

## America's Segregated Classroom: an Unending Cycle of Poverty and Prejudice

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Racial segregation is unequivocally bonded to our country's history. While the American identity is often predicated upon the ideals of liberty, justice, and equality, how can we say this for a country so deeply rooted in division and prejudice? Classroom segregation, for example, has embedded its place in American history as a political tool to divide black and white Americans. Built upon Louisiana's Jim Crow laws in 1890, classroom segregation served as a method of enforcing "separate accommodations for Whites and Blacks." Since then, the Supreme Court, through numerous cases, has constantly sequestered the right to education for America's black citizens. It was only until 1954, through the iconic court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, that the Supreme Court "declare[d] that separate schools [were] inherently unequal."<sup>1</sup>

Given that the legal parameters of classroom segregation were abolished long before our time, it remains devastatingly unconstitutional that remnants of this atrocious act remain in our society today. Yes—there are no longer classrooms and schools designated specifically for white students and students of color. Yes—there are no longer any divided bathrooms. Yes—we no longer see buses that transport students to segregated school districts. But the lingering problem of institutionalized racism within our education structure has yet to be solved.

A study conducted by *The Atlantic* on South Orange Maplewood School in New Jersey shows that "at every level where students are tracked, black students were underrepresented in higher-level classes."<sup>2</sup> For its eighth grade, the school's total enrollment was 44.1% white and

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<sup>1</sup> "Brown V. Board: Timeline of School Integration in the U.S." Tolerance.org. Accessed November 16, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Kohli, Sonali. "Modern-Day Segregation in Public Schools." *The Atlantic* (USA), November 29, 2014. Accessed November 22, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/11/modern-day-segregation-in-public-schools/382846/>.

47.4% black. While 73.2% of white students were enrolled in the school's upper level math class, the same only occurred for 11.6% of black students.<sup>3</sup> This analysis reinforces the presence of national stereotypes over the identity of black students and students of color—that, academically, they fail to achieve as much as white students. This characterization itself is inherently racist; it serves as a mental barrier that separates our perception of white students from students of color.

This modern-day rendition of classroom segregation cannot be addressed by reforms on education policy alone. Instead, by improving the socio economic conditions of America's black communities, our country can prepare these students to take advantage of what our public school system has to offer.

Such a feat can only be accomplished by a redistribution of government funds toward strengthening the country's housing policy. In a public school system based on districts and residency, this manifests into a nationwide scramble for living in the most prestigious school districts—an act that inevitably penalizes the underprivileged. The schools that today's disadvantaged black students attend are a product of this oppressive system, rooted in their high representation in impoverished neighborhoods. An analysis from Rutgers University indicates that “7 percent of poor whites lived in high poverty neighborhoods” while “15 percent of poor Hispanics” and “a breathtaking 23 percent of poor blacks” lived in these same neighborhoods in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

This relates to education opportunity in a very direct manner. When America's impoverished citizens have less access to preventive health care, greater absenteeism in schools is generated. When these children have less opportunities for after-school activities, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup> Rothstein, Richard. "Modern Segregation." Epi.org. Last modified March 6, 2014. Accessed November 23, 2020.

development of their academic skills is restrained. When these children have the obligation to look after their families by working in part time jobs, their academic progression is put to a standstill. Now—you might be asking—why is it always racial minorities who are shackled within the chains of this oppressive poverty cycle?

This dispute dates back to the use of redlining in America—a practice that demarcated the country’s residential areas based on its perceived standard of living. Since the 1930s, there were already clear racial differences along the borders of these areas. The prevalence of black citizens in lower ranked neighborhoods remained the same for decades to come, reciprocating in long term effects on family wealth—Emily Badger of the New York Times argues that “people who weren’t able to buy a home never developed the equity that would allow their children [and grandchildren] to buy homes.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the development of white neighborhoods would continue as the country’s public policies continuously expanded the working class and public school system for these affluent neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the problem is exacerbated by tax allocation—a system that fundamentally reinforces the wealth disparity in our country. State governments utilize real estate taxes to proportionately bolster public schools, thus creating a parallel between wealth (living standard) and the quality of education. This antiquated system is precisely why redlining has marred education opportunities for racial minorities. While today’s Connecticut is one of the “wealthiest states in the Union,” *The Atlantic* writer Alana Semuels indicates that several school districts are also amongst the “worst in the country.”<sup>6</sup> On a wider scope, according to the U.S. Department of

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<sup>5</sup> Badger, Emily. "How Redlining's Racist Effects Lasted for Decades." *Nytimes.com*. Last modified August 24, 2017. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-last-ed-for-decades.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Semuels, Alana. "Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School." *The Atlantic* (USA), August 25, 2016. Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/08/property-taxes-and-unequal-schools/497333/>.

Education, high-poverty districts “spend 15.6 percent less per student than low-poverty districts do.”<sup>7</sup> The trickle-down effect of real estate taxes into the public school system has widened a persistent divide between the poor and the rich, or—derivatively—between America’s black and white citizens.

The historical mistreatment of America’s black citizens is reflected in today’s achievement gap between white and black students. Through discriminatory activity such as redlining, America has embedded its anti-black sentiment in public schools, residential areas, and more. Providing equal opportunity for black citizens isn’t as simple as fixing our country’s educational policy. It also means extensive reform on our country’s housing policy and reversing a segregative history that has infiltrated America’s public school system.

While many countries aim to achieve a meritocracy, the establishment of this merit-based system is oftentimes flawed. The Obama Administration, according to the US Department of Education, attempted policies such as heavy investments into school curricula and simplifying applications for Federal Student Aid.<sup>8</sup> Achieving substantial education reform, however, can only be done by dismantling America’s disproportionate wealth gap. For example, the federal government could grant tax credits and vouchers to teachers who are willing to work in underdeveloped residential areas. The establishment of incentives for teachers to move out of powerhouse school districts—oftentimes wealthy districts—can level the playing field for America’s disadvantaged minority. Additionally, the government could also increase funding for, specifically, the public schools in historically impoverished areas. In the long term, stronger education means that racial minorities are empowered with the opportunity to achieve financial

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education. "Progress in Our Schools." Ed.gov. Accessed December 27, 2020. <https://www.ed.gov/k-12reforms>.

stability and, eventually, provide for future generations. These policies, admittedly, are not necessarily radical changes to the district structure; nonetheless, they represent a step in the right direction while minimizing social upheaval.

Segregation exists in American education due to a historically segregated district system and, resultedly, the stereotype that racial minorities are expected to perform poorly in the classroom. The road to lasting reform remains inevitably arduous due to the prevalence of profound social and structural obstacles and resistance. However, by implementing redistribution policies and targeted funding, our country can finally start to repair its historical sins and initiate the long-but-necessary process of empowering our disadvantaged youth.

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