparison can be made or how that could be parsed by gender. Different people will manifest their sense of cultural disconnect differently should they happen to have it." I asked Collin Williams, who attended the all-boys Collegiate School starting in sixth grade, what he thought. He agreed that the question is a nuanced one.

"Some difference does exist. Boys and girls learn differently and have different social interactions. And they enjoy things in different ways, whether that's a biological or a socialization process. What is more important is the fact that both men and women struggle in the same ways—but I think it *looks* different."

I have never been incredibly graceful—and I felt even less so at Chapin as the tall, solid black girl who galumphed around in scuffed Nike hi-tops and wore my brother's sweatbands as accessories. Though I was mostly comfortable with myself, I was always hyper-aware of the amount of space I took up, physically and emotionally. Even when being loud or excitable, I always tried hard not to seem angry or aggressive. Collin's experience as a black boy at an all-boys' school was very different.

Collin's parents were new to the country when he was born. They sent him back to Antigua to be raised by family until they were able to support him in their new home in New York, and he returned to the States when he was five. Collin's mother was particularly uncompromising with regard to his education. "After moving to America and not having much family or many connections, my parents' thought process was, "Our son has to have the best education possible,'" he says.

In public school, "a lot of privileges went along with being the smart guy," even when Collin was rambunctious. He continued to do well academically at Collegiate and forged close relationships with several teachers. But he always felt "very noticeably black." He sensed that some students picked on him because of his race, and he refused to be disrespected. So he fought.

"Literally all the time," Collin says. "There were times I was on probation and it was never because of academics. As a guy who embraces masculinity, I was like, 'You're not going to punk me or talk to me this way, and I'm going to punch you in the face so that everybody knows I'm not the black guy you're going to pick on.'"

"It's not just about opening doors and creating a 'diverse' environment."

That changed after an incident in his sophomore year of high school. Collin was playing ping pong with friends in the student lounge, and another student entered and took the paddle from him, declaring that it was his turn. Collin's friends demanded that the boy give it back—it wasn't his turn and, if Collin wanted to, he could take it back by force since he was bigger. Still, Collin insisted that it wasn't worth it and let it go; the other student agreed.

"Collin's smarter than that," he said. "He knows if he takes it from me, if he physically touches me, he'll definitely end up working at McDonald's in ten years." Stunned, Collin left the lounge, went to a bathroom down the hall, and cried.

"I thought about all the fights I got into and how they were similar," he says. "I'm a big optimist so I used to think, 'Oh, that person didn't mean it that way, it's not like that.' I really thought that I was part of the community and a valued person, but I was still this little charity case. It was like he was saying, 'My grandparents' grandparents went to Harvard, so my life is set. You got this one chance, but if you fuck it up you've got nothing to fall back on.'"

Though Collin says he knows female friends at other independent schools had similar problems, he doubts that he would have gotten into as many—or any—confrontations if he were female. A heightened degree of physicality (or back-talk, or confrontation, or subversion) is already expected from boys more than it is from girls; physical altercations may be more common for boys of color because they are boys, not because they necessarily have more difficulty adjusting to independent schools than black girls do. Not every girl who smiles, or appears unfazed, is actually okay.

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American Promise uncovers the constant build up and breakdown of parents' expectations over the course of their independent-school journey. Idris imagines that varsity basketball will be a highlight of his Dalton experience, and is crushed when he doesn't make the team. After being diagnosed with a learning disability, Seun and his parents Tony and Stacey Summers hope that he'll be able to succeed at Dalton with extra support, but his grades fall too low to continue at the school beyond eighth grade. Even after her son's disappointing experience, Stacey Summers wonders how it will be possible to go from Dalton to another school. "It's like, where do you go after [here]?" she asks, looking at a final letter of concern from the school. Still, Seun enrolls in the public, mostly-black Benjamin Banneker Academy where he meets nurturing administrators and pursues travel opportunities.

After what looks like a typically stressful college-application experience, Idris is rejected from his dad's alma mater, Stanford, and enrolls in Occidental College. Seun enrolls in SUNY, Fredonia to study graphic design.

I asked Idris's parents if, in hindsight, they believe their expectations of Dalton were unrealistic.

