

Research Brief

How the Racial and Socioeconomic Composition of Schools and Classrooms Contributes to Literacy, Behavioral Climate, Instructional Organization and High School Graduation Rates

By Susan Eaton

Charles
Hamilton
Houston
INSTITUTE FOR
RACE & JUSTICE
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

This is the second in a series of three briefs summarizing findings from the newest and most rigorous research related to racial and socioeconomic diversity in public schools. The studies on which this brief is based were published recently in three special issues of the peer-reviewed journal, *Teachers College Record*, edited by Professors Roslyn Arlin Mickelson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Kathryn Borman of the University of South Florida.

This brief considers the relationship between the racial and socioeconomic composition of a school and/or classroom and a variety of important educational measures.

Why This Research is Important

This research augments an already extensive body of work in this area, which has reached similar conclusions. However, the work published this year in *TCR* is particularly rigorous. It draws from several strong data bases and employs cutting-edge statistical methods. This comprehensive collection of studies pays meticulous attention to separating the discrete contributions that schools, teachers, families and students themselves make to a variety of important educational outcomes, such as test scores and graduation rates. We urge courts, policymakers, education rights lawyers, educators and others to use this new work as a guide in decisions and advocacy related to diversity, schooling and equal opportunity.

What Does the Research Tell Us About the Relationship Between Racial and Socioeconomic Composition and . . .

READING AND VERBAL ACHIEVEMENT?

- A study by Geoffrey Borman of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Maritza Dowling of the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research reanalyzes James Coleman's 1966 report, "The Equality of Educational Opportunity." The "Coleman Report" is widely considered to be one of the most influential studies ever conducted on education. Its fundamental finding is that a student's own family background has far more influence upon student achievement than do school characteristics. However, Borman and Dowling's reanalysis shows something quite different.
- Borman and Dowling find that attending a high-poverty or highly segregated African American school has a "profound" negative effect on a student's verbal achievement, "above and beyond" the effects of a student's own poverty level or racial group.¹
- More specifically, the racial/ethnic composition and social class composition of a student's school are 1¾ times more important than a student's social class or race in explaining verbal achievement in the 9th grade. School racial and

social class composition, Borman and Dowling's analysis shows, explain more than a quarter of the variability in verbal achievement above and beyond an individual student's own racial or social class background. Both low socioeconomic status and having a disproportionate share of African American and Latino students in a school were negatively associated with verbal achievement.

- Borman and Dowling's data demonstrate that inequalities in student achievement within schools are explained in part by teachers' biases favoring middle-class students and by a school's greater reliance on academic and nonacademic tracking.
- Borman and Dowling find that 40 percent of the variance in verbal achievement is explained by differences in social composition and other types of differences between schools. This contrasts with Coleman's original findings, which suggested that no more than about 10 to 20 percent of the variance in achievement could be explained by differences that existed between schools.
- These findings, Borman and Dowling conclude, reveal that the effects of school context can, in contrast to Coleman's original findings, "dwarf the effects of family background."
- In a fine-grained analysis, James Benson and Geoffrey Borman of the University of Wisconsin-Madison consider the particular ways and times of the year that neighborhood and school racial composition and neighborhood and school "social context" (defined as average socioeconomic composition) are related to reading achievement from between the time a student enters school to the end of first grade.²

- The Benson and Borman study finds that the proportion of neighborhood residents from minority groups (African American and Latino) had no impact upon reading achievement when students entered kindergarten or during the summer.
- However, Benson and Borman's study finds that the average socioeconomic status of a student's neighborhood is associated with reading scores when students entered kindergarten and during the summer. They find that both the socioeconomic status of a student's neighborhood and the racial composition of a student's school have a substantial impact upon reading scores, depending upon the time such scores are measured.
- For example, the study finds that living in a low-SES neighborhood³ is associated with lower scores when entering kindergarten and during the summer. However, the positive impact of living in a high-SES neighborhood is stronger than the negative influence of a poor neighborhood. (In summer, the effect that living in a low-SES neighborhood has on reading scores does not reach statistical significance.)
- The proportion of African American and Latino students in a school is not associated with reading scores or growth in kindergarten, Benson and Borman find, but is strongly and negatively associated with first-grade reading growth. For each standard deviation increase in the proportion of African American and Latino students at a school, average reading growth slows by two-thirds of a month worth of reading growth over the course of a school year of typical length. The negative association between the share of African American and Latino students in a school and reading growth is strongest for African American students.

