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How Segregation Impedes Graduation: New Research to Know

By Sarah D. Sparks on October 30, 2017 8:28 AM

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If districts allow their schools to become racially segregated, they may hamstring their own efforts to boost graduation rates and raise academic achievement.

New studies suggest that increasing racial and economic segregation can create so-called "apartheid schools" concentrating students from disadvantaged groups in racially diverse states such as Florida and New York. And as segregation intensifies, efforts to raise graduation rates may stall.

Rise in 'Apartheid Schools'?

In "**Tough Choices Facing Florida's Governments: Patterns of Resegregation in Florida's Schools**," Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California Los Angeles, tracked school segregation in Florida in the last 30 years. About 1 in 3 black and Hispanic students in the state now attend a school where more than 90 percent of the students are not white, and on average, they attend schools with one and a half times the concentration of poverty as the schools attended by the average white student. The likelihood of attending a racially or economically isolated school for both white and minority students was connected to rising residential segregation in the state.

"We do see an increase in these apartheid schools, especially for Latinos, who were rarely in that sort of school a generation or so ago," Orfield said. More than 20 percent of public schools in Florida are now 90 percent nonwhite, up from 10.6 percent in 1995; 3.7 percent of schools in the state are 99 percent or more nonwhite, up from 2.1 percent in the same time.

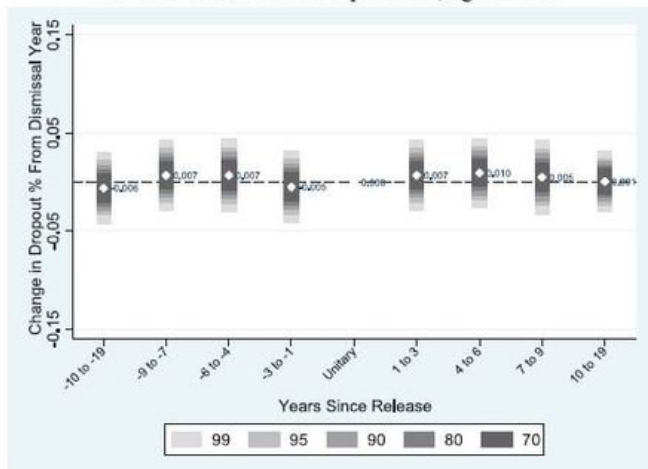
Graduation Gap Rises in Segregated Schools

Florida is not alone in facing consequences from school segregation. "**Ending to What End? The Impact of the Termination of Court-Desegregation Orders on Residential Segregation and School Dropout Rates**," published this fall in the Journal of Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis suggests increased segregation held back black and Hispanic students' progress even during a period of rising graduation rates.

Since the early 1990s, federal courts have lifted racial desegregation orders on 215 districts nationwide, nearly half of the school systems that had been bound by them. David Leibowitz, now an analyst for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development who did the research on this while at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, found that residential segregation increased in those districts after their desegregation orders were lifted, particularly for white and Hispanic students.

Moreover, Leibowitz found that when districts were no longer required to integrate their schools, the dropout rates rose by 1 percentage point for black students, and by 3 percentage points for Hispanic students.

Panel A. Black status dropout rate, ages 16–19



Those students leaving school were partially hidden by an improving national graduation rate as educators across the country became more focused on cutting dropout rates. In 1990, more than 14 percent of black students ages 16 to 19 dropped out of high school nationwide; by 2010, only 7.8 percent did so. Similarly, the Hispanic dropout rate nationwide dropped from 20.1 percent to 14.2 percent.

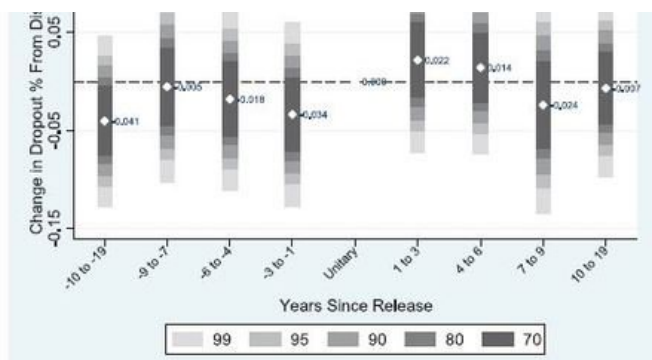
But in districts released from court desegregation orders, dropout rates for black students declined by only 1.5 percent during that time, and dropout rates for Hispanic students dropped only 4 percent.

"Not that desegregation plans when they were in place were a complete panacea for addressing racial inequity in schools ... but I think there is something instructive that there were meaningful differences when you see your dropout rate drop 7 percent versus 4 percent," Leibowitz said.

In follow-up analyses, Leibowitz suggested that as schools became more racially segregated, they also were more likely to receive unequal funding and other resources, which might have nudged more students to drop out.

Panel B. Hispanic status dropout rate, ages 16–19





That might help explain why Hispanic dropout rates rose faster than those of black students; in the South at least, many districts that had been under desegregation orders provided additional funding to their majority black schools as part of the conditions to lift the orders.

If integrated schools began to lose resources, "you have conditions in which white residents moved out of mostly Hispanic neighborhoods," he said. "In the short term, there was evidence this increased the rate of Hispanic isolation."

And economic segregation has increased faster nationwide than racial segregation, but in many cases is harder to disentangle, Leibowitz said.

"The whites left in these schools, unless they are magnet schools, are highly impoverished," Orfield said.

Economists Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland and Phillip Levine of Wellesley College found in a 2015 study that the more that low-income students perceive their school as having unequal resources and supports as compared to other schools, the less they consider their own academic efforts to be meaningful, and the more likely they are to drop out.

Diverse Schools Yield Academic Gains in New York

In "[Separate and Unequal: A Comparison of Student Outcomes in New York City's Most and Least Diverse Schools](#)", using 2015-16 student achievement and graduation data, New York University researcher David Kirkland and Joy Sanzone compared the Big Apple's most segregated and integrated schools.

Citywide, only 109 schools had populations that reflected the city's population, with about 50 to 75 percent black and Latino students. By contrast, nearly eight times as many schools were highly segregated, with either more than 76 percent black and Latino students or more than half white students, and either very high or low student poverty. Nearly 40 percent of New York City students attended a highly segregated school, and little more than 9 percent attended an integrated school.

"The real problem facing New York City schools goes beyond diversity, what can be seen as part of the 'cosmetics of equity,'" Kirkland and Sanzone argued in the study.

The researchers found that the gaps between white students and black and Latino students in math and reading test scores as well as gaps in graduation rates were all smaller in integrated schools than in segregated schools. For example, in the city's segregated schools, white students were 23 percentage points more likely to graduate high school than black students and 29.4 percentage points more likely to graduate than Latino students. By contrast, in New York's most well-integrated schools, the Latino-white graduation gap was only 3.9 percent, and black students graduated statistically on par or even slightly more often than white students.

This summer, New York City's education agency announced a new focus on boosting diversity and integration across its schools. The researchers recommended that education policymakers focus on both increasing school and staff diversity, but also ensuring all schools had similar access to advanced coursework, effective teachers, and enrichment.

"Integration isn't natural; it has to be planned for," Orfield said. "The default of our society is to spread residential and school segregation. That's what will happen if you don't have a plan for it to come out a different way."

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