

Miles To Go

The State of Education for Black Students in America

Executive Summary

Seventy years after the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that declared racially segregated public schools unconstitutional, significant challenges remain in Black students' educational opportunities.

Introduction

This report presents a broad overview of data on the education of Black students in the United States in early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education. The data clearly show disparities in outcomes for Black students' graduation rates, test scores, course completion, and many other measures, when compared with national averages and other student groups. However, our analysis shows that these disparities are actually symptoms of *opportunity gaps* – or limits to the opportunities some students have to learn and succeed educationally.

These opportunity gaps – often systemic and stemming from historical and present-day inequities – deny many Black students (and others) full opportunities to learn and succeed.

This report examines a wide range of opportunity gaps for Black students, including:

- Limited opportunity to participate in **high-quality early childhood education**.
- Disproportionately low access to **rigorous coursework**, including Advanced Placement.
- **Less funding** in K-12 school districts that serve high numbers of Black students.
- **Increasing racial segregation** in schools, associated with a host of systemic disparities.
- **School discipline practices** that cause Black students to be punished much more frequently and harshly for the same behaviors as other students.
- Lower **college enrollment and graduation rates**.
- **The rising costs of college** that block access and create prohibitive debt that affect Black students more than others.

70 years after the *Brown* decision, major disparities remain in the quality of education for Black students in America.

Part I: K-12 Education

School segregation rates rising: In spite of progress in the wake of the *Brown* decision in 1954, racial segregation in K-12 schools has been increasing for several decades. Today, 81% of Black students in the U.S. and 82% in the South attend schools whose enrollment is majority students of color – a higher rate than in the late 1960s and up substantially from 62% nationally and 55% in the South in the mid-1970s.

Less funding and fewer resources for schools that mainly serve students of color: Schools and districts that serve high rates of Black students and other students of color receive less funding than other schools, even when controlling for other factors. One study showed that districts with the highest percentages of students of color received about 13% less per student than districts with the lowest percentages. In a school district of 5,000 students, this would total \$9 million in lost annual revenue on average – enough to pay the national average salary for nearly 200 additional teachers.

Major disparities in school discipline: Black students are suspended at more than *three times* the rates of their White and Hispanic classmates – despite research that consistently shows these disparities are not a result of higher rates of misbehavior or more egregious misbehavior. A study of more than 32 million students in 95,000 schools found that school-discipline disparities by race were instead associated with rates of racial bias. Black males are suspended and expelled at the highest rates of any student subgroup, but Black girls suffer some of the most disproportionate punishments. More Black girls were suspended than White girls in 2017-18 by a margin of 322,000 to 192,000 – even though public schools enroll nearly *three times* as many White girls (24.3%) as Black girls (8.9%).

Shortages of Black teachers contributing to educator shortages nationwide: While research shows that *all* students benefit from access to a diverse teaching workforce – and Black students and other students of color benefit the most – only 6.1% of the teacher workforce is Black. Post-*Brown*, 39,000 of the 82,000 employed Black teachers were dismissed, dealing still-unremedied damage to the workforce. Today, Black teacher candidates report a lack of inclusivity in their teacher preparation programs, and Black teachers report a lack of support for their well-being and sense of belonging, which drives turnover levels higher. Even in schools with more than 90% students of color the teacher workforce is only 17.3% Black (and 47.8% White) on average.

Disparities in student achievement outcomes, college access: Black students' average scores are lower than those of other students on standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the SAT and ACT, and Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and they have lower rates of school attendance, high school graduation, college enrollment, and other measures. This report shows how these outcome gaps are clear symptoms of systemic opportunity gaps in the education system. These disparities in students' opportunities to learn and succeed must be addressed if we are to see more equitable results and improved outcomes for all students.

Part II: Postsecondary Education

Gaps in college enrollment: Black students are underrepresented in postsecondary education across the South and the nation. Black students represent 12.5% of U.S. college enrollment and 18.1% of college enrollment in the South, while 14.9% of K-12 students nationally and 22.4% in the South are Black.

Costs of college hit students hard: The rising costs of college tuition and fees have a disproportionate impact on Black students and young Black professionals. Four years after graduation, Black students still *owed* 188% more on average than White students *borrowed*, one recent analysis showed. Another study found that more than half of Black student-loan borrowers owed more in student loans than their net worth.

Lack of faculty diversity: The proportion of Black postsecondary faculty is even lower than the proportion of Black teachers in K-12 schools. Only 5.9% of full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions are Black, and only 4.1% of full professors are Black. Further, one study of more than 4,000 faculty members found that Black and Hispanic faculty earned \$10,000-to-\$15,000 less on average than their White peers.

HBCUs and two-year colleges need greater support: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the nation's community and technical colleges hold enormous potential for providing more equitable outcomes for students at more affordable tuition levels. For example, HBCUs represent only 3% of U.S. colleges and universities, but graduate 40% of Black engineers, 50% of Black teachers, 70% of Black doctors, and 80% of Black judges. However, both HBCUs and two-year institutions are often vastly underfunded compared with four-year predominantly White institutions, hampering their potential for even greater impact.

