

SEF

SOUTHERN
EDUCATION
FOUNDATION

ECONOMIC VITALITY AND EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

Part I: The South's Pre-Pandemic Position



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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

2022 marks 155 years that the Southern Education Foundation has worked to advance equity in education and opportunity. We began as the Peabody Foundation following the Civil War, with a mission to provide education to the formerly enslaved, their children, and poor White children. We have evolved into an organization dedicated to education equity for Black students, other students of color, and students from low-income families across the South.

Since our inception, SEF and our nation have made much progress, but it is clear there is much more still to be done to ensure that every child has access to the high-quality education that will allow them to thrive and succeed.

Black and Brown students and students from low-income families still do not get the full range of educational opportunities afforded their White, more affluent peers. Schools that predominantly serve these students continue to be underfunded and under-resourced, and therefore less able to provide the enriching, advanced academic experiences that prepare students to thrive later in life. The problem is bigger than the struggles of any individual school or district. Many students who struggle academically also face challenges outside of school.

Resources available to children and youth at home, services in their neighborhoods, their access to nutritional food, and other non-school factors impact their academic achievement—and with it, their point of entry into the workforce. Systemic disparities that affect low-income parents and parents of color—discrimination in housing and labor markets, barriers to education, impediments to career advancement, and wealth gaps—also influence children's academic outcomes, sometimes more than anything that happens in the classroom.

While SEF's focus has always been on education equity, we recognize that to achieve that equity, public policies and practices must also address the persistent disparities that exist for Black and Brown adults, low-income earners, women, and adults with low educational attainment levels. This is especially true in Southern states, which are home to a high percentage of vulnerable populations and are among the states with the lowest rankings for educational attainment, income, employment, and other economic measures.

For these reasons, the Southern Education Foundation is launching a new research series, *Economic Vitality and Education in the South (EVES)*. EVES provides a broad overview of education in each SEF state, the education-related challenges those states faced prior to the pandemic, and those they will face in the future, as well as policy recommendations for addressing those challenges.

The EVES series draws on SEF's historical and continuing work on education equity. It expands on SEF's *New Majority Series*, which examined the increasing share of the population that comprises children of color and children living in low-income families in the South.

The EVES series will focus on factors beyond the education system, as well as nonacademic school factors, to examine how these affect students' academic performance. This approach, which uses a social determinants of education framework for research, policy design, and implementation, makes clear that we cannot rely on schools alone to compensate for all the opportunity gaps that exist in the lives of students and their families.

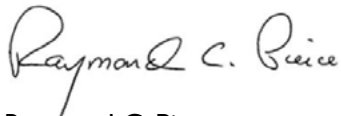
This first report in the series, *EVES I: The South's Pre-Pandemic Position*, uses pre-pandemic data to review the historic and ongoing disparities beyond the classroom that affect students' educational outcomes. These include poverty and food insecurity, childcare inadequacies, and discrimination in the workforce. The series will also examine racially biased disciplinary action in schools.

The second report in the EVES series, *Projections for a Post-Pandemic South*, will examine how the pandemic

accelerated automation and created permanent shifts in the workforce, displacing many pre-pandemic workers who are disproportionately Black and Brown, women, and low-wage earners. That report will discuss how these changes affect students, especially with regard to higher education, and the implications for educators trying to prepare students for occupations that may not yet exist.

With the *Economic Vitality and Education in the South* series, SEF is issuing a call to action to policymakers, the business community, community leaders, and education leaders to work together to implement changes that support students' achievement inside and outside of schools. Without significant and targeted investments that provide equitable opportunities for all Americans, the disparities that exist today will only continue to worsen. To achieve excellence in education we must eliminate policies that keep families trapped in cycles of poverty and low educational attainment, and support and implement comprehensive "whole-child" efforts that support students' success and that of their families.

Sincerely,



Raymond C. Pierce
President & CEO
Southern Education Foundation

“Since our inception, SEF and our nation have made much progress, but it is clear there is much more still to be done to ensure that every child has access to the high-quality education that will allow them to thrive and succeed.”

~ Raymond C. Pierce



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Economic Vitality and Education in the South (EVES) expands on the Southern Education Foundation's (SEF's) 2015 *New Majority Research Bulletin* examining the increasing share of the population that comprises children living in low-income families. EVES builds upon that work and makes the case that race-based and income-based gaps in educational performance and attainment are the result of disparities in policies, practice, access, and opportunity. Those disparities are reinforced by discriminatory and often racist policies that disproportionately affect Black people and other people of color and lead to significant gaps in achievement and prosperity.

The South's Pre-Pandemic Position, the first in the EVES series, provides state-by-state information on more than 20 critical data points associated with the education-to-workforce pipeline. The report looks specifically at the 17 states in the SEF region: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. For the purposes of this report, these will be referred to as SEF states or the SEF region. The language used in this report mirrors the language used in the data sources we draw from, which use Black, Hispanic, and White as identifiers.

EVES I explores persistent and historic outcome gaps for Black, Hispanic, and low-income Americans and discusses how inequities in the education system and the labor force—due to these persistent gaps—are often more pronounced in the South. In 2019, across the SEF region:

- Children qualified for the free and reduced-price lunch program, faced food insecurity, and lived in poverty at higher rates compared with the nation overall.
- Black students faced school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, and school-related arrests at disproportionately higher rates compared with their Hispanic and White peers.
- Black and Hispanic people were overrepresented among those living in poverty.
- On average, Black households brought in \$22,000 less than White households.
- Black residents still made up nearly half of all residents living in formerly redlined neighborhoods.
- Childcare costs rose to nearly one-quarter of the average Black family's household income, compared with 14% for White households.

- Black and Hispanic students performed below the median on national assessments of fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math skills.
- Students from low-income families were consistently underprepared for standardized assessments of student progress.
- Black and Hispanic adults had lower rates of postsecondary completion compared with White adults.
- Adults with lower levels of educational attainment earned less and were more likely to be living in poverty or to be facing unemployment than their more educated peers.
- Black and Hispanic adults were less likely to be employed than their White peers.

Without significant investments from state leaders to provide equitable opportunities for all Southerners, the South will continue to be overrepresented in rankings of poverty, low educational attainment, and workforce disparities. The time is now to address the historic and unprecedented disparities that face low-income families and families of color.

For more than 150 years, the Southern Education Foundation has championed the policies and practices that advanced educational opportunity for underserved students across the South. We recognize that this work cannot happen in isolation from the practices and policies that address the range of issues that affect access to high-quality education. We encourage and support the efforts of state, education, and industry leaders who are working toward economic equity for all—those who understand that we cannot thrive as a community of individuals if we do not ensure that each individual within the community has a chance to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Gaps are symptoms, not effects

We hear the word “gap” frequently in conversations about economics and education: achievement gap, wealth gap, employment gap, and others. These frequently describe outcome disparities based on race or income, as in “the gap between Black people and their White peers.” Discouragingly, most readers may interpret these statements to mean that observed differences are attributable to individuals’ characteristics, life choices, or culture. Not only is this untrue, but framing conversations around outcome gaps misrepresents the drivers of those gaps and inhibits efforts to address them.

In reality, these so-called “achievement gaps” are due to disparities in opportunity, or opportunity gaps—barriers to access, achievement, and prosperity that affect some members, usually those with the fewest resources, in a diverse society. Examples include the historical and ongoing inequities that disproportionately affect Black Americans, other communities of color, and low-income families: food deserts, inadequate childcare, over-incarceration, unsafe housing, inadequate medical services, and poorly resourced schools. These inequities translate to outcome gaps for individuals and families over generations; they are absolutely not a function of the color or culture of individuals themselves.

While education is frequently cited as a main driver of inequality, other factors also have a significant impact on student performance and achievement. Sometimes these factors have more impact than anything that happens in schools. Children’s social environments, their neighborhoods, their parents’ educational attainment and employment status, and their access to health services and nutritious food can all affect their academic performance.¹

Despite this reality, we do not invest sufficient resources in efforts to address or mitigate the extra-educational inequities that cause many underserved children to struggle.² We continue to rely on schools to make up for a broad array of missing or inadequate financial, material, and relational supports without providing schools with the funding and resources necessary to address all those needs. Achieving education equity will require implementing a range of supportive policies and targeted, scalable solutions that extend beyond the education system.



In 2020, a global health pandemic drastically changed the way that people learn and work, with long-term implications, especially for Black people and other people of color as well as low-income earners, many of whom were already struggling financially. Disproportionate impacts from the pandemic widened race-based wealth and employment gaps and will compound over time if we do not find and implement innovative ways to address the underlying sources of inequity found inside *and outside* of schools.³ We must develop new strategies and refocus our efforts so that we do not continue to implement practices and policies that have not succeeded in improving education equity in the past.

If we are to change the way we view and address education challenges and engage more people in supporting and implementing effective scalable solutions, the education community must adopt a shared framework for assessing issues related to student achievement—one in which schools are not responsible for most of the heavy lifting. Policymakers must consider

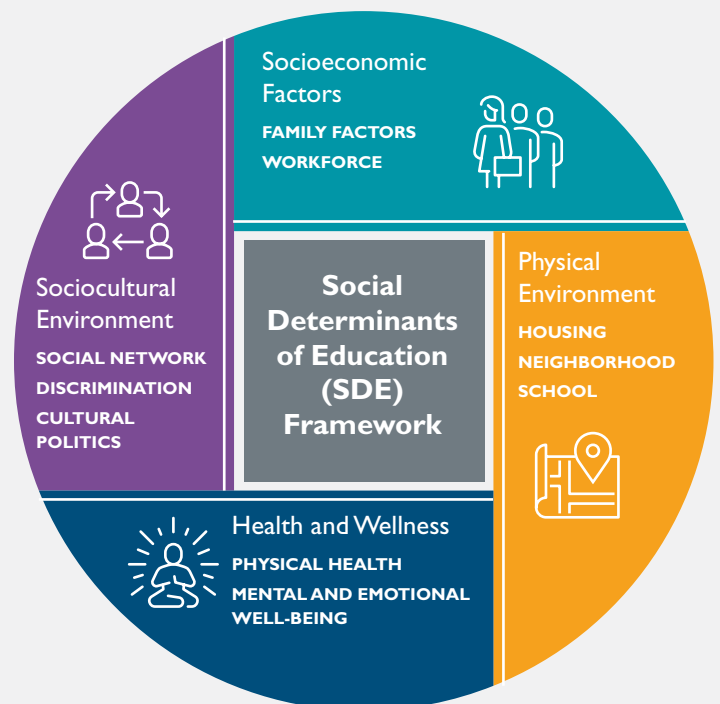
the overlap and interplay of systems when looking to improve education. Efforts must include collaboration among various government, private, and nonprofit organizations—from federal to local.

We have an example of what this looks like. The Social Determinants of Health (SDH) framework was created in 1948 by the World Health Organization (WHO). It includes many of the nonmedical social and economic factors that influence health, such as income, education, job security, housing, early childhood development, food insecurity, and working conditions, and it considers how those factors interact to affect health. According to WHO, the health sector alone cannot ensure overall health outcomes. The social determinants of health must be considered, as they can account for 30% to 55% of an individual's overall health outcomes.⁴

Education leaders should adopt a social determinants of education (SDE) framework,⁵ similar to the social determinants of health frameworks already common in the health care field, to guide future policy efforts and community partnerships. This will better ensure that efforts to advance education equity take into consideration the interconnectedness of the systems that are needed for children to thrive in schools—or that prevent them from doing so. Using an SDE framework helps to position education as the beneficiary of targeted equity efforts, rather than leaving it to compensate for society's array of disparities.

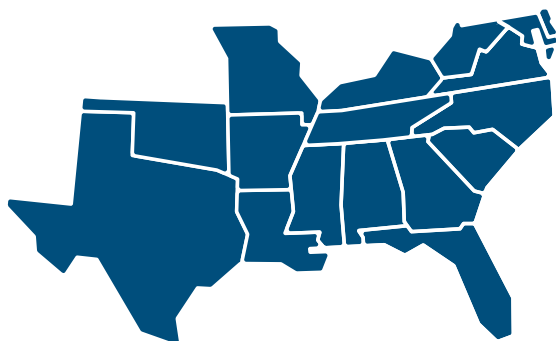


To that end, the Southern Education Foundation is developing a framework to guide future research and advocacy efforts. SEF encourages all states to adopt an SDE framework that addresses the ways in which extra-educational systems impact children's learning, and to pass and implement policies accordingly. SEF's working SDE model offers a guide for education research, more integrated policy design, whole-student supports, and an implementation relationship map that highlights opportunities for cross-community partnerships. We hope that this model, along with a future SDE brief that will further explore this topic, encourages a wide range of education systems and stakeholders to adopt an SDE framework and contributes to the conversations around social determinants of education and learning frameworks already circulating the industry. See Appendix A.



