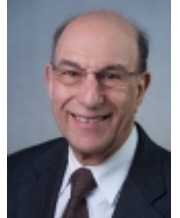


## The racial academic achievement gap cannot be closed in segregated schools.

*In the first of two posts, [Richard Rothstein](#) unpacks the reasons behind the gap in achievement between African American school students and white students. While many have suggested that this gap can be addressed solely through improving schools, he argues that school reforms will have only limited effect as long as the concentrated social and economic disadvantages facing black children and their families remain unaddressed. He writes that school and neighborhood segregation are a major contributor towards the achievement gap: in Detroit for example, the typical black student attends a school where 3 percent of students are white, and 84 percent are low income. Only by undoing the racial isolation of disadvantaged black children's schools, can the achievement gap be substantially narrowed.*



Americans have mostly come to the conclusion that the gap in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged children (in particular, between middle- and lower-class children, or between white and black children) is the fault of “failing schools,” because it makes no common sense that it could be otherwise. After all, if teachers know how to teach reading, or math, or any other subject, children should be able to learn whatever their family income or skin color.

This common-sense perspective, however, is misleading and dangerous. It ignores how social class characteristics in a stratified society like the U.S. may actually influence learning in school. It confuses social class, a concept that Americans have historically been loath to consider, with two of its characteristics, income and, in the United States, race. For it is true that low income and skin color themselves don't influence academic achievement, but the collection of characteristics that define social class differences and that are highly correlated with family income and skin color, inevitably influences achievement.

We cannot substantially improve the performance of the poorest African American students by school reform alone. [It must be addressed primarily by improving the social and economic conditions](#) that bring too many children to school unprepared to take advantage of what even the best schools have to offer. Social and economic disadvantage—not poverty itself, but a host of associated conditions—depresses student performance. Concentrating students with such disadvantage in racially and economically homogenous schools depresses it further.

The individual predictors of low achievement have been well documented. With less access to routine and preventive health care, disadvantaged children have greater absenteeism due to minor illness; they cannot benefit from good schools if they are not present. Environmental pollution in dense urban environments results in [black children having high rates of asthma](#); if untreated, children may be awake and night wheezing and be less attentive in school even if they show up. With less literate parents, disadvantaged children are read to less frequently when young and are exposed to less complex language at home. With less adequate housing, they rarely have quiet places to study and may move more frequently, changing schools and teachers. There are many schools in low-income urban areas in the U.S. where mobility rates are 100 percent or more, annually. With fewer opportunities for enriching after-school and summer activities, disadvantaged children's background knowledge and organizational skills are less developed. With fewer family resources, their college ambitions are constrained.



Credit: [Xavier](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

In forthcoming work, Leila Morsy and I describe some emerging economic conditions that threaten student achievement. For example, the growth of flexible scheduling in the United States for workers in low-wage retail, restaurant, and warehousing jobs poses a new threat to achievement of children from low-income families. Half of all black hourly-paid workers of the childrearing age 26-32 get less than one week's advance notice of their weekly work schedules. This on-demand scheduling is more frequent for black than for white workers. Parents with such schedules have difficulty enrolling young children in high quality child care and instead must make last-minute arrangements with friends and relatives where, too-often, the children are parked in front of televisions. Parents with such schedules have difficulty keeping their children on regular meal-time and bedtime schedules, an ingredient of healthy child development. Thus, children whose parents work on-demand schedules, on average, will have lower academic achievement.

As disadvantages like these accumulate, lower social class children inevitably have lower average achievement than middle-class children, even with the highest quality instruction. Certainly, good teachers will elicit better outcomes from disadvantaged children than will poor teachers. But the best teachers will not be able to elicit typical middle-class outcomes from such children, on average.

This is not a deterministic argument at an individual level, [nor is it an argument that “schools don’t make a difference.”](#) There is a distribution of ability, performance, and opportunity among all children, and within demographic groups. Some children from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve at higher levels than typical middle class children, and some middle class children will achieve at lower levels than typical disadvantaged children. But on average, outcomes will vary by social class, [as they do in every country](#).

A fair summary of over a half-century of research by economists, sociologists and developmental psychologists would conclude that about two-thirds of the achievement gap is attributable to differences in social and economic conditions, with one-third attributable to differences in school quality. So school improvement can serve to narrow the gap, but it can't substantially close it.

