



Miles To Go

The State of Education for Black Students in America



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Miles To Go

The State of Education for Black Students in America

A report from the Southern Education Foundation
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Acknowledgments

Lead Author: Max Altman, *Director of Research and Policy, Southern Education Foundation*

Miles To Go Advisory Committee

Chandra L. Alston, *Senior Researcher, Learning Policy Institute*

Allison Boyle, *Research and Policy Specialist, Southern Education Foundation*

Soncia Coleman, *Editor, S.A. Coleman Consulting*

Tabitha Reynolds Hoang, *Research and Policy Analyst, Southern Education Foundation*

Raymond C. Pierce, *President and CEO, Southern Education Foundation*

Alan Richard, *Director of Communications, Southern Education Foundation*

Kenita T. Williams, *Chief Operating Officer, Southern Education Foundation*

We are grateful to all the professionals who advised SEF on this report.

Designer: Claire Newbury, *Newbury Design*

Copy Editor: David Raney

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A Letter from Raymond C. Pierce
*President and CEO of the
Southern Education Foundation*

Why the education of Black students is critical to the nation's future

As I write this letter, national elections are upon us and debate is under way on many critical policy issues and the direction of our nation. The state of our education systems and our ability to develop well-educated Americans, well-prepared for the future, is one of those critical issues.

Across the country, many school systems, higher education institutions, and the advocacy and research community in education are focused on greater equity in education. Founded in 1867, the Southern Education Foundation has focused historically on education opportunity. We began with building the first schools for Black students in the South.

Building on that legacy, we now focus on expanding education opportunity, education effectiveness, and education equity. The education of Black children, particularly in the southern states, was SEF's focus from the beginning.

Today, despite many decades of litigation, court-ordered desegregation, school reform, teacher development, and debate over more equitable funding and school choice, the state of education for Black students remains challenging. This report examines the most significant areas of concern.

Simply put, 70 years following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, far too many vestiges and remnants of the past systems of segregation and inequity continue to vibrate throughout the education landscape for most Black children in our nation. In many cases, these disparities are woven into the fabric of the current system that our children must navigate. Therefore, it should be no surprise that disparate outcomes continue to result from these systems.

Many complex factors have led to these continued disparities in education for Black children. Our education system and other factors that affect education are multi-faceted. Thoughtful conversations based on sound research and analysis are essential if we are to understand these challenges and work to strengthen education opportunity. These conversations can support the development of better-informed policies and practices that will elevate student learning.

I was first introduced to the Southern Education Foundation when I became a lawyer and worked in Little Rock, Arkansas, for John W. Walker – the legendary civil rights attorney. It was 1984, and Mr. Walker was preparing for a school desegregation case that would ultimately go before the U.S. Supreme Court: *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell*. Information and reporting from the Southern Education Foundation was a significant part of our preparation for that case. From that experience early in my career, I learned the importance of research and analysis in confronting education disparity and inequity.

The subject of disparities around educating Black students is vast and complex. This new *Miles To Go* report does not attempt to cover the entire landscape of this issue, but lifts up the most critical education issues that deserve our focus and examination – and can help us envision and develop more effective policies and practices in education.

This report also informs and reflects some of the programming at SEF. The Equity Assistance Center-South (EAC-South) is now based at SEF through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to assist public schools facing challenges on a range of civil rights concerns. The EAC-South provides a wealth of experience, research, and expertise to help K-12 school systems address inequities and disparities more effectively. Like our other programs at SEF, the EAC-South provides a front-seat view to improving students' opportunity to learn.

This *Miles To Go* report will not only bring greater attention to the remaining inequities that impact Black students. This report from SEF's Research and Policy team will also demonstrate that research and data analysis are the foundations of all SEF programs.

Our release of this new *Miles To Go* report comes 26 years after SEF published a similar volume on the education of Black students in the South. Unfortunately, many of the central issues still have not been fully addressed. SEF is pleased to share this report with all who are engaged in the work of advancing education opportunity. My hope is that we confront and address these challenges.



Raymond C. Pierce
President and CEO

Miles To Go

The State of Education for Black Students in America

Executive Summary

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Part I: K-12 Education

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

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

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

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

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

Part II: Postsecondary Education

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

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

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

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

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

Part III: Early Care and Education (ECE)

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

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

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

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

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

Key Recommendations and Takeaways

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

Ensure more equitable funding at all levels of education.

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

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

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

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

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

Address school discipline disparities.

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

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

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

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

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

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

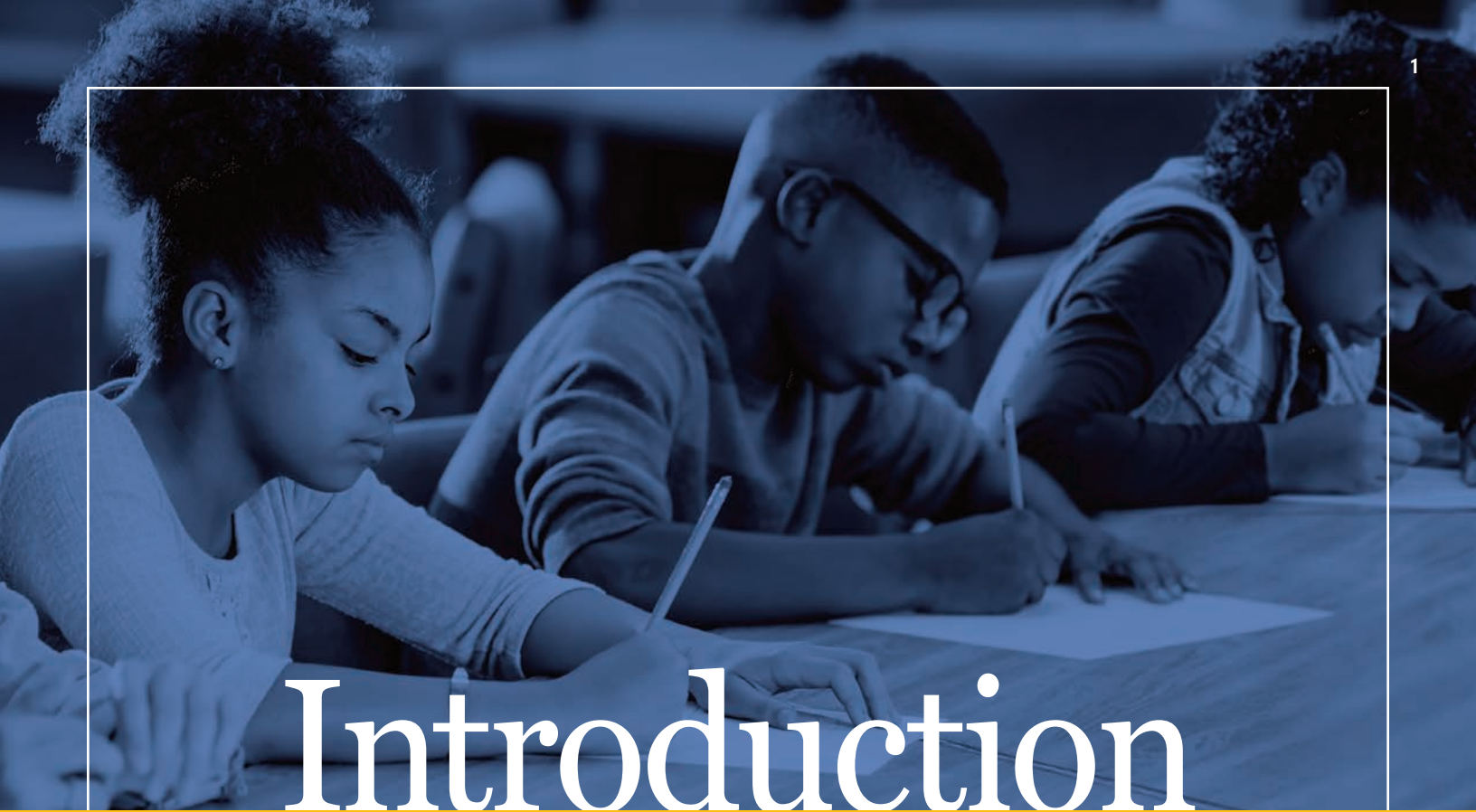
Focus on diversifying the teaching workforce at all levels. Only 6.1% of K-12 teachers are Black, and only 4.1% of full professors are Black, despite clear research evidence that access to a diverse set of educators benefits all students, and particularly Black students. Improve educators' training and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

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

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

Use data to identify, understand, and address disparities.

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



Introduction

Opportunity Gaps and the Education of Black Students

This report examines the current state of education for Black students in the United States. While the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) focuses today on increasing opportunity for all students of color and those from low-income families throughout the South, this report builds on SEF's original mission of establishing and improving the education of Black students. Founded in 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War, SEF was instrumental in building a formal system of education for Black children in the South.

Now, 157 years later, major disparities remain in the quality of education available to Black students across the nation. Chronic teacher shortages, racial segregation, limited access to advanced courses, and discriminatory school discipline are among the many challenges examined in this report that have especially pronounced effects on Black students. These disparities limit many students' opportunities to learn – creating *opportunity gaps*.

Seventy years after the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, which declared racially segregated public schooling unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, significant obstructions to Black students' educational opportunities remain. The *Brown* decision in 1954 met with substantial pushback from White leaders in the South, and what efforts there were to comply with the Supreme Court's decision led to the mass dismissal of many Black educators. As part of their federal court-ordered desegregation requirements, southern states eliminated nearly 39,000 Black teachers' positions from 1954 to 1965 – about half of the 82,000 Black teachers working in segregated schools across the country. These effects are still visible today in the severe shortages of Black teachers across the nation, which, as this report will show, strongly affect Black students' educational opportunities and outcomes.

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

This report focuses on Black students due to the persistent systemic challenges and opportunity gaps they face – stemming from the enduring legacy of enslavement, racial segregation, and discrimination, particularly in the South, that has shaped Black Americans' unique place in American society.

To address the educational inequities faced by Black students, it is crucial to first define what we mean by *equity*. There are many interpretations of equity in education; SEF maintains that equity will be achieved in part when race and family income no longer predict outcomes for students. Pursuing this vision of equity not only addresses the profound effects of discrimination still faced by Black students, but as this report shows, will benefit *all* Americans. Confronting the disparities in education detailed in this report can alleviate many national challenges that affect us all – in the economy, workforce, health and welfare, scientific and technological development, community and family well-being, and many other areas.

This report highlights key indicators and outcomes that provide insight on the educational experiences of Black students today in early care and education, K-12 schools, and postsecondary education – discrete educational periods, but along an educational continuum. This report also addresses how the current outcomes in early childhood development, standardized testing, high school graduation rates, college attendance and completion, and other measures often associated with an “achievement gap” are actually symptoms of opportunity gaps.¹

To fully understand the implications of education outcomes, we must recognize that *students are not all presented with the same level of opportunity to learn and succeed in school*. Opportunity gaps arise when schools do not provide all students with access to high-quality courses, when historical underinvestment in neighborhoods and communities limits resources in a way that prevents students from fully engaging in their education, and when limited school resources constrain students' opportunities. They arise when teachers hold lower expectations for some students than for others, and when those expectations affect how those students are treated. They arise when



“Achievement gaps” in early childhood development, standardized test scores, college attendance and completion, and other measures are actually symptoms of opportunity gaps.

families affected by poverty do not receive services that can disrupt those disparities. They arise when some students are disciplined at much higher rates than others for the same behaviors, and when students do not see their backgrounds or culture reflected in the school environment or curriculum.

Focusing solely on differences in student outcomes can lead to deficit thinking – seeing Black students and others as “at risk” and making these disparities seem permanent, as if gaps in outcomes are inherent for some student populations. Such a focus also places too much responsibility for these outcome gaps on students and their families, rather than the systems that perpetuate opportunity gaps.

It is important to note that while Black students are more likely to face opportunity gaps,² that does not predetermine negative outcomes or define the possibilities for what students can achieve. Every day

1 While much of the discussion in this report is about Black students, it also includes data specific to the experiences of Black teachers. In the same way that many Black students face systemic challenges that often limit their educational opportunity, so too do many Black teachers – and potential future Black teachers – face systemic challenges that limit their opportunity for teaching positions, adequate compensation, and appropriate job supports, among other things. As discussed later in this report, this results in extremely low representation of Black teachers in the teaching workforce, increased risk of turnover, and other challenges that deny students access to a diverse range of educators and deny educators and potential educators full opportunity to participate in the education system.

2 Note that this is not intended to suggest anything about *individual* Black students or their families. Like all Americans, Black families may be wealthy or low-income, rural, suburban, or urban. They may have experiences that fit all of the challenges identified here or none of them. The data that will be addressed show clear disparities *on average* and that Black students and families are *more likely* to face opportunity gaps.

in U.S. schools, many devoted teachers are employing effective strategies to teach all of their students. Many students are succeeding and developing new ideas that will leave their communities and world better than they found them. Educators and policymakers must address the challenges and opportunity gaps identified in this report, however, so that many more students can learn, grow, and succeed.

A Focus on the South

Twenty-six years ago, SEF published *Miles to Go: A Report on Black Students and Postsecondary Education in the South*,³ a seminal report that examined the persistent disparities in Black students' outcomes and opportunities at the dawning of the 21st century.

56% of Black Americans live in the 17 SEF states.

This new report examines national data but places a special emphasis on the South, defined by SEF as the 17 states that had a formal system of enslavement through the Civil War – Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. The educational challenges and opportunity gaps in this report hold profound implications for the South – where the concentration of Black Americans is about 50% higher than in the nation as a whole.

As of 2020, nearly 49.3 million people in the U.S. (about 15% of the population) identified as Black. Of those, 27.4 million Black Americans live in the South,

which comprises 40% of the total U.S. population but about 56% of its Black population.^{4,5} These numbers are also reflected in enrollment in early care and education (ECE), K-12, and postsecondary education: In ECE, the concentration of Black students is 57% higher in the South than in the U.S. as a whole. In K-12 schools, the concentration is 50% higher in the South than in the U.S. as a whole. In postsecondary education, it is 45% higher in the South than in the U.S. as a whole.⁶

Our emphasis on the South also reflects the deep connections to the South among Black populations in the Northeast and Midwest, and on the West Coast, stemming from the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South from 1916 to 1970.⁷ Many Black Americans maintain roots in the South. A greater understanding of the region's challenges in education can inform our understanding of these issues nationwide.

A Note on Data Sources and the Impact of COVID-19

Researchers continue to study the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic that first struck during the 2019–20 school year and changed so much about the world. The quantitative analysis in this report draws largely on the most recent data available from sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection. While some of these data come from the past several years, many come from the years immediately prior to the pandemic, not necessarily accounting for pandemic-related changes.⁸ However, there are some preliminary data on the impact of COVID-19.

3 Kronley, R. A., & Handley, C. V. (1998). *Miles to go: A report on black students and postsecondary education in the South*. Southern Education Foundation.

4 United States Census Bureau. (2023). *Annual estimates of the resident population by sex, race, and Hispanic origin for the United States: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2022*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-national-detail.html>

5 United States Census Bureau. (2023). *State population by characteristics: 2020–2023*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-detail.html>

6 22.6% of ECE students in the South are Black, compared with 14.7% nationally.

22.4% of K-12 students in the South are Black, compared with 14.9% nationally. This includes 21.5% of students enrolled in traditional (non-charter) public schools and 28.7% enrolled in charter schools in the South, compared to 14.2% in public non-charters and 24.4% in charters nationally. 12.4% of private school students in the South are Black, compared with 9.4% nationally. Relatively few Black students across the nation are homeschooled: only about 1.2% in 2019, compared with 1.9% of Hispanic students and 4% of White students.

18.1% of postsecondary students in the South are Black, compared with 12.5% nationally.

See: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_202.40.asp for ECE data;

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.50.asp for public school data; https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_216.90a.asp for charter-

school data; https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_205.30.asp for private school data; https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_206.10.asp for homeschool data; https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_306.60.asp for postsecondary data.

7 Wilkerson, I. (2011). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's great migration*. Vintage Books.

8 This report also occasionally refers to pre-pandemic data in instances where data collected during the pandemic make sense only in the context of the pandemic. For example, data on suspensions and expulsions during the pandemic are not very meaningful outside of that context because so many students were attending school virtually and the structure of teacher-student interactions was so different; in such instances the analysis is still of pre-pandemic data even if data from the pandemic are now available.

K-12 Education

Preliminary data show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities in K-12 education. An analysis of nearly 8,000 school districts found that scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) declined more during the pandemic in school districts with higher poverty levels and higher concentrations of families of color than in other districts. The same was true for students whose school districts spent more time in hybrid or remote instruction in the 2020-21 school year.⁹ Far more students in the South had access to in-person learning (up to 63.5% compared with 37% in the Midwest, 22% in the West, and 16% in the Northeast), but students of color had less access to in-person learning both in the South and nationally.¹⁰ A study of 4.9 million students in grades 3 through 8 found that racial inequality in student achievement during the pandemic widened nationally both within and between schools.¹¹

During the pandemic, Black students' test scores saw sharper declines than other students'.

The Education Recovery Scorecard, a collaboration of scholars at Harvard and Stanford Universities, found that among the 20 states for which data by race were available, Black students' scores on state-administered math and reading tests declined more than White students' scores during the pandemic. Black students' scores then improved somewhat more than White (and Hispanic) students' scores from 2022 to 2023, but the difference between White and Black students' average scores was still greater in 2023 than it had been in 2019 before the pandemic.¹²

The National Academy of Education and many other research organizations are conducting ongoing studies to better understand the inequities that arose during the pandemic and how they can be addressed. Much of this early research on academic outcomes since the beginning of the pandemic has found or theorized that pre-pandemic inequities for Black students worsened because they had less access to resources, high-quality teaching, and other learning opportunities and academic support services.¹³

Postsecondary Education

Federal survey data show that in 34% of Black households, at least one adult canceled postsecondary education plans in fall 2020, compared with 32% of Hispanic households, 28% of White households, and 20% of Asian households.¹⁴ The same pattern was true for fall 2021.¹⁵ Delayed college plans are associated with lower degree-completion rates and potential barriers to college reentry – providing additional evidence of economic hardship from the pandemic that disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic communities.¹⁶

A study from researchers at North Carolina Central University, a historically Black university, found that students had experienced substantial financial impacts from the pandemic, but that they were mitigated by the Higher Education Emergency Relief

34%

of Black households had at least one adult cancel plans for postsecondary education in fall 2020.