Poverty and food insecurity disproportionately impact families of color

The Southern Education Foundation’s 2015 *New Majority Research Bulletin* found that in 21 U.S. states⁶—14 of them SEF states—more than half of public-school students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) in 2013. By 2019, FRL eligibility had risen to 52% nationwide, and the SEF regional median was slightly higher, at 57%.⁷



SEF states and the SEF region consist of 17 states: AL, AR, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MO, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV

Free and reduced-price lunch eligibility is typically awarded when a child’s family is considered low-income—earning below 185% of the poverty threshold.⁸ Children can also qualify if they are enrolled in one of several federal programs, such as those for foster children, or if they attend a school that predominantly serves other eligible students, even if they are not in a low-income family themselves. For that reason, some argue that FRL eligibility overstates low-income status, especially in states with lower cost of living.⁹

In 2021, the poverty threshold for a family of four with two kids under 18 was \$26,500.

It is widely recognized that the poverty line is too low and that it underestimates the number of people facing deprivation and lack in the United States. The poverty level, which was originally calculated in the 1960s based on the cost of food, is adjusted yearly but has not been raised high enough to reflect the expenses associated with maintaining a minimum standard of living

Children eligible for free or reduced price lunch



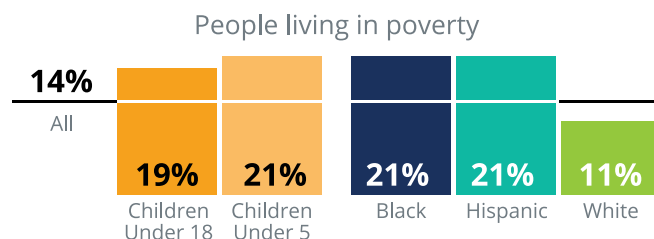
57%

SEF median state, 2019

in the U.S. today.¹⁰ The cost of food, housing, childcare, and medical expenses has risen exponentially faster than the poverty threshold over the same period.¹¹ In fact, the poverty line consistently falls far below research-based estimates of true minimum living costs.¹² For example, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities’ 2019 report found that in 2018, a working couple living at the poverty threshold in a medium-cost metropolitan area would need to spend 83% of their wages to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment and a nutritionally adequate diet.¹³

If we do accept the poverty level as an adequate measure, then across the United States more than 1 in 10 Americans (12%) were living in poverty in 2019—in SEF states, 14%.¹⁴ The statistics are worse for children, especially the youngest ones. Nationwide, 17% of children under 18 years old, and 18% under 5 years old, were living in poverty in 2019. In SEF states, the proportions living in poverty were 19% and 21%, respectively. **SEF states are home to 41% of the nation’s children under 18, but 46% of the nation’s children who are living in poverty.**

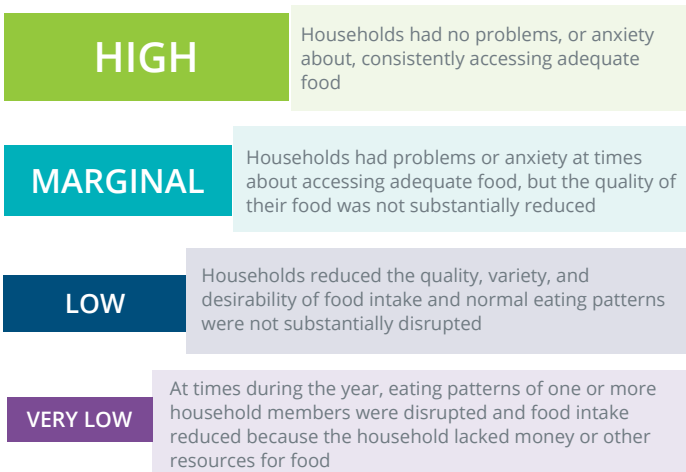
People of color of all ages are disproportionately living in poverty. Across the nation and in SEF states, 21% of Black people lived in poverty in 2019. Nationwide, 9% of White people and 17% of Hispanic people also lived in poverty, compared to 11% and 21%, respectively, in SEF states.¹⁵



SEF median state, 2019

The United States has higher poverty rates and more extreme income gaps than other high-economy countries.¹⁶ In 2019, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) compared poverty rates in the United States with 25 other developed nations and found that the U.S. had the highest poverty rates for both adults and children—nearly *double* the OECD averages. Poverty was also found to be more extreme in the U.S., with a wider gap—40%—between the average incomes of those who live in impoverished conditions and the established line at which we say people are in poverty, a gap larger than in all but one OECD country.¹⁷

Food Security



Source: Adapted from the USDA Economic Research Service

The relatively high living standard for middle- and upper-class Americans is not meaningful with regard to an individual’s living conditions or well-being, especially for the American poor. This “standard” is usually based on per-capita gross domestic product—total economic output divided by the number of people living in the



country.¹⁸ In fact, when compared with other similarly developed nations, low-income families living in the U.S. are more impoverished and face greater resource deprivation than poor families in other countries.¹⁹ Furthermore, “standard of living” is not the same as quality of life or well-being. A country may have a comparatively high standard of living even when many of its citizens have low quality of life and well-being.

Quality-of-life measures include wealth, employment stability, environmental factors, physical and mental health, education, safety, and security, to name a few. When compared on these measures, the United States ranks “lower than most developed nations due to declines in personal safety, healthcare, and uneven access to high-quality public education.”²⁰ While the U.S. poor are affluent according to international standards, when it comes to life expectancy, infant mortality, homicide, and incarceration rates, Americans of color and Americans with low educational attainment and low income levels rank below citizens of other developed nations and often rank similarly with citizens of less-developed nations.²¹ For example:

1. Life expectancy for Black men and women with low educational attainment is 15 to 25 years lower than for highly educated White men and women in the U.S. and is similar to life expectancy overall in countries such as Mongolia, Pakistan, and Rwanda.
2. Infant mortality rates in the U.S. are higher overall than in other developed nations, and they are twice as high for non-Hispanic Black than for non-Hispanic White people.
3. In U.S. high-poverty cities, the homicide rate is nearly 20 percentage points higher than for the U.S. overall, and higher than rates in the Dominican Republic, Libya, Pakistan, and Rwanda.
4. U.S. incarceration rates are higher overall than in other developed and undeveloped nations, especially for Black men, who are incarcerated at a rate nearly seven times that of U.S. citizens on average.²²

Due to the major inequities associated with living in disadvantaged homes and communities for any period—children’s access to high-quality education and their ability to learn can be negatively impacted—poverty is a key determinant of education. Research shows that the academic achievement rates for students living in poverty are consistently lower than those of their peers, and students living in poverty are less likely to complete high school or enroll in college.²³ Children living in

poverty typically begin school less prepared than their more affluent peers, often due to missed opportunities for quality early learning experiences and physical and cognitive delays related to poor nutrition and health care—both stemming from a lack of such resources in their communities.²⁴

For example, impoverished communities are more likely to be food deserts: “geographic areas where residents have few to no convenient options for securing affordable and healthy food.”²⁵ Barriers to access to affordable, healthy food prevent parents from being able to provide adequate nutrition for their children. Low-income parents may be unable to afford higher-priced fresh, nutritious foods. They may be forced to rely on community dollar and corner stores with fewer or more expensive options than supermarkets, and fast-food restaurants that offer few healthy options. Due to work and transportation constraints, low-wage earners may lack the time or means to travel outside the community to go to a grocery store.

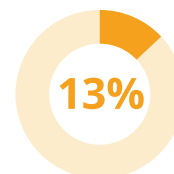
Living in food deserts is one reason that families, more often those with children, face food insecurity—a lack of consistent access to healthy meals—which has many potential implications for children’s performance in school.²⁶ Inadequate nutrition can lead to developmental delays and negatively impact children’s academic achievement. Children experiencing food insecurity may struggle to pay attention and be disengaged from learning. They may experience mood fluctuations and anxiety and become disruptive in class. And they are more likely to



be identified for disciplinary actions, to be late to school, to miss class, to earn lower grades than their peers, and even to have to repeat grades.^{27,28}

Long-term inadequate nutrition can lead to heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, and certain cancers. People facing food insecurity can also become obese, as unhealthy food options tend to be less expensive and thus more accessible to low-income individuals.²⁹

Children living in food insecure households



SEF median state, 2019

For many students, the meals they eat at school may be their only meals. According to the Food and Research Action Center, across the nation, on average 11% of households faced food insecurity from 2017 to 2019, meaning they had reduced access to healthful, varied meals. An additional 4% of households experienced consistent disruptions in meal access and may not have had enough money to buy food to eat. Family food insecurity was greater in SEF states: 13% of households faced low food security and 5% faced very low food security.³⁰

The Cost:

Poverty and food insecurity cost the nation dearly, even beyond the impacts on the individuals who experience them. According to the Poor People’s Campaign, **child poverty alone costs the U.S. nearly \$1.03 trillion a year** in lost “economic productivity, increased health and crime costs, and increased costs as a result of child homelessness and maltreatment.” Hunger costs “\$160 billion in increased health care costs and another \$18.8 billion in poor educational outcomes.”³¹

The ROI:

Researchers estimate that for every dollar spent to end child poverty, the United States could save at least 7 dollars of related economic costs.

Children’s educational opportunities are inextricably linked with where they live

The connection between housing and education may seem simple and obvious: Where you live determines, at least in part, where you go to school. This is especially true for students who face barriers to accessing options beyond the local public school. Parents may be unable to provide transportation to local magnet, charter, or private schools that do not have the same public-school busing system. Parents may also not be able to afford alternative schooling options. And in many cases, non-public-school options have discriminatory enrollment policies that exclude certain children from enrolling.

However, the depth and complexity of the relationship between housing and children’s access to quality learning experiences and supports—and their corresponding performance in school—cannot be overstated. Housing is a key social determinant of education. One meta-analysis of 88 articles examining that connection found that overall, four neighborhood characteristics had a significant influence on individuals’ educational outcomes: concentrated poverty, poor educational climate, the presence of many different ethnic or migrant groups, and social disorganization.³³



Concentrated poverty limits resources such as housing, employment, and neighborhood facilities in a community. In communities where resources are scarce and community members must compete for them, an artificial sense of competition may arise. This can be heightened by racial tension. Poverty, and the competition it creates between groups of people, especially those with differences in salient characteristics, can lead to social disorganization and neighborhoods that have higher incidence of violence and crime.³⁴

Social disorganization can also refer to difficulty or inability for community members to collectively cope with social problems and to influence others’ participation in social norms. Community members’ attitudes toward each other and their willingness to work together influence how the community functions, and thus the environment in which children are growing up.³⁵

It is difficult to accurately measure the impact of each variable, but one thing is clear in the research: **Until we address the community and housing inequities that negatively impact too many American children, even large-scale efforts to reform struggling schools and bridge learning gaps for disadvantaged students will continue to fall short.**³⁶

One suggested approach to understanding the relationship between housing and education involves organizing research into four categories.³⁷ The first examines *the physical dwelling* itself—a component of children’s physical environment in the SDE framework. Related factors include overcrowding in the home, the presence of lead paint or other toxins, and policies that affect the affordability of the home and impact whether (and how often) a child’s family moves—another area of research on housing and education.

Scholars of *residential and school stability* (the second category) find an overall negative relationship between children’s academic performance and both homelessness and housing mobility—components of the physical environment in the SDE framework. Economically disadvantaged families tend to move and experience

homelessness more often, which interrupts children's learning; may disrupt their social-emotional functioning; and, depending on their age, can even delay their cognitive functioning.³⁸ As a result, the children in those families are more likely to perform poorly in school, drop out, and display antisocial behavior. Teachers serving in high-mobility schools—often those with less-affluent students and more students of color—struggle to maintain continuity and momentum in learning.³⁹

However, the impact of family moves can vary, depending on whether the move is a *strategic* improvement in the family's circumstances or a *reactive* move, as in the case of homelessness or eviction.