When a school's proportion of students at risk of failure grows, the consequences of disadvantage are exacerbated. In schools with high proportions of disadvantaged children, remediation becomes the norm, and teachers have little time to challenge those exceptional students who can overcome personal, family, and community hardships that typically interfere with learning. In schools with high rates of student mobility, teachers spend more time repeating lessons for newcomers and have fewer opportunities to adapt instruction to students' individual strengths and weaknesses. When classrooms fill with students who come to school less ready to learn, teachers must focus more on discipline and less on learning. Children in impoverished neighborhoods are

surrounded by more crime and violence and suffer from greater stress that interferes with learning. Children with less exposure to mainstream society are less familiar with the standard English that is necessary for their future success. When few parents have strong educations themselves, schools cannot benefit from parental pressure for higher quality curriculum, children have few college-educated role models to emulate and have few classroom peers whose own families set higher academic standards.

Nationwide, low-income black children's isolation has increased. It is a problem not only of poverty but of race. The share of black students attending schools that are more than 90 percent minority has grown from 34 to 39 percent from 1991 to 2011. In 1991, black students typically attended schools where 35 percent of their fellow students were white; by 2011, it had fallen to 28 percent. The share of black students attending schools where peers are mostly low-income has similarly increased.

In cities with the most struggling students, the isolation is even more extreme. The most recent data show, for example, that in Detroit, the typical black student attends a school where 3 percent of students are white, and 84 percent are low income. It is inconceivable that significant gains can be made in the achievement of black children who are so severely isolated.

This school segregation mostly reflects neighborhood segregation. In urban areas, low-income white students are more likely than black students to be integrated into middle-class neighborhoods and less likely to attend school predominantly with other disadvantaged students. [In 2011, 23 percent of poor blacks lived in high-poverty neighborhoods](#) (where more than 40 percent of the residents are poor), up from 19 percent in 2000. For poor whites, it was 7 percent, up from 4 percent. A neighborhood where 40 percent of the population is poor, and many more are low-income, is not one where it is reasonable to expect many children to be successful, no matter how good their schools.

In his [2013 book, \*Stuck in Place\* \(2013\)](#), the New York University sociologist Patrick Sharkey defines a poor neighborhood as one where 20 percent of the residents are poor, still a severely disadvantaged community. He finds that young African Americans (from 13 to 28 years old) are now ten times as likely to live in poor neighborhoods, defined in this way, as young whites—66 percent of African Americans, compared to 6 percent of whites. What is more, for black families, mobility out of such neighborhoods is more limited than for whites. Sharkey shows that 67 percent of African American families hailing from the poorest quarter of neighborhoods a generation ago continue to live in such neighborhoods today. But only 40 percent of white families who lived in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods a generation ago still do so.

Considering all black families, 48 percent have lived in poor neighborhoods over at least two generations, compared to 7 percent of white families. If a child grows up in a poor neighborhood, moving up and out to a middle-class area is typical for whites but an aberration for blacks. Black neighborhood poverty is thus more multigenerational, while white neighborhood poverty is more episodic; black children in low-income neighborhoods are more likely than others to have parents who also grew up in such neighborhoods.

The [implications for children's chances of success are dramatic](#). Sharkey shows that children in non-poor neighborhoods whose mothers grew up in poor neighborhoods score lower than children who live in poor neighborhoods yet whose mothers grew up in non-poor neighborhoods. Sharkey concludes that "the parent's environment during [her own] childhood may be more important than the child's own environment." He calculates that "living in poor neighborhoods over two consecutive generations reduces children's cognitive skills by [an amount] roughly equivalent to missing two to 4 years of schooling."

There is solid research evidence that integrating disadvantaged black students into schools where more privileged students predominate can narrow the black-white achievement gap. But the conventional wisdom of contemporary education policy notwithstanding, there is no evidence that segregated schools with poorly performing students can be "turned around" while remaining racially isolated. Claims that some schools, charter schools in particular, "beat the odds" founder upon close examination. Such schools are selective on non-observables and frequently have high attrition rates. In some small districts, or in areas of larger districts where ghetto and middle-class neighborhoods adjoin, school integration can be accomplished by devices such as magnet schools, controlled choice, and attendance zone manipulations. But for African American students living in the ghettos of large cities, far distant from middle-class suburbs, the racial isolation of their schools cannot be

remedied without undoing the racial isolation of the neighborhoods in which they are located.

*This article has been partly adapted from Mr. Rothstein's previously published work, including but not limited to publications hyperlinked above, and the paper 'The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools, and Segregated Neighborhoods: A Constitutional Insult', in Race and Social Problems. Source citations for claims made in the post can be found in these hyperlinked works. Next week, he will describe how a national mythology about the origins of residential segregation has precluded U.S. policy from considering residential desegregation as an option.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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