- 9 Fahle, E.M., Kane T. J., Patterson T., Reardon S. F., Staiger, D. O., Stuart, E. A. (2023) *School district and community factors associated with learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf
- 10 Oster, E., Jack, R., Halloran, C., Schoof, J., McLeod, D., Yang, H., Roche, J., & Roche, D. (2021). Disparities in learning mode access among K-12 students during the COVID-19 pandemic, by race/ethnicity, geography, and grade level - United States, September 2020-April 2021. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 70(26), 953-958. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7026e2>
- 11 Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Lewis, K., Ruzek, E., & Johnson, A. (2022). The COVID-19 school year: Learning and recovery across 2020-2021. *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221099306>
- 12 Fahle, E.M., Kane T. J., Patterson, T., Reardon, S. F., & Staiger, D. O. (2024). *Education recovery scorecard: The first year of pandemic recovery: A district-level analysis*. <https://educationrecoverycard.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ERS-Report-Final-1.31.pdf>
- 13 E.g., Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/COVID-19-Education-Impact-Report-2023.pdf>
- 14 McCann, C. (2020). *New federal survey data show the pandemic has hit would-be college students hard*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/new-federal-survey-data-show-pandemic-has-hit-would-be-college-students-hard/>
- 15 NCES. (2022). *Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on fall plans for postsecondary education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/tpb/covid-impact-postsecondary-plans>
- 16 Ibid.

Fund. The study also found that loss of access to on-campus residency limited students' opportunities for academic and social growth. Researchers found concerns about the quality of student learning in virtual environments and suggested that information about institutional resources for students should be made available more frequently and consistently.¹⁷

Early Care and Education (ECE)

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to the ECE system. To comply with health and safety guidelines, many schools and child-care centers closed temporarily, and enrollment dropped in those that remained open. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of 3- to 6-year-olds enrolled in preschool dropped significantly between 2019 and

2021, from 51.1% to 41.8%.¹⁸ By 2021, there were only 4.1 million children enrolled in preschool, the lowest number since collection of these data started in 2005.¹⁹ The impact was even more severe for Black children, whose enrollment rates fell by 13.4 percentage points.²⁰

Further, a recent report estimates that nearly 16,000 child-care centers and licensed family child-care programs closed permanently between December 2019 and March 2021, representing a 9% decrease in the number of such centers and programs nationwide.²¹ The long-term effects of these disruptions on children, families, and ECE providers remain to be seen.



During the pandemic, preschool enrollment dropped and thousands of child-care centers closed permanently.

¹⁷ Mayo, M., Carrigan, S., Oliver, S., Green, J., & Rao, J. (2024). *The impact of Covid-19 on college affordability for low income and rural students of North Carolina*. [Manuscript in preparation]. School of Education, North Carolina Central University.

¹⁸ Hernandez, E. L. & McElrath, K. (2023, August 30). *Public and private preschool enrollment from 2019 to 2021 at its lowest since 2005*. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/08/preschool-enrollment.html>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Child Care Aware of America. (March 2022). *Demanding change: Repairing our childcare system*. [https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2022-03-FallReport-FINAL%20\(1\).pdf?utm_campaign=Budget%20Reconciliation%20Fall%202021&utm_source=website&utm_content=22_demandingchange_pdf_update332022](https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2022-03-FallReport-FINAL%20(1).pdf?utm_campaign=Budget%20Reconciliation%20Fall%202021&utm_source=website&utm_content=22_demandingchange_pdf_update332022)



Part I

Outcomes and Opportunity in K-12 Education

Significant outcome gaps between Black students and other student groups reflect the disparities still present in students' educational opportunities.

As of the 2022 school year, there were about 56 million total students and about eight million Black students in the K-12 education system in the United States.²²

This system consists of a range of schooling options, including traditional public schools, public charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling. When possible, we address data covering all students – for example, all students can take the SAT – but at times we note that certain data only apply to public school students.

- **Public schools:** Approximately 7.4 million Black K-12 students (about 93% of all Black students) are enrolled in public schools.²³ This includes:
 - **Traditional public schools:** Approximately 6.5 million Black K-12 students (82%) are enrolled in traditional public schools.²⁴

- **Public charter schools:** Approximately 900,000 Black K-12 students (11%) attend public charter schools.²⁵

- **Private schools:** Approximately 500,000 Black K-12 students (6%) are in private schools.²⁶

- **Homeschooling:** Less than 100,000 Black K-12 students (slightly over 1%) are homeschooled.²⁷

Outcomes in K-12 Education

The sections below provide a detailed analysis of key educational outcomes for Black students in K-12 education. These include students' standardized test scores, enrollment in accelerated courses, absenteeism data, high school graduation data, and college enrollment rates.²⁸

22 NCES. (2024). *Condition of education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/#indicators>

23 NCES. (2023). *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2031*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.50.asp

24 NCES. (2024). *Condition of education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/#indicators>

25 Ibid.

26 NCES. (2023). *Percentage distribution of students enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools, by school orientation and selected characteristics: Selected years, fall 2009 through fall 2021*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_205.30.asp

27 NCES. (2021). *Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through 12th grade, by selected child, parent, and household characteristics: Selected years, 1999 through 2019*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_206.10.asp

28 While many students attend college, this report is in no way intended to suggest that college is the correct or preferred option for all students. Rather, all students should have the same opportunity to attend college if they so choose, and the data presented here show that Black students do not have the same opportunity to attend college – and do not enroll at proportionally the same rates – as their peers.

93% of Black students in the U.S. attend public schools.

Overall, the data show significant performance gaps and persistent disparities in educational outcomes across all the areas covered in this report. These outcomes reflect systemic issues within education such as inequitable access to resources and funding, disciplinary practices, and access to quality curriculum and teaching – as well as issues outside of education, including poverty and food insecurity, geography and neighborhood resourcing, the criminal justice system, and the workforce and child-care systems. We address systemic issues in education in the following sections on opportunity gaps. For in-depth discussion of systemic issues outside of education, see the 2022 SEF report *Economic Vitality and Education in the South, Part I: The South's Pre-Pandemic Position*.²⁹

Standardized Tests

From state-level assessments to college entrance exams, standardized testing is a significant component of the educational landscape in the U.S. These tests have played an important role in identifying performance gaps and holding educators accountable for student performance. However, critics of standardized testing argue that student achievement is not simply a reflection of school factors like quality of teaching and that student performance can be influenced by many other

factors (e.g., neighborhood resourcing, safety, food insecurity).³⁰ Additionally, many researchers and statisticians argue that standardized tests lack validity for broad conclusions about student knowledge.³¹ Other common critiques of these tests include that they are biased and/or not culturally inclusive³² and that they often measure students' ability to take tests more than actual knowledge of content.³³

State-Level Assessments

Public school students in every state are required to take state-level standardized tests.³⁴ Federally mandated annual testing is a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, with its increased focus on "accountability" and the use of tests to evaluate schools and sanction them for failing to sufficiently improve.³⁵ The tests and specifics vary – some states employ standardized assessments created by national organizations or consortia, like Smarter Balanced or ACT Aspire, while others require state-specific tests such as the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) or the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Still other states require a combination of the two: for example, Louisiana administers the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) to students in grades 3-8 and then requires all 11th grade students to take the ACT.

For this reason, results on state tests are not comparable across the South or nationally. However, state-level data show that Black students have the lowest testing performance outcomes of any identified racial group in 15 of the 17 southern states in English-language arts and in all 17 southern states in math.³⁶

29 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

30 Ibid.

31 E.g., Koretz, D. M. (2008). *Measuring up*. Harvard University Press. A lack of validity means that these tests necessarily measure specific ability on an arbitrary selection of items that does not actually enable any broad analysis of student knowledge in a topic. In other words, if a student takes a single 50-question math test and answers 34 of them correctly, this can tell us a lot about the student's knowledge of those particular items. However, that student may have performed quite differently on a test with different questions (regardless of knowledge or ability, students may simply miss some questions and correctly answer others; a test that coincidentally includes many questions of the former type will result in a very different score than one with more of the latter set for any given student). This makes what statisticians call the confidence interval, or the margin of error of the test, far too large to draw any real conclusions.

32 E.g., Kim, K. H., & Zabelina, D. (2015). Cultural bias in assessment: Can creativity assessment help?. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 6(2). <https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/301/856>

33 Dutro, E., & Selland, M. (2012). "I like to read, but I know I'm not good at it": Children's perspectives on high stakes testing in a high poverty school. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 42(3), 340-367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2012.00597.x>

34 These tests are generally only required in public schools, but private schools sometimes elect to administer them as well.

35 While initially a popular bipartisan initiative, No Child Left Behind has since been criticized for its emphasis on standardized tests and ultimately did not meet its stated goal of closing the achievement gap. The 2015 update of the law returned responsibility for "accountability" to the states (although it maintained federal testing requirements). See e.g., Reardon, S.F., Greenberg, E.H., Kalogrides, D., Shores, K.A., & Valentino, R.A. (2013). *Left behind? The effect of No Child Left Behind on academic achievement gaps*. Stanford CEPA. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/left-behind-effect-no-child-left-behind-academic-achievement-gaps>

36 Based on authors' analysis of state-level testing outcome data on the [Alabama] Scantron Performance Test, ACT Aspire, Florida Standards Assessments, Georgia Milestones Assessment, Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress, Louisiana Educational Assessment Program, Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program, Mississippi Academic Assessment Program, Missouri Assessment Program, North Carolina End-of-Grade Tests, Oklahoma School Testing Program, SCReady, Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, [Virginia] Standards of Learning, West Virginia General Summative Assessment, and data from The Covid-19 Hub.

In all 17 southern states, Black students scored lower overall in math on state tests than any other group – and lower in 15 of the 17 states in English/language arts.

NAEP Scores

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as “the nation’s report card,” is a standardized test administered every two years to students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in math and reading. Unlike state tests, NAEP scores allow for regional and national comparisons. Black students’ average scores on NAEP are lower than the national averages for all students, although the gap has narrowed slightly in recent decades.

In the most recent NAEP results in reading, the average Black student’s score is second-lowest (after Native American students) in grade 4 and lowest in grades 8 and 12. These average scores for Black students were 18, 16, and 22 points, respectively, below the average scores for all students who took the exams, using a 500-point scale. Average NAEP scores for Black students in reading and math have increased

slightly over the last 30 years, while the averages for all students have remained mostly steady. The gap between Black students’ average scores and averages for all students narrowed by seven points between 1992 and 2022 in grades 4 and 8.³⁷ This narrowing has not occurred in grade 12.³⁸

In the most recent NAEP results in math, Black students’ average scores were the lowest of any group in grades 4, 8, and 12. These average math scores for Black students were 19 and 21 points below the averages for all students in grades 4 and 8 on a 500-point scale, and 22 points below the average grade 12 math score for all students on a 300-point scale.³⁹ Black students’ average NAEP scores also tend to be lower than the overall averages at the state level, particularly in the South. In 2019 across the 17-state SEF region, the *highest* average statewide NAEP score for Black students in grade 4 reading (211, in Florida) was lower than the *lowest* average statewide score for White students (214, in West Virginia).^{40, 41}

These differences in scores show the urgent need to identify strategies for systemic change and to develop interventions that can reverse this trend in performance. It is also important to recognize the high stakes that surround testing in education. States and school districts must address these test-score gaps by strengthening supports for students.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Average Scores in Reading and Math, 2022

READING			MATH		
	Average NAEP reading scores for all students	Average NAEP reading scores for Black students		Average NAEP math scores for all students	Average NAEP math scores for Black students
4th grade	217	199	4th grade	236	217
8th grade	260	244	8th grade	274	253
12th grade	285	263	12th grade	150 (out of 300 points)	128 (out of 300 points)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2022 data
Grade 12 scores are from 2019.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2022 data
Grade 12 scores are from 2019.

37 Again, this is 7 points on a 500 point scale, not 7 percentage points.
 38 NCES. (2022). *Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale score, by sex, race/ethnicity, and grade: Selected years, 1992 through 2022.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_221.10.asp?current=yes
 39 NCES (2022). *Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics scale score, by sex, race/ethnicity, and grade: Selected years, 1990 through 2022.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_222.10.asp?current=yes
 40 NCES. (2019). *Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale score of 4th-grade public school students, by race/ethnicity, school’s rate of free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, and state: 2019.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_221.50.asp?current=yes
 41 NCES. (2022). *Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale score of 4th-grade public school students, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1992 through 2022.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_221.40.asp?current=yes

SAT and ACT Scores

The SAT and ACT are standardized tests that have been traditionally used by colleges in admissions decisions. Both nationally and in the South, the percentages of Black students taking the SAT and ACT remain disproportionately low compared to their school enrollment numbers.⁴² In spite of a decrease in the number of total test takers in recent years, these proportions have not changed much in the long term: for example, in 1998 only 11% of SAT-takers were Black,⁴³ and 25 years later in 2023 the rate was 11.8%.⁴⁴

11% of SAT-takers were Black in 1998 – and only 11.8% in 2023.

Average scores among Black students who take the SAT and ACT are notably lower than the U.S. averages, and this difference has remained consistent since 2017, when the SAT was redesigned.⁴⁵ The average SAT score for Black students in 2022 was 926 (out of 1600) compared with 1050 for all students,⁴⁶ and the average ACT score for Black students in 2022 was 16.1 (out of 36) compared to 19.1 across all students.⁴⁷

While colleges' emphasis on standardized college admissions tests has declined in recent years – with the National Center for Fair and Open Testing estimating that nearly 2,000 colleges and universities

do not require SAT or ACT scores as of fall 2024⁴⁸ – there is some evidence that this trend is reversing,⁴⁹ and the SAT and ACT continue to play a major part in many students' college options. It is essential to address the disparities in participation and performance on these tests, as well as the longstanding criticism that these tests perpetuate racial inequities.⁵⁰

Accelerated Coursework

The Advanced Placement Program (AP) is a set of college-level courses offered at the high school level, with the potential for students to receive college credit based on their performance on end-of-course exams. Courses cover a wide range of topics in seven academic subjects and are developed by committees of high school AP teachers and college faculty. Success in these courses can provide substantial academic and financial benefits.⁵¹ Data show that students who take AP courses tend to have better college entrance exam scores, college GPAs, writing skills, college graduation rates, and rates of advanced degree attainment.⁵²

Unfortunately, many Black students do not have access to AP courses.⁵³ Black students are underrepresented in AP courses both nationally and in the South.⁵⁴ While they make up 14.9% of all K-12 students in the U.S., they only account for 9.5% of AP students. In the SEF region, the gap is even wider: Black students make up 22.4% of K-12 students but only 13.8% of AP students.⁵⁵ Black students are underrepresented in AP courses in all 17 states in the region,

42 20.1% of students who participated in the SAT/ACT in the South were Black (compared to 22.4% of enrolled students) and 14% of students who participated in the SAT/ACT nationally were Black (compared to 14.9% of enrolled students). See: Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2024). *National Data*. <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/profile/us?surveyYear=2020>

43 Lawrence, I., Rigol, G.W., Van Essen, T., & Jackson, C. A. (2002). *A historical perspective on the SAT: 1926–2001*. The College Board. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED562579.pdf>

44 NCES. (2023) *Number, percentage distribution, and SAT mean scores of high school seniors taking the SAT, by sex, race/ethnicity, first language learned, and highest level of parental education: Selected years, 2017 through 2023*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_226.10.asp

45 NCES. (2022). *Number, percentage distribution, and SAT mean scores of high school seniors taking the SAT, by sex, race/ethnicity, first language learned, and highest level of parental education: Selected years, 2017 through 2022*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_226.10.asp. Between 2020 and 2022, the difference in scores remained exactly the same at 124 points, slightly larger than the 2017 difference of 119 points.

46 NCES. (2022). *Fast facts: SAT scores*. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=171>

47 NCES. (2022). *Fast facts: ACT scores*. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=897>

48 The National Center for Fair and Open Testing. (2024). *Test optional and test free colleges*. <https://fairtest.org/test-optional-list/>

49 Natanson, H., & Svrluga, S. (2024, March 18). *The SAT is coming back at some colleges. It's stressing everyone out*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/03/18/sat-test-policies-confuse-students/>

50 As one example, see Smith, E. & Reeves, R.V. (2020, December 1). *SAT math scores mirror-and-maintain-racial-inequity*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sat-math-scores-mirror-and-maintain-racial-inequity/>

51 Due to the ability for students to receive college credit for AP courses they took in high school, meaning that they do not then have to pay to take those courses in college, AP credit can represent a substantial financial advantage.

52 It is important to note, however, that students who take AP courses are also more similar in certain characteristics – like their family income, where they live, and their level of academic preparation – than students overall, and that studies that control for those characteristics often find smaller or even nonexistent effects. In other words, some research suggests that AP course taking alone may not produce these effects independent of the characteristics that increase students' likelihood of taking them. Nonetheless, AP courses do represent a direct opportunity for students to receive college credit while in high school, regardless of their other effects. See e.g., Warne, R. T. (2017). Research on the academic benefits of the Advanced Placement program: Taking stock and looking forward. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 2158244016682996.

53 Rodriguez, A., & McGuire, K.M. (2019). More classes, more access? Understanding the effects of course offerings on Black-White gaps in Advanced Placement course-taking. *The Review of Higher Education* 42(2), 641-679. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0010>

54 This is also not strictly an issue of course availability. Additional systemic challenges that affect Black students, including lower access to high-quality teaching and disciplinary inequities, also affect students' opportunities to take these courses.