A third category of research examines how the *location of housing* impacts children's environment, their learning capacity, and the quality of schools they attend. Factors include:

- *Community factors and neighborhood effects:* neighborhood institutions like daycare centers, playgrounds, and after-school programs
- *Social disorganization:* crime, residential turnover, and social isolation
- *Environmental norms:* social norms, adult role models, the availability or lack of jobs
- *Language environment:* early exposure to language development opportunities
- *School factors:* material resources; social resources, such as teachers; and quality academic offerings and supports

The last category of research examines *how school quality impacts housing markets*; that is, how the perceived quality of public schools can attract or discourage families from moving into certain areas. Higher-performing schools attract wealthier homebuyers, driving up housing prices in those communities that have highly rated schools. As a result, low-income families increasingly are priced out of good schools. Conversely, low-income families often live in under-resourced communities with lower-performing school districts that have more temporary and affordable housing and are unattractive to wealthier homebuyers. Notably, mortgage lending practices disproportionately prevent low-income individuals from securing loans to purchase homes despite their having to pay as much or more for rent as they would for a mortgage, which prevents these families from building equity and wealth.⁴⁰

School funding is largely based on property taxes calculated as a percentage of the value of a person's home. Taxes collected from the local district or county typically determine, in part, the total funding for the assigned local school. Frequently, more affluent homeowners pay a lower tax rate based on the value of their homes, but because their homes are so much more valuable, the tax collections themselves are higher. In low-income neighborhoods, property taxes may be levied at a higher rate, a disproportionate burden for low-income families. Yet, even at a higher rate, low-income communities generate fewer tax dollars because the value of housing is depressed, a cycle that leads to perpetually underfunded schools.^{41,42}

Redlining and discriminatory lending practices segregated neighborhoods, shaped homeownership and wealth gaps, and led to the perpetual underfunding of struggling schools

Across the nation, 81% of metropolitan regions with at least 200,000 residents were more racially segregated in 2019 than they were in 1990, according to the Othering & Belonging Institute. Their *The Roots of Structural Racism Project* found that “household incomes and home values in White neighborhoods are nearly twice as high as those in segregated communities of color.”⁴³ Conversely, “neighborhood poverty rates are highest in segregated communities of color (21%), which is three times higher than in segregated White neighborhoods (7%).”⁴⁴

Redlining, a decades-long practice of mapping, in red, where large communities of Black people resided—used by the real estate community and mortgage lenders to enforce de facto racial and economic segregation—was an *intentional* government effort to secure housing for lower-middle-class to middle-class White people and to drive Black people into lower-quality, higher-cost urban housing.⁴⁵ After years of legal discrimination in mortgage lending practices, and ongoing informal segregation, such as realtors showing Black families homes in only non-White neighborhoods, **83% of formerly redlined “poor” neighborhoods remain segregated and populated by people of color.**⁴⁶

Federal housing policies allowed larger numbers of White families to purchase homes; enjoy safe, well-resourced communities; and build equity and wealth. At the same time, these policies isolated large numbers of Black families in areas that received lower levels of investment, preventing those families from building equity and familial wealth through housing. In this way, several SDE components compound. Discrimination in housing and lending policies impact children's physical and social environments and their families' economic resources. All of these factors affect schools, which affects students' opportunity and overall achievement.⁴⁷

By 2019, 77% of people who lived in highly segregated White communities owned their homes, compared with only 46% in highly segregated communities of color.⁴⁸ That same year, Black families were twice as likely as White families to have no wealth. The median White family had nearly \$184,000 in wealth, compared with just \$23,000 for Black families and \$38,000 for Hispanic families.⁴⁹

Historic housing segregation that leads to the persistent underfunding of neighborhoods and schools exacerbates racial- and income-based outcome gaps later in life. The so-called achievement gaps we observe today are the result of years of inequitable funding; disparities in community resources, school materials, and facilities; understaffing of qualified teachers and administrators; and reduced access to advanced academic offerings, to name a

few factors. One example of the impact of neighborhood segregation: Black children raised in White neighborhoods earn \$4,000 more per year as adults, compared with those raised in communities of color. For Hispanic students, the earnings gain is \$5,000.⁵⁰

Nationwide, the demographics of formerly redlined districts are changing. Today, just 28% of people living in segregated neighborhoods in U.S. cities are Black—most are Hispanic or White. But in the South, nearly 49% of residents in formerly redlined neighborhoods are Black, a testament to the persistent force of legislated segregation and the modern Jim Crow practices that preserve it.⁵¹

For years, policies blocked Black families from accumulating wealth and deprived schools and communities of color equitable access to the same financial, material, and social resources enjoyed by White communities—all economic and environmental determinants that impact children's performance. To address these historic community disparities, states will need to employ housing policies that both encourage more community integration and improve conditions in currently underserved communities.⁵² States must work strategically to integrate neighborhoods, provide affordable housing, bolster neighborhood institutions, and sustainably fund struggling schools in segregated communities of color.

Nationwide, the demographics of formerly redlined districts are changing. Today, just 28% of people living in segregated neighborhoods in U.S. cities are Black—most are Hispanic or White. But in the South, nearly 49% of residents in formerly redlined neighborhoods are Black.



Legislated discrimination in the criminal justice system and the workforce fueled racial, gender, and industry wage gaps

Researchers at Goldman Sachs found that “the median Black household owns nearly 90% less wealth than the median White household,” and that about two-thirds of the average wealth gap comes from earnings gaps.⁵³ Wealth and earnings gaps—economic components within the SDE framework—stem not only from disparate policies and practices designed to segregate Black and Brown people in certain neighborhoods but also from inequitable workplace policies and unspoken practices that concentrate people of color in low-wage industries and positions.

Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery in 1865, Black people and other people of color were treated as chattel, forced to perform the bulk of agricultural, domestic, and service work, especially in the South. Even after legal slavery ended, Black people remained mostly barred from occupations besides those they were forced to work as enslaved people. They were subject to contracted servitude on Southern plantations. Black people also suffered from deprivation enforced through Jim Crow laws, a form of legal segregation.⁵⁴ These laws included “Black Codes” that criminalized ordinary activities like walking at night or “loitering” and imposed fines or prison time on Black people for doing jobs other than those that enslaved people had been responsible for previously.⁵⁵

These Black Codes, early mechanisms of forcing Black people back into unpaid labor through the criminal justice system, took advantage of the fact that the 13th Amendment did not protect those convicted of a crime from being enslaved. Together with convict leasing, a practice that allowed states to profit from renting Black prisoners to wealthy plantation owners—and later chain gangs, in which prisoners performed their work chained together—these policies laid the foundations for our current prison system that continues to overincarcerate people of color, especially Black men.⁵⁶

During the 1970s, there was an explosion of construction, manufacturing, and service work that prisoners started performing, such as making shoes and clothing, recycling,



producing metal and wood materials, and operating farms.⁵⁷ The prison population doubled during that decade. Then, mandatory minimum sentencing and policies that disparately criminalize communities of color, such as anti-loitering and curfew laws, drug policies, and inequitable sentencing practices, doubled the prison population again in the 1980s.⁵⁸

The result is that **nationwide, Black people are incarcerated nearly five times as often as White people; “one in every 81 Black adults is serving time in state prison.”**⁵⁹ In 12 U.S. states, nine of them in the SEF region, more than half of the prison population is Black.⁶⁰ Hispanic people are also overincarcerated; their rates are 1.3 times the incarceration rate of Whites. It is important to note that due to underreporting or lack of data gathered on the racial and ethnic makeup of state prison populations, even these disparities in incarceration rates are likely understated.⁶¹

Following the Jim Crow era, various government policies were enacted that dramatically improved working conditions in certain industries. However, these policies also preserved occupational segregation and denied agricultural, domestic, and service workers—who were, and still are, predominantly people of color—many of the protections and benefits reserved primarily for White male workers.⁶²

For example, the 1935 Wagner Act expanded collective bargaining rights for union members but excluded domestic and agricultural workers, while permitting industry unions to continue discriminating based on race.⁶³ The 1935 Social Security Act created old-age and unemployment benefits to help struggling workers, but it too was limited to those industries predominantly worked by White men, while Black and female workers were given access to less sufficient social welfare programs. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which introduced a 40-hour work week, established a federal minimum wage and overtime requirements, and banned child labor, also excluded domestic and agricultural workers.⁶⁴

Not only did policies like these enforce occupational segregation, prevent workers of color from being adequately paid, and limit support for these workers in time of need, but lower-wage agricultural, domestic, and service work itself—more likely to be performed by women and people of color—has been undervalued compared with work predominantly performed by White men.⁶⁵ This further exacerbates occupation and industry pay disparities. Today, workers in these industries, and in entry-level positions overall, continue to be grossly underpaid compared with equally skilled workers in other industries.⁶⁶

When women entered the workforce, they too were channeled into low-wage service and domestic positions and were paid less overall in every industry—another trend that persists.⁶⁷ According to the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, “As the rate of women working in a given occupation increases, the pay in that occupation declines—even when controlling for education and skills.”⁶⁸

Discriminatory employment policies and hiring practices have depressed wages and career opportunities for both people of color and women for decades. The resulting race- and sex-based earnings disparities are dramatic, and these earnings gaps permeate the lives of children being raised by working parents. For example, students who grow up in low-income households are five times more likely to drop out of high school than those raised in high-income homes and 13% less likely to graduate from high school on time.⁶⁹

Black wage earners experience the greatest earnings disparities, but Hispanic workers also face wage discrimination in the workplace, as evidenced by large median income gaps. **Nationwide, in 2019, the average White household income was nearly \$28,000 higher than the average Black household income and \$16,000 higher than the average Hispanic household income.** In the SEF median state, White households received a median income of \$61,967 in 2019—approximately \$22,000 more than the median Black household (\$39,690), and \$12,500 more than the median Hispanic household (\$49,434).⁷⁰ While these earnings gaps are narrower in the South, incomes in the South are generally lower as well.

People often attribute pay disparities to employment variations based on educational attainment gaps and personal career preferences, but even when controlling for education, staggering racial pay gaps still exist. According to the Economic Policy Institute, Black and Hispanic workers are paid less than White workers at nearly every educational level, and those gaps increase dramatically at the highest attainment levels.⁷¹ These disparities are even worse for women.

Median Household Income

On average, people of color were paid less than White people.



Black:
\$39,690



Hispanic:
\$49,434

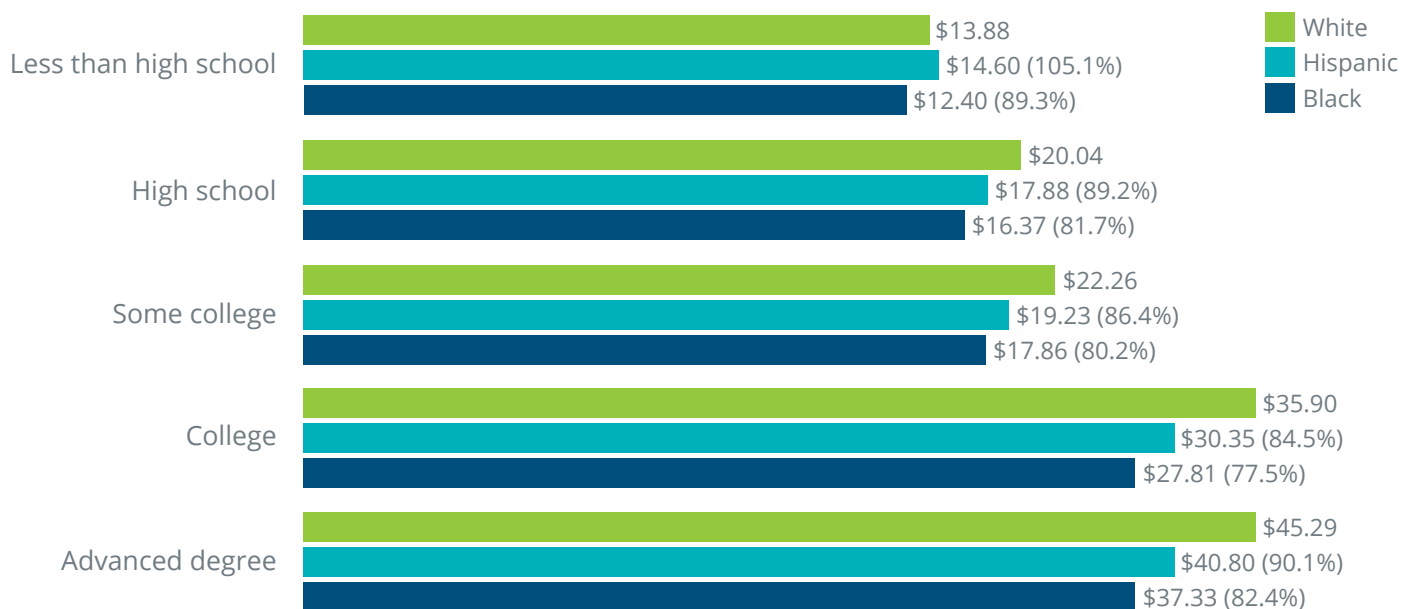


White:
\$61,967

SEF median state, 2019

On average, White workers are paid more than Black and Hispanic workers at nearly every education level