"When you ask a question like that, 'Were you unrealistic?' I am always going to say yes," Idris's dad, Joe Brewster, answered. "But the reality is that our son was able to achieve a certain level of academic success that's rare in any school. What we have become increasingly aware of is that there are multiple developmental skills with which we must monitor our sons: Are they empathetic? Do they care about other people? Do they have a sense of justice, and morality? Are they aware of the importance of taking care of their bodies? If you look at all of these scales, Idris has done very well."

For Michèle, the question is less a matter of unrealistic expectations than understanding what the expectations are.

"It's not just about opening doors and creating a 'diverse' environment. It's about putting all the cards on the table about what it takes so that you're striving toward true equity in the educational journey," she said. "Public schools should also be demanding that kind of expectation from both their teachers and their student body, but my son should also be able to be in an independent school environment and own it, and have that sense of entitlement."

Like all parents, low-to-middle income parents of color can be remarkably demanding of their children. But ensuring their children's success at independent schools requires some leveling of expectations—not by aspiring to less, but by realistically assessing the abilities of individual private schools to nurture their children. It is easy to assume that these schools will be able to provide everything any child might need, and far more difficult to accept that even these impressive places have flaws. Likewise, if independent school administrators want new students to become a real part of the fiber of their old institutions, they must be honest about the culture of their schools, not only when courting students, but when dealing with conflict.

In *American Promise*, nearly every parent and educator—both inside and outside of Dalton—says that they want their children to acquire a sense of self-esteem and self-determination. And every permutation of the academic experience (single-sex/co-ed, public/private/charter, racially diverse and downtown, or socioeconomically stratified uptown) is presented as some grand experiment that might reveal The Solution to growing exceptional children, as if such a thing exists. After seven years at Chapin, most of which were happy ones, I am not disappointed that my experience was neither exceptional nor perfect, but grateful that I learned in time that it would not be.

Part Five

Black Boys Have an Easier Time Fitting In at Suburban Schools Than Black Girls

Minority young men are considered by their white peers to be cool and tough; minority young women, on the other hand, are stereotyped as "ghetto" and "loud."
Aboubacar Ndiaye Oct 21 2013, 10:32 AM ET

Though I'm sure my name was a hint, I happen to be black. My parents are West African (Mali and Senegal to be exact), and I was born and raised in France. When I was 13, my family and I moved to a suburban community outside of Atlanta. The school I attended, though relatively diverse for Georgia, was majority white. I had an easy time there. I made friends quickly, a lot of them white. To this day, more than ten years later, my friend circle is still very much white, populated by the people I met at my mostly-white high school, or at my mostly-white university, or in my mostly-white neighborhood. I have always attributed my ability to fit into both multicultural and white environments to my personality and my immigrant's need to adapt to whatever environment I'm in.

But recent research published in the American

Sociological Association's *Sociology of Education* journal shows that my gender (male) was one of the determinative factors in the relative ease of my social integration. In an article published last year, Megan M. Holland, a professor at the University of Buffalo and a recent Harvard Ph.D., studied the social impact of a desegregation program on the minority students who were being bussed to a predominantly white high school in suburban Boston. She found that minority boys, because of stereotypes about their supposed athleticism and "coolness," fit in better than minority girls because the school gave the boys better opportunities to interact with white students. Minority boys participated in sports and non-academic activities at much higher rates. Over the course of her study, she concluded that structural factors in the school as well as racial narratives about minority males resulted in increased social rewards for the boys, while those same factors contributed to the isolation of girls in the diversity program.

Another study looked at a similar program, called Diversify. Conducted by Simone Ispa-Landa at Northwestern University, it showed how gender politics and gender performance impacted the way the minority students were seen at the school. The study shows that "as a group, the Diversify boys were welcomed in suburban social cliques, even as they were constrained to enacting race and gender in narrow ways." Diversify girls, on the other hand, "were stereotyped as 'ghetto' and 'loud'"—behavior that, when exhibited by the boys in the program, was socially rewarded. Another finding from her study was that because of the gender dynamics present at the school—the need to conform to prevalent male dominance in the school—"neither the white suburban boys nor the black Diversify boys were interested in dating" the minority girls. The girls reported being seen by boys at their schools as "aggressive" and not having the "Barbie doll" look. The boys felt that dating the white girls was "easier" because they "can't handle the black girls."