55 U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection. (2024). *National data*. <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/profile/us?surveyYear=2020>

and no southern state has a rate of Black students in AP courses that equals or exceeds the overall percentage of Black students in the state. The disparities are particularly striking in some states. For example, only 12.1% of South Carolina's AP students are Black even though they make up 32.6% of the state's overall K-12 enrollment.⁵⁶

Percentages of Black Students in AP Courses, 2020-21

	Percentages of Black students in K-12 schools	Percentages of Black students in AP courses
In the U.S.	14.9%	9.5%
In the 17 SEF states	22.4%	13.8%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2020-2021 data

Despite the overall expansion of AP course offerings and increased participation generally, significant disparities in access and enrollment persist. The nationwide percentages of Hispanic, Black, White, and Asian graduates receiving AP course credit increased between 1990 and 2013, an analysis found, but this increase was notably smaller for Black students. As of 2013, only 27% of Black high school graduates in the U.S. had AP course credit compared with 36% of Hispanic students, 41% of White students, and 70% of Asian students. The same analysis also found that Black students were less likely than Hispanic, White, and Asian students to attend schools that offered AP mathematics and/or AP science courses – and that the average number of AP course subjects available to Black students was lower than the average number offered to other students.⁵⁷

AP Course Credit Among High School Graduates

Student population	Percentages with AP credit
Black students	27%
Hispanic students	36%
White students	41%
Asian students	70%

Source: Malkus, N. (2016)

27% of Black high school graduates earn AP course credit, at least 9 percentage points lower than other groups.

The College Board releases AP exam results annually, although it has stopped releasing data disaggregated by race and earlier sets of data are no longer publicly available. However, a 2023 College Board report did compare the number of Black, Hispanic, and White students receiving a 3 or higher (often the cutoff for receiving college credit). In the 10 most commonly taken AP courses,⁵⁸ lower percentages of Black students scored 3 or higher on their exams than Hispanic or White students. Black students were also underrepresented in each of these 10 courses. The numbers of Hispanic students were triple or nearly triple the number of Black students in most of them, and White students in some of the courses represented more than 10 times the number of Black students enrolled.⁵⁹

Black students are less likely than others to attend high schools with AP math and science courses.

Dual enrollment programs enable high school students to take college-level courses and earn both high school and college credit simultaneously. Typically the result of partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education, these programs are designed to provide students with an opportunity to advance their education, improve their college readiness, and potentially shorten the time and cost to complete a college degree. Dual enrollment has become increasingly popular across the U.S. and has expanded significantly in recent years, with over 1.4 million high school students enrolled in dual enrollment programs across the country.⁶⁰

56 Ibid.

57 Malkus, N. (2016). *AP at scale: Public school students in Advanced Placement, 1990-2013*. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/AP-at-Scale.pdf>

58 The 10 most commonly taken AP courses are Calculus AB, Statistics, English Language, English Literature, U.S. History, World History, U.S. Government and Politics, Human Geography, Biology, and Psychology.

59 Ewing, M. & Wyatt, J. (2023). *Understanding racial/ethnic gaps in AP exam performance*. College Board. https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Understanding_Racial_Ethnic_Performance_Gaps_in_AP_Exam_Scores.pdf

60 Mehl, G., Wyner, J., Barnett, E. A., Fink, J., & Jenkins, D. (2020). *The dual enrollment playbook: A guide to equitable acceleration for students*. Community College Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/dual-enrollment-playbook-equitable-acceleration.html>

However, a 2020 report from the Community College Resource Center found that most school districts have racial equity gaps in dual enrollment participation, with only 7% of Black students participating on average, compared to 12% of White students.⁶¹ The report acknowledges several systemic barriers to participation, such as high-stakes placement tests, transportation, and cost (tuition, fees, and books), that must be addressed for programs to better serve Black students.

Both the AP and dual enrollment programs hold significant potential for enhancing educational outcomes and providing students with valuable academic and financial benefits. To fully realize their potential, these programs need substantial improvements to address the persistent disparities in access and participation faced by Black students.

Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

Consistent school attendance is linked to students' overall well-being, academic achievement, and personal development.^{62,63} However, factors such as transportation, physical and mental health issues, family circumstances, access to safe school routes, and the general effects of poverty can impact students' ability to attend school regularly.⁶⁴ Students who miss at least 15 days of school in a given year (even if the absences are excused) are considered "chronically absent."⁶⁵ Research finds links between chronic absenteeism and both lower academic outcomes and reduced educational and social engagement.⁶⁶

Drawing on data from the 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection, the U.S. Department of Education found in a study that 20.5% of Black students – or more than one in five – experienced chronic absenteeism, higher than the overall average of 16%. The study also found that Black students were over 20% more likely than their Hispanic peers, and over 40% more likely than their White peers, to experience chronic absenteeism.⁶⁷



Many students' absences are excused but still have an impact on learning.

Further, the analysis shows that attendance challenges increased greatly in high school, with elementary and middle school rates of chronic absenteeism hovering around 14%, then jumping to more than 21% – a 50% increase – in high school. While the rates of students with chronic absences increased slightly between elementary and middle school (from 13.6% to 14.1%), the rate for Black students was lower in middle school than in elementary school: 18.5% of Black elementary students were chronically absent, 16.5% in middle school, then 26.4% – more than one in every four students – in high school.

Research conducted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown major increases in chronic absenteeism. An analysis of federal education data⁶⁸ by Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works found that 29.7% of students were chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year, representing 14.7 million students – an increase of 6.5 million students since before the pandemic.⁶⁹ The study also found that two-thirds (66%) of all students attended a school with high (greater than 20%) or extreme (greater than 30%) levels of chronic absenteeism, up from only about 25% of students attending such schools before the pandemic.

61 Ibid.

62 E.g., Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2020). A multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports model to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 23(3), 316-337.

63 Allison, M. A., & Attisha, E. (2019). The link between school attendance and good health. *Pediatrics*, 143(2). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3648>

64 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: A hidden educational crisis*. [https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one; Attendance Works. \(2023\). *Chronic absenteeism*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>](https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one;AttendanceWorks.(2023).Chronicabsenteeismhttps://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/)

65 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: A hidden educational crisis*. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>

66 Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 19(2), 53-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696>

67 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: A hidden educational crisis*. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>

68 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Ed data express: Data download tool*. https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/download/data-builder/data-download-tool?f%5B0%5D=program%3AChronic%20Absenteeism&f%5B1%5D=school_year%3A2021-2022

69 Chang, H., Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2023, October 12). *Rising tide of chronic absence challenges schools*. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/rising-tide-of-chronic-absence-challenges-schools/?preview=true>

Although these pandemic-driven increases are expected to decline over time, these data highlight the urgent need for schools to better understand and address disparities in attendance. This is crucial not only to address current challenges and potential long-term effects on academic outcomes and student well-being, but also to mitigate the pre-existing disparities in attendance for Black students.

High School Graduation Rates

While few students directly drop out of school, many others remain but do not graduate due to a lack of support in earning all necessary credits, passing required state graduation tests, attending school consistently, and a range of related challenges. The national high school dropout rate is only 2.6% in grades 9-12, and 4.0% for Black students – certainly higher, but still only one in 25 students.⁷⁰ However, 31% of Black high school students in the U.S. did not graduate in four years, nearly double the overall national average of 18%, according to an analysis of 2013 data by the Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. This represented a decline in the rate of Black students not graduating on time, down from 36% in 2009. However, the overall rate of U.S. students not graduating in four years also had declined from a 2009 rate of 24%, so although the rate for Black students declined, it was less than the decline for all students.⁷¹

Some recent data indicate this gap may be narrowing – a 2024 study from the Schott Foundation for Public Education found that between 2012 and 2020, Black students' graduation rates increased by the highest percentage of any student group: 14%, compared to

4% for White students. This increase cut the difference in graduation rates between Black students and White students almost in half.⁷² However, even with this improvement, major disparities in graduation rates for Black students remain.

The dangerous impact of these disparities is clear: Outcomes for those who do not graduate include lower-wage jobs, higher unemployment, poorer health, higher mortality rates, and a higher likelihood of incarceration.⁷³

College Enrollment

College enrollment rates have fluctuated widely over the last 50 years. For example, in the final three pre-pandemic years of 2017 through 2019, the percentage of Black recent high school completers⁷⁴ enrolling in college rose from 59.4% in 2017 to 64.5% in 2018, then fell to 49.8% in 2019. During the same timespan, the percentage of all students enrolling in college rose from 66.7% in 2017 to 69.1% in 2018, then fell to 66.2% in 2019.⁷⁵ Comparisons of these varying rates across years can be difficult, but there are some definite trends within the data. Between 1972 and 2022, college enrollment rates for Black recent high school completers exceeded the average for all students only once (in 2014) and have been at least 10 percentage points lower than the national average 20 times, including seven times in the last 20 years and three times in the last decade.

Data show that increased segregation of Black students and other students of color in K-12 schools – discussed in more detail beginning on page 13 – is associated with lower four-year college enrollment rates. In 2011-12 (the most recent year for which data are available), 43.9% of students at K-12 schools enrolling less than 5% students of color and 44.9% of students at schools enrolling 5-to-19% students of color enrolled in four-year colleges. For K-12 schools enrolling 20-to-49% students of color, the average college enrollment was only 36.9%, and for schools enrolling half or more students of color it was 33%.⁷⁶

31% of Black high school students did not graduate in four years – compared to the overall U.S. average of 18%.

70 NCES. (2023). *Number and percentage of 9th- to 12th-graders who dropped out of public schools (event dropout rate), by race/ethnicity, grade, and state or jurisdiction: 2018-19*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.50.asp. NCES defines the "event dropout rate" as "the percentage of public school students in grades 9 through 12 who dropped out of school between one October and the next." They also note that data for ungraded students were prorated based on the counts for graded students.

71 The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Kids Count Data Center. (2024). *High school students not graduating on time by race and ethnicity (Percent)*. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/customreports/1/9012,9537>

72 The Schott Foundation. (2024). *"Love is the foundation for life": Schott report on Black males in public education*. <https://schottfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/schott-foundation-2024-black-males-report.pdf>

73 Rumberger, R. W. (2020). The economics of high school dropouts. In S. Bradley and C. Green (Eds), *The Economics of Education: A Comprehensive Overview*. (pp. 149-158). Academic Press.

74 Per NCES, recent high school completers are defined as all individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who have either graduated from high school or completed a high school equivalency credential such as a GED in that calendar year.

75 NCES. (2022). *Percentage of recent high school completers enrolled in college, by race/ethnicity and level of institution: 1960 through 2021*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_302.20.asp

76 NCES. (2014). *Number of high schools with 12th-graders and percentage of high school graduates attending 4-year colleges, by selected high school characteristics: Selected years, 1998-99 through 2011-12*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_302.40.asp

A Reflection on Outcomes: A Story, But Not a Full One

Researcher Ivory Toldson cautions against treating academic achievement measures as the ultimate goal.

“Indicators of academic achievement are meaningless without their relationship to positive life outcomes. Thus, in theory, indicators of academic achievement (like test scores and grades) should ‘predict’ positive life outcomes. However, in practice, indicators of academic achievement ‘determine’ positive life outcomes.

“This is a problem because we can never know if the academic ‘things’ we measure have any real relationship to positive life outcomes. Educators and parents fixate more on ‘things,’ like test scores and grades, and neglect fundamental social, developmental, and educational needs that are more important than the ‘things’ upon which we fixate.” (p. 5)⁷⁷

Students’ standardized test scores may not indicate their potential for positive life outcomes, but lower test scores can limit a student’s postsecondary education options, in turn limiting access to high-quality learning and career training that can impact students’ lifetime income, health, and other quality-of-life factors. If testing and assessments are included in the education program, the validity of those tests is critical. Also critical is that students be provided the opportunity to learn the material being tested – we know that students who have less opportunity to learn would not be expected to perform as well on these tests as students who have had more opportunity to learn, if all other characteristics of those students were the same.

Challenges and Opportunity Gaps in K-12 Education

This section outlines some of the major opportunity gaps for Black students that lead to the outcome gaps described above.

Despite continual legislative and judicial efforts to improve U.S. public education, many education outcomes remain sharply unequal based on race, even when controlling for other factors. Simply put, our education system provides more opportunity for some students than others. The following section details some of the most notable opportunity gaps in K-12 education, including persistent school segregation, inequities in school resources, major disparities in school discipline, and the removal of Black history from the curriculum and other attempts to limit inclusivity – issues that must be addressed to support sustained progress in improving student outcomes.

Racial segregation in K-12 schools may be linked to lower four-year college enrollment rates for Black students.

Segregation in Neighborhoods and Schools

Despite significant efforts to desegregate our nation’s schools post-*Brown*, racial segregation has been on the rise, echoing longstanding patterns of segregation that date back to the early 20th century. Today’s schools are often segregated by race and socioeconomic status, resulting in significant disparities in resources and outcomes, especially for Black students.

⁷⁷ Toldson, I. A. (2019). *No BS (bad stats): Black people need people who believe in Black people enough not to believe every bad thing they hear about Black people*. Brill | Sense.

The increase in racial segregation is not accidental. Segregation within cities in the North and especially the South increased steeply between the Civil War and 1940.⁷⁸ Discriminatory practices in housing and real estate that had been in operation well before *Brown* kept many neighborhoods racially separate, pushing Black families into low-value housing in under-resourced neighborhoods, and discriminatory federal policies and banking practices cemented these resource disparities through practices such as redlining.⁷⁹ By the mid-20th century, Black Americans were far more clustered and segregated into “Black” neighborhoods than they had been just after the Civil War, and the artificially reduced property values in these neighborhoods meant less funding for schools serving Black children.⁸⁰ These high levels of geographic racial segregation continued to be reflected in local school attendance, keeping levels of *de facto* school segregation high even after legalized segregation had been ruled unconstitutional.⁸¹

Following the *Brown* decision, school segregation in the U.S. initially declined slowly, particularly from the mid-1960s through mid-1970s. Since then, racial segregation in schools has increased throughout the nation and especially in the South. In 1968, 77% of Black students still attended schools enrolling a majority of students of color. Just eight years later, the rate of Black students attending such schools had fallen to 62% in 1976, due in part to desegregation and busing policies. This level remained about the same over the next 12 years (63% in both 1980 and 1988) before rising slightly to 66% in 1991.⁸²

That year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* that a school district could be declared “unitary”

In 1976, 62% of Black students in the U.S. attended schools in which students of color were the majority, down from 77% in 1968. By 2018, the number was 81% – higher than in 1968.

(i.e., fully integrated) and freed from federal court oversight if it could show that it had made substantial progress towards desegregation. Following this ruling there was a significant increase in the number of districts released from court-ordered desegregation – in the 25 years after *Dowell*, the number of open cases with involvement from the U.S. Department of Justice dropped by nearly half, from 444 to 266.⁸³ Racial segregation in schools began to increase, and by 2005, 73% of Black students nationwide attended schools in which students of color were the majority. By 2018, it was 81% – higher than in 1968.⁸⁴

The trend toward greater segregation has been similar in the South. In 1968, 81% of Black students attended schools in which enrollment was majority students of color. By 1976, this rate had fallen to 55%, but by 2018 it had increased to 82% – a higher rate than in 1968.⁸⁵

In 1968, 81% of Black students in the South attended schools in which enrollment was majority students of color. By 1976, this rate had fallen to 55%, but it increased to 82% by 2018 – a higher rate than in 1968.

78 Before 1900, areas that had a higher concentration of Black residents were still not *mostly* Black (in other words, still contained many non-Black residents), and most Black people did not live in them (in other words, most Black Americans were not in high-concentration Black areas). For more on the index of dissimilarity, or segregation index, and how it shows a steep increase in segregation in the U.S. and particularly in the South between 1850 and 1940, see Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press.

79 In 1933, the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) had created a series of neighborhood maps identifying lending risk. Neighborhoods classified as lowest risk were coded green, followed by blue, yellow, and then red for the most hazardous. Race was an explicit factor in this risk assessment, and the presence of even one Black family could earn an entire neighborhood a hazardous rating. This process of identifying neighborhoods deemed hazardous in red – *redlining* – had lasting effects: Two-thirds of the neighborhoods graded as hazardous for federal loans 90 years ago contain more than half residents of color today, and 74% are low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods today. See Mitchell, B., & Franco, J. (2018). *HOLC “redlining” maps: The persistent structure of segregation and economic inequality*. National Community Reinvestment Coalition: Washington, DC.

80 Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press.

81 Mitchell, B., & Franco, J. (2018). *HOLC “redlining” maps: The persistent structure of segregation and economic inequality*. National Community Reinvestment Coalition: Washington, DC. <https://ncrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/NCRC-Research-HOLC-10.pdf>

82 Orfield, G., & Jarvie, D. (2020). *Black segregation matters: School resegregation and Black educational opportunity*. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jp1z62n>

83 United States Commission On Civil Rights. (2007) *Becoming less separate?: School desegregation, Justice Department enforcement, and the pursuit of unitary status*. <https://lccn.loc.gov/2007473149>.

84 Orfield, G., & Jarvie, D. (2020). *Black segregation matters: School resegregation and Black educational opportunity*. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jp1z62n>

85 It was 55% in 1976 and then rose to 60% by 1991 and 73% by 2005 before exceeding 80% in the last decade. Worth noting here is that by the late 1980s the percentage of Black students in the South attending schools that were more than 50% students of color was actually *lower* than the percentage in the nation as a whole. In fact, the South had the lowest such percentage of any U.S. region for more than 15 years.

The percentage of Black students attending the most segregated schools – those enrolling 90% or more students of color – is lower today than in 1968. However, this percentage has also increased in recent decades. In 1968, 64.3% of Black students attended such schools. The rate dropped to 32% by 1988, but had risen to 40.1% in 2018. In the South, Black students attending highly segregated schools fell from 77.8% in 1968⁸⁶ to 23% in 1980 – then increased to 37% by 2018.⁸⁷

Brown's Promise battles racial segregation, resource inequities

In 2023, the Southern Education Foundation announced the launch of Brown's Promise, a multi-year initiative to combat racial segregation and resource inequities in schools. The SEF-based initiative will reinvigorate national discussion on the importance of ending school segregation and resource disparities in schools, districts, and states.

Brown's Promise 

The states with the 10 highest levels of racial segregation in school enrollment, using the same measure, are dotted across different regions of the country. California had the highest percentage of Black students attending schools with a majority of students of color (although just 5% of California's students are Black, a much lower percentage than any other state in the top 10). New York had the highest percentage of Black students attending schools with enrollment of more than 90% students of color.

