

Report: Public schools more segregated now than 40 years ago

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: August 29, 2013

Today, African American students are more isolated than they were 40 years ago, while most education policymakers and reformers have abandoned integration as a cause.

That reality is explained in a new report called "[For Public Schools, Segregation Then, Segregation Since: Education and the Unfinished March](#)" by Richard Rothstein of the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute, which looks at the reasons and the implications of continued [school segregation](#).

Here are some excerpts of the report (with footnotes removed), which you can [read here in full](#):

Fifty years ago last January, George C. Wallace took the oath of office as governor of Alabama, pledging to defy the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision prohibiting separate public schools for black students. "I draw the line in the dust," Wallace shouted, "and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever" (Wallace 1963).

Eight months later, at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King Jr. set forth a different vision for American education. "I have a dream," King proclaimed, that "one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

Wallace later recanted, saying, "I was wrong. Those days are over, and they ought to be over" (Windham 2012). They ought to be over, but Wallace's 1963 call for a line in the dust seems to have been more prescient than King's vision. Racial isolation of African American children in separate schools located in separate neighborhoods has become a permanent feature of our landscape. Today, African American students are more isolated than they were 40 years ago, while most education policymakers and reformers have abandoned integration as a cause.

In place of integration, politicians, commentators, and public education critics, content with situating black students in racially homogenous schools, declare instead that the test score gap between black and white students is the "civil rights issue of our time."

Although this gap is real, it has been declining for decades, while a host of factors besides schools influence student performance. The marchers did not need to be told what a half century of subsequent social science research has confirmed — schools cannot fulfill their potential so long as African Americans are segregated, as King put it, into “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

Today, many black children still attend schools in racially and economically isolated neighborhoods, while their families still reside in lonely islands of poverty: 39 percent of black children are from families with incomes below the poverty line, compared with 12 percent of white children (U.S. Census Bureau(a)); 28 percent of black children live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared with 4 percent of white children (Casey 2013).

Other socioeconomic hardships that powerfully affect student achievement also remain unacceptable for black students: Housing for many remains inadequate (Sherman 2006); the black unemployment rate remains today, as then, more than twice that for whites (Austin 2013). While the minimum wage has been extended to some occupations in which black workers predominate, its level today is below that established in 1967, inflation-adjusted and in relation to national average wages (Mishel 2013). A discriminatory criminal justice system today incarcerates many more black young adults than it did 50 years ago (Alexander 2010).

Freeing African Americans from these lonely and segregated islands was the aspiration of the 1963 March on Washington. Yet with the march’s demands for school integration and economic justice still unfulfilled, how did test scores become *the* civil rights issue of our time?

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Should we focus on the achievement gap?

School reformers typically justify subordinating demands for economic and social equality to school policies aimed at narrowing the achievement gap by claiming that if black scores were higher, graduates would get better jobs, earn higher incomes, and could then afford to live in middle-class neighborhoods relatively free of crime, anti-social temptations for their children, and intrusive and aggressive policing. As New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg once cavalierly put it, if schools improved, “a lot of what Dr. King wanted to accomplish in our society will take care of itself” (Wyatt 2002).

His claim was flawed for three reasons.

First, public education critics exaggerate the economic benefits of better achievement because they ignore how firms employ credentials for workforce sorting. Many good reasons exist for helping all children get better educations, but one is not that education itself can solve problems of poverty and inequality. Better-educated workers can be more productive, but they can also

comprise a surplus of qualified job seekers, depressing wages. Already, many college graduates are employed part time, are forced to work as poorly paid interns rather than career-path professionals, or are working at jobs not requiring their skills (Rampall 2012). This surplus can grow if reformers progress toward their objective of having all students “college ready.”

If more educated workers grow in number faster than the economy and faster than the proportion of jobs requiring higher education, wages of these workers will fall. Education alone can be a ticket to the middle class only if proportional to the number of middle-class jobs available. School reformers fantasize that as more workers get more education, technology will eliminate poorly paid jobs on which many workers now depend—driverless trucks will deliver goods to retail malls, fast food restaurants will be self-stocking, and new medical technology will permit the elderly and disabled to live independently. It is only a fantasy.