- The Benson and Borman study demonstrates that the benefits of living in a high-SES neighborhood accrue primarily to upper middle- and high-SES students. In contrast, growing up in a low-SES neighborhood poses a double disadvantage because low-SES family origins and low-SES neighborhoods are both associated with lower reading achievement at school entry, and slower growth during the summer season.
- Benson and Borman urge policymakers to “attend to the quality of neighborhood and school settings as a means of promoting literacy development for young children.” They continue: “Our findings suggest that contemporary policy reforms aimed at equalizing achievement among students from different social and racial/ethnic backgrounds may not accomplish their aims unless they extend to addressing the vastly different neighborhood conditions in which children are growing up and learning.”
- In a study of Australian schools, increases in the overall socioeconomic status of a school are associated with consistent increases in student achievement in reading. (This is also true of math and science, as noted in Research Brief 1 of this series). This relationship is strongest in schools with relatively higher levels of socioeconomic status. This pattern holds true for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.⁴ This study finds that differences in test scores that can be attributed to a school’s predominant socio-economic status are greater than differences attributable to family income or the resources available at the school.

BEHAVIORAL CLIMATE?

- In his study of the behavioral climate in predominantly African American schools, predominantly white schools, and racially diverse

schools,⁵ Sean Kelly of the University of Notre Dame finds educators in predominantly African American schools far more likely to perceive a negative behavioral climate in their schools and to use discipline more often than educators in schools where African American students are not in the majority. Educator perception is important, as schools with large shares of African American students often have trouble finding and retaining well qualified teachers. Educators in predominantly African American schools were more likely to perceive a range of behavioral problems – including tardiness, absenteeism, lack of control and threatening behavior – than teachers in other schools.

- White teachers are more likely to perceive behavioral problems among African American students than are African American teachers. For example, 34 percent of African American teachers in predominantly African American schools report disrespect of teachers occurring daily, while 43 percent of non-African American teachers report this. However, Kelly finds that a teacher’s race made a relatively small difference in whether or not teachers report behavioral problems. More important in determining a teacher’s perceptions about behavior was whether or not the school was a predominantly African American school.
- During observation, instances of discipline occurred at much higher rates in predominantly African American classrooms than in predominantly white and integrated classrooms. After controlling for a host of other variables, “racial composition” accounts for 23 percent of the variance in discipline between predominantly African American and other schools. It is not that African American students are necessarily more prone to behavior problems, per se, or “negatively inclined” toward schools, but that a prevailing school climate and teacher percep-

tions tend to arise in predominantly African American schools for a variety of reasons. Kelly attempts to discern whether such perceptions negatively affect instructional practice.

- As said, Kelly’s study is intended mainly as an inquiry into whether or not, given these well-established differences in climate, classroom instruction is then tailored to maintain order in more segregated, predominantly African American schools. He also finds that despite these challenges, teachers in such schools still provide students with opportunities for engaging instruction. However, Kelly also urges more research into whether negative educator perceptions that arise in predominantly African American schools might inhibit positive relationships between teachers and students and lead to less engaging classroom instruction.

INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING?

Many educators, scholars and advocates have long expressed concern about the common educational practice of sorting students into learning groups based upon their past performance or perceived abilities. Critics of the practice charge that students in lower-level groups suffer from poor quality teaching and curriculum and never get the opportunity to develop skills and gain knowledge required for success at higher levels of education and work. Data indicate that African American and Latino students are more likely to be sorted into lower-level groups or “tracks,” which many advocates and concerned scholars argue exacerbates existing racial and ethnic inequalities in society.

- Building upon research on secondary education that finds high levels of school segregation closely associated with homogeneous grouping, researchers Anthony Buttaró, Sophia Catsambis and their colleagues investigate the relationship between the racial composition of schools and the use of within-class ability

grouping for kindergarten reading.⁶ They find that this instructional practice is used most extensively in schools that enroll more than 25 percent minority students. The practice is used least often in primarily white schools (where 90 percent or more of the students are white).

- In schools that enroll primarily white students, 57 percent of teachers use in-class ability grouping. In schools that enroll primarily African American or Latino students, 78 percent of teachers use the practice.
- In schools with African American and Latino concentrations between 25 and 50 percent, teachers use within-class ability grouping 17 minutes more per week, on average, than teachers in primarily white schools.
- It is also important to note that the use of within-class grouping in high minority schools (those with more than 50 percent African American and/or Latino students) is also associated with reading gains. This was not true for other schools.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES?