The rates of Black students attending the most segregated schools – enrolling 90% or more students of color – are lower today than in 1968, but these rates are rising.

The South had four of the 10 states with the highest rates of Black students attending schools with a majority of students of color and three of the 10 states with the highest rates of Black students attending schools enrolling more than 90% students of color. Maryland and Georgia had among the 10 highest rates of segregated schools in both categories.

States with Highest Rates of School Segregation for Black Students, 2018-19

Percentages of Black students in schools with more than 50% students of color		Percentages of Black students in schools with more than 90% students of color	
California	95%	New York	64%
Nevada	94%	Illinois	57%
Texas	91%	Maryland	53%
Maryland	91%	California	51%
New York	90%	New Jersey	51%
Illinois	87%	Michigan	48%
Florida	85%	Georgia	47%
Georgia	84%	Pennsylvania	46%
Connecticut	84%	Wisconsin	45%
New Jersey	83%	Tennessee	45%

SEF states shaded in blue.

Source: Orfield & Jarvie, 2020

⁸⁶ In 1968, 81% of Black southern students attended schools that were more than 50% students of color and 77.8% of Black students attended schools that were more than 90% students of color. In other words, almost all Black students who attended schools that were more than half students of color were actually in schools that were more than 90% students of color – almost no students (only about 3%) were in schools that were more than half but less than 90% students of color.

⁸⁷ Orfield, G., & Jarvie, D. (2020). *Black segregation matters: School resegregation and Black educational opportunity*. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jp1z62n>

Measuring Black students' levels of exposure to White students, the South had five of the 10 states with the lowest exposure levels – Maryland, Texas, Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi, from highest to lowest.

Seven of the 10 states with the highest levels of exposure for Black students to other Black students are in the SEF region – Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Maryland, and Missouri, from highest to lowest.⁸⁸

In summary, the levels of student segregation and racial isolation in schools in the South and the U.S. have been rising for the last several decades. This increase has negative implications for all students, and especially for Black students. Segregation in schools leads to major disparities in outcomes and opportunity, including lower achievement in math, science, language, and reading; less access to experienced teachers; less supportive school climates; and fewer resources.⁸⁹ The next section provides further detail on these funding and resource disparities and their connections to school segregation.

States with 10 Highest Rates of Black Students' Exposure to Black Students

Exposure rates of Black students to Black students ⁹⁰	
Mississippi	69
Louisiana	64
Michigan	62
Alabama	61
Georgia	59
Illinois	57
Tennessee	57
Maryland	57
Missouri	56
Ohio	55

SEF states shaded in blue.

Source: Orfield & Jarvie, 2020

Funding for K-12 Schools

In most cases, schools are funded through a combination of local, state, and federal funds. Less than 10% of school funding nationally comes from the federal government, leaving districts to rely mostly on state and local funding to operate.⁹¹ The distribution varies widely across the country. For example, a 2018 analysis by EdTrust found that Arkansas provided its public schools with the nation's highest percentage of state funds, with 86% of total non-federal revenues coming from the state and 14% from the local level.⁹² South Dakota, Nebraska, and New Hampshire provided the lowest rates of state funding, with a little over one-third from the states and the rest coming from localities. In the South, Texas had the lowest percentage of state funding to school districts at slightly over 40%.

In 2023–24, six of the 10 states with the lowest per-capita spending levels on K–12 education were in the South.

States have their own formulas for funding schools, and these also can vary widely. States can fund districts at a constant rate based solely on student enrollment, or can adjust their formulas based on measures of district needs. Local funding comes primarily from property taxes and can also vary widely between districts, and this is especially problematic in light of the impacts of segregation and discrimination in Black neighborhoods discussed in the previous section.⁹³

Beyond the *percentages* of state funding provided to school districts, there is also a wide range in the *amounts* of state education spending. New York invests the most per-capita state funds in education at more than \$33,000 per student. Meanwhile, education spending in the South is lower than the

88 Orfield, G., & Jarvie, D. (2020). *Black segregation matters: School resegregation and Black educational opportunity*. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jip1z62n>

89 Mickelson, R. A. (2016). *School integration and K-12 outcomes: An updated quick synthesis of the social science evidence*. National Coalition on School Diversity. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED571629>

90 Exposure rates here are calculated by summing the ratio of the square of the number of Black students in each school to the product of the total number of Black students in the state and the total number of students at the school across all schools in the state. This is a more specific case of the general formula for exposure rates used in the cited report in which the top of the ratio is the product of the number of students in each school belonging to each of the two population groups whose exposure is being calculated.

91 Allegretto, S., García, E., & Weiss, E. (2022). *Public education funding in the US needs an overhaul: How a larger federal role would boost equity and shield children from disinvestment during downturns*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/public-education-funding-in-the-us-needs-an-overhaul/>

92 Morgan, I. & Amerikaner, A. (2018). *Funding gaps: An analysis of school funding equity across the U.S. and within each state*. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGapReport_2018_FINAL.pdf. In other words, after removing the small percentage of revenue that comes from the federal government, 86% of remaining funding in Arkansas comes from the state while localities supply the remaining 14%

93 Ibid.

national average. SEF states spent an average of \$14,416 per student as of mid-2022 – more than 15% less than the U.S. average of \$17,280. While the three lowest-spending states are in the West – Idaho, Utah, and Arizona – six of the bottom 10, and 13 of the bottom 20, are in the South.⁹⁴

All but two of the 17 SEF states fund their K-12 schools at below the national per-student average.

Average Per-Student Spending for K-12 Schools in SEF Region, 2021-22

SEF State	Average per-student spending
MD	\$19,820
DE	\$18,200
National Average	\$17,280
VA	\$16,440
WV	\$15,360
KY	\$15,340
SC	\$14,880
MO	\$14,700
GA	\$14,660
SEF State Average	\$14,416
TX	\$14,260
LA	\$13,760
AL	\$13,460
AR	\$13,260
TN	\$12,430
FL	\$12,420
MS	\$12,390
NC	\$12,350
OK	\$11,350

Source: Education Data Initiative

Funding gaps across and within states can increase educational disparities for Black students. Research shows that racial and economic segregation of students is often accompanied by inequitable resource allocation and fewer educational opportunities for students of color. In 2018, high-poverty

school districts on average received 7% less state and local funding, or about \$1,000 less per student, than low-poverty school districts.⁹⁵ Districts with the highest percentages of students of color received about 13% less funding per student.⁹⁶ For context, 7% less per-student funding in a school district of 5,000 students would mean nearly \$5 million in lost resources each year, and 13% less funding would mean \$9 million in lost resources – enough to pay the national average salary for nearly 200 additional teachers. Another analysis found that more racially segregated districts have lower district revenues than less-segregated districts in the same state, even when accounting for poverty.⁹⁷

School districts with the highest rates of students of color received less state and local funding on average than districts with the lowest rates.

A 2023 Mississippi Center for Justice report illustrates the problem, finding that per-student spending is nearly \$13,500 less than the estimated adequate spending level for schools in the state's highest-poverty districts. The report found that the state's wealthiest districts were also underfunded, but only by about \$1,925. The report outlines strong links between race and income in these school districts, identifying 12 (about 10% of the districts in the state) whose enrollment consisted of more than 90% Black students and more than 80% students from low-income families that had clear disparities in physical resources, technology and broadband access (particularly indispensable during the pandemic), teacher shortages, and availability of educational programs.⁹⁸

Developing a more equitable system of school funding is crucial for improving outcomes for Black students – as the current disparities in resource allocation only serve to perpetuate educational inequities.

94 Hanson, M. (2024, July 14). *U.S. public education spending statistics*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>.

95 This comparison does not even take into account the fact that research consistently finds that it costs substantially *more* to educate students in poverty – the federal Title I formula accounts for a 40% increase in spending for students in poverty, and many argue that this should be much higher. It is certainly important here not to conflate Black students with students in poverty, but analysis shows that racial segregation contributes to poverty concentration in Black communities – e.g., Quillian, L. (2012). Segregation and Poverty Concentration: The Role of Three Segregations. *American Sociological Review*, 77(3), 354–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412447793>

96 Morgan, I. & Amerikaner, A. (2018). *Funding gaps: An analysis of school funding equity across the U.S. and within each state*. EdTrust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGapReport_2018_FINAL.pdf

97 Weathers, E. S., & Sosina, V. E. (2022). Separate remains unequal: Contemporary segregation and racial disparities in school district revenue. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(5), 905–938. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221079297>

98 Mississippi Center for Justice. (2022). *COVID-19 & education impact report*. <https://mscenterforjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/COVID-19-Education-Impact-Report-2023.pdf>

Discipline in K-12

In previous reports, SEF highlighted the disproportionately high rates of discipline of Black students in public schools during the past decade^{99,100} and identified factors that contribute to those outcomes, including:

- Unconscious bias among teachers and school administrators that results in Black students being punished more harshly than other students for the same infractions.
- School and teacher expectations that reflect behavioral norms for some students (often White middle- and upper-class students) and punish some behavioral norms of Black students and others. Examples can include punishing students for verbally interacting with the teacher or classmates around course content; treating common forms of Black students' dress or hairstyles as inappropriate for school; and the framing of commands as questions (e.g., "Would you like to sit down?"), a rhetorical practice common in some White families but that can be interpreted by Black students as a legitimate question.
- Microaggressions and other racist and abusive language toward Black students and other students of color by students or school personnel, particularly when not taken seriously at the classroom or school level.

Effects of these disciplinary disparities go far beyond immediate school experiences. Disciplinary removal from the high school classroom increases the likelihood that students will earn less income later in life, and it decreases their likelihood of college attendance. It also more than doubles the likelihood of incarceration as a young adult.¹⁰¹

Research consistently finds that higher rates of school discipline for Black students are not a result of higher rates of misbehavior or more egregious misbehavior by Black students. Rather, a recent national study of county-level data found that teacher bias correlated with racial disparities in school discipline and academic achievement – even when controlling for factors such as students' socioeconomic status, racial segregation, per-student spending, and student-teacher ratios.¹⁰² A Yale University study that examined school arrests, expulsions, law enforcement referrals, and in-school and out-of-school suspensions across 32 million students in more than 95,000 schools found that disparities by race were associated with county-level rates of racial bias.¹⁰³

Also, a 2015 study of the more than 3,000 school districts in 13 southern states found that 84 of the districts suspended *only* Black students in the 2011-12 school year. In 346 of the school districts – more than 10% of the districts in these 13 states – at least 75% of school suspensions were for Black students.¹⁰⁴

Other research and data provide further evidence of these disparities. In 2017-18, Black students in the U.S. received out-of-school suspensions at three-to-four times the rates of Hispanic and White students and more than 12 times the rate of Asian students.¹⁰⁵ Black students were also expelled from school at more than three times the rate of Hispanic and White students. In all, about one in every 200 Black students in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools was expelled during the 2017-18 school year compared to less than one in 600 White and Hispanic students.

In 2019, more than one in three Black male public school students had been suspended at least once while in school.

99 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation.

<https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

100 Suits, S. & Dunn, K. (2014). *Just learning: The imperative to transform the juvenile justice system*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/just-learning-final.pdf>

101 Davison, M., Penner, A. M., Penner, E. K., Pharris-Ciurej, N., Porter, S. R., Rose, E. K., Shem-Tov, Y., & Yoo, P. (2022). School discipline and racial disparities in early adulthood. *Educational Researcher*, 51(3), 231-234. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211061732>

102 Chin, M. J., Quinn, D. M., Dhaliwal, T. K., & Lovison, V. S. (2020). Bias in the air: A nationwide exploration of teachers' implicit racial attitudes, aggregate bias, and student outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 49(8), 566-578. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20937240>

103 Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S. (2019). Racial disparities in school-based disciplinary actions are associated with county-level rates of racial bias. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(17), 8255-8260. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1808307116>

104 Smith, E. J., & Harper, S. R. (2015). *Disproportionate impact of K-12 school suspension and expulsion on Black students in southern states*. University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. <https://race.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pub-14-Smith-and-Harper.pdf>

105 NCES. (2022). *Percentage of students suspended and expelled from public elementary and secondary schools, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state: 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipeds-tables/dt21/tables/dt21_233.40.asp?current=yes

Black girls were suspended from school in the U.S. at much higher numbers than White girls – despite nearly three times as many White girls enrolled.

Black males receive by far the most school suspensions and expulsions. More than one in seven Black male students was suspended from school and one in every 150 Black males was expelled during the 2017-18 school year. Disparities by gender are even greater for Black girls, who were expelled at more than five times the rate of White girls and more than 3.5 times the rate of Hispanic girls. More total Black girls were suspended than White girls – by a margin of 322,000 to 192,000¹⁰⁶ – even though public schools enrolled *nearly three times* as many White girls (24.3%) as Black girls (8.9%) in 2017-18.¹⁰⁷

Overall, 14.4% of public school students in grades 6-12 were suspended at least once, and disparities by students' race and ethnicity are stark: In 2019, 11.4% of Hispanic students had been suspended from school, 12.3% of White students, and 29.6% – *nearly one-third* – of Black students, including 22.6% of Black students identifying as female and 36.6% of Black students identifying as male.¹⁰⁸

In many states in the South, the school-discipline rates are even higher and more likely to disproportionately impact Black students than in the nation as a whole. Thirteen of the 17 SEF states¹⁰⁹ – all except Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Texas – had higher rates of out-of-school suspensions for Black students than the national average of 12.3% in 2017-18. The region's highest rate for school suspensions was in South Carolina, which suspended 18.3% of its Black public school students – nearly one in five – in that school year.¹¹⁰

Percentages of Black Students Suspended from School in SEF States, 2017-18

SEF states	Percentages of Black students with out-of-school suspensions
SC	18.3%
TN	17.4%
MS	15.7%
DE	15.5%
WV	15.3%
MO	15.1%
KY	14.8%
AL	14.5%
NC	14.2%
AR	13.9%
OK	13.3%
LA	13.2%
VA	12.9%
National average	12.3%
GA	11.6%
TX	9.8%
FL	9.6%
MD	7.4%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017-2018 data

Seven SEF states – Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee – had expulsion rates for Black students higher than the national average in 2017-18. Tennessee public schools had the highest rate in the region that year, expelling about 2.5%, or about one in 40, of the Black students in the state's public schools.¹¹¹ To put that number into perspective, the average class sizes in the U.S. (excluding self-contained classes for students with disabilities) were 26.2 students in elementary schools, 24.9 students in middle schools, and 23.3 students in high schools, respectively.¹¹² If all students in Tennessee had been expelled at the same rate as Black students in 2017-18, more than one student in every two classrooms in the state, or about 25,000 public school students, would have been expelled.

106 NCES. (2022). *Number of students receiving selected disciplinary actions in public elementary and secondary schools, by type of disciplinary action, disability status, sex, and race/ethnicity: 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_233.27.asp

107 U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *School enrollment in the United States: October 2020 - detailed tables*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/school-enrollment/2020-cps.html>

108 NCES. (2021). *Percentage of public school students in grades 6 through 12 who had ever been suspended or expelled, by race/ethnicity and sex: Selected years, 1993 through 2019*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_233.20.asp

109 As noted above, the 17 SEF states are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

110 NCES. (2022). *Percentage of students suspended and expelled from public elementary and secondary schools, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state: 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_233.40.asp?current=yes

111 Ibid.

112 NCES. (2018). *National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS): Average class size in public schools, by class type and state: 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1718_ftable06_t1s.asp

Nearly one in five Black students in South Carolina received an out-of-school suspension in 2017-18.

A growing body of evidence suggests that social and emotional learning¹¹³ and restorative disciplinary practices can help mitigate these student-discipline disparities¹¹⁴ and many schools are increasing their focus on such practices. However, research shows that schools with a higher proportion of Black students are less likely to use restorative disciplinary practices as alternatives to removing students from school.¹¹⁵

Black Students with Disabilities

In 2022, 16.7% of Black students ages 3 to 21 were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B. This is higher than the average of 14.7% for all students served under IDEA and the second-highest percentage for students with disabilities after American Indian/Alaskan Native students' rate of 18.6%.¹¹⁶ Black students represent the highest percentage of students by racial-ethnic group diagnosed with emotional disturbances and intellectual disabilities, and the second-highest percentage of students diagnosed with developmental delay. Black students with other disabilities for which students receive services, including hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, and autism, have the fourth-highest diagnosis levels or less.¹¹⁷ These data

Black students with disabilities are suspended and expelled at more than twice the rate of other students with disabilities.

raise questions about Black students' access to the appropriate range of health services they may need.

Black students with disabilities were also suspended and expelled from K-12 schools at higher rates than Black students without disabilities and at more than twice the rate of other students with disabilities. According to NCES data, 18.4% of Black students with disabilities received at least one out-of-school suspension in the 2017-18 school year – and about half of those students were suspended multiple times. About 0.72% of Black students with disabilities, more than one in every 140, were expelled that same year.

Black males with disabilities had the highest suspension and expulsion rates of any racial-ethnic group of students with disabilities. More than 20.8%, or greater than one in five Black males with disabilities, were suspended in 2017-18, and 0.83% of Black males with disabilities were expelled. Black girls with disabilities had the largest disparities in school discipline of any student group by gender and race, with more than four times the suspension and expulsion rates of White girls with disabilities and more than three times the suspension and expulsion rates of Hispanic girls with disabilities.¹¹⁸

School Discipline Rates for Students with Disabilities, 2017-18

Disciplinary Action	Black students			All students
	Total	Black male	Black female	
Students with disabilities suspended one or more times	18.4%	20.8%	13.6%	8.8%
Students with disabilities expelled	0.7%	0.8%	0.5%	0.3%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017-18 data.