Improving blacks’ education relative to whites would reduce blacks’ disadvantage in competing for better jobs, but would not itself do much to increase the number of such jobs. The combination of more education and tepid economic growth could produce a new underclass of well-educated truck drivers, coffee baristas, and home health care aides. Equality requires not only enhancing African Americans’ competitive position when competing with whites for limited opportunity, but also expanded opportunity with truly full employment for all workers — black and white — and improved labor standards. African Americans, no matter how well qualified, have never made rapid gains in periods of economic stagnation.

African Americans who complete high school still have 18 percent unemployment, twice the white rate. Even before the 2008 recession, unemployment for black college graduates was 50 percent higher than for whites; by 2011, over 8 percent of black college graduates remained unemployed, compared with 4.5 percent for whites (Mishel et al. 2012, Table 5.3).

Continued racial discrimination may partly explain this ongoing disparity. It may also result from spatial mismatch — blacks are disadvantaged in competing for jobs located where historic housing discrimination has prevented them from residing. No doubt, the disparity may partly result from blacks having poorer achievement than whites with similar attainment. Whatever the combination of reasons, school reformers hold out false hopes to many when they tell black students that if only they get more education, they will enjoy middle-class incomes with middle-class security. They will certainly benefit from more education, but the “if only” misleads.

A second flaw in school reformers’ approach is their mostly backwards theory of cognitive development. True, children with better achievement are more likely to escape poverty, but even more so, better socioeconomic family conditions enable children to improve achievement. Children coming to school in poor health or with unstable housing are absent more frequently and cannot benefit from good instruction. Children who walk (or ride) to school through violent neighborhoods, or who return to these neighborhoods after school, are stressed and less able to focus on studies. Children with more frequently unemployed parents suffer from insecurity that affects learning.

These children cannot reasonably be expected to achieve, on average, like children without

these disadvantages, no matter how high quality their instruction. Equality requires that the cycle of low achievement leading to poverty and poverty leading to low achievement be interrupted, but contrary to reformers' assumptions, the latter direction is more susceptible to policy influence and a more powerful lever than the former.

And third, obsession with test score improvement undermines disadvantaged children's opportunity for well-rounded education that public schools more typically deliver to middle-class children. The obsession is counterproductive because developing literary and quantitative proficiency requires balance between mechanical skill and background knowledge; holding educators accountable for the test scores in schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged children creates incentives to narrow curricula by directing time, effort, and resources away from non-tested curricular areas and toward more test preparation and drill in math and reading. This strategy ignores that literacy depends not only on decoding print but also on informed curiosity about history, literature, science, and the arts. Mathematics proficiency also relies upon children's having quantitative problems they are motivated to solve.

Graduates of both races need cultural literacy to compete in middle-class society and the workforce. Contemporary school reformers ignore this balance between basic skill and background knowledge, and exacerbate disadvantages of impoverished black youth.

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The march forward

... Whatever the shortcomings of public schools, damage to black children from the recent recession and its disparate impact on their families exceeds damage attributable to inadequacy of the schools that black children attend. Social and economic improvements necessary for African American educational success are conceivable only in reasonably stable communities and in reasonably secure families. While white adult unemployment has come down slowly from last year, the rate for blacks — still last hired and first fired — has remained virtually unchanged (BLS 2013). ...

... Poor white and poor black families may improve their circumstances and leave high-poverty neighborhoods. But when poor white families move to better neighborhoods, their children benefit from better environments. When poor black families move to better neighborhoods, middle-class flight from these neighborhoods frequently ensues; the segregation (and poverty concentration) of the new neighborhoods increases, defeating these families' mobility ...

... Neighborhoods in major metropolitan areas are segregated because of a century-long pattern of racially motivated and racially explicit federal, state, and local policies of banking regulation, mortgage guarantees, public housing, law enforcement, planning and zoning, highway and school construction, and urban renewal (Rothstein 2012, 2013; Rothstein and Santow

2012a). Effects of these public policies endure; segregation of major urban areas today offends the Constitution and calls for a remedy.

It is inconceivable to think that education as a civil rights issue can be addressed without addressing residential segregation — a housing goal of the March on Washington. Housing policy is school policy; equality of education relies upon eliminating the exclusionary zoning ordinances of white suburbs and subsidizing dispersed housing in those suburbs for low-income African Americans now trapped in central cities.

By stressing integration as the most important goal of education improvement, the [1963] March on Washington had it right. It is appropriate not only to commemorate this resolve, but to renew it.

[Read the full report here.](#)

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