Average hourly wages, by race/ethnicity and education, 2019



Source: The Economic Policy Institute, 2020

Women of color, and especially Black women, sit at the intersection, discriminated against for both their race and their sex.⁷² They are hired less often, paid less, retained less often, and promoted to leadership positions less often than either their Black male or other female counterparts. **In 2020, Black women earned just \$.63, and Black men \$.71, for every dollar a White man earned.**⁷³

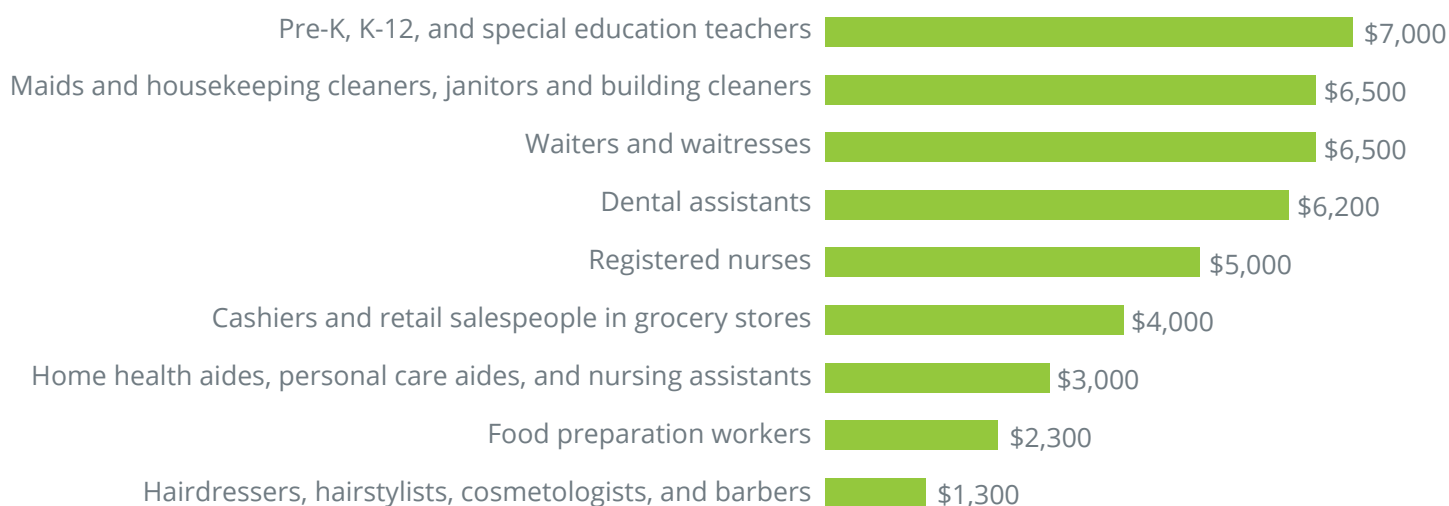
For Black women, the earnings gap is growing—10 percentage points over the last two decades.⁷⁴ Over a lifetime, Black women lose almost a million dollars in cumulative earnings to this pay disparity, which is especially troubling considering that they are increasingly the heads of households and breadwinners in their families.⁷⁵ **Hispanic women are paid even lower wages, earning just \$.55 for every dollar a White man earns.** Even among lower-wage frontline workers, women lose thousands of dollars every year to the gender pay gap.⁷⁶

Racial pay gaps are also influenced by employment disparities and barriers to career mobility for Black

people. According to McKinsey and Company’s 2021 report on racial disparities in the U.S. private sector, Black employees, who make up 12% of the American workforce, face several common challenges in the workplace.⁷⁷

1. Black employees are overrepresented (18%) in frontline jobs, which no longer serve as adequate launching pads into career promotions or managerial roles.
2. Black employees are overrepresented in entry-level jobs and have higher turnover rates than White employees. Likewise, Black employees are promoted less often, leaving them underrepresented in management roles.
3. There is a “trust deficit” between Black employees and their companies: Black employees are 41% less likely than their White counterparts to feel that promotions are fair, and 39% less likely to believe their company’s diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are effective.
4. Black workers are 23% less likely than White workers to say they have a lot of support at work.

Annual losses due to the wage gap for women in selected front-line jobs



Source: National Women's Law Center, 2019

While Black workers hold 12% of all entry-level jobs, they hold just 7% of management positions and 5% or less of vice president and other executive-level positions, such as chief operating officer and executive director.⁷⁸ Research shows that people tend to promote those with whom they identify, creating a cyclical barrier to leadership for deserving Black employees.⁷⁹ Consciously or not, these trends perpetuate a system that was created intentionally beginning when people of color and women entered the U.S. workforce. Furthermore, recruiters and hiring professionals, unaware of their bias or their company's, tend to reinforce discrimination already occurring in the workplace.⁸⁰

Wage and employment disparities—whether legislated, a function of current-day discrimination, or an undervaluing of certain industry and “gender-assigned” work—influence poverty rates, wealth accumulation, homeownership, access to community resources, and access to alternative school options. Each of these variables impacts children's lives and well-being, making them part of a social determinants of education framework.

The Cost:

From 2000 to 2020, the Black wage gap alone cost the United States \$2.7 trillion in lost economic activity.⁸¹ **At the current rate, it will take the U.S. 95 years to reach talent parity for Black workers,** or 12% representation across all private-sector levels.⁸² Every dollar spent on incarceration results in another \$10 in social costs. Even excluding jail costs, “the aggregate burden of incarceration exceeds \$500 billion annually.”⁸³

The ROI:

Closing the wealth gap could prevent 70% of middle-class Black children from falling out of the middle class by adulthood, while closing the earnings gap for Black people could increase lifetime earnings for Black individuals by over \$1 million each.⁸⁴ Closing this gap for Black women alone could add 1.2 million to 1.7 million jobs and \$300 billion to \$450 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product.⁸⁵

Quality childcare and early childhood education can help close employment and opportunity gaps

Quality, affordable childcare and early childhood education (ECE) programs generate multiple benefits. They can help provide stability for working parents and are linked with improvement in children's academic and workforce outcomes later in life. This makes childcare and ECE key determinants of education, both as economic factors for children's families and as key supports that help prepare young children to be successful in later years.

Accessible childcare and ECE can help reduce income-based employment gaps among parents. Parents who cannot find or afford childcare may be forced to reduce work hours, may have to postpone further job training and schooling, and may be unable to accept promotions at work, further reducing their earning potential. Parents who work outside the typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. window, more often low-wage earners, face additional challenges and often must rely on a patchwork of options for childcare, if any exist.⁸⁶

Inadequate care options also reinforce racial and gender workforce gaps and force many parents to choose between childcare and their jobs. Black parents are nearly twice as likely as White parents to have to make job sacrifices due to childcare challenges.⁸⁷ Women are more likely than men to bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities, often leaving their jobs to care for their children.⁸⁸ Furthermore, reentering the workforce can be difficult even for those who leave for a short period of time. Workers who leave often lose their career momentum and miss opportunities for promotions, passed over by hiring managers in favor of other applicants with no employment lapse.⁸⁹ These setbacks reduce overall lifetime earnings and diminish family wealth accumulation.

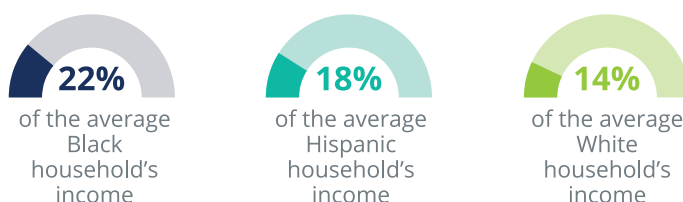
In SEF states, most children under 6—a median 68%—had all their caretakers in the workforce, underlining the importance of states developing a robust, quality childcare system that is available to all families.⁹⁰ In SEF states, a median 48% of families lived in childcare deserts—areas with more than 50 children under age 5 that contain either no childcare providers or more than

three times as many children as licensed childcare slots.⁹¹ Childcare deserts are most prevalent in communities predominantly populated by Hispanic people, in low-income neighborhoods, and in rural communities.⁹²

Where it is available, childcare is often prohibitively expensive. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services considers childcare affordable if it costs a married couple no more than 7% of their combined income for one child. However, in the SEF region the average cost of infant care for one child required 16% of the median married couple's combined income in 2019.⁹³ Even if the cost of childcare were reduced or subsidized to 7% of the median household income, just 14% of families would be able to afford it at their current income level.

For families of color, who already struggle to access childcare, the additional burden of employment and earnings disparities leads to significant affordability gaps. In the median SEF state, infant care cost the average White couple 14% of their combined income *before taxes* in 2019.⁹⁴ For the average Black household, infant care consumed 22% of the family's pre-tax income; for the average Hispanic household, this proportion was 18%.

Annual childcare expenses should cost just 7%* of a family's income, but **infant care for one child cost**



If infant care cost 7% of the region's median income,



just **14 of every 100** families could afford it.

*according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

SEF median state, 2019



Positive effects of early education can help mitigate future opportunity gaps for economically disadvantaged students and can help lessen the effects of poverty and environmental stresses. High-quality ECE and prekindergarten programs have been linked to lower criminal activity and decreased rates of depression and tobacco use, while supporting sustained wage growth and higher rates of homeownership later in life.⁹⁵

High-quality programs are characterized by various factors. These include having comprehensive, developmentally appropriate early learning standards and curricula and utilizing appropriate child assessments. High-quality programs ensure that professional staff have the knowledge and skills to be effective in their roles and are equipped to address the needs of diverse students and their families. They also provide access to ongoing professional development opportunities for educators and staff. These programs engage families in meaningful ways and use quality rating and improvement systems to support continuous improvement.⁹⁶

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) developed 10 quality standard benchmarks to rate preschool programs on various measures, including *structural quality standards*, like maximum class sizes and staff-to-child ratios, and *process quality standards*, including teacher qualifications and instruction, student supports, and screenings aligned through third grade.⁹⁷ The median SEF state met 7.5 quality benchmarks in 2020; only Alabama and Mississippi met all 10 quality standards.⁹⁸

Attending a high-quality preschool has also been shown to reduce special education placement by 10% while reducing by 15% the likelihood that a child will have to repeat a future grade.⁹⁹ Furthermore, according

to the First Five Years Fund, **children who enter kindergarten ready for school have an 82% chance of mastering basic skills by the time they are 11, versus a 45% chance for children who enter kindergarten unprepared.**¹⁰⁰

While it's promising that more children on average attend public-ECE programs across the SEF region—41% of 4-year-olds attended such programs in 2020—than across the nation, where the number was 34%, states still have a long way to go to make high-quality public-ECE programs accessible to all young children.¹⁰¹ Eight SEF states did not offer public ECE in all their districts, and six SEF states served below the national average of students.¹⁰²

Significant state investment is needed to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early learning programs and that programs are affordable, especially in underserved communities and for low-income and working parents. States must move toward universal childcare if they hope both to fully address the needs of underserved children and to ensure that all parents, especially single parents, low-wage earners, and working mothers, can participate in the workforce now and in the future.

The Cost:

Childcare inadequacies cost states, businesses, and individuals a total of \$57 billion a year nationwide.¹⁰³ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation estimates that **in 2019, states lost between \$479 million and \$3.47 billion each in economic activity due to inadequate childcare.**¹⁰⁴ Childcare deserts reduce labor force participation rates, especially women's rates, reinforce poverty, stunt economic growth, and increase the risk for children to experience abuse and neglect.¹⁰⁵

The ROI:

According to the Economic Policy Institute, meaningful childcare reform and a 7% household income cap on the cost of childcare would increase economic activity nationwide, including enabling states in the SEF region to generate \$56.4 billion in new economic activity, and allow 512,000 parents to go back to work.¹⁰⁵

Disparities in opportunity show up as so-called “achievement gaps” for students at every step of the educational pipeline

Children’s resources at home, their parents’ employment and earnings status, the neighborhoods in which they grow up, their access to nutrition and health services, and the quality of the school experience all impact children’s overall achievement and future entry into the workforce. One way that opportunity disparities show up in Black and Brown children’s lives are as early differences in achievement outcomes on national reading and math assessments.

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP),¹⁰⁶ known as “the nation’s report card,” has been measuring student academic performance nationwide every two years since 1969.¹⁰⁷ At the **Basic level**, students demonstrate partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills.¹⁰⁸ At the **Proficient level**, students are most likely on track to be college- and career-ready when they graduate high school.