- 113 Social and emotional learning supports students' ability to manage their thoughts, emotions, and interpersonal relationships in healthy and constructive ways. For more, see Skoog-Hoffman, A., Miller, A.C., Plate, R.C., Meyers, D.C., Tucker, A.S., Meyers, G., Diliberti, M.K., Schwartz, H.L., Kuhfeld, M., Jagers, R., Steele, L., and Schlund, J. (2024). *Social and emotional learning in U.S. schools: Findings from CASEL's nationwide policy scan and the American teacher panel and American school leader panel surveys*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-2.html. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-2.html
- 114 Darling-Hammond, S., Fronius, T. A., Sutherland, H., Guckenburg, S., Petrosino, A., & Hurley, N. (2020). Effectiveness of restorative justice in U.S. K-12 schools: A review of quantitative research. *Contemporary School Psychology, 24*(3), 295–308. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-020-00290-0>; Lodi E, Perrella L, Lepri GL, Scarpa ML, Patrizi P. (2022). Use of restorative justice and restorative practices at school: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010096>; Zakszeski, B., & Rutherford, L. (2021). Mind the gap: A systematic review of research on restorative practices in schools. *School Psychology Review, 50*(2-3), 371–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1852056>
- 115 Payne, A. A., & Welch, K. (2015). Restorative justice in schools: The influence of race on restorative discipline. *Youth & Society, 47*(4), 539–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12473125>
- 116 As with all of the NCES data cited in this report, students are split into seven racial categories – American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, White, and two or more races. These categories do not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of how students and families may describe their own race.
- 117 NCES. (2023). *Children 3 to 21 years old served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by age group and sex, race/ethnicity, and type of disability: School year 2022-23*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_204.50.asp
- 118 NCES. (2021). *Percentage of students receiving selected disciplinary actions in public elementary and secondary schools, by type of disciplinary action, disability status, sex, and race/ethnicity: 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_233.28.asp?current=yes

Curriculum

The content of the curriculum is pivotal because it directly shapes students' knowledge, understanding, and perspectives. The U.S. does not have a nationwide school curriculum, leaving the responsibility (along with more than 90% of education funding, as discussed earlier) to states and local districts.

Since the earliest movement toward a coherent education system in the U.S., there has been debate and contention over what students should be learning and why,¹¹⁹ and historians of education have shown how curriculum has often been designed to push particular narratives about U.S. history.¹²⁰ This is especially true for issues of race and topics such as enslavement, the Civil War, and the Jim Crow era.¹²¹

Despite the positive impacts of culturally responsive curriculum and teaching,¹²² some of today's policy-makers have renewed the push to eliminate or greatly reduce discussion of race, racism, and Black history in school curriculum. Those pushing to limit these topics often refer to "critical race theory" (a specific legal theory)¹²³ or "divisive concepts," and legislation has been proposed or passed in many states to curtail students' access to curriculum around race – even leading to the firing of teachers who discuss issues of race.¹²⁴

These efforts to restrict classroom teaching and learning about race have increased in recent years. More than 45 states have introduced bills to restrict or prohibit race-conscious instruction since 2021, and the number of such bills introduced in 2022 grew by 250% from 2021.¹²⁵ These efforts have extended from K-12 schools to early childhood and postsecondary education.¹²⁶

Many educators and parents do not support such efforts, however. A recent study by SEF and UNCF polled teachers, college faculty, parents, and community members across the U.S. on "divisive concepts" bills such as House Bill 1084 in Georgia, which has now become state law.¹²⁷

Some 82% of respondents indicated that the bill amounted to educational censorship (with another 13% saying they did not know and only 5% disagreeing). Ninety percent of respondents, including 100% of teachers, indicated they did not think that restricting what can be taught or discussed in schools would improve children's learning experiences. More than 50% of respondents indicated they had experienced educational censorship themselves.¹²⁸

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- 119 In 1848, Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education Horace Mann published his 12th report, in which he called for the developing common (public) schools in the United States to teach physical, political, moral, and religious education. Since then there have been many different debates around what and how students should be learning, including Charles Eliot and the Committee of Ten, John Dewey's "new education," the Life Adjustment curriculum, and the "curriculum wars" of the 1990s. While it is beyond the scope of this report to address historical curriculum development in further detail, see sources like Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958*. Routledge.
- 120 E.g., Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press.
- 121 Anderson, C. B., & Metzger, S. A. (2011). Slavery, the Civil War era, and African American representation in US history: An analysis of four states' academic standards. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 39*(3), 393-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2011.10473460>
- 122 E.g., Ervin, J. (2022). Critically reading the canon: Culturally sustaining approaches to a prescribed literature curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent Adult & Literature, 65*(4), 321-329. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1208>
- 123 Critical race theory (CRT) is not taught at the K-12 level anywhere in the U.S. and rarely mentioned in undergraduate-level college education. It is an academic theory, a way of understanding and interpreting political and social developments around race in graduate-level courses. Largely credited to the work of legal scholar Derrick Bell in the 1970s, CRT has five key points: racism is a normalized and permanent part of American life (*the permanence of racism*); many firmly-held ideas and assumptions in this nation are inaccurate myths, and "counter-storytelling" that counters these assumptions with reality and real-world experience is critical (*counter-storytelling*); Whiteness is something that is possessed and can be used to the advantage of the possessor (*Whiteness as property*); seeming advancements in civil rights ultimately take place when in the interest of the dominant culture (*interest convergence*); and feigned "colorblindness," the neutrality of the law, and the efficacy of incremental change are all problematic and inaccurate (*critique of liberalism*). CRT addresses the ways in which systems produce outcomes – it does not address personal or individual-level racism. For more on CRT and its links to the *Brown* decision, see Bell, D. A. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma*. *Harvard Law Review, 93*(3), 518-533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>
- 124 Bissell, T. (2023). Teaching in the upside down: What anti-critical race theory laws tell us about the first amendment. *Stanford Law Review, 75*, 205. <https://review.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/01/Bissell-75-Stan.-L.-Rev.-205.pdf>
- 125 Watson, L. M. (2023). The anti-"critical race theory" campaign – classroom censorship and racial backlash by another name. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, 58*, 487. https://journals.law.harvard.edu/crcl/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2023/09/HLC208_Watson.pdf
- 126 For example: At the ECE level, Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education Barbara Cooper submitted her resignation in 2023 after Alabama Governor Kay Ivy ordered her to issue a memo denouncing the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s Developmentally Appropriate Practices manual, a widely used teacher training manual compiled by a nationally recognized organization that referred to systemic racism and LGBTQ+ issues. At the postsecondary level, states like Texas and Florida have passed bills banning or defunding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and activities, challenging teaching about race, and removing courses they claim are associated with "Critical Theory."
- 127 Georgia Code §§ 20-1-11.
- 128 Altman, M. & McClendon, N. (2023, May). *If we want censorship, we can have it...but we don't want it*. Paper presented at the 2023 American Educational Research Association Conference. Virtual.

Access to Qualified Teachers

Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages occur when the number of available teachers in a state or district (or more broadly across the U.S.) is insufficient to accommodate student enrollment. Schools without a sufficient number of teachers face clear operational difficulties in accommodating and teaching all students, enabling full access to needed courses, and completing other necessary tasks. These shortages occur for a variety of reasons, including limited availability of new teachers, turnover in the profession, changes to expected student-teacher ratios, and the “attractiveness” of teaching as a career and of teaching in specific locations.¹²⁹ Teacher shortages affect urban, suburban, and rural schools alike, but a 2023 study found that rural schools especially have struggled to fill teaching vacancies in recent years, particularly high-poverty rural schools.¹³⁰

research has measured the “value-add” of teachers – generally measured as the effect a teacher has in increasing students’ test scores.¹³² Research is clear, however, that Black students are more likely to have a novice teacher,¹³³ teachers with lower licensure-exam scores, and teachers with lower value-add estimates.¹³⁴ Research also finds that these disparities are persistent and that teacher-quality gaps impact students by race more than by economic class. For example, one study found that students of color in North Carolina and Washington have twice the exposure rate to teachers with less experience as students classified as economically disadvantaged.¹³⁵

Access to Black Teachers

Research finds that all students benefit from having a diverse set of teachers, and that Black students and other students of color benefit the most. Access to Black teachers increases test scores and decreases

Black students are more likely to have uncertified, first-year, and novice teachers than other students.

Research suggests that shortages of certified teachers have a particularly pronounced effect on Black students. A 2021 report from EdTrust found that Black students are more likely than others to be taught by uncertified teachers and to attend high schools with a high percentage of uncertified teachers (more than 10%). Black students are also more likely than other students to be taught by first-year and novice (first- and second-year) teachers and to attend schools with high percentages of novice teachers.¹³¹

Teacher Quality

Teacher quality is notoriously difficult to measure. Many studies rely on proxy data, like the level of teacher experience or credential(s) held, while other



Research shows that *all* students benefit from having a diverse set of teachers – and Black students and other students of color benefit the most.

- 129 Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(35). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3696>
- 130 Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Teacher shortages and turnover in rural schools in the US: An organizational analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(2), 396–431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231159922>
- 131 Mehrotra, S., Morgan, I. S., & Socol, A. (2021). *Getting Black students better access to non-novice teachers*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/getting-black-students-better-access-to-non-novice-teachers/>
- 132 E.g., Sass, T. R., Hannaway, J., Xu, Z., Figlio, D. N., & Feng, L. (2010). Value added of teachers in high-poverty schools and lower poverty schools. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 72, 104–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2012.04.004>
- 133 E.g. Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Vigdor, J.L. (2005). Who teaches whom? Race and the distribution of novice teachers. *Economics of Education Review*, 24, 377–392. <https://doi.org/10.54300/497.986>
- 134 Goldhaber, D., Lavery, L., & Theobald, R. (2015). Uneven playing field? Assessing the teacher quality gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. *Educational Researcher*, 44(5), 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15592622>
- 135 Goldhaber, D., Quince, V., & Theobald, R. (2018). Has it always been this way? Tracing the evolution of teacher quality gaps in U.S. public schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 171–201. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217733445>

absences for students of all races.¹³⁶ Additionally, students of color have better behavioral outcomes,¹³⁷ score higher on standardized tests,¹³⁸ and demonstrate improved learning outcomes and social and emotional development¹³⁹ when taught by teachers of color – and this is particularly true for Black students taught by Black teachers.¹⁴⁰ Recent research even finds that both students of color and White students perceive their teachers of color more favorably than their White teachers.¹⁴¹

Student Benefits Of Having Black Teachers

- Increase in test scores for all students
- Decrease in absences from school for all students
- Improved learning outcomes for students of color
- Improved social and emotional development for students of color

See footnotes 136-141 for sources.

Despite the positive impact of Black teachers on all students and particularly students of color, Black teachers are underrepresented in the nation's K-12 education system. As of 2021, only 6.1% of teachers in U.S. public K-12 schools were Black, compared with 14.9% of students who are Black (this disparity is most pronounced for students in rural areas, where only 3.3% of public school teachers are Black).¹⁴²

6.1% of the nation's K-12 teachers are Black.

Representation of teachers of color in private schools is also low. Only 3.7% are Black¹⁴³ compared with 9% of private school students.¹⁴⁴ The proportion of a school's teachers of color generally grows along with the proportion of students of color. Yet in schools with enrollments of at least 90% students of color, Black teachers still represented an average of only 17.3% – or less than one-fifth – of their faculty, while White teachers made up 47.8% of the teachers in those schools in 2021. In schools with fewer than 25% students of color, fewer than 1% of teachers were Black on average.¹⁴⁵

The mass firing of Black teachers in the decade following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision reduced the Black teacher workforce by nearly 50%, a harm that has never been remedied. This has been exacerbated by newer disparities, including an inadequate pipeline and inadequate educational opportunities for potential Black teachers,¹⁴⁶ unwelcoming environments in teacher education programs and schools that affect potential and current Black teachers' sense of belonging,¹⁴⁷ and lack of support for stress reduction and mental health for teachers of color.¹⁴⁸

136 Blazar, David. (2024). *Why black teachers matter*. (EdWorkingPaper: 21-501). Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/jym0-wz02>.

137 Redding, C. (2019). A teacher like me: A review of the effect of student–teacher racial/ethnic matching on teacher perceptions of students and student academic and behavioral outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(4), 499-535. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319853545>

138 Ibid.

139 Bristol, T. J., & Martin-Fernandez, J. (2019). The added value of Latinx and Black teachers for Latinx and Black students: Implications for policy. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 6(2), 147-153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219862573>

140 Redding, C. (2019). A teacher like me: A review of the effect of student–teacher racial/ethnic matching on teacher perceptions of students and student academic and behavioral outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(4), 499-535. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319853545>

141 Cherng, H.-Y. S., & Halpin, P. F. (2016). The importance of minority teachers: Student perceptions of minority versus White teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 45(7), 407-420. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16671718>

142 NCES. (2022). *Number and percentage distribution of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and selected teacher and school characteristics: Academic year 2020-21*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_209.23.asp

143 NCES. (2022). *Number and percentage distribution of teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools, by selected teacher characteristics: Selected school years, 1987-88 through 2020-21*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_209.10.asp?current=yes

144 NCES. (2024). Private school enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgc>.

145 NCES. (2022). *Number and percentage distribution of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and selected teacher and school characteristics: Academic year 2020-21*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_209.23.asp?current=yes

146 Madkins, T. C. (2011). The Black teacher shortage: A literature review of historical and contemporary trends. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(3), 417-427. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40063582>

147 Grace, J., & Aming-Attai, R. (2023). 'This is so white': examining Black and Brown pre-service teachers' sense of belonging in a predominantly White educator preparation program. *Whiteness and Education*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2023.2277789>

148 Cormier, C. J., Wong, V., McGrew, J. H., Ruble, L. A., & Worrell, F. C. (2021). Stress, burnout, and mental health among teachers of color. *The Learning Professional*, 42(1), 54-62. <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/stress-burnout-and-mental-health-among-teachers-of-color.pdf>

Black teachers in public schools are far more likely than their colleagues to have entered the field through alternative certification programs: 19.4% of all teachers held such certification in 2021, compared with 35.5% of Black teachers – or more than one in three Black teachers.¹⁴⁹ Research finds that teachers certified through alternative certification programs – which can often be substantially less expensive¹⁵⁰ than traditional programs – are trained with less consistency and have less positive influence on student outcomes,¹⁵¹ and are more likely to leave the profession.¹⁵² Research finds that teacher candidates of color who attended traditional certification programs in predominantly White institutions reported that they did not feel that their experiences were reflected in the curriculum, and that (predominantly White)

instructors did not effectively support their White classmates in developing critical perspectives around the teaching of children of color.¹⁵³

NCES data show that Black teachers are also underpaid compared to their peers, making an average base salary in 2021 of \$58,980, compared to \$61,600 for all teachers.¹⁵⁴

Given all of these factors, it is not surprising that Black teachers are more likely to leave the teaching profession. In 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, an average of 7.7% of all teachers had left teaching in the prior two years, including 7.5% of White teachers, 8% of Hispanic teachers, and 10.1% of Black teachers.¹⁵⁵



149 NCES. (2022). *Number and percentage distribution of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by whether they entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program and selected teacher and school characteristics: School year 2020-21*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_209.24.asp?current=yes

150 Expense is a key aspect of this difference, as in addition to lower salaries in the South and nationally research also finds that Black teachers are more likely than their colleagues to have taken out student loans, to have remaining student loan debt that they are still repaying, and to feel higher levels of stress from student loan debt. See García, E., Wei, W., Patrick, S. K., Leung-Gagné, M., & DiNapoli Jr, M. A. (2023). *In debt: Student loan burdens among teachers*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/497.986>

151 Bowling, A. M., & Ball, A. L. (2018). Alternative certification: A solution or an alternative problem?. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(2), 109-122. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.02109>

152 Chambers Mack, J., Johnson, A., Jones-Rincon, A., Tsatenawa, V., & Howard, K. (2019). Why do teachers leave? A comprehensive occupational health study evaluating intent to quit in public school teachers. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 24(1), e12160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jabr.12160>

153 Bristol, T. J., Wallace, D. J., Manchanda, S., & Rodriguez, A. (2020). Supporting Black male preservice teachers: Evidence from an alternative teacher certification program. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 95(5), 484-497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2020.1828690>

154 NCES. (2022). *Average total income, base salary, and other sources of school and nonschool income for full-time teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools, by selected characteristics: School year 2020-21*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_211.10.asp?current=yes

155 NCES. (2019). *Mobility of public elementary and secondary teachers, by selected teacher and school characteristics: Selected years, 1987-88 through 2012-13*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_210.30.asp?current=yes

Looking Ahead: Recommendations/Strategies for the Future

Part I of this report has outlined many disparities in key K-12 educational outcomes for Black students – and shown how these disparities are symptoms of major opportunity and resource gaps in U.S. schools. Educators and policymakers can address these disparities for Black students through policy changes in school funding and finance, policies and procedures, teaching and learning, student supports, and future developments that include harnessing educational technology.

Key issues to address in K-12 education

Funding and Finance

- Make school funding and resources more equitable.
- Prioritize investments that strengthen public education.
- Implement research-based, equity-focused academic interventions to support student learning and reduce outcome disparities.

Policies and Procedures

- Ensure students' preparation for standardized tests is more equitable.
- Work toward having more students of color in advanced courses.
- Adopt proven, more restorative school discipline strategies.
- Pursue innovative approaches such as Outcomes Based Contracting – which requires vendors to help improve student outcomes.

Teaching and Learning

- Ensure the curriculum is accurate and inclusive of all students' experiences.
- Make classroom instruction more effective for all students.
- Address teacher shortages by identifying more diverse candidates and through "grow-your-own" teacher-prep programs.
- Improve educators' professional development.

Student Supports

- Invest in ways to improve school attendance.
- Strengthen students' social and emotional learning.
- Provide safe learning environments for all.
- Develop community schools that provide an array of services.
- Adopt a whole-child approach in schools.

Innovations

- Leverage technology to provide students with additional academic support.

Funding and Finance

Many of the outcome disparities in K-12 schools are a direct result of inequitable or insufficient funding. Policymakers must *fund schools more equitably* to provide all students with access to the resources that will help them learn. States should revise their funding formulas to make them more equitable, providing higher levels of resources to lower-resourced schools.

Further, policymakers must *protect and defend public funds for public schools*, rejecting attempts at harmful reductions and diversions of public education funds to support private education through school voucher programs, tax credits, education-savings accounts, and other such tactics.

States should make school funding formulas more equitable for lower-resourced schools.

Schools must be provided with the level of funding necessary to *finance proven intervention strategies* tailored to improve academic attainment for Black students.