In his study of the Cleveland Municipal Schools, Argun Saatcioglu urges policymakers and educators to consider the influence of desegregation not by judging whether it produces achievement gains of individual students but by whether the policy improves schools’ abilities to counteract the effects of challenges outside the school.⁷ In other words, severe non-school related problems – such as poverty – can undermine student performance and it is thus plausible that desegregated schools, which deconcentrate those problems, are more effective than segregated ones that serve disproportionate shares of racial minority students.

The study finds that:

- Desegregated high schools in Cleveland were indeed more effective than segregated ones in helping students graduate. This is true even though individual tendencies to drop out changed only modestly, due most likely to worsening conditions outside the school, such as economic instability or increasing concentrations of neighborhood poverty.
- In the Cleveland study, the more exposed African American and Latino students were to desegregation before high school, the greater the beneficial effects of attending a desegregated high school.
- The results were similar for whites and for African American and Latino students.
- Attending a non-desegregated (termed “segregated”) school until late in high school was associated with a 20 percent increase in a typical African American or Latino student’s odds of dropping out in the first year of high school. By the 4th year of high school, experiencing segregation until late in high school was associated with a 39 percent increase in odds of dropping out.
- Saatcioglu finds that desegregation “turned the average high school into an institution that cushions more effectively the negative effects of intensifying nonschool problems on graduation chances. This is not a small win, given the difficulties the schools face in an urban context.”
- In other words, desegregation, alone, can’t “fix” complex problems, such as the dropout rate, but the data suggest that problems such as the dropout rate would be far worse *without* desegregation and that resegregation of schools will tend to make schools worse by reducing their power to counteract the effects of non-school challenges.

Is It the School, the Neighborhood or Both?

A study by Stefanie DeLuca and Peter Rosenblatt of Johns Hopkins University suggests that moving a child from a high poverty neighborhood to a lower poverty neighborhood does not guarantee that a child will attend a high quality school. Leading from that, the research also suggests that children who move will likely not experience academic gains unless they also move to higher quality schools.⁸

DeLuca and Rosenblatt examine findings from the federal experiment, Moving To Opportunity (MTO), which provided poor families opportunities to move from public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods to neighborhoods with comparably low levels of poverty. Prior research has suggested that such moves might lead to academic gains for children. However, in the case of MTO, children in the study often remained in the same school or schools of similar quality, even though they moved to new neighborhoods. Thus, there were few observed educational benefits associated with the change in neighborhood. DeLuca and Rosenblatt’s study also reveals that even with the help of the voucher and housing counseling, poor parents had difficulty navigating the private rental market and often ended up moving to communities with schools of low quality. The researchers compare these findings with studies of programs through which economically disadvantaged students did move to schools that were predominantly middle class. While some of those school studies are complicated by methodological concerns, overall, the comparative review demonstrates that there is an independent influence of the composition of a school itself on achievement and opportunities to learn.

Extensive interviews with parents reveal that their decisions about where to send their children to school are compromised by numerous psychological and logistical barriers and a lack of accurate information about the vast differences in quality

between schools. The researchers find: “The families participating in social programs like MTO have often been living in poverty for generations and have needs that exist beyond those that the vouchers are meant to remedy.” The parents, the researchers find, typically face myriad challenges, including domestic violence, health problems and family instability, forcing school-related decisions lower on the priority list.

In other words, it is important that past studies of MTO, which showed few academic gains, be carefully reconsidered within the context of this research, which underlines the importance not only of changing neighborhoods, but changing schools. The moves to geographical opportunity that programs like MTO make possible may be necessary to improve family and child well being. But without improvement in other areas of people’s lives, they are understandably not always sufficient to get families over the barriers erected by entrenched poverty.

What Else Do We Know?

The cutting-edge research published in *Teachers College Record* offers yet more evidence that racial and economic diversity and predominantly middle-class school settings tend to contribute to academic achievement. Diversity and/or reductions in concentrated poverty certainly do not guarantee that students’ academic achievement will improve. However, research strongly suggests that lower poverty schools that do not enroll disproportionate shares of African American and Latino students offer more favorable conditions than high-poverty schools, where a host of challenges threaten to undermine learning. For example, in 2007, the National Academy of Education reviewed the research on the impact of racial diversity in schools. The Academy concluded:

“[T]he research evidence supports the conclusion that the overall academic and social effects of increased racial diversity are likely to be positive. Racial diversity does not guarantee such positive

outcomes, but it provides the necessary conditions under which other educational policies can facilitate improved academic achievement, improved intergroup relations, and positive long-term outcomes.”⁹

What Should This Research Lead Us To Do?