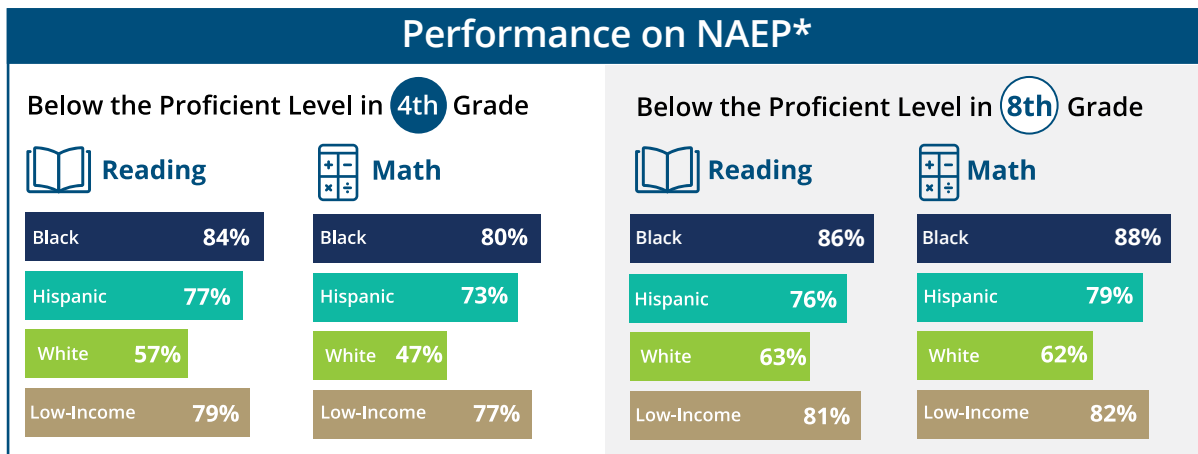
Nationwide, 83% of Black fourth-grade public-school students were reading below the Proficient level in 2019, compared with 77% of Hispanic students and 55% of White students. Hispanic students in the SEF region performed as well as other Hispanic students nationwide as a whole, but Black and White students were further behind, with 84% of Black students and 57% of White students reading below the Proficient level.

Early outcomes in math were equally poor that year. Nationwide, 48% of White students, compared to 80%



of Black and 72% of Hispanic students, scored below the Proficient level on fourth-grade NAEP math. The SEF region’s students had similar results, with 47% of White, 80% of Black, and 73% of Hispanic fourth graders lacking proficiency in grade-level mathematics concepts and knowledge.

Achievement gaps observed in fourth grade typically remain or widen by eighth grade, as children who were underprepared in the early grades do not have a solid foundation upon which to build new skills, as tested on NAEP. Nationwide, 89% of Black children and 78% of Hispanic children were reading below the Proficient level in eighth grade in 2019, compared with 58% of White children. The corresponding percentages in SEF states were 86%, 76%, and 63%, respectively.



*National Assessment of Educational Progress

SEF median state, 2019

That same year, 87% of Black and 80% of Hispanic eighth graders scored below the Proficient level nationwide in eighth-grade math, compared with 57% of White children. In the SEF region, 88% of Black, 79% of Hispanic, and 62% of White students were not on track to be college- and career-ready at the end of high school.



Caution when interpreting standardized test results

While we refer to standardized test statistics, it is important to note that standardized tests themselves can be highly inequitable and misrepresentative of students' abilities. The practice of using the results of answers to a relatively small set of questions as a proxy for all of students' knowledge gathered over multiple years in a subject like math or English brings with it numerous possible biases and validity errors. These include questions that test knowledge outside of the subject, such as cultural capital relating to student experiences, or language/reading proficiency required to complete a math test. Further, inequities in schools can be exacerbated by testing, such that students who attend under-resourced schools with less access to shared knowledge around tests and testing strategies can perform lower—just as students who attend highly resourced schools and may have access to substantial test preparation can perform higher—than reflects their subject knowledge.

Children in low-income families face myriad disparities in opportunity

Both Black and Brown students and students living in low-income families face opportunity gaps, and due to a range of historical inequities, including those already discussed, these groups often overlap—Black and Brown children are more likely to be born into low-income households and are also more likely to attend under-resourced schools predominantly attended by other underserved students.

School poverty levels are determined by the percentage of attending students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch:

Low poverty = less than 25% eligible

Mid-low poverty = between 25.1 and 50% eligible

Mid-high poverty = between 50.1 and 75% eligible

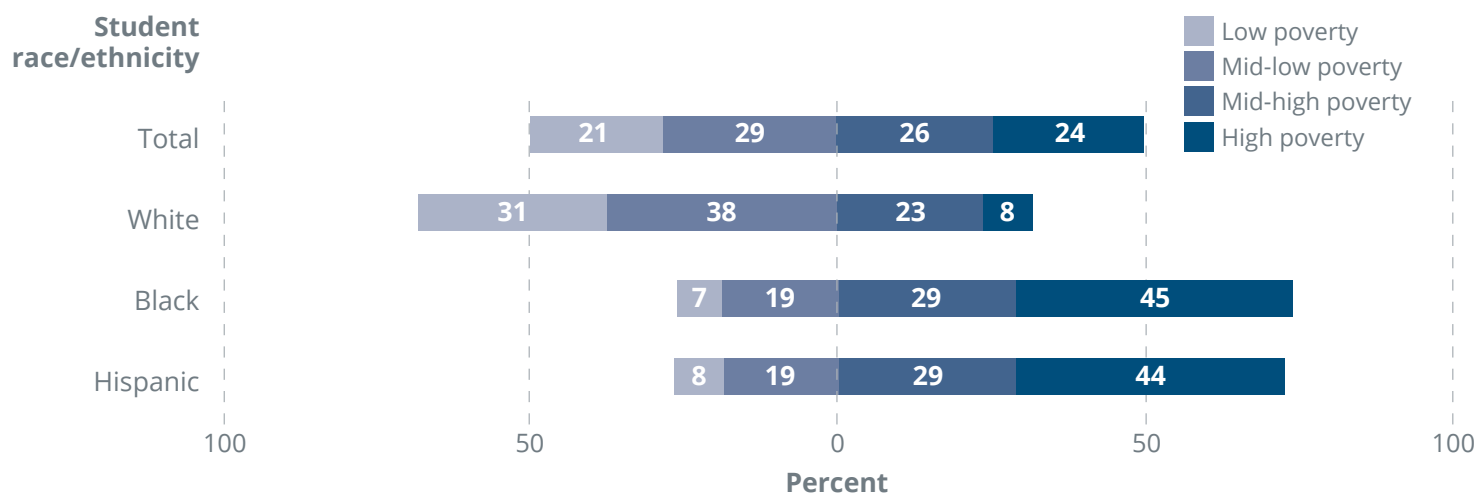
High poverty = more than 75% eligible

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2021

Nationwide, in 2018, 45% of Black and 44% of Hispanic children were enrolled in high-poverty public schools, compared with just 8% of White children. An additional 29% of both Black and Hispanic students were in mid-high-poverty schools, compared with 23% of White students.¹⁰⁹ Attending high-poverty schools is associated with lower scores on state exams, so even students in these schools who are not from low-income families may have poor testing outcomes. A study published by Brookings found that nationwide, in 2012, the average student from a low-income family attended a school that scored at the 42nd percentile on state exams that year, while the average student from a middle/high-income family attended a school that scored at the 61st percentile on state exams.¹¹⁰

Students in low-income families face extreme challenges to achieving academically in comparison to their more affluent peers.¹¹¹ For this reason, household income is an important, and one of the most reliable, determinants of education. In 2019, nationwide, 79% of students living in low-income families nationwide and across the SEF region scored below the Proficient level on NAEP in fourth-grade reading. Meanwhile, 74% of these students

Percentage distribution of public-school students, for each racial/ethnic group, by school poverty level: Fall 2018



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2021

nationwide scored below Proficient in math, compared with 77% of students from low-income families in SEF states.

That same year, disparities for eighth graders were even larger. Across the nation, 80% of eighth-grade students from low-income families scored below the Proficient level in reading. In eighth-grade math, 82% of the nation's students scored below the Proficient level. In SEF states, 81% of students in low-income families were below the Proficient level in reading, while 82% of students scored below the Proficient level in math.

The foundational skills that students acquire in English and math are necessary for them to perform well in other subjects, to advance year-to-year, and to be prepared for college or a career after high school.¹¹² Early achievement disparities are a major predictor of postsecondary attainment and later workforce and employment disparities. If states want strong college completion and a skilled and active workforce, they must work to decrease opportunity gaps in order to break down the achievement barriers that threaten vulnerable students early in their education, and they must offer additional support to students who were left behind.

Early achievement disparities are a major predictor of postsecondary attainment and later workforce and employment disparities.



Early disparities reinforce educational attainment, wage, and employment gaps for Black adults

Since a student’s foundational reading and math skills are integral to success in other subjects and life in general, those who experience opportunity gaps and lack of support early in school and don’t receive help are being set up for continued outcome gaps. Students who do not read well by the end of third grade often fall behind academically, are less likely to complete high school and postsecondary credentials, and face disadvantages later in the workforce.¹¹³ One 2012 study on early reading found that:

63% of students who did not graduate from high school on time had shown reading performance in third grade that was “roughly equivalent” to below Basic on NAEP. In contrast, only 4% of students whose third-grade reading skills measured up to the NAEP Proficient level did not graduate on time.¹¹⁴

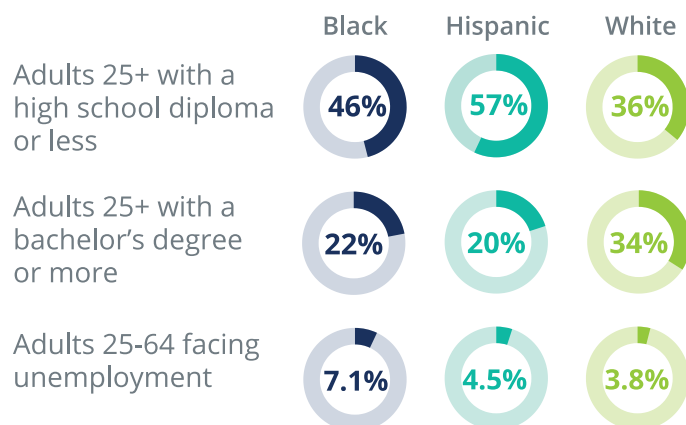
Similarly, students who struggle in early math and don’t receive help tend to be unprepared for algebra and other advanced math courses in high school, making them less likely to participate in challenging high school curricula, graduate, enroll in college, or earn any credentials after they leave high school.¹¹⁵ An individual’s lack of postsecondary achievement is *not a personal failure*. It is one result of being underprepared from a young age and of the inequities that children, and their families before them, have experienced in the United States—a generational cycle of low educational attainment and restricted opportunities to thrive.¹¹⁶

Across the United States, 45% of Black adults and 58% of Hispanic adults ages 25 and older did not have a high school diploma in 2019, compared with 34% of White adults. Meanwhile, just 23% of Black and 18% of Hispanic adults held at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with 37% of White adults.

That same year, educational attainment across SEF states was similar to that seen across the nation. Across the region, 46% of Black and 57% of Hispanic adults 25 and older had a high school diploma or less, compared with 36% of White adults. Meanwhile, 22% of Black adults and just 20% of Hispanic adults had a bachelor’s degree or



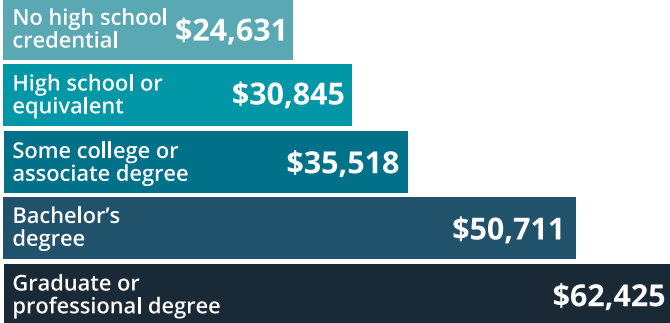
more, compared with 34% of White adults. Adults with no postsecondary education, and their children, typically earn lower wages, are more likely to live in poverty, are more likely to experience housing and income instability, and are less likely to be employed or active in the labor force than their more educated peers.¹¹⁷



SEF median state, 2019

For reasons such as these, **children born to parents who have a high school diploma or less are 10 times as likely to have those same achievement levels later in life.**¹¹⁸ Parents with no postsecondary education face significant barriers to providing for their children’s basic needs, supporting learning at home, or having adequate resources to send their children to college. These familial characteristics and circumstances, including parents’ and caretakers’ educational attainment and employment variables, are examples of social and cultural capital that can and do influence children’s educational and future outcomes, making them additional determinants of education.