Additionally, schools must *seek out and examine more innovative and equitable approaches to spending, rather than just relying on the traditional models*. Methods such as Outcomes Based Contracting, an approach that directly links expenditure of school district resources to improving student outcomes, are worthy of further exploration.

Student testing can be made more equitable by adopting new research-based methods of assessment.

Policies and Procedures

Beyond funding and resources, the challenges identified in this report point to the need for policies and procedures that can provide many students with greater opportunity to succeed. To better understand and assess student learning, *testing must be made more equitable* through the development of new approaches to assessments that provide more students sufficient opportunity to show what they know – including portfolios and integrated assessment systems now used in some states and school districts.¹⁵⁶

Schools should also *examine and change the processes for assigning students to courses*, so that more Black students have the opportunity to take rigorous and challenging courses. Organizations like the Global Teaching Project are working in the South to expand students' access to AP courses through innovative partnerships with colleges and other institutions.¹⁵⁷ However, these are systemic issues that cannot be fully ameliorated by innovative programs. The root causes of this disparity must be addressed.

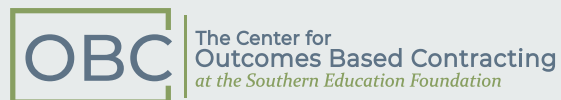
Schools need to *implement more equitable and restorative student discipline practices*. States and school districts also need to *promote stable school governance*. School boards are critical to

Outcomes Based Contracting (OBC) Shows Promise

The Center for Outcomes Based Contracting at SEF empowers school districts to contract for clear student outcomes and compels mutual accountability for achieving them.

School districts across the U.S. are adopting OBC when contracting for academic support services for students. OBC requires that 40% or more of overall payment to an outside service provider be contingent on meeting agreed-upon outcomes for students.

By holding school districts and service providers jointly responsible for driving student success, OBC fosters a culture of mutual accountability and focused collaboration. It ensures that every effort is made to address equity gaps for students with clear expectations for achieving the contracted outcomes.



¹⁵⁶ E.g., Shepard, L. A. (2021). Ambitious teaching and equitable assessment: A vision for prioritizing learning, not testing. *American Educator*, 45(3), 28.; Jimenez, L., & Modaffari, J. (2021). *Effective and equitable assessment systems: Future of testing in education*. Center for American Progress.

¹⁵⁷ Stewart, S. (2018, April 4). *Students study physics during UM spring break visit*. University of Mississippi News. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/4992>

adopting and implementing effective educational improvement strategies. School boards govern our public schools, set policy, and should seek and retain superintendents committed to these improved practices. Unfortunately, school boards are often disrupted by misguided politics that can prevent the advancement of more effective and equitable policies and practices.

Teaching and Learning

There are major disparities in student access to quality teaching and instruction, and to rigorous and accurate coursework. As a primary mandate, we must *ensure students have an accurate and culturally relevant curriculum and effective learning opportunities*. This means ensuring that choices around curriculum content reflect the expertise of subject matter experts and those who study teaching and learning. No censorship of students' opportunities to learn or read should be permitted, and careful attention should be paid to ensuring that instructional materials are culturally relevant for students.¹⁵⁸

K-12 schools and districts should *overhaul hiring processes to make them more equitable* and develop more effective strategies for attracting and developing teachers. We know that access to diverse teachers is good for all students. If traditional hiring practices continue to result in low representation and high turnover for teachers of color, these practices should be changed in ways that make them more inclusive, extend their reach, and leverage existing and new pipelines to get more potential teachers into the field.

One promising strategy is the establishment of *grow-your-own (GYO) teacher programs* that develop potential local teacher candidates into credentialed educators who can teach in their own communities. These programs create pathways for individuals who may not otherwise enter the teaching profession

Grow-your-own programs can develop more teachers in their own communities.

and are a highly effective approach¹⁵⁹ for creating more educators who know and can identify with the students they teach. GYO programs, often partnerships between community organizations, school districts and institutions of higher education, have shown promise in improving recruitment and retention.¹⁶⁰

Finally, we must *ensure that teachers and other school and district staff receive high-quality professional development that is job-embedded and cohesive*. This professional development should be sustained, content-focused, and collaborative, and should provide coaching and practical models.¹⁶¹

Student Supports

Schools must *invest in supports to increase student attendance* – working to understand attendance challenges and develop strategies to decrease chronic absenteeism. Attendance Works recommends that educators take a data-driven approach to this challenge, beginning by engaging with students and their families in collaborative and proactive ways, with guidance from community partners on how to address absences and the causes of chronic absenteeism.¹⁶²

Instructionally, schools must *increase focus on social and emotional learning (SEL)*.¹⁶³ SEL refers to the ability of students to understand and manage their interpersonal interactions, emotions, and thoughts in ways that are positive and beneficial for themselves and others. SEL is increasingly being integrated into public education – as of 2022, all 50 states had adopted SEL standards for pre-K education, and 27 had adopted SEL standards for K-12 schools.¹⁶⁴

158 E.g., Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin, a SAGE Company.

159 Garcia, A. (2020). *Grow your own teachers: A 50-state scan of policies and programs*. New America. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609132.pdf>

160 Ibid. Some national and community organizations such as the Center for Black Educator Development also focus specifically on building community pipelines for Black teachers – for more context, see e.g., <https://thecenterblacked.org/>

161 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development* (research brief). Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://learning-policyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_BRIEF.pdf

162 Chang, H., Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2023, October 12). *Rising tide of chronic absence challenges schools*. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/rising-tide-of-chronic-absence-challenges-schools/?preview=true>

163 In addition to *social and emotional learning*, these skills are sometimes called things like *soft skills*, *intrapersonal/interpersonal skills*, and *noncognitive competencies*. While there is some frequency of the use of the phrase “noncognitive competencies,” it is worth noting here that it is something of a misnomer – SEL skills are most assuredly cognitive.

164 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.) *SEL policy at the state level: A systemic approach can align state policies, resources, and actions to support SEL*. CASEL. <https://casel.org/systemic-implementation/sel-policy-at-the-state-level/>

Research increasingly shows that SEL affects many of the outcomes described in this report, including school success, college entry, college completion, and life earnings.¹⁶⁵ A 2023 report analyzing more than 250 studies on universal school-based (USB) SEL in the early grades found that the potential of SEL to support students of color – particularly students of color with disabilities – was deeply under-investigated and held great potential for future research.¹⁶⁶

Key benefits of community schools

- Better academic outcomes – especially for Black students and other students of color
- Narrowing of gaps in student outcomes
- Stronger family engagement
- Improved student attendance

Schools must also *ensure safe environments for learning* – not through overaggressive discipline or policing, but by investing in community-focused approaches to safety and security that reflect authentic understandings of what students, families, and community members say they need. Finally, policymakers can *invest in community schools*. Community schools are public schools that partner with local organizations and families to provide students with comprehensive services, both academic

and non-academic. Effective community schools have four pillars: 1) integrated student supports, 2) expanded and enriched learning time and activities, 3) active family and community engagement, and 4) collaborative leadership and practices. Research increasingly shows the positive effects of community schools.¹⁶⁷ These include better academic outcomes – with specific potential benefits for Black students and other students of color – and narrower outcome gaps,¹⁶⁸ stronger family engagement,¹⁶⁹ and improved student attendance.¹⁷⁰

Navigating Future Trends and Innovations for Greater Equity

In addition to changes that address the challenges we already see, a range of educational developments and innovations may present the opportunity to increase equity in K-12 in the future – or, if implemented without proper care or thoughtfulness, to decrease it. For example, schools need to *evaluate emerging educational technology with an intentional focus on equity*. While technology can enhance teaching and learning, unequal access can also widen existing opportunity gaps. It is crucial to use technology in a way that promotes equity rather than exacerbates disparities.

Schools must also *invest in and implement research-based models and innovative practices that improve student learning*, including personalized learning, high-impact tutoring, small group learning, and differentiated instruction.

165 Jones, S. M., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and emotional learning: Introducing the issue. *The Future of Children*, 3-11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018>

166 Cipriano, C., Naples, L. H., Eveleigh, A., Cook, A., Funaro, M., Cassidy, C., McCarthy, M. F., & Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G. (2023). A systematic review of student disability and race representation in universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions for elementary school students. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(1), 73-102. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221094079>

167 Sanders, M. G., & Galindo, C. L. (Eds.). (2020). *Reviewing the success of full-service community schools in the U.S.* Routledge.

168 Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>

169 Anderson, J. A., Chen, M. E., Min, M., & Watkins, L. L. (2019). Successes, challenges, and future directions for an urban full service community schools initiative. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(7), 894-921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517747032>

170 Covelli, L., Engberg, J., & Oppen, I. M. (2022). *Leading indicators of long-term success in community schools: Evidence from New York City*. <https://doi.org/10.26300/59q2-ek65>



Part II

Outcomes and Opportunity in Postsecondary Education and Employment

Black students' college enrollment and graduation rates, among other measures of success, are still inequitably low across the South and the nation.

There are many potential pathways for students once they leave K-12 schooling. These can include postsecondary education at two-year community and technical colleges or four-year public and private colleges and universities (which in both instances can be classified as Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs] or other Minority Serving Institutions [MSIs], or may be Predominantly White Institutions [PWIs]).

Black students are underrepresented in postsecondary education nationally and even more so in the South. While the Black population ratios in early care and education and K-12 enrollment are as high as or slightly higher than the overall population average both nationally and in the South, the Black population in postsecondary education is about 12% lower than the average nationally and 17% lower in the South.¹⁷¹

- **Two-year institutions:**¹⁷² Nearly 690,000 Black students (about 30% of all Black postsecondary students) are enrolled in two-year institutions of higher education. This includes:
 - **Public institutions:** More than 639,000 Black postsecondary students (27.7%) attend public two-year postsecondary institutions.
 - **Private nonprofit institutions:** Nearly 10,300 Black postsecondary students (0.4%) attend private nonprofit two-year postsecondary institutions.
 - **Private for-profit institutions:** Nearly 40,000 Black postsecondary students (1.7%) attend for-profit two-year postsecondary institutions.
- **Four-year institutions:**¹⁷³ More than 1.6 million Black students (about 70% of all Black postsecondary students) are enrolled in four-year institutions of higher education. This includes:

¹⁷¹ 12.5% of the national postsecondary population is Black, compared with 14.2% of the total population, and 18.1% of the southern postsecondary population is Black, compared with 21.8% of the population in the South overall.

¹⁷² NCES. (2024). *Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by control and classification of institution, level of enrollment, and race/ethnicity or nonresident status of student: 2022*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_306.50.asp

¹⁷³ Ibid.

- **Public institutions:** Nearly 924,000 Black postsecondary students (40%) attend public four-year postsecondary institutions.
 - **Private nonprofit institutions:** More than 474,000 Black postsecondary students (20.5%) attend private nonprofit four-year postsecondary institutions.
 - **Private for-profit institutions:** More than 217,000 Black postsecondary students (9.4%) attend for-profit four-year postsecondary institutions.
- Additionally, about 219,000 of the Black postsecondary students described above attend HBCUs, with nearly 58,000 attending two-year HBCUs and more than 161,000 attending four-year HBCUs.¹⁷⁴

Postsecondary options also include certification and training programs (such as HVAC repair), as well as the workforce, or a combination of these options. These choices all provide different advantages and challenges and may be better or worse fits for particular students given their individual goals and preferences. SEF strongly believes that students should have the opportunity to choose the best postsecondary path for them.

Outcomes in Postsecondary Education

The sections below provide an overview of key outcome data in postsecondary education – including degree attainment, fields of study, and median earnings – for Black students across the South and the nation. They also address the positive impacts of HBCUs and the broader implications of these educational outcomes on workforce participation. Addressing the disparities and systemic challenges highlighted in these sections is crucial for increasing educational equity and ensuring that all students have the resources and support to succeed in postsecondary education and beyond.¹⁷⁵

Graduation Rates

Data on college graduation rates show major inequities by race. At the two-year college level, Black students have the lowest rate of associate degree completion within 150% of expected time (i.e., three years for full-time students) at 25.3%, compared with the national average of 34.1% and more than 2 percentage points below Pacific Islanders, who have the second-lowest average rates.¹⁷⁶



Major inequities persist in graduation rates for Black students at both two-year and four-year institutions.

¹⁷⁴ NCES. (2023). *Selected statistics on degree-granting historically Black colleges and universities, by control and level of institution: Selected years, 1990 through 2022*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_313.30.asp

¹⁷⁵ It is important to note that postsecondary institutions are not required to report data on many of the topics for which it is required at the K-12 level. For example, they do not report sanctions for students who violate campus conduct policies, nor are they required to provide data on the race of students who are accused of violating or determined to have violated particular policies. For that reason, it is not possible to determine from available data whether there are racial inequities in things like college-level discipline. See e.g., Waryold, D. M., & Lancaster, J. M. (Eds.). (2008). *Student conduct practice: The complete guide for student affairs professionals*. Stylus Publishing. One thing we do know is that although data show that total reported on-campus crimes and crime rates per student both went down during the 2010s, hate crime incidents – including vandalism, intimidation, and assault – increased, with race accounting for 39% of vandalisms, 47% of intimidations, and 37% of simple assaults that were classified as hate crimes. Further, although four-year private nonprofit institutions account for less than half as many students as four-year public institutions, private institutions had nearly as many reported hate crimes as their public counterparts (almost 90%), suggesting that Black students who attend private four-year institutions face an even higher likelihood of experiencing a hate crime than those in public colleges and universities. See NCES. (2021). *Criminal Incidents at Postsecondary Institutions*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2021/2021092.pdf> and NCES. (2021). *Hate Crimes at Postsecondary Institutions*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2021/a22_508c.pdf

¹⁷⁶ NCES. (2023). *Graduation rate from first institution attended within 150 percent of normal time for first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking students at 2-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and control of institution: Selected cohort entry years, 2000 through 2019*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_326.20.aspx

At the four-year college level, Black students have a four-year graduation rate of 29.7%, compared to the U.S. average of 49.1% for all students; a five-year graduation rate of 42.6%, compared to an average rate of 61.8%; and a six-year graduation rate of 45.7%, compared to an average rate of 64.6%. The four-year graduation rate for Black students at public four-year institutions is 27.1%, meaning that only slightly more than one in four Black four-year public college students graduate in four years.¹⁷⁷

These figures underscore a troubling disparity in graduation rates for Black students across both two-year and four-year institutions, reflecting broader systemic challenges that hinder educational attainment and long-term success.

Degree Fields

In the 2021-22 academic year, the top five bachelor's degree fields of study for Black students were:

Top 5 Bachelor's Degree Fields of Study for Black Students, 2021-22

Field of study	Total Degrees Conferred in 2021-22
Business	36,341
Health Professions and Related Programs	34,113
Psychology	15,204
Social Sciences/History	13,702 (nearly all in social sciences; only 1,099 in history)
Biological and Biomedical Sciences	10,903

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2021-2022 data

The breakdown across all students is similar but not identical: business (375,418) and health (263,764) remain the top two, followed by social sciences/history (151,109, with a higher percentage [21,392] in history), biological and biomedical sciences (131,462) and then psychology (129,609). Also worth noting is that engineering is the sixth most common field of study for all college students (123,107 degrees, or a

little more than 6% of degrees), while engineering for Black students is not among the top 10 areas of study, representing only 2.7% of degrees.

In fact, Black students are underrepresented overall as recipients of undergraduate degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). In 2021-22, 9.9% of all certificates and degrees conferred went to Black students, but only 8.9% of STEM certificates and degrees did. Further, 39.2% of all degrees conferred are STEM degrees, but only 30.5% of degrees conferred on Black students are (in other words, about four in 10 degree recipients receive their degrees in STEM, whereas only about three in 10 Black degree recipients do).¹⁷⁸ However, HBCUs provide a bright spot – although they enroll only about 10% of Black college students and make up only 3% of four-year nonprofit postsecondary institutions, they confer 25% of the STEM degrees received by Black graduates¹⁷⁹ and produce 40% of all Black engineers.¹⁸⁰ Additional benefits and positive impacts of HBCUs are discussed on the next page.



177 NCES. (2024). *Graduation rate from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, control of institution, and percentage of applications accepted: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2016*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_326.10.asp

178 NCES. (2023). *Number and percentage distribution of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees/certificates conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, level of degree/certificate, and sex of student: Academic years 2012-13 through 2021-22*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_318.45.asp

179 United Negro College Fund (2019). *By the numbers: How HBCUs stack up*. <https://unf.org/the-latest/by-the-numbers-how-hbcus-stack-up>

180 U.S. Dept. of Education. (2023, September 29). *Biden-Harris administration highlights a record of championing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)* [Press Release]. <https://www.thehbcuadvocate.com/biden-harris-administration-highlights-a-record-of-championing-historically-black-colleges-and-universities-hbcus/>

The Impact of HBCUs

Black students are underrepresented in postsecondary education, representing around 12.5% of enrollment nationally and 18.1% in the South, compared to a total Black population of around 15% nationally¹⁸¹ and 20.8% in the South. The lower college graduation rates for Black students only compound the challenges around low enrollment levels. However, these patterns are challenged by the relatively high levels of success among students in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

HBCUs are mission-based postsecondary institutions established prior to 1964¹⁸² with a central focus on educating Black students. The Morrill Act of 1862 established a set of land-grant postsecondary institutions which served only White students; in 1890, the second Morrill Act established 21 separate land-grant schools for Black students – all of them public except for Tuskegee University, the nation's only private land-grant HBCU. The two acts also had a key distinction: 1862 Morrill institutions were provided funding and 30,000 acres of land in each state, while the 1890 institutions for Black students were only granted funding to be distributed as determined by the state – leaving these institutions with pennies to the dollars received by White institutions.¹⁸³

There are currently 102 accredited HBCUs in the United States, of which 53 are public and 49 are private.¹⁸⁴ Today, 94 of the nation's 102 HBCUs are in the South, with another two in Washington, D.C. The remaining six are located in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, with two each.

HBCUs make up 3% of four-year nonprofit colleges and universities and enroll 10% of Black students in the U.S. but are responsible for 25% of degrees earned by Black college graduates.¹⁸⁵ One in six Black Americans with a bachelor's degree graduated from an HBCU. A working paper recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research notes that HBCUs are highly effective in supporting their students, who come from low-income backgrounds at three times the rate of students in predominantly White institutions.¹⁸⁶

HBCUs represent only 3% of U.S. colleges and universities but graduate 25% of Black students earning bachelor's degrees.