- Advocates, policymakers and educators hoping to improve verbal and reading achievement should avoid policies that would increase concentrations of poverty and racial segregation in schools and encourage policies that aim to reduce concentrations of poverty and racial segregation.
- Advocates, policymakers and educators hoping to improve the reading and verbal achievement of economically disadvantaged students should focus their efforts not only on school improvement, but upon improving the neighborhood conditions in which students live and reducing concentrations of poverty in both schools and neighborhoods.
- Reform efforts of advocates and educators concerned about the potentially negative effects of ability grouping/tracking should turn their attention not merely to racially and economically diverse schools but also explore the prevalence and impact of the practice in segregated predominantly African American/Latino schools. (Research Brief 1 in this Series also contains recommendations related to instructional grouping).
- Policies and practices to reduce concentrated poverty and racial segregation should be incorporated into reforms aimed at improving graduation rates for African American and Latino students.

- Policies that would increase racial and economic segregation between schools should be avoided, as research strongly suggests that not only do high-poverty schools that enroll disproportionate shares of African American or Latino students contribute to low achievement, but they also tend to have poorer behavioral climates and are less well-equipped to counteract the negative effects of out-of-school challenges such as poverty or economic instability.
- “Mobility programs” that give poor African American or Latino families opportunities to change schools or neighborhoods should provide counseling that accounts for the numerous psychological and logistical barriers that prevent parents from moving children to new schools, even if those schools may be “better” according to quantitative measures.
- Mobility program designers and advocates should carefully consider what other services must be in place for families so that they have a better chance of benefitting from the program. This might include better transportation structures, job counseling, assistance with building social networks, etc.
- Advocates and policymakers should consider coupling neighborhood mobility programs with school mobility programs to improve efficiency and the chances that children will experience academic success.
- People can learn from the example of the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program. See a recent report on this program from the Poverty & Race Research Action Council:
[www.prrac.org/projects/baltimore.php](http://prrac.org/projects/baltimore.php) A summary of the report can be found here:
<http://prrac.org/newsletters/novdec2009.pdf>

Susan Eaton is research director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School. The author would like to acknowledge Gina Chirichigno and Kelly Garvin at the Institute for their assistance with this brief.

Endnotes

- 1 Geoffrey Borman & Maritza Dowling, *Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity Data*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1201 (2010).
- 2 James Benson & Geoffrey Borman, *Family, Neighborhood, and School Settings Across Seasons: When Do Socioeconomic Context and Racial Composition Matter for the Reading Achievement Growth of Young Children?* 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1338 (2010).
- 3 In this study, a "low-SES" neighborhood is one in which the average level of socioeconomic status is in the lowest quintile for all neighborhoods measured in the study. In this study, a high-SES neighborhood is one in which the average level of socioeconomic status is in the highest quintile for all neighborhoods in the study. In this study, the average socioeconomic status of neighborhoods is computed as an equally-weighted combination of two measures: 1) the average years of education for adults in the neighborhood, and 2) the average income of households in the neighborhood.
- 4 Laura B. Perry & Andrew McConney, *Does the SES of the School Matter? An Examination of Socioeconomic Status and Student Achievement Using PISA 2003*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1137 (2010).
- 5 Sean Kelly, *A Crisis of Authority in Predominantly Black Schools?*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1247 (2010). Predominantly Black schools were schools that were more than 50 percent Black.
- 6 Anthony Buttaro, Jr., Sophia Catsambis, Lynn M. Mulkey & Lala Carr Steelman, *An Organizational Perspective on the Origins of Instructional Segregation: School Composition and Use of Within-Class Ability Grouping in American Kindergartens*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1300 (2010).
- 7 Argun Saatcioglu, *Disentangling School- and Student-Level Effects of Desegregation and Resegregation on the Dropout Problem in Urban High Schools: Evidence From the Cleveland Municipal School District, 1977–1998*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1391 (2010).
- 8 Stefanie DeLuca & Peter Rosenblatt, *Does Moving to Better Neighborhoods Lead to Better Schooling Opportunities? Parental School Choice in an Experimental Housing Voucher Program*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1443 (2010).
- 9 National Academy of Education, *Race-Conscious Policies for Assigning Students to Schools: Social Science Research and the Supreme Court Cases*. (2007). http://www.naeducation.org/Meredith_Report.pdf