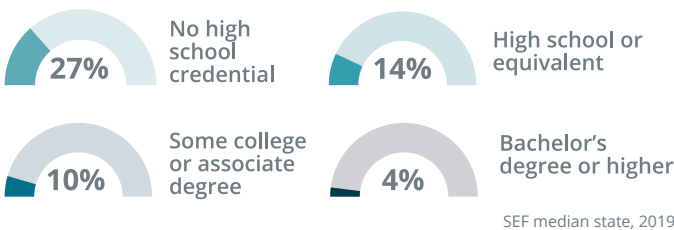
Adults 25+ with lower attainment earn less.



SEF median state, 2019

Across the nation, the median income for a person over 25 was nearly \$42,000 in 2019. Adults with high school diplomas earned a median income of nearly \$32,000, compared with over \$56,000 for a person with a bachelor's degree and \$76,000 for workers with graduate or professional degrees. That same year the median income for all workers in SEF states was nearly \$38,000. High school diploma holders earned almost \$31,000, compared with nearly \$51,000 for bachelor's degree recipients and more than \$62,000 for those with higher credentials.¹¹⁹

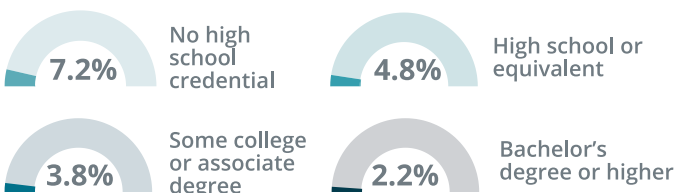
Adults 25+ living in poverty



SEF median state, 2019

Nationwide, 13% of adults 25 and older who had a high school credential—a diploma or its equivalent—were living in poverty, compared with 9% of those with some college or an associate degree and 4% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. That same year, 14% of adults in SEF states who had a high school credential were living in poverty, compared with 10% of those with some college or an associate degree, and 4% of those with a bachelor's degree or more.¹²⁰

Adults 25-64 facing unemployment



SEF median state, 2019

Adults with low levels of education are more likely to be paid lower wages and face unemployment more frequently than their peers with higher levels. In 2019, the U.S. unemployment rate was 4.8% for working-age adults—ages 25 to 64—who had a high school credential, compared with 2.3% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. Unemployment rates in SEF states were similar to those observed across the nation.

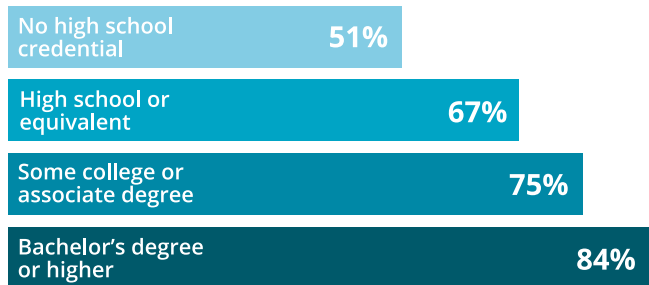
Not only were unemployment rates in 2019 higher for adults with lower levels of education, but the unemployment rate for Black Americans was more than double that of White, non-Hispanic Americans—7.7% versus 3.7%. In the median SEF state, these numbers were 7.1% versus 3.8%. Hispanic unemployment rates were 5.1% nationwide and 4.5% in the median SEF state.

The unemployment rate, however, does not tell the whole story. It excludes people who were not actively looking for work in the previous month, those considered not to be in the labor force. It also does not account for the underemployed, either people working in positions for which they are overqualified or those who want to work more hours but are prevented from doing so.¹²¹

Unemployed individuals, and those categorized as “not in the labor force,” may want to work but haven't had a recent opportunity to look for a job, or they may face additional barriers that actually prevent them from being able to do so.¹²² These include family care responsibilities and inadequate and unaffordable childcare options.¹²³ Impoverished communities also often lack adequate employment for the people who live in them. Still other



Adults 25-64 with **higher attainment** have a higher employment-to-population ratio — they are more likely to be in the labor force.



SEF median state, 2019

potential workers may lack the means to look for work: They may not have a permanent residence, access to high-speed internet, adequate transportation, or any of the other important resources people need to find a job in the current landscape.¹²⁴

To get a better understanding of how many people are absent from or prevented from participating in the workforce, as well as true labor force participation rates based on educational attainment, we use the “employment-to-population ratio.” This ratio is expressed as the portion of employed people as a percentage of the total working-age population. It is not as affected by seasonal variations or short-term fluctuations in the labor market as are unemployment rates. It also includes unemployed people not currently looking for work and is “often considered to be a more reliable indicator of job shrinkage or growth than the unemployment rate.”¹²⁵

The employment-to-population ratio for adults with lower levels of educational attainment—more often low-wage earners—is lower than for those adults with higher levels. Nationwide, the employment-to-population ratio for all working-age adults with a high school diploma was 69%, compared with 85% of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. In SEF states, these were 67% and 84%, respectively.¹²⁶ These numbers indicate that more highly educated adults likely have greater access to employment options and are less likely to face barriers that may prevent those with lower levels of education from finding work, which correlates with the information we have presented on employment disparities.

Shifts in the workforce like those seen early in the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as industry shifts due to advancing automation, have had and will have an outsize impact on Black and Brown workers and adults with lower levels of education.¹²⁷ Vulnerable workers—those

Vulnerable workers—those without any postsecondary education—recover more slowly from the negative impacts of shifts in the labor force.

without any postsecondary education—also recover more slowly from the negative impacts of shifts in the labor force. **As recently as June 2021, the unemployment rate for Black people 20 years and older remained nearly double the unemployment rate for similarly situated White people.**¹²⁸ In order to build a thriving economy in the future, states must work to close educational and workforce gaps among adults—factors within an SDE framework—to break poverty and unemployment cycles that have affected U.S. adults and will continue to affect their children.

The Cost:

Over the last decade, the nation lost \$130.5 billion from unrealized growth potential that could have been earned with just a 1.0 percentage point increase in bachelor's degree holders.¹²⁹ **Over the last 20 years, gaps for Black people—wages, education, housing, and investing—cost the nation an estimated \$16 trillion, with the pay gap alone accounting for \$2.7 trillion in forfeited economic gains.**¹³⁰

The ROI:

Because of its impact on businesses, workers and their families, and state and national economies, increasing workforce equity over just the next 10 years could generate more than \$130 billion in economic growth from raising adult educational attainment levels and more than \$1 trillion in increased economic activity from closing racial-pay gaps. It also could save billions of dollars in social programs by decreasing poverty and hunger. Businesses would have access to a more diverse pool of creative, innovative, and skilled workers, which would improve the United States' ability to compete in the global marketplace. Most importantly, the combination of increased revenue and savings would allow states to increase education funding to improve the lives of subsequent generations, adding even more to these cumulative gains.

Discipline disparities for Black children feed the school-to-prison pipeline

Every year, Black students are punished more frequently and more harshly than their Hispanic and White peers for the same actions. Bias among students, teachers, and administrators; zero-tolerance policies; and the presence of inadequately trained school resource officers (SROs)

Every year, Black students are punished more frequently and more harshly than their Hispanic and White peers for the same actions.

contribute to Black students being overidentified for school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, and school-related arrests.¹³¹ These disproportionate

disciplinary actions deprive students of their education, label them as criminals from a young age, and create future barriers to their maintaining employment and earning livable wages. In many cases, Black students are ultimately funneled into the juvenile justice system and, later, the criminal justice system, from which many never escape, making discrimination and school discipline critical determinants of education.¹³²

Teachers and staff who are unaware of their own biases may be more likely to levy harsher punishments against students against whom they are biased.¹³³ Bias in the classroom, from teachers as well as other students, often causes Black students to be singled out as troublemakers, their behaviors criminalized due to racial attitudes rather than the behaviors themselves. Further, educators who teach in low-income and racially segregated schools are more likely to be stressed, inexperienced, and drawn from communities different from those they serve.¹³⁴ Black students more frequently attend high-poverty schools that serve higher percentages of underserved, high-need students, meaning their teachers must do significantly more with significantly less.¹³⁵

Police officers and security personnel are also much more likely to be placed in under-resourced schools predominantly attended by underserved students.¹³⁶ Schools where more than 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are significantly more likely to have a school resource officer or security officer present.



Also, schools with a higher percentage of students of color are much more likely to have law enforcement or security personnel present every day.¹³⁷ The mere fact that officers are present more often among poor students and students of color makes these students more likely to be identified for disciplinary action than students who attend schools that do not have SROs or security personnel.

SROs can also worsen already strained disciplinary environments, as few are required to receive training in adolescent development, social-emotional learning, racial equity, or de-escalation strategies, leaving them ill-equipped to perform their job without having a negative impact on students.¹³⁸ In some cases, the presence of SROs has been found to reduce crime, and perceived safety is an important component in the SDE framework.¹³⁹ However, school disciplinary cases are more often needlessly escalated to the juvenile justice system by police officers when a student's punishment could and should have been addressed by the school.¹⁴⁰

One 2009 study from the University of Tennessee found that, controlling for socioeconomic status, the only notable difference in outcomes observed where there was an SRO present was a significant increase in criminal

“disorderly conduct” charges that led to a student’s arrest. The schools in that study did not show any other meaningful differences in measured criminal activities. The mere presence of an SRO did not notably decrease instances of—nor result in more arrests related to—assaults, drugs, alcohol, or weapons on campus.¹⁴¹

Even though **research shows that SROs do not reliably make schools safer**, as the incidence of school shootings has increased so has the presence of police officers in schools.¹⁴² Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that in the 2018–19 school year, 58% of public schools reported that they had a dedicated SRO or other law enforcement officer present, while an additional 22% had security personnel at the school—the difference being that law enforcement officials can make arrests, and security personnel cannot.¹⁴³

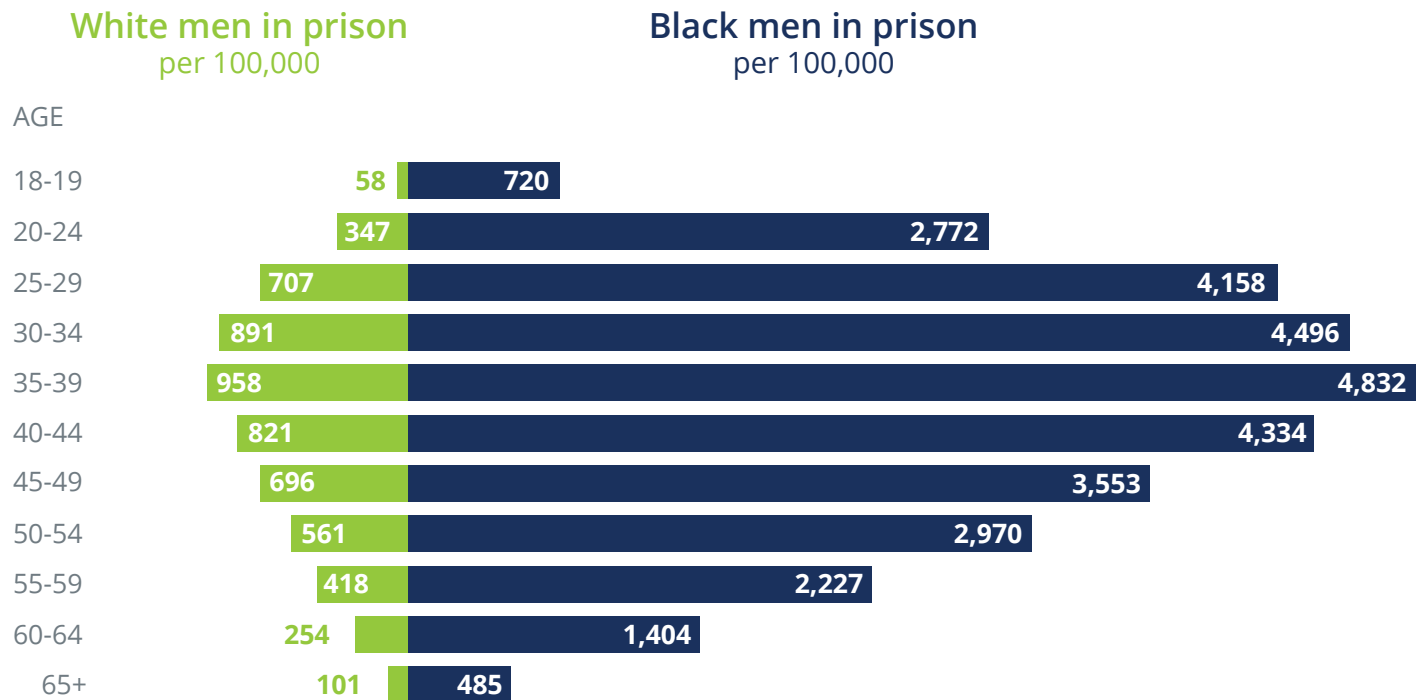
Zero-tolerance policies, which set harsh punishments regardless of circumstances or the severity of the student’s infraction, are disproportionately applied to

Black students and further contribute to their being suspended or expelled for minor disruptions, or for actions as benign as bringing a nail clipper to school.¹⁴⁴ When students are suspended or expelled, they miss crucial learning time and often fall behind.¹⁴⁵ And students who have been suspended or expelled are more likely to be unsupervised during the day, leaving them open to negative influences.