Black students who attended HBCUs were 30% more likely to earn a degree than Black students in other colleges, twice as likely to earn a STEM degree, and had a higher estimated household income at age 30, a recent longitudinal study of nearly 1.2 million Black SAT-takers found.¹⁸⁷ A large proportion of Black professionals come from HBCUs: they produce 40% of Black engineers, 50% of Black teachers, 70% of Black doctors and dentists, and 80% of Black judges, according to the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁸⁸

Despite these positive results, HBCUs have struggled to get the support they need. There have been several decades of state and federal court litigation around issues of differential treatment of public HBCUs by state higher education systems.¹⁸⁹ Civil Rights offices at the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education have spent decades addressing discriminatory state education policies that negatively impact HBCUs. The common threads in these cases have been the underfunding and limited education programming at HBCUs, still allowed by state higher education systems as vestiges of segregation in higher education. Renewed focus on HBCUs in the context of the education of Black students must include review and analysis of these matters of law and policy, and their impact on higher education opportunities for Black students.

181 United States Census Bureau. (2022). *The Black alone or in combination population in the United States: 2022*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/race/ppl-bc22.html>

182 The first HBCU, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, was founded in 1837.

183 Allen, B. & Esters, L. (n.d.). *Historically Black land-grant universities: Overcoming barriers and achieving success*. https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/HBLGUs_0.pdf

184 See <https://nces.ed.gov/COLLEGENAVIGATOR/?s=all&sp=4> for a listing of currently accredited HBCUs; note that different organizations may define and count HBCUs slightly differently.

185 United Negro College Fund (2019). *By the numbers: How HBCUs stack up*. <https://unfc.org/the-latest/by-the-numbers-how-hbcus-stack-up>

186 Price, G. & Viceisza, A. (2023). *What can Historically Black Colleges And Universities teach about improving higher education outcomes for Black students?* https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w31131/w31131.pdf

187 Edwards, A., Ortagus, J., Smith, J., & Smythe, A. (2023). *HBCU enrollment and longer-term outcomes. Working paper*. <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-883.pdf>

188 U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Fact sheet: Biden-Harris administration highlights a record of championing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)*.

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-highlights-record-championing-historically-black-colleges-and-universities-hbcus>

189 E.g., Hamilton, L. V. (2002). Equality under the law. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 1, 1-20. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1064088>



Workforce Participation and Median Earnings

College degrees matter for Black students. Black degree holders have a slightly higher-than-average representation in the nation's workforce: 81.5% of Black associate degree holders were employed compared to 81.3% for all associate degree holders, and 89% of Black bachelor's degree holders were employed compared to 87.2% for all bachelor's degree holders. Black Americans *without* degrees, however, participate in the workforce at lower-than-average rates. Those with some college but no degree were employed at a rate of 76.8% compared to an overall national average of 77.8%. Those with a high school diploma or equivalent had an employment rate of 67% compared to 71.6% for all adults. The employment rate for Black Americans without a high school diploma was 47.4% compared to 60.6% for all such adults.¹⁹⁰

The annual earnings for recent Black graduates lag behind the averages across all recent college graduates. The median annual income for Black full-time year-round workers ages 25 to 34 was \$40,850,

The median income for Black *master's degree* holders is lower than the median income for non-Black *bachelor's degree* holders.

compared with \$49,990 for all year-round workers in that age group. In fact, Black workers were paid less at all levels of education. Black Americans who held a high school diploma as their top credential earned a median \$35,050 compared with \$39,710 for all such workers, and those with some college experience but no degree earned a median \$35,270 compared with \$41,000 for all such workers. Among degree holders these differences are larger: Black bachelor's and master's holders in this age range earned a median of \$49,970 and \$61,460, respectively, compared to \$61,610 and \$74,590 across all earners. This means the median income for a Black master's degree holder is lower than the median income for bachelor's degree holders across all Americans.¹⁹¹

190 NCES. (2022). *Labor force participation, employment, and unemployment of persons 25 to 64 years old, by sex, race/ethnicity, age group, and educational attainment: 2018, 2019, and 2021*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_501.10.asp

191 NCES. (2022). *Median annual earnings of full-time year-round workers 25 to 34 years old and full-time year-round workers as a percentage of the labor force, by sex, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment: Selected years, 1995 through 2021*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_502.30.asp

Opportunity Gaps in Postsecondary Education

As in the K-12 system, differential postsecondary outcomes are symptoms of opportunity gaps. The K-12 opportunity gaps discussed earlier in this report all contribute to postsecondary outcomes as well, as their effects on students continue through high school and into the next stages of education, work, and life. Below we discuss some of the opportunity gaps affecting Black students that are specific to the postsecondary level, such as rising tuition costs and the student debt crisis, the prevalence of developmental (remedial) courses, and the lack of faculty diversity.

Rising Costs of College and Student Debt Student Loans

The rising cost of college and the rise in student debt disproportionately affect Black students. Research shows that Black students are more likely to borrow than students of other races pursuing similar degrees, and are more likely to borrow larger amounts. This can be attributed to a number of systemic issues, from inadequate college preparation from the K-12 system to the racial wealth gap.¹⁹² A recent analysis of 2018 NCES data by the Education Data Initiative found that, four years after graduation, Black students still *owe* 188% more on average than White students *borrowed*, and that the average Black college graduate owes \$25,000 more in student loans, on average, than the average White college graduate.¹⁹³

Four years after college graduation, Black adults *owe* more on student loans than White students *borrowed*.

The analysis also found that Black students have the highest average monthly student loan payments of any racial-ethnic group, and that Black undergraduate degree holders average \$52,000 in student loan debt. (The College Board found an average student loan balance in 2023 of \$29,400 for all 2022 college graduates,¹⁹⁴ and Experian reported that the average student loan balance in 2023 was \$38,787 for all U.S. adults.¹⁹⁵) Additionally, more than half of Black student loan borrowers reported they owe more in student loans than their net worth.¹⁹⁶

Direct financial challenges are not the only impact of student loan debt. Research also finds that student loans affect mental health, with more than half of borrowers experiencing anxiety and other reported responses including depression, insomnia, and panic attacks. Additionally, more than four of five borrowers indicated that their debt has caused a delay in a major life event. The disproportionate loan debt on Black borrowers thus reflects major quality-of-life challenges outside of the economic implications.¹⁹⁷

25% of college costs are covered by Pell Grants today compared with 75% in 1975.

Pell Grants

In addition to the more than 90% of student *loans* from the federal government,¹⁹⁸ students can also receive federal *grants* they do not need to repay, the most common of which is the Pell Grant. Pell Grants are awarded to undergraduate students in low-to-moderate-income households and are a major portion of financial aid for these students – who are more likely to be students of color and first-generation college students.¹⁹⁹ In 2015-16, Pell Grants made up 72% of grant-based federal aid to undergraduates classified as low-income.²⁰⁰ However, the purchasing

192 Baum, S. (2019). Student debt: The unique circumstances of African American students. In Espinosa, L.L. (Eds.) et. al., *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* (pp. 201-210). American Council on Education. <https://www.equityinhighered.org/resources/ideas-and-insights/student-debt-the-unique-circumstances-of-african-american-students/>

193 Hanson, M. (2023, December 8). *Student loan debt by race*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-by-race>

194 Ma, J. & Matea, P. (2023). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2023*. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends%20Report%202023%20Updated.pdf>

195 Horymski, C. (2024). *Experian 2023 consumer credit review*. <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/consumer-credit-review/>

196 Hanson, M. (2023, December 8). *Student loan debt by race*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-by-race>

197 Wright, M. (2023, April 17). *How student loan forgiveness can help close the racial wealth gap and advance economic justice*. NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

198 Hahn, A. & Tarver, J. (2024). *2024 student loan debt statistics: Average student loan debt*. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/student-loans/average-student-loan-debt-statistics/>

199 NCES. (2015). *Trends in Pell grant receipt and the characteristics of Pell grant recipients: Selected years, 1999–2000 to 2011–12*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015601>

200 Katsinas, S. G., Bray, N. J., & Kanter, M. J. (2022). *Educating the top 100 percent: Policy pathways for public higher education*. Harvard Education Press.

power of Pell Grants has fallen significantly since the program began: In 1975, the maximum Pell Grant covered more than 75% of the average cost of attendance at public four-year institutions – but today only covers about 25% of students' costs.²⁰¹

Tuition and Fees

Student debt is directly related to the rising costs of college. The College Board found that between 1993-94 and 2023-24, average published full-time tuition and fees at public four-year institutions increased by 109%, from \$5,380 to \$11,260, and those at private four-year institutions increased by 78%, from \$23,300 to \$41,540. In just the last year, between 2022-23 and 2023-24, average tuition and fees increased by \$270 for in-state students at public four-year institutions and by \$850 (to \$29,150) for out-of-state students, and private four-year institutions increased their average tuition and fees by \$1,600.²⁰²

Two-year colleges' tuition and fees, however, increased by only 51% since 1993-94 and by only \$100 in the last year to a current average annual 2023-24 cost of \$3,990, representing a substantially less expensive option. Additionally, UNCF found that HBCUs' average tuition costs 28% less than comparable non-HBCUs.²⁰³

Developmental Education

Developmental or remedial education courses are often required for students who are accepted into a college but deemed unprepared for credit-bearing coursework in one or more subjects. These courses, which students pay for but which do not count toward degree requirements, can significantly extend the time and cost of earning a degree.²⁰⁴ A recent analysis of 2020 data by New America shows that about 40% of students at two-year institutions and 25% of those at four-year institutions indicated that they had taken at least one developmental course.²⁰⁵

Many college students take developmental courses, but relatively few of them complete two- and four-year degrees.

Although postsecondary institutions do not systematically report on developmental course-taking patterns, data show that such courses are prevalent. The 2020 numbers represent a drop from the 2016 estimates that showed nearly one-third of students at four-year institutions and 56% of students at two-year colleges taking developmental courses.^{206, 207} Whether the improved numbers from 2020 represent a meaningful change in course-taking patterns or simply the influence of the pandemic is not yet clear. Regardless, Black students take developmental courses at higher rates. In the 2020 data, 50% of Black students at two-year institutions and 33% at four-year institutions reported having taken at least one developmental course.

While some recent research shows that students who completed developmental courses had better outcomes than students who did not, the completion rate for these courses is very low. A 2016 report by NCES found that only 49% of developmental course-takers passed every developmental course they attempted, with 35% completing some of their developmental courses and 16% completing none.²⁰⁸ Further, 67% of students who had entered a two-year institution in 2003-04 and taken but not completed remedial courses had left without a degree by 2008-09. In four-year colleges, 44% of such students had the same result.²⁰⁹ This represents a huge challenge to Black students' postsecondary completion and success. This can be particularly pronounced in developmental mathematics courses, which a majority of enrolled students do not pass on the first attempt.²¹⁰

201 National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. (2022, August). *NASFAA Issue Brief: Doubling the Maximum Pell Grant*. NASFAA. https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/Issue_Brief_Double_Pell.pdf

202 Ma, J. & Matea, P. (2023). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2023*. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends%20Report%202023%20Updated.pdf>

203 United Negro College Fund (2019). *By the numbers: How HBCUs stack up*. <https://uncf.org/the-latest/by-the-numbers-how-hbcus-stack-up>

204 Valentine, J. C., Konstantopoulos, S., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2017). What happens to students placed into developmental education? A meta-analysis of regression discontinuity studies. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(4), 806-833. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1147706.pdf>

205 Thai, T. (2023). *Who takes remedial courses? Examining the demographics*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/who-takes-remedial-courses-examining-the-landscape>

206 NCES. (2021). *Remedial coursetaking at U.S. public 2- and 4-Year institutions: Scope, experience, and outcomes*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf>

207 Thai, T. (2023). *Who takes remedial courses? Examining the demographics*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/who-takes-remedial-courses-examining-the-landscape>

208 National Center for Education Statistics, U. S. Department of Education. (2021). *Remedial coursetaking at U.S. public 2- and 4-Year institutions: Scope, experience, and outcomes*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf>

209 Ibid.

210 Cawley, A. (2014). Mathematical perceptions and problem solving of first year developmental mathematics students in a four-year institution. In *17th Annual Conference on Research in Undergraduate Mathematics Education (RUME)*.

These courses can also create barriers to graduation due to the time needed to complete multi-course developmental sequences. Students may be placed into as many as four levels of developmental education (and, in rare cases, as many as six), each requiring a passing grade to move on to the next.²¹¹ At a two-year college, a student required to take four semester-long developmental courses would not be able to receive a math credit until the fifth semester, making it impossible to complete a two-year degree on time, even with an A in every course.

The fact that many students do not immediately pass each of their developmental courses only compounds the issue. The high non-completion rate in these courses further contributes to extended time-to-degree, increased financial burdens, and lower graduation rates, with Black students more frequently facing these challenges.

Faculty Diversity

Research shows that access to racially and culturally diverse college faculty better prepares all students for success in work and citizenship, improves their problem-solving skills, and increases creativity as well as respect for and understanding of others. For students of color, exposure to Black faculty also increases degree persistence and the likelihood of college completion.²¹² However, the nation still has few Black professors. In 2022, only about 5.9% of full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were Black, or just 49,454 out of more than 842,000 faculty members. Only 4.1% of full professors are Black.²¹³ Even though Black students are underrepresented in postsecondary education, the proportion of Black college students was more than twice the percentage of Black faculty members and instructors.

5.9% of full-time college faculty are Black.



Faculty salaries at land-grant HBCUs in some states in the South average more than \$40,000 lower than at non-HBCU land-grant institutions.

This may be due, in part, to disparities in compensation. Although faculty salaries at colleges and universities are not subject to the same public reporting requirements as teacher salaries in K-12 schools, research shows a clear wage gap for professors of color. A 2017 study of more than 4,000 faculty across six departments at 40 selective public universities found that Black and Hispanic faculty earned \$10,000 to \$15,000 less, on average, than their White peers.²¹⁴ There is also a very large pay gap for HBCU faculty, who have been found to make nearly \$20,000 less annually on average than non-HBCU faculty. At land-grant HBCUs in the South, pay gaps compared to land-grant non-HBCUs can exceed \$30,000 and even \$40,000 in some cases.²¹⁵

211 This means that students may be required to take and pass multiple non-credit remedial courses before they are permitted to take credit courses, often up to as many as four different courses that must each be taken and passed (and paid for) in sequence before a credit course can be attempted.

212 Bitar, J., Montague, G., & Ilano, L. (2022). *Faculty diversity and student success go hand in hand, so why are university faculties so White?* EdTrust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Faculty_Diversity_Report_FINAL-3.pdf

213 NCES. (2023). *Full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and academic rank: Fall 2020, fall 2021, and fall 2022*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_315.20.asp

214 Li, D., & Koedel, C. (2017). Representation and salary gaps by race-ethnicity and gender at selective public universities. *Educational Researcher*, 46(7), 343-354. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726535>

215 NEA Higher Education. (2021). *The HBCU salary gap*. https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Salary2020_HBCUs.pdf. Land-grant HBCU faculty on nine-to-10-month contracts made about \$32,000 less on average than their non-HBCU peers in Virginia, \$33,500 less in Alabama, \$37,000 less in Arkansas and Florida, \$38,000 less in Texas, \$42,000 less in Maryland and Delaware, \$43,000 less in Missouri, and \$44,000 less in Kentucky.

Looking Ahead: Recommendations/Strategies for the Future

Black students face clear disparities that stem from opportunity gaps in postsecondary education and career access. While more limited data and reporting at the postsecondary level restrict some of what we can know and understand about student outcomes, there are clear strategies for improvement in areas like funding and finance, student supports, and policy and practice.

Steps to Address Opportunity Gaps in Postsecondary Education

Funding and Finance

- Reduce students' college debt now and in the future.
- Invest more in HBCUs and community colleges.
- Close the racial wage gap among postsecondary faculty.

Student Supports

- Improve student pathways – especially for Black and other underrepresented students – to and through a range of postsecondary opportunities.
- Expand support systems in college, especially for nontraditional and part-time students.
- Destigmatize career and technical education.

Policy and Practice

- Collect data, set equity goals, and provide supports to improve students' graduation rates and ensure timely degree completion.
- Study postsecondary disparities to better understand student equity needs.
- Increase faculty and student diversity.
- Overhaul and improve developmental education to help more students complete college degrees.



Funding and Finance

College debt has major effects on students' lives, and particularly strong effects for Black students. Policymakers must *address the student debt crisis*, which harms the U.S. workforce and economic outlook. Increased educational opportunity and success for Black students not only affects those students but also leads to better outcomes for everyone – a stronger and better-prepared workforce, a more robust economy, a wider availability of key professionals, and a host of other benefits.²¹⁶

Policymakers must invest more in HBCUs and community colleges.

Further, while postsecondary education is expensive, there are options that are more financially accessible. Policymakers must *invest more in HBCUs and community colleges*, which can help to address the disparities that plague these institutions and support students in better accessing the enormous potential they hold.

In addition to the impact of HBCUs, a growing body of research shows the often untapped power of two-year community and technical colleges to support equitable outcomes for Black students (and their other students as well).²¹⁷ Two-year institutions can often be more affordable, accessible, and flexible, and can better fit student needs, but heavy underfunding often prevents them from fully realizing their transformative potential.²¹⁸

Additionally, college faculty must be diversified. Colleges and universities must *remedy the racial wage gap in the professorship*, as well as the funding gaps between public HBCUs and other land-grant institutions that result in large salary disparities for professors at HBCUs.

Student Supports

In order to reduce disparities and increase student supports, educators must *improve student pathways and access to postsecondary opportunities*. At the K-12 level, this includes ensuring students understand their postsecondary options, including the multiple types of institutions they can access, and that students have an understanding of financial needs and how they can pay for postsecondary education. This also includes federal action to streamline and better inform families and communities around financial aid and loan and grant options for students.

At the postsecondary institutional level, this includes expanding the ways in which students can demonstrate college readiness and additional targeted outreach to potential postsecondary candidates.