The black boys in Ispa-Landa's study found themselves in peculiar situations in which they would play into stereotypes of black males as being cool or athletic by seeming "street-smart." At the same time, though, they would work to subvert those racial expectations by code-switching both their speech and mannerisms to put their white classmates at ease. Many of the boys reported feeling safer and freer at the suburban school, as they would not be considered "tough" at their own schools. It was only in the context of the suburban school that their blackness conferred social power. In order to maintain that social dominance, the boys engaged in racial performance, getting into show fights with each other to appear tough and using rough, street language around their friends.

In the case of the girls, the urban signifiers that gave the boys so much social acceptance, were held against them. While the boys could wear hip-hop clothing, the girls were seen as "ghetto" for doing the same. While the boys could display a certain amount of aggression, the girls felt they were penalized for doing so. Ispa-Landa, in an interview, expressed surprise at "how much of a consensus there was among the girls about their place in the school." She also found that overall, the girls who participated in diversity programs paid a social cost because they "failed to embody characteristics of femininity" that would have valorized them in the school hierarchy. They also felt excluded from the sports and activities that gave girls in those high schools a higher social status, such as cheerleading and Model U.N., because most activities ended too late for the parents of minority girls. Holland notes that minority parents were much more protective of the girls; they expressed no worries about the boys staying late, or over at friend's houses.

Once minority women leave high school and college, they are shown to continue to struggle with social integration, even as they achieve higher educational outcomes and, in certain locales, higher incomes than minority men. Though, as presaged by high-school sexual politics, they were still three times less likely than black men to marry outside of their race.

For the second time in as many sessions, the Supreme Court heard a case about affirmative action last Tuesday. Following last year's Fisher v. Texas non-decision, the court will now be deciding whether states can ban the consideration of race in college admissions through ballot initiatives as the Michigan did in 2006. Based on the

tenor of the oral arguments, some court watchers have predicted that the court's conservative majority will now take the opportunity to further limit the use of affirmative action in admissions across the nation. As Garrett Epps noted last week, it is nearly impossible to have a measured conversation about affirmative action, an issue that splits even the most ardent liberals. However, there appears to be a general consensus that minority populations benefit from these programs. But very rarely do commentators stop to consider the diversity of that minority population, and even fewer consider what impact affirmative actions programs have on the disparate, intersecting groups who participate in them.

A couple of months ago, Ebony.com editor Jamilah Lemieux started the Twitter hashtag #blackpowerisforblackmen to discuss the little-talked about but deeply-felt existence of black male privilege. Tweets like "#blackpowerisforblackmen because the Black men's problems are the community's problems" and "#blackpowerisforblackmen bc although black women played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement, we're only told about MLK&other blk men" speak to a history of minimizing of the experience of black women. The hashtag, which attracted no small amount of blowback from black males, revealed the dilemma that many black women face: having to combat both racism and sexism. Like the research about the diversity programs, the conversation showed that what we sometimes instinctively think of as "the black experience" is complicated by gender. The ostensible purpose of affirmative action is to increase the presence of minorities in colleges and universities. But as the Supreme Court considers further limiting the scope of such programs, it is important to remember that unless cultural expectations about race and gender change, full educational integration will remain a pipe dream.

Part Six

When Class Became More Important to a Child's Education Than Race

In 1963, kids in the 10th percentile of income fell behind children in the upper echelon of wealth by about a year or so. Today, that gap is closer to four years.

Sarah Garland Aug 28 2013, 7:02 AM ET

On a weekday afternoon in July, Jessica Klaitman pulled her 16-month-old daughter Hannah out of a stroller in the lobby of the New York Kids Club, a "child-enrichment center" with four classrooms, a dance studio, and gym space in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y.

Hannah was sleepy after a nap, but her face lit up as she was let loose with several other toddlers and their nannies. She grabbed some

blocks and then headed to a table stocked with piles of a pink, play-dough-like sculpting material. For 45 minutes, the children wandered around wielding dolls and blocks, grabbing at each others' toys and taking turns on a miniature slide. When time was up, they sang along with the "Clean-Up Song" and helped put away the mess.