Lower rates of college success: Black students complete college degrees at the lowest rates of any major racial-ethnic group in the U.S. These rates underscore the broader disparities and systemic challenges that hinder many students' long-term success.

Part III: Early Care and Education (ECE)

The need for greater access and quality: Research links children's participation in high-quality ECE programs to higher third-grade reading levels, high school completion rates, college graduation, and even higher incomes. However, Black students' access to such programs is much more limited than their peers'. Only about 4% of the nation's Black children participate in high-quality state pre-K programs, for example.

Affordability of ECE programs: The median cost of child care in the South requires about 22% of Black families' average income and 14% for White families. In some southern states, child-care costs exceed 30%-to-40% of family income and average annual infant-care costs are higher than average in-state college tuition.

Discipline disparities for young children: ECE students are punished at much higher rates than K-12 students. The average expulsion rate in state pre-K programs is about three times higher than for K-12 students, one analysis found. Black children represented 18.2% of U.S. pre-K enrollment but 43.3% of pre-K children suspended and 38.2% of those expelled.

Segregation in ECE programs: Racial segregation levels are higher in ECE programs than in K-12 schools. One study found that ECE programs are more than twice as likely to enroll nearly 100% Black or Hispanic students than schools with kindergarten and first-grade students. However, research consistently shows academic, cognitive, and social and emotional benefits for all students in diverse and inclusive preschool settings.

Less access to early intervention services: Black children are less likely than their peers to be identified for critical early intervention services, including speech therapy, physical therapy, and psychological and social work services. Black children with developmental delays are 78% less likely than their peers to receive the services they need.

Key Recommendations and Takeaways

How can policymakers, educators, and others improve education for all students, and especially for Black students and other historically marginalized students?

Ensure more equitable funding at all levels of education.

Funding at all levels of education must be more equitable. In ECE, this includes increased funding for high-quality early learning programs that can prepare more students for future academic success. In K-12, steps to address disparities in funding between wealthier and less-wealthy school districts – and between districts with higher levels of Black student enrollment and lower levels – are essential for making public schools more equitable. At the postsecondary level, more substantial investments in HBCUs and community colleges would better enable these institutions to more fully reach their enormous and often still-untapped potential to improve outcomes for Black students and others.

Improve student support and pathways from ECE through K-12 and postsecondary education.

Educators and policymakers must strengthen students' transitions at each level of education and provide clearer pathways to success across the education spectrum.

More effectively integrate learning environments for students in early childhood through postsecondary education.

To combat rising segregation in ECE and K-12 education, policymakers must reconsider the policies and practices that have led nearly half of Black and Hispanic early learners in publicly funded preschools to attend programs that are at least 90% students of color – and have caused segregation in K-12 schools to return to levels not seen since the 1960s. At the postsecondary level, opportunity gaps that cause major underrepresentation of Black students in non-HBCU postsecondary institutions must be addressed to ensure that students' postsecondary options are not constrained by their race or class.

Address school discipline disparities.

School-discipline disparities for Black students in K-12 schools and even more so in ECE should alarm all Americans. These discriminatory practices must be addressed through systemic actions such as revising unfair and harmful disciplinary policies, increasing teacher training and support, and making educational opportunities more equitable for all students.

Improve students' access to a broad set of educational opportunities.

Black students are too often denied access to high-quality ECE, essential support services, more rigorous and advanced coursework, and the full range of postsecondary opportunities. We must view the education system through a lens of access to better understand the barriers that exist – inadvertent or purposeful – for many students, especially for Black students.

Provide high-quality curriculum and learning opportunities for all students, especially for Black students and other marginalized groups.

Ensure that all students have access to a high-quality and accurate curriculum and that learning opportunities are not censored or limited. This includes what students learn, how they are taught, and how their teachers are trained and supported.

Increase diversity of K-12 teachers and the postsecondary education workforce.

Focus on diversifying the teaching workforce at all levels. Only 6.1% of K-12 teachers are Black, and only 4.1% of full professors are Black, despite clear research evidence that access to a diverse set of educators benefits all students, and particularly Black students. Improve educators' training and supports to improve their practice and support their well-being and retention.

Focus on community-based programs and solutions, including community schools, community supports, community-based teacher pipelines, and community colleges.

Invest in community-focused efforts such as grow-your-own (GYO) teacher programs, stronger ECE mixed-delivery systems, community schools, community colleges, local teacher-pipeline programs, and career training. Meet students and their families where they live and work to open the full range of educational opportunities to them.

Use data to identify, understand, and address disparities.

Examine outcome data to identify disparities, address them, and better support all students. Understand that many disparities are caused by systemic issues that must be addressed systemically, rather than reflective of particular characteristics of the students, families, and communities that face limits to opportunity.