Black and Brown students who are labeled troublemakers are often pushed into alternative disciplinary schools run by private or unaccredited entities, “characterized by low expectations, inadequate supports to address student needs, and ineffective instruction and technology.” Students channeled into these juvenile justice education programs due to disparate disciplinary actions are not given the same-quality educational experiences or supports they would receive in the public-school system, and therefore fail to make significant improvements in learning and academic achievement—so their educational performance consistently, and often permanently, lags behind that of their peers.¹⁴⁶

Racial disparities in men’s imprisonment persist across all ages

Number of men in state and federal prisons, per 100,000 population, by age and race



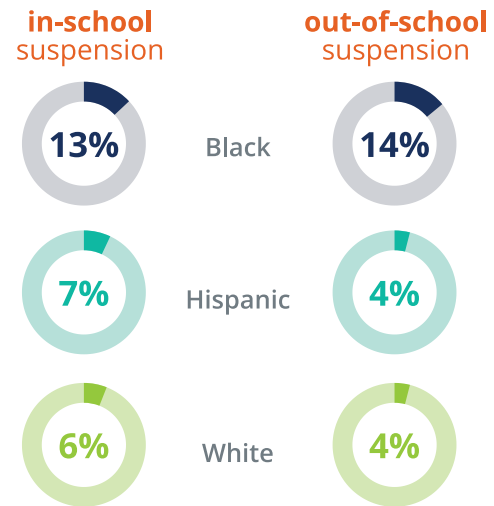
Source: Prison Policy Initiative, 2020

The overrepresentation of Black and Brown students among those facing discipline, as well as the harsher punishments they face in relation to their White peers, results in their being channeled into the juvenile justice system at much higher rates. This funneling of Black and Brown students from schools directly into incarceration is known widely as the school-to-prison pipeline. In 2019, **Black people were five times as likely as White people, and twice as likely as Hispanic people, to be imprisoned in a state or federal prison.**¹⁴⁷

Discipline disparities that perpetuate disproportionate incarceration rates for Black people, especially Black men, begin affecting children as early as preschool.¹⁴⁸ Nationwide, in the 2017–18 school year, Black students were suspended three times as often as their Hispanic and White peers. That year, 11% of Black public-school students faced in-school suspension, compared with 4% of Hispanic and White students. Meanwhile, 12% of Black students faced out-of-school suspension, compared with 4% of Hispanic and 3% of White students.

Disparities in school suspensions were worse across the SEF region that same year. In the median SEF state, 13% of Black students faced in-school suspensions and 14% faced out-of-school suspensions. For Hispanic students, these rates were 7% and 4%, respectively. Among White students, 6% faced in-school suspension and 4% received out-of-school suspension.¹⁴⁹

Students who were suspended, by race:



SEF median state, 2017-18

Black students are also referred to law enforcement and experience school-related arrests at disproportionate rates compared with their Hispanic and White peers. These disparities, like school suspensions, are also worse across the SEF region. **Nationwide, Black students made up 15% of public-school students in the 2017–18 school year but accounted for nearly 28% of referrals to law enforcement and over 30% of school-related arrests.**¹⁵⁰ In SEF states, 23% of students were Black, but 35% of students referred to law enforcement were Black, as were 38% of those with school-related arrests.

Nationwide, Hispanic students were referred to law enforcement or experienced a school-related arrest at nearly the same rates at which they enrolled. Hispanic students accounted for 27% of both student enrollments and those referred to law enforcements. They were slightly overrepresented among students who had school-related arrests, accounting for 31% of those arrested. Conversely, White students were underrepresented, accounting for 47% of national public-school enrollments but 37% of law-enforcement referrals and 34% of school-related arrests.

In SEF states, Hispanic students, who made up 26% of 2017–18 enrollments, were underrepresented among referred students (24%), but overrepresented among students who were arrested (31%). White students were underrepresented for both measures. They accounted for 44% of student enrollments but 36% of law-enforcement referrals and 26% of school-related arrests.



Students need positive, supportive school environments that are equipped with the financial, material, and social resources to address their individual needs—academic, social, emotional, and mental.¹⁵¹ They need teachers and administrators with whom they can form close, authentic relationships.¹⁵² Research indicates that positive, caring relationships with adults and access to community support can help improve students’ brain structure, mitigate effects from poverty and stress, and help students engage and perform better in school.¹⁵³ For this reason, children’s social networks and school culture are included in the SDE framework.

School enrollments in the school year:



Of those who were **referred to law enforcement**,



Of the students who had a **school-related arrest**,



SEF median state, 2017-18



For schools and educators to deliver on these needs, states must address disparities in funding and social supports, such as advisory systems, available to struggling students and schools. States also must implement teacher preparation and training opportunities that impart to educators the social-emotional and anti-racist knowledge and skills they need to deliver culturally appropriate, whole-child interventions.¹⁵⁴

Finally, state leaders must implement discipline and student support models that divert students away from the juvenile justice system and toward resources that help them succeed in all schools. These include mental health services, counseling, and enhanced academic supports.¹⁵⁵ Where SROs are present, they should be required to complete social-emotional training and be well versed in defined and appropriate student disciplinary and de-escalation methods that refer children more often to school administrators than to the court system.^{156,157} Turning to legal actions through the juvenile justice system should always be the last resort, tried only after all other options to help and support a student are exhausted.

The Cost:

By 2020, 40 states were spending more than \$500,000 per child per year to confine young offenders.¹⁵⁸ A 2009 report that examined the costs associated with juvenile justice found that for each residential placement in the juvenile justice system, some Southern states spent anywhere from \$11,136 to \$18,936 annually on educational services alone.¹⁵⁹

The ROI:

Juvenile justice programs that help prevent young people from becoming re-offenders could save society about \$3.9 million per youth.¹⁶⁰ This considers not only the savings associated with students not becoming repeat offenders and the high societal costs associated with criminal activity, but also the returns on having those students become productive, contributing members of society.

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED BY LEVERAGING A DIVERSE SET OF POLICY ACTIONS

Our current society demands that education be the main driver of broad state and national outcomes, including raising families' economic status, supporting thriving industry, boosting the national GDP, and keeping the U.S. competitive in global markets. Schools face immense pressure to alleviate hunger and address mental health challenges, to provide childcare, to educate, and to prepare a viable workforce. The idea that education can or should treat all the nation's ills grossly ignores the roles that income, nutrition, housing, employment, and interaction with the justice system play in creating the circumstances in which children grow and learn.

Racial "achievement gaps" for children stem from opportunity gaps and resource gaps caused by myriad policies that reinforce inadequate school resourcing, food insecurity, generational poverty, and housing injustice. Gaps persist because they are engrained in programs and funding models that maintain them. Policies have been proposed to address undesirable differences in access and achievement for Black schoolchildren and those from low-income families, but there is often a significant disconnect between the benefits such policies promise and their insufficient or adverse effects.

One example of this is early learning standards and required assessments. Early learning standards are intended to ensure young students are prepared for the elementary grades (learning the alphabet or how to count). However, this move toward increased rigor at an early age takes away from play-based learning activities that research has shown for years to be more meaningful and effective learning strategies than rote memorization. These standards, and the standardized assessments that accompany them, do not account for the different developmental growth patterns of young children and may label some children as developmentally "behind" when in fact their learning simply doesn't follow a standardized trajectory, nor are their skills and abilities adequately measured by the test.¹⁶¹

Workforce gaps are symptoms of inequitable education, prejudiced labor practices, and housing discrimination, not the effects of being Black, Brown, or poor. Low wages, workforce discrimination, and inadequate childcare serve as enormous roadblocks to deprived workers advancing even to middle-class status.

The educational process does not happen in a vacuum. Interventions that will close opportunity gaps in schools must extend beyond classrooms to undo the damage of historically racist policies, insufficient funding and policy implementation, and discriminatory practices across industries throughout U.S. history. It is time for private and public leaders and policymakers alike to address the related variables that influence children's learning. Education cannot compensate for all the inequities in our nation, particularly when schools serving the most vulnerable students are deeply underfunded and understaffed. We must recognize that disparities are a function of historic and current policies and not individual characteristics.

The social determinants of education have a broad impact on students' lives, and focusing on them through effective policy can improve outcomes not only for our most underserved students but for our nation as a whole. When workers earn higher wages, they bolster the economy with their spending. When adults have postsecondary credentials, the nation benefits from a skilled and innovative workforce. Furthermore, diversity benefits students and workers of all races and backgrounds. When people are exposed to viewpoints different from their own, they have more opportunities to think critically and creatively, which has positive impacts for both individuals and their communities. **Diversity has been found to promote cognitive skills and civic engagement, enhance group problem-solving abilities, and help prepare students for adulthood.**¹⁶² It is only through embracing diversity and working to acknowledge and address the damage of the past that we will meet the lofty but necessary goal of ensuring equal access for everyone. Only by serving the underserved can we truly achieve our nation's goal of excellence in education.



Potential Policy Levers: Poverty and Food Insecurity

1. Expand federal programs that address poverty and food insecurity, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children program. Expand support to help families access resources, including training and employment programs, in addition to the supplemental support programs mentioned.
2. Invest in struggling low-income communities and segregated communities of color. Revitalize housing, community buildings, and infrastructure, and invest in local small businesses.
3. Connect families with opportunities to increase their incomes and build wealth, including by developing and implementing adult education programs in underserved, segregated, and rural communities and by implementing policies that boost homeownership among Black families and other families of color.
4. Increase access to school meal programs, including funding healthy school meals for all children. Expand access to out-of-school meals for families—before and after school—as well.
5. Raise state minimum wage requirements and promote transparent pay practices to help ensure that all low- and middle-income earners' wages are increased proportionately. Support workers' unionization and require businesses to implement robust paid family and medical leave policies for all workers.
6. Invest in state need-based student financial aid programs that help more people of color and students from low-income families attain higher education credentials without accumulating large amounts of debt.
7. Implement universal childcare to help more working parents, especially mothers, participate in the labor force.



Potential Policy Levers: Housing

1. Support Black families and other families of color in achieving homeownership. Increase down-payment assistance, tax credits, and affordable credit options for low-income individuals and first-time homebuyers.
2. Expand housing policies that create more mixed-income communities. Reform zoning standards that allow for greater variation in housing and lot sizes. Set aside public property in mid- and high-income communities, and use government grants to build affordable housing there. Increase the availability of housing vouchers that enable low-income families to purchase homes.
3. Invest in low-income and racially segregated communities. Offer tax credits to incentivize purchasing and revitalizing homes and businesses, and implement property-tax relief programs for low-income homeowners who invest in housing repairs.
4. Expand access to home improvement, foreclosure prevention, and emergency financial assistance for low-income families.
5. Increase housing mobility by offering moving assistance and financial counseling services to Black families and other low-income or first-time homebuyers.
6. Allow low-income taxpayers to pay property taxes more frequently than once or twice a year and provide tax credits to help ease tax burdens and the impacts of rapid rate tax increases for low- and middle-income families.
7. Pass housing policies that will increase racial and socioeconomic diversity among students in neighborhood public schools. Ensure that affordable housing is available near all schools to make it possible for teachers and staff to live in the neighborhoods in which they teach. Additionally, encourage funding for underserved neighborhoods to make those communities more attractive to potential school staff.



Potential Policy Levels: Criminal Justice System

1. Eliminate prison sentences for low-level crimes.
2. End minimum mandatory sentencing practices and implement proportional sentencing mandates.
3. Provide greater access to rehabilitation services for all inmates and released convicts.
4. Implement mental health and addiction recovery services in place of increased jail time for re-offenders who recidivate due to mental health struggles and addictions.
5. Mitigate disparities caused by the war on drugs, including scaling back prison terms for nonviolent and low-level drug offenses, limiting the authority of law enforcement officers to arrest people for drug possession, and reducing prison sentences for currently incarcerated individuals.
6. Implement racial impact laws that mandate states to measure the disparate effects of crime policies based on race. This includes increasing accuracy in recording incarceration rates by race and ethnicity.
7. Implement diversity and inclusion training for law enforcement officials, and train them in the same de-escalation techniques provided to mental health care providers. Implement additional ongoing professional development.