A drop-in class at the New York Kids Club costs about $47, according to an employee. Hannah's playgroup that day was free, but only because Klaitman, 40, and her husband, Jordan Small, 39, have enrolled their three children in package deals for classes in karate and preschool--which run about $650 per child for 17 once-a-week sessions. Klaitman estimates she's dropped thousands of dollars at the club over the years, not to mention what she spends on the private preschool her oldest son attends, additional classes in Spanish and music elsewhere, and the family's museum memberships.

The Klaitman-Smalls' considerable investment in their children is becoming the norm for families like theirs who are in the top tiers of the country's income distribution. The resources the affluent are pouring into their children are also driving a growing divide between academic outcomes of the children of the well-to-do and those of everyone else's kids. That widening academic divide means that kids who are born poor and kids who are born rich are increasingly likely to stay that way once they reach adulthood.

When Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech a half-century ago, on Aug. 28, 1963, black children lagged behind their white peers in school by more than three years. For poor children, the picture was somewhat more encouraging: Those in the 10th percentile of income fell behind the children in the upper echelon of wealth by about a year or so. Poverty was a major obstacle, but not so large that it couldn't be scaled by the brightest and most ambitious.

Fifty years later, social class has become the main gateway--and barrier--to opportunity in America.

The country is far from fulfilling King's dream that race no longer limit children's opportunities, but how much income their parents earn is more and more influential. According to a 2011 research study by Stanford sociologist Sean Reardon, the test-score gap between the children of the poor (in the 10th percentile of income) and the children of the wealthy (in the 90th percentile) has expanded by as much as 40 percent and is now more than 50 percent larger than the black-white achievement gap--a reversal of the trend 50 years ago. Underprivileged children now languish at achievement levels that are close to four years behind their wealthy peers.

These days, middle-class children are also falling further behind their affluent peers. The test-score gap between middle-income (the 50th percentile of income) and poor children has remained stagnant; it's the gap between the top earners and the rest that is growing rapidly. And though more poor and middle-income children are completing college these days, they can't keep up with the growth in college graduates among the wealthiest families. A 2012 study by Reardon also found that "more and more seats in highly selective schools have been occupied by students from high-income families."

"Income has become a much stronger predictor of how well kids do in school," Reardon says. "Race is about as good a predictor as it was 30 years ago. It's more that income has gotten more important, not that race has gotten less important."

Jessica Klaitman's husband works in the finance industry, and she's a social worker who has worked part-time running support groups for new parents and teaching yoga. They do well enough to pay $4,400 a month in rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn Heights, one of the borough's most-coveted neighborhoods, to pay for a full-time nanny in addition to their spending on preschool, and to take the family on regular vacations to see relatives out of state.

"I'm a middle-class New Yorker, and upper-class anywhere else," Klaitman says. "I know how astonishingly privileged we are, but at the same time we're dipping into savings for housing. I don't go out and buy shoes, but my kids have tons of classes."

"Income has become a much stronger predictor of how well kids do in school. Race is about as good a predictor as it was 30 years ago."

Researchers say the expanding class gap in education is likely a byproduct of the country's widening income inequality. There's been an explosion in spending by well-to-do parents on their children: The amount has more than doubled in the last 30 years, according to work by Columbia University School of Social Work researchers Neeraj Kaushal and Jane Waldfogel and Katherine Magnuson of the University of Wisconsin.

Parents in the top quintile of income in the U.S. (households earning at least $102,000 in 2011, according to census data compiled by the Tax Policy Institute, a nonprofit research group) now spend more than double what parents in the second quintile (earning at least $62,000) spend on trips for their children-about $2,000 per year compared with $800, the Kaushal study found. They also spend significantly more on childcare, computers, books, and private-school tuition than their non-wealthy peers.

A 2013 study by sociologists Sabino Kornrich and Frank Furstenberg found that disparities in spending between the top and the bottom grew between the 1990s and 2000s, with parents in the bottom half of income distribution actually spending less on their children in the 2000s than previously--probably because of decreasing incomes.

"It's everyone trying to take care of their kids, but if you have a lot of money, you can do all of them, the Mandarin, the lacrosse, the SAT tutoring, the camps," says Richard Murnane, a Harvard University economist and editor of *Whither Opportunity*, a 2011 book that published the Reardon and Kaushal studies. "You can do a lot of extra things with extra money."