Additionally, *more support must be provided for non-traditional and non-full-time students* given their unique needs. A recent study found that 36% of Black students – twice the rate for other students – have responsibilities they said interfered with their education, including jobs or caregiving responsibilities. Further, more than half of Black students working on bachelor's degrees indicated that they needed greater flexibility around their work or personal schedules in order to remain enrolled in their program.²¹⁹

Educators must also work to *destigmatize job and training programs* and other career and technical education options. This must happen within a context of expanded access and opportunity for postsecondary education for all students. All students should have access to a full range of postsecondary options, enabling the choice of whether to attend a college or university or to select other training programs or pathways to be based on student interest and potential rather than associated with student characteristics such as race and class.

216 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South's pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

217 To avoid making an inaccurate distinction, it should be noted here that while most HBCUs are four-year, there are a small number of two-year HBCUs as well.

218 Cawley, A. (2014). Mathematical perceptions and problem solving of first-year developmental mathematics students in a four-year institution. In *17th Annual Conference on Research in Undergraduate Mathematics Education (RUME)*.

219 Gallup. (2023). *Balancing act: The tradeoffs and challenges facing Black students in higher education*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Black-Learners-Report-2023.pdf>

Policy and Practice

Outside of HBCUs, postsecondary institutions produce clear disparities in college outcomes, many of which affect or are specific to Black students. Postsecondary institutions must *understand and address outcome disparities* by collecting data, setting equity goals, and providing supports to improve graduation rates and ensure timely degree completion.

As much as possible given the current anti-DEI push, postsecondary institutions must *increase the diversity of their student bodies and their faculty*. The ample evidence of the benefits of student and faculty diversity means that purposeful action is needed to change the underrepresentation of Black students in

higher education and the even more profound underrepresentation of Black professors.

Postsecondary institutions must implement strategies to support students in gaining credit and progressing in their college journey, including through dual enrollment programs for high school students. Additionally, *developmental education programs must be rethought and redesigned* to ensure that students are able to graduate with the required credits in a timely manner. Some institutions are successfully implementing accelerated developmental pathways,²²⁰ while programs such as Carnegie Math Pathways shift to a co-requisite model, in which courses can be taken simultaneously.²²¹

220 Jaggars, S. S., Hodara, M., Cho, S.-W., & Xu, D. (2015). Three accelerated developmental education programs: Features, student outcomes, and implications. *Community College Review*, 43(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552114551752>

221 Strother, S., & Klipple, K. (2019). *Corequisite remediation in mathematics: A review of first-year implementation and outcomes of Quantway and Statway*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/corequisite-remediation-in-math/#>



Part III

Outcomes and Opportunity in Early Care and Education

Too many children and families still do not have access to high-quality early learning programs.

Unlike the K-12 and postsecondary systems, which can be divided into distinct categories and grade ranges²²² and analyzed using robust data, the nation's early care and education (ECE) system is more complex. It is a *mixed-delivery system* supporting children from birth to age 5 through various programs and funding mechanisms. It includes government initiatives like the federal Head Start program and state pre-K programs, private early learning centers, and home-based services such as home visiting programs and individual caregivers. Additionally, informal care provided by family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) is a vital component of the ECE system.

NCES estimates that of the 2.7 million Black children under 6 years old and not yet in kindergarten in 2019:

- 36.9% had parental care only
- 33.1% received center-based care
- 22.6% were cared for by other relatives

- 4% received nonrelative home-based care (0.8% in the child's own home and 3.1% in another home)
- 3.5% had multiple arrangements

Funding for this mixed-delivery system comes from various sources: federal grants and subsidies, including Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); state funds for pre-K programs and child-care subsidies; private contributions and tuition fees; and local investments in community-based programs.

This diverse array of programs and funding creates a complex and often uneven ECE landscape, resulting in significant variability in access, quality, and support depending on location and available resources.²²³

Outcomes in ECE

Comprehensive data on ECE's effects are somewhat limited due to inconsistent collection across various

²²² In the K-12 system, for example, students generally attend public schools (including both traditional and charter) or private schools, or are home-schooled, with the first two categories (and the first most substantially) making up the vast majority of services. In the postsecondary system, students generally attend public or private institutions classified as two- or four-year colleges and universities that may also offer graduate programs or a range of formal training/certification programs.

²²³ Learning Policy Institute. (2021). *Building a national early childhood education system that works*.

https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/490/download?inline&file=LPI_Early_Childhood_Education_2021_BRIEF.pdf

settings. However, indicators such as elementary school reading levels and long-term educational achievements of ECE program participants provide valuable insight. The sections below detail the research showing that high-quality ECE participation is associated with stronger third-grade reading skills and higher rates of high school and college completion, especially for Black students. These positive outcomes underscore the importance of continued investment in ECE.

Third-Grade Reading Levels

One common indicator used to measure ECE outcomes is students' reading levels when they reach third grade. ECE is often seen as ending at age 5, when many children start kindergarten. A more complete definition of ECE goes through age 8,²²⁴ when many students reach third grade and experience significant growth in their reasoning skills and ability to learn from what they read (often called "reading to learn" rather than "learning to read").²²⁵

Researchers have found an association between children's vocabulary development by age 3 and students' resulting third-grade achievement.²²⁶ A report by Children at Risk considered 47,000 students across major Texas metropolitan areas and found that the likelihood among third-graders qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals of having reading skills at a college-ready pace was 40% higher if they had attended full-day public pre-K programs. The report also found a 33-point improvement in average third-grade reading scores on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness for Black students who had attended high-quality pre-K programs compared with those who had not. The increases for Black students who had attended high-quality pre-K were higher than for Hispanic students (20 points) and students with limited English proficiency (22 points).²²⁷

Research shows an association between children's participation in high-quality state pre-K programs and improved third-grade reading skills.

Similar findings have emerged from studies in the SEF region, including Georgia²²⁸ and Arkansas,²²⁹ which show a strong association between pre-K participation and improved third-grade reading outcomes. The Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 16% of children living in poverty who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade also do not graduate from high school on time.²³⁰ This rate increases to 31% for Black students from low-income families, emphasizing the critical nature of high-quality early education in setting these students on a path to greater academic success.

Long-Term Outcomes

Research also indicates that high-quality ECE is associated with a range of additional positive outcomes into adulthood, including higher rates of high school completion and college graduation as well as higher salaries. These long-term benefits are especially pronounced for Black students.²³¹ Extensive longitudinal studies²³² of specific ECE programs have demonstrated these long-term effects: For example, an analysis of the Abecedarian Project, a year-round, center-based ECE program that served children from infancy through kindergarten, found that compared to children in a control group, participants had higher reading and math scores as young adults, were more than twice as likely to attend a four-year college, and were nearly twice as likely to have a skilled job as adults.²³³ Similarly, a study of the Perry Preschool

224 DelGiudice, M. (2017). Middle childhood: An evolutionary-developmental synthesis. In N. Halfon, C.B. Forrest, R.M. Lerner, & E.M. Faustman (Eds.), *Handbook of life course health development*. (pp. 95–107). Springer.

225 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early warning! Why reading by the end of third grade matters*. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf

226 Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Paul H Brookes Publishing.

227 The Meadows Foundation. (2016). *Pre-K in Texas: A critical component for academic success*. https://catriskprod.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pre-K-in-Texas-A-Critical-Component-For-Academic-Success_Full-Report.pdf

228 Early, D. M., Li, W., Maxwell, K. L., & Ponder, B. D. (2019). Participation in Georgia's Pre-K as a predictor of third-grade standardized test scores. *AERA Open*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858419848687>

229 Jung, K., Barnett, W.S. & Hustedt, J. (2013). *Longitudinal effects of the Arkansas better chance program: Findings from first grade through fourth grade*. NIEER. <https://nieer.org/research-library/longitudinal-effects-arkansas-better-chance-program-0>

230 Hernandez, D. (2012). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty affect high school graduation*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf>

231 Allen, R., Meek, S.E., Alexander, B.L., Palomino, C., Blevins, D., Catherine, E., McIntosh, K., Hemmeter, M, Powell, T., Soto-Boykin, X. (2022). *A holistic approach to ending exclusionary discipline for young learners: A review of the data, research, and multidimensional solutions*. The Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University. <https://cep.asu.edu/resources/exclusionary-discipline>

232 It is important to note here that since these studies followed children until they were much older to track long-term effects, the ECE programs the studies examined are also older.

233 University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. (2007). *Poverty and early childhood intervention*. FPG Child Development Institute. https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/snapshots/FPG_Snapshot42_2007.pdf

Project found that Black children from low-income families who participated in the program were more likely by age 40 to have graduated from high school, have a job, and enjoy higher earnings.²³⁴

Opportunity Gaps in ECE

The sections below examine access and quality issues in ECE, with a focus on disparities affecting Black children. We analyze factors such as the availability of high-quality programs, including the qualifications of teachers; families' ability to afford and otherwise access quality care; and the impact of segregation in ECE programs. This report also delves into student discipline, highlighting the disproportionately high expulsion and suspension rates for Black children, as well as disparities in early intervention services, where Black children are less likely to receive critical support. Addressing these opportunity gaps is essential for advancing educational equity and ensuring that Black children can access high-quality early education.

Access Issues in ECE

Access to High-Quality ECE

Many of the positive outcomes associated with ECE are attributed to high-quality programs. While specific definitions of quality may vary, it is generally agreed that high-quality programs tend to have lower student-teacher ratios, offer increased opportunity for responsive child-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions, and feature well-trained instructors and caregivers who have received the appropriate level of education.²³⁵ Other characteristics may include well-compensated educators, safe and stimulating environments, comprehensive curricula that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, family engagement, and ongoing child assessments.

Despite similar enrollment rates in center-based ECE programs,²³⁶ Black children are less likely to attend

high-quality programs compared to White children. Only about 15% of the nation's Black early learners are enrolled in high-quality center-based early learning programs, compared with 24% of White children.²³⁷ Further, the average quality of ECE programs attended by Black children is lower than that of programs attended by White children.²³⁸ High-quality center-based programs are shown to have greater impacts on children's development during enrollment and in the long term.²³⁹ An analysis by EdTrust found that only 4% of all Black children attended high-quality state pre-K programs.²⁴⁰



4% of Black children attend high-quality state pre-K programs.

One of the major challenges in expanding access to high-quality ECE is the shortage of qualified ECE professionals. Research generally shows a correlation between teacher qualifications and ECE quality²⁴¹

- 234 Schweinhart, L.J. (n.d.). *The High/Scope Perry preschool study through age 40: Summary, conclusions, and frequently asked questions*. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. <https://image.highscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/16053615/perry-preschool-summary-40.pdf>
- 235 Manning M., Garvis S., Fleming C., & Wong G. T. W. (2017). *The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood care and learning environment*. Campbell Systematic Reviews. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573516.pdf>
- 236 Friedman-Krauss, A., & Barnett, W. S. (2020). *Access to high-quality early education and racial equity*. National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University. <https://nieer.org/research-library/special-report-access-high-quality-early-education-racial-equity>
- 237 Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). *How much can high-quality universal pre-K reduce achievement gaps?*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-much-can-high-quality-universal-pre-k-reduce-achievement-gaps/>
- 238 Friedman-Krauss, A., & Barnett, S. (2020). *Access to high-quality early education and racial equity*. National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University. <https://nieer.org/research-library/special-report-access-high-quality-early-education-racial-equity>
- 239 Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L., Gormley, W. T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Society for Research in Child Development. <https://www.fcd-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Evidence-Base-on-Preschool-Education-FINAL.pdf>
- 240 Gillispie, C. (2021). *Young learners, missed opportunities: Ensuring that Black and Latino children have access to high-quality state-funded preschool*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/rti/early-childhood-tool/>
- 241 Manning M., Garvis S., Fleming C., & Wong G. T. W. (2017). *The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood care and learning environment*. Campbell Systematic Reviews. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573516.pdf>

and between teacher qualifications and student achievement.²⁴² About two-thirds of all ECE educators (including aides and assistant teachers) and 76% of primary teachers and instructors have a postsecondary degree or ECE-specific credential such as a state license or child development associate (CDA) certificate.²⁴³

The connection between the quality of ECE services and these degrees and credentials, however, differs among ECE programs. The Early Childhood Workforce Index shows that 35% of center-based teachers have a bachelor's degree and more than half have an associate degree or higher, while around 15% of home-based teachers have a bachelor's degree and another 16% hold an associate degree.²⁴⁴ Home-based ECE can provide other benefits for children and families: Such care may be more affordable or accessible to families and may be taught by someone more familiar with students' contexts, enabling highly successful outcomes unrelated to caregivers' possession of a bachelor's degree. However, this difference also points toward the need for additional education and training to support ECE teachers in all settings.

A significant barrier to enhancing the qualifications of ECE professionals is the extremely low pay for teachers and other child-care professionals. The median hourly wage for all child-care professionals in 2019 was only \$11.65, and the median hourly wage for ECE teachers was only \$14.67, compared to \$32.80 – or two-to-three times more – for kindergarten teachers. Even the median hourly wage for ECE center directors was still about \$9 less per hour than the median hourly wage for kindergarten teachers.²⁴⁵

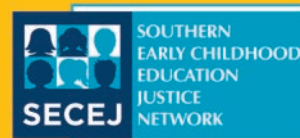
The median wage for early childhood center *directors* is about \$9 less per hour than for kindergarten *teachers*.

ECE teachers face poverty rates 7.7 times higher than K-8 teachers on average,²⁴⁶ and Black ECE teachers were 50% more likely than White ECE teachers to live in poverty.²⁴⁷ Black ECE teachers earn an average of 78 cents less per hour than White ECE teachers, even after controlling for educational attainment. That difference more than doubled for Black teachers of preschool-age children, to an average of \$1.71 less per hour.

Addressing this issue is crucial for attracting and retaining qualified educators, ultimately ensuring that all children, particularly those from marginalized communities, receive the high-quality early education they deserve.

Network of ECE Advocates Pushing for Change in South

The Southern Early Childhood Education Justice network is a regional coalition managed by SEF that unites state and national policy organizations and advocates to improve and expand early learning opportunities across the South.



a program of the Southern Education Foundation

ECE Costs

Children's access to ECE means more than just the existence of programs. Not all available programs are accessible to the children and families who can benefit the most. Research addresses different "keys to access" such as whether programs are affordable, provide transportation and physical accessibility, have available slots/openings, accommodate families' schedules, address cultural and language barriers, and provide services that families want and believe meet their needs.²⁴⁸

242 Barnett, W. S. (2003). *Better teachers, better preschools: Student achievement linked to teacher qualifications (Preschool Policy Matters No. 2)*. NIEER. <https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/2.pdf>

243 Coffey, M. (2022, July 19) *Still underpaid and unequal: Early childhood educators face low pay and a worsening wage gap*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/still-underpaid-and-unequal/>

244 Whitebook, M., McLean, C., and Austin, L.J.E. (2016). *Early childhood workforce index - 2016*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Early-Childhood-Workforce-Index-2016.pdf>

245 McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K.L. (2021). *Early childhood workforce index - 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf>

246 Ibid.

247 Austin, L. J.E., Edwards, B., Chavez, R., & Whitebook, M. (2019). *Racial wage gap in early education employment*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/brief/racial-wage-gaps-in-early-education-employment/>

248 E.g., Serban, N. (2019). *Healthcare system access: Measurement, inference and intervention*. Wiley.; Penchansky, R., & Thomas, J. W. (1981). The concept of access: Definition and relationship to consumer satisfaction. *Medical Care*, 19, 127-140. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00005650-198102000-00001>

Of these “keys to access,” child-care costs likely loom largest. The current U.S. Department of Health and Human Services standard is that annual child-care expenses should not exceed 7% of a family’s income – but the current median cost in the South is 14% of the average White household’s pre-tax income and 22% of the average Black household’s pre-tax income.²⁴⁹ In some SEF states, median child-care costs exceed 30% and even 40% of average household income, particularly for single parents.²⁵⁰

Costs for infant care are especially high. In 34 of the 50 states, the average annual cost of infant care is higher than the average cost of in-state yearly college tuition. In 21 states, the average cost of infant care is higher than average annual rent, and infant care is at least two-thirds the cost of the average rent in 15 of the 17 states in the SEF region.²⁵¹

The effects of high child-care costs and limited access in the U.S. do not only impact families with children. In a study of 12 states, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found that each state lost hundreds of millions – if not billions – of dollars in annual economic activity from inadequate child care that affected families’ ability to participate fully in the workforce.²⁵² In the South, estimated losses totaled \$9.39 billion in Texas, \$5.4 billion in Florida, \$1.4 billion in Missouri, \$865 million in Arkansas, and \$673 million in Mississippi.²⁵³ These challenges have harsher effects on Black and Hispanic parents who are less likely to have job flexibility and more likely to exit the workforce – with child-care challenges as a major reason.²⁵⁴

Identifying ways to bring costs down without limiting the availability of child care is critical to the nation’s future, particularly given that a majority of the U.S. population in 2018 lived in child-care deserts (areas with at least three times as many young children as licensed child-care slots).²⁵⁵



In 34 of the 50 states, the average annual cost of infant care is higher than the average cost of in-state yearly college tuition.

Student Discipline in ECE

Significant disparities in student discipline exist in ECE. First, preschoolers are generally expelled at much higher rates than K-12 students. Studies of the nation’s state-subsidized pre-K programs have found that the average expulsion rate in those programs was about three times higher than in K-12 schools.^{256, 257} Research indicates that expulsion from preschool is associated with decreased student ability to learn, socialize, and develop social and emotional skills. Additionally, expulsion can cause long-term harms such as the development of negative attitudes toward school and the student’s ability to learn, and persistent behavioral issues that can impact success in school later on.²⁵⁸

249 Crowe, M. (2022). *Economic vitality and education in the South, part I: The South’s pre-pandemic position*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-part-i-the-souths-pre-pandemic-position/>

250 Economic Policy Institute. (2020). *Child care costs in the United States*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/>

251 Ibid.

252 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2020). *Piecing together solutions: The importance of childcare*. https://chamber-foundation.files.svdcn.com/production/documents/EarlyEd_Minis_Report