Potential Policy Levels: Workplace Practices

1. Fully fund and implement state antidiscrimination agencies and empower state agencies to address workplace discrimination claims.
2. Eliminate liability exclusions for small companies that allow them to ignore employment discrimination laws and treat staff differently or deny promotions based on race.
3. Make protections under the federal Fair Labor Standards and Wagner Act fully inclusive of all industry workers and repeal all state “right-to-work” laws.
4. Lift company minimum employee thresholds that block antidiscrimination enforcement.
5. Develop and sustainably fund programs and institutions that prepare workers of color for industries in which they are historically underrepresented, especially historically Black colleges and universities, which are disproportionately successful at preparing Black students for jobs in science, technology, and engineering.
6. Within state agencies, understand the status of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and prioritize interventions that increase racial equity, including those that identify and eliminate bias and informal barriers in hiring and promotion practices.
7. Expand access to affordable child and family care—during, before, and after typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workdays—and increase other family work benefits, including family leave policies.
8. Incentivize businesses to increase their professional development and employee training opportunities. Strengthen community partnerships that increase access to higher education certificates, especially for underserved communities and in high-wage, high-growth industries.
9. Provide more platforms and create new industry networks to amplify the experiences of women of color in leadership and allow them to provide guidance and support to other women of color and women from low-income communities as they advance in their careers.
10. Incentivize programs that prepare more workers of color and those from low-income backgrounds for leadership positions, and implement diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development programs for those already in leadership to encourage greater diversity among those newly hired and promoted.



Potential Policy Levers: Childcare and Early Childhood Education

1. Expand access to free high-quality early childhood and free prekindergarten programs and sustainably fund those programs based on fixed costs and annual enrollment numbers rather than attendance records, which change throughout the year.
2. Ensure that early learning standards are culturally responsive and reflect the diversity of people and communities. Add equity measures to quality rating systems and provide financial support and professional development opportunities to help providers achieve equity standards.
3. Ensure that all students receive a high-quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum and expand the use of appropriate, culturally responsive developmental assessments, and use reliable tools to identify struggling children at an earlier age.
4. Use subsidies to reimburse childcare centers based on operating costs and real costs associated with providing quality care. Dedicate additional financial support to help centers meet quality and equity benchmarks and state licensing requirements.
5. Increase the use of contracts and grants to subsidize existing providers and attract new ones into the system. Monitor the quality of vendors and target subsidies to providers in underserved and rural communities, and grant subsidies that remain consistent, covering centers' fixed costs, even as families move in and out of programs.
6. Incorporate a social determinants of education framework into state policies and programs. Implement trauma-informed care and culturally relevant, healing-centered approaches to help mitigate the effects of toxic stress on young children, especially Black children and other marginalized populations.
7. Raise wages for childcare workers and early education providers, including home-based providers, and ensure that alternative subsidy calculations include appropriate livable-wage estimations. States can establish minimum wage standards for their childcare system and convene educator wage boards to develop pay scales commensurate with educators' training and experience.
8. Networks and alliances between childcare providers allow them to share limited staff, resources, and various administrative activities, including those related to funding. States can encourage these networks by offering startup grants and technical assistance or by making changes to state licensing rules that make it easier for programs to share resources.
9. Gather a broad group of stakeholders around a unified vision for universal state childcare that provides quality, affordable childcare and early education opportunities to all families.



Potential Policy Levers: Education

1. Ensure universal attendance in high-quality kindergarten programs. Use a multi-tiered system to identify struggling students, and target early interventions to underserved student groups, especially students from low-income families and students learning English.
2. Foster collaborative, stable, and quality district and school leadership. Provide professional development opportunities for educators, school administrators, and local leadership to bolster these efforts.
3. Ensure that students of color and other historically underserved students are taught by well-prepared and licensed teachers by advancing evidence-based policies that support teacher preparation, recruitment, development, and retention.

4. Adopt a social determinants of education framework and invest in community school approaches to meet the needs of the whole student. Cross-pollinate community resources to expand diversity and ensure that under-resourced communities are connected to resources that exist in other, more affluent neighborhoods.
5. Support parent and community engagement that results in shared accountability to improve school systems. Invest in educating the parent workforce and implement culturally appropriate ways to engage parents, including making opportunities more accessible for working parents who may have obligations during school hours or in the evening. Encourage teachers and administrators to form relationships with parents outside of the school, including by performing home visits.
6. Provide the necessary supports, resources, and opportunities to schools with low-performing groups of students and with significant gaps in student performance as compared to their peers. Boost funding supports for struggling schools and revise punitive funding formulas that harm them while rewarding already high-performing schools with more funding than they need.
7. Ensure that teachers and school administrators receive proper training to identify their own implicit bias, to become culturally informed and anti-racist practitioners equipped to implement appropriate discipline in school while offering whole-child support for struggling students that meet each student's academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs.
8. Implement policies that support the reentry of children who have been suspended or expelled back into traditional schools. End the practice of sending students to disciplinary alternative schools as stepping stones into the juvenile justice system.
9. Promote a culturally relevant, rich, and rigorous curriculum that prepares students for success in college and the workforce. Ensure that all students have equitable access to accelerated learning options that prepare them for high-demand, growing industries with high-wage entry-level positions.
10. Support making schools physically and emotionally safe environments for every student. Provide teachers with social-emotional training and professional development experiences. Only employ student resource officers who are specifically and highly trained to work in schools, to be anti-racist, and to implement appropriate disciplinary policies.
11. Increase emphasis on early reading and math standards, assessment, and teaching methodologies in teacher preparation programs, and implement the use of evidence-based assessments and interventions for students who struggle early.
12. Eliminate voucher programs and microschoools that divert public funds to private schools.
13. Reform school funding by sharing state tax revenues across local school districts so that per-student allocations are more equitable and that high-need, high-cost schools are funded proportionately based on the actual cost of providing a high-quality education for all students.
14. Encourage efforts that increase diversity in the teacher workforce, including by creating lower-cost options for teacher preparation programs, implementing recruitment programs that target diverse populations, and improving working conditions and compensation for the existing teacher workforce.
15. Ensure that all educators receive high-quality preparation and training, ongoing professional development, and culturally sensitive social and emotional learning opportunities. This is especially important for teachers who are in their first five years of service and for those who primarily teach underserved students—Black students, other students of color, and students living in low-income families.
16. Reform punitive accountability systems that underfund struggling schools. End the overreliance of accountability systems on standardized tests that are biased toward students already more likely to perform well. Ensure that funding is equitable and that struggling schools receive consistent additional support and resources, and are well-resourced with high-quality, experienced educators.

17. Improve and maintain excellent facilities for all students. Ensure that students have plenty of quality school supplies, up-to-date instructional materials, and access to current technologies and broadband service.
18. Increase access to higher-level math and science courses and accelerated learning opportunities, including dual enrollment courses, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses that award college credit and count toward postsecondary credentials.
19. Strengthen partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions that help more students make a successful transition into postsecondary education and that prepare students to attain degrees and credentials of value.
20. Raise teacher salaries to a level commensurate with their education, training, and experience and to a level that is comparable to market salaries in private industries. Ensure current and future funding of teacher pension plans and expand health care and retirement benefits.
21. Provide financial support and other student resources to students of color pursuing teacher degrees to ensure that they complete their degrees and teacher preparation programs.



Potential Policy Levers: Student Discipline

1. Implement nonpunitive, student-appropriate discipline practices and evaluate zero-tolerance policies for nonviolent offenses, as well as those that impose harsh punitive measures regardless of the circumstance or infraction.
2. Require that all law enforcement and security officers who work with children be trained in social-emotional learning, mental health, and age-appropriate disciplinary and de-escalation techniques. Ensure that all those who work in schools receive ongoing professional training in child development, racial equity, and social-emotional learning.
3. Implement diversity and implicit bias training for all school educators and administrators in alignment with school board policy.
4. Remove school resource officers, implement codes of conduct for existing ones, or replace them with highly qualified professionals who are specifically trained to work with students.
5. Set and apply the same educational standards that exist for all students in a state to the schools and educational programs in the juvenile justice system.
6. Provide additional mental health and academic supports to students from low-income families and those attending high-poverty schools. Extend these supports to family members.
7. Establish effective and timely methods of testing and reporting on the educational status and progress of every child and youth in the juvenile justice system.
8. Develop and implement an individual educational plan and learning strategy, including special education, developmental services, academic motivation, and persistence, to guide the instruction of and services provided to every student in the juvenile justice system.
9. Establish systems of coordination and cooperation to provide seamless transition of students from and back into public schools, and that emphasize the importance of children remaining in school.
10. Create and maintain data systems to measure institutional and systemwide application of disciplinary policies and ensure that data include measures of race and ethnic identity to identify where policies are being applied disproportionately.

Appendix A

The following are the Southern Education Foundation’s proposed categories for a social determinants of education framework. This framework was adapted, in part, from Heather Sammen’s 2017 social determinants of education framework¹⁶³ as well as the Social Determinants of Learning model developed by Chamberlain University.¹⁶⁴ SEF’s proposed physical health and mental and emotional well-being categories will be explored in depth in *Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part II*, while the entire framework and included categories will be described in greater detail in another upcoming brief in the *EVES* series on the SDE framework.

Socioeconomic Factors	Family Factors	<i>Income level / Poverty status Parents’ educational attainment level Parents’ marriage status Parents’ employment status Household net worth Transportation</i>
	Workforce	<i>Job instability Advancing automation Access to childcare Fluctuating or insufficient work hours Work-related hazards or stress</i>
Physical Environment	Housing	<i>High mobility or homelessness Crowding in the home Inadequate housing Building pollutants</i>
	Neighborhood	<i>Community violence and perceived safety Social vulnerability Living in segregated communities Rurality / Urbanicity</i>
	School	<i>Inadequate facilities, materials, and equipment Classroom factors (class size, student-to-teacher ratio) School climate Advanced curricular offerings Social-emotional learning supports</i>
Sociocultural Environment	Social Network	<i>Social and human capital Quality of adult connections Community values and culture</i>
	Discrimination	<i>Colorism Gender bias Racism Disability discrimination</i>
	Cultural Politics	<i>Policy’s influence on culture and social notions Social cohesion and institutional rules Digital culture and social media influence Social movements</i>
Health and Wellness	Physical Health	<i>Early care Access to medical and dental care Physical disabilities Environmental pollutants</i>
	Nutrition	<i>Food insecurity Access to nutritious foods</i>
	Mental and Emotional Well-being	<i>Environmental and relationship stresses Mental health conditions Trauma</i>

Endnotes

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- ⁷ U.S. total includes imputation for nonreporting states. Delaware, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia reported only the count of students who were eligible based on direct certification. Direct certification is the process by which children are certified for free meals based on household participation in one or more means-tested federal assistance programs—such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—without the need for a household application. Tennessee percentage was based on an imputation for survey nonresponse. State-level imputations for 2016–17 through 2018–19 were based on the reported percentages for 2015–16 applied to the 2016–17 through 2018–19 enrollments. The SEF median was calculated based on state data. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD). *Public elementary/secondary school universe survey, 2000–01, 2010–11, 2016–17, 2017–18, and 2018–19*. (This table was prepared October 2020.)
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Economic Vitality and Education in the South

The second report in the *EYES* series, *Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part II: Projections for a Post-Pandemic South (EYES II)*, will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated automation and created permanent shifts in the workforce, displacing many pre-pandemic workers, with a disproportionate effect on those who are Black and Brown, women, and low-wage earners. The report will discuss how these changes have affected and will continue to affect education, especially the teacher workforce and postsecondary students, and the implications for educators trying to prepare students for occupations that may not yet exist.

Furthermore, *EYES II* will continue to explore aspects of the social determinants of education framework, including physical and mental health and well-being. *EYES II* will focus especially on disparate impacts of COVID-19 on people of color and the effects of pandemic-related stress on teachers and education leaders.

As part of the *EYES* series, SEF will also publish a brief explaining the rationale for the categories in its social determinants of education framework. The brief will address the ways in which extra-educational systems impact children's learning and discuss the imperative for states to pass and implement policies accordingly.



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Southern Education Foundation, founded in 1867, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by partners and donors committed to advancing equitable education policies and practices that elevate learning for Black students, other students of color, and students from low-income families in the Southern states. We develop and disseminate research-based solutions for policymakers and grow the capacity of education leaders and influencers to create systemic change.