Money Matters

America's widening class gap shapes the hopes and prospects of families like the Lynches, who live just a few miles from the Klaitman-Smalls in Crown Heights, a mostly working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn where stately limestone townhouses and public housing projects stand side by side.

At first glance, the lives of Bryson Lynch, two, and his three-year-old brother London are not too different from the lives of the Klaitman-Small children. On a sticky afternoon in July, the two boys were busy in their shared room in the back of their parents' three-story home in Brooklyn. London was building a tower with Lego bricks. Bryson was toting around a plastic beach bucket and pretending to build a sand castle on the rug. A television set atop a dresser was tuned to a cartoon on Nick Jr., Nickelodeon's preschool channel.

Their quiet play didn't last long--after a while, they tumbled into the living room. London grabbed his scooter and did a circle around the room. Bryson found an iPad, turned on his favorite song, and began to dance. Their parents, Larry, 32, and Krystal, 29, seated nearby at the kitchen table, kept a watchful but patient eye on the boys' exuberant play.

Children in both families are lucky to have parents focused on creating a path to happy, successful adulthood for their children. But in making sure their children reach their highest potential, the Lynches have far fewer resources available to them.

"Not everyone can be a lawyer or a doctor ... but I would actually love that."

The family would most likely count as solidly middle-class in any other city, but in New York money can sometimes be tight. "We're not rich, but we're not struggling," says Krystal.

Larry works for the city's medical-examiner office as a computer technician, and Krystal has stayed home with the boys since New York City laid her off from her job as an operator for its information hotline, 311, in August 2012. They bought their house through a city affordable-housing lottery, and the Lynches qualify for Head Start, the free federal preschool program for children living near the poverty line.

Both parents are happy with their standard of living. But they also want their boys to be more successful than they have been. "Whatever will make them happy, as long as it's not hanging out on the streets," Larry said. "Not everyone can be a lawyer or a doctor ... but I would actually love that."

Opportunities that would launch the boys on a path to being lawyers or doctors can seem elusive, however. Larry, a product of the New York City public schools, refuses to send his children to any of the poorly performing public schools in the neighborhood. They can't afford Catholic school tuition--about $5,000 a year, they say. Instead, Krystal has researched privately run charter schools in the area and picked out her top choice: an all-boys charter run by the network Uncommon Schools, which receives high marks on the city's grading system but chooses students through a lottery--meaning they won't necessarily get in.

To supplement Head Start, Krystal has both boys work on their letters and numbers every night. At age three, London can write his full name; lately he's been practicing writing it in a straight line. Bryson can count to 20. But Krystal Lynch has a harder time finding enrichment activities outside of the home to keep the boys busy and engage their growing brains. Research suggests that new experiences are essential to building children's vocabularies, and that a large vocabulary is in turn essential for a successful academic career.

"There so many places to take children, but they're so expensive," Krystal Lynch says. "They'll have trial [classes], but we can't go back for another class, because they're $80 for one session. It's a little frustrating."

Instead, she takes the children to the park and to free swimming classes offered by the city. The family went on their first out-of-town vacation this August, a day trip to the Sesame Place Family Theme Park, in Langhorne, Penn.

Race no doubt plays a role in the different opportunities available to the Klaitman-Small and Lynch children. The Klaitman-Smalls are white and the Lynches are African-American, and black families are still disproportionately represented among lower-income groups. But Larry Lynch says his own experiences and those of the other people in his neighborhood reflect what the trend lines show: that social class has become increasingly important in deciding outcomes for children.

"I think race is starting to be a little less of a factor," Larry Lynch says. "It just matters less these days."

The Information Divide

When Jessica Klaitman considers what it might take to even the playing field for families less fortunate than hers, one of the things she mentions are social networks. In-the-know affluent parents gather in play clubs and exclusive preschools, where they provide each other not only with support, but also with information, including ideas about child-rearing and tips on how to access opportunities for their kids that are likely to set them up for success later on.

"This isn't in and of itself educational," Klaitman says of Hannah's playgroup at the Kids Club, although she noted that the socialization and learning of classroom norms was probably helpful preparation for school. "It's

more about the parents--to have a place to go and focus your day around," she says. "It probably helps to talk to people and get advice."

"I think isolation is one of the hardest things about having kids," she adds.

Krystal Lynch agrees. As the first among her friends to have babies, she says felt on her own while raising her children. "We didn't really have a go-to circle to ask questions. I wish I had," says Lynch. "I didn't have a social network."

She has a tight-knit family--the grandparents often help with babysitting, for instance--but when it comes to parenting strategies, or thinking ahead about schools, she has relied on her own and Larry's instincts. Both Krystal and Larry Lynch were the first in their families to go to college, and both graduated from New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York, a four-year school with a vocational focus in downtown Brooklyn.

They talk about their boys "going away" to school, but beyond that they say they'll have to do research online to find good colleges for their kids and to figure out what it will take for them to get in. They also aren't sure how they'll be able to afford a school with more elite status than their alma mater. Krystal Lynch says she'll begin looking for a new job this fall so the family can start putting money into a college fund.

"I wouldn't hope too far," she says. "As long as they go somewhere."

Closing the Gap

The factors that have fed the class divide in student achievement are complicated. One of the best ways to close the class achievement gap, according to many researchers, is somewhat simple, though. It's an idea that Martin Luther King Jr. pushed in his later years, while planning a second March on Washington in 1967 to support his Poor People's Campaign: Put more money directly into the hands of lower-income families.

"The evidence is stronger than it used to be that if you give more money to families it's going to benefit kids."

According to the Kornrich and Furstenberg study, even though poor families spend much less money on their children, they put a higher percentage of their paychecks toward investments in their children (about 20 percent, compared with 5 percent among wealthier families). And Murnane points to evidence showing that when lower-income families have additional income, through the Earned Income Tax Credit, for example, their children's test scores increase.

Jane Waldfogel, the Columbia University social-work professor, has looked at how low-income families spend additional income in two different studies in Britain and the U.S., and found they put extra cash either towards their kids, by buying books, toys and clothing, or their jobs--buying clothes for work or purchasing a car, for example.

"I'm pretty convinced that we know families are not going to squander the money on drugs or alcohol," Waldfogel says. "And the evidence is stronger than it used to be that if you give more money to families it's going to benefit kids."

But wealth redistribution is not popular politically. In its place, other efforts that show some promise have taken precedence. Home-visiting programs can provide to parents living in poverty the support and information that high-income parents tend to get from their education experiences and social networks. Intensive, high-quality preschool experiences where children have plenty of time to build social skills and bigger vocabularies through

play improve test scores, at least in the short term, and reduce their chances of being poor as adults in the long term.

School reformers have focused on evidence showing that high-quality teachers and schools also help close achievement gaps, although so far efforts to improve the teaching force and the quality of schools through opening more charter schools and putting teachers under the scrutiny of more intensive evaluations have had mixed results. A national study of charter schools has shown that a minority perform better than regular public schools, and many do worse, although students living in poverty tend to learn more in charters. And early adopters of new teacher evaluations, including Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., have seen both drops and gains in test scores.

Most of these efforts have come far short of closing the gap completely, and they don't address how to deal with the growing divide between the middle and the top. "It's not that you can't do anything," Murnane says. "But I think we way underestimate the magnitude of the problem."

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, *a nonprofit, nonpartisan education-news outlet affiliated with Teachers College, Columbia University.*

Part Seven

After-School Activities Make Educational Inequality Even Worse

How middle-class parents use soccer, ballet, and chess to solidify their children's advantage over others

Hilary Levey Friedman Nov 13 2013, 7:31 AM ET

It's not just what happens inside the classroom that determines a child's status as an adult. Accomplishments outside the classroom can be just as influential. Yes, a basic public education is in principle free to all (though of course quality correlates with property values). But activities outside of school are not free, so they largely benefit already advantaged kids. While we talk a lot about inequalities between the rich and the poor, and the role school quality plays in perpetuating class divisions, one often overlooked factor is the opportunities middle- and upper-middle-class kids get to strengthen their life skills through organized competitive activities outside of the school system.

I spent 16 months on soccer fields and in dance studios and school basements, conducting nearly 200 interviews with parents, children, teachers, and coaches associated with competitive chess, dance, and soccer. Millions of American children engage in these three competitive after-school activities each year (travel soccer alone has over 3 million children playing on U.S. Youth Soccer teams), in addition to a multitude of other athletic and artistic options from music competitions to tennis to shooting.

The group of 95 families I met almost all belong to the broadly defined "middle class," although a few were lower-income and many were upper-middle class. Training a lens on more affluent families helps us understand how and why the professionalization of children's competitive after-school activities has become an important way that the middle class has institutionalized its advantage over others.

Parents identified five skills they want their children to learn through participation in competitive after-school activities that help develop the "all-around (wo)man" in the 21st century. Together, I call these skills "Competitive Kid Capital;" this Competitive Kid Capital helps distinguishes middle- and upper-middle class children from their less fortunate peers as they compete in various credentialing tournaments that will determine their place in the socio-economic hierarchy as adults.

The Importance of Winning

This is essential in acquiring Competitive Kid Capital. One soccer parent told me, "I think it's important for [my son] to understand that [being competitive] is not going to just apply here, it's going to apply for the rest of his life. It's going to apply when he keeps growing up and he's playing sports, when he's competing for school admissions, for a job, for the next whatever." Such an attitude prepares children for winner-take-all settings like the school system and lucrative labor markets.

Learning From Loss

Learning from loss involves perseverance and focus; kids are taught how to bounce back from a loss and win the next time. One mom explained, "The winning and losing is phenomenal. I wish it was something that I learned because life is really bumpy. You're not going to win all the time and you have to be able to reach inside and come back." Often kids have to lose in order to learn what it takes to win—and appreciate success. One father summarized how he tried to raise a son to be a winner in life: "This is what I'm trying to get him to see: that he's not going to always win. And then from a competitive point of view, with him it's like I want him to see that life is, in certain circumstances, about winning and losing. And do you want to be a winner or do you want to be a loser? You want to be a winner! There's a certain lifestyle that you have to lead to be a winner, and it requires this, this, this and this. And if you do this, this, this and this, more than likely you'll have a successful outcome."

Time Management

Learning how to succeed given time limits is also a critical skill. Games, tournaments, and routines all have time limits. Furthermore, the competition schedule is also demanding, cramming many events into a weekend or short week. On top of that, children need to learn how to manage their own schedules, something they might have to do someday as busy consultants and CEOs. One eight-year-old boy revealed how busy his young life is when he told me what soccer teaches him: "Dodging everything—like when we have to catch a train, and there are only a few more minutes, we have to run and dodge everyone. So, soccer teaches that [skill]."

Adaptability

The fourth ingredient in the Competitive Kid Capital recipe is teaching children how to perform and compete in environments that require adaptation. Competitors, and especially winners, learn how to adapt to loud,

distracting, cold, hot, large, or small settings where they compete. The following quote from a mom of a fourth-grader links the competitive environment of chess tournaments to performing well on standardized tests: "It's that ability to keep your concentration focused, while there's stuff going on around you…I mean to see those large tournaments, in the convention centers, I know it is hard. I did that to take the bar exam, and the LSAT I took for law school, and GREs. You do that in a large setting, but some people are thrown by that, just by being in such a setting. Well that's a skill, and it's a skill and it's an ability to transfer that skill. It's not just a chess skill. It's a coping-with-your-environment skill."

Grace Under Pressure

Finally, in this pressure-filled competitive environment children's performances are judged and assessed in a very public setting by strangers. One dance mom explained this fifth skill in the following way: "I think it definitely teaches you awareness of your body and gives you a definite different stance and confidence that you wouldn't have…When she has to go to a job interview, she's going to stand up straight because she's got ballet training; she's not going to hunch and she's going to have her chin up and have a more confident appearance. The fact that it is not easy to get up on a stage and perform in front of hundreds or thousands of people, strangers, and to know that you're being judged besides, definitely gives you a level of self-confidence that can be taken to other areas so again if she has to be judged by a teacher or when she's applying for a job she'll have more of that confidence, which helps you focus."

The parents I met understand that missing a goal on the soccer field when you are eight won't directly determine your future. But the resiliency you learn by coming back to play again likely will translate into other advantages later in life. The vast majority of today's competitive afterschool programs are pay-to-play, which means the development of Competitive Kid Capital is differentially distributed by income. The goal made or missed at eight years old might not matter, but the skills acquired by engaging in competition *do* matter to elite schools and employers—emphasizing the real connection between the achievement gap and this accepted system of kid credentialing. Afterschool activities are not just about recreation, they are another way that *not* everyone in the United States is playing to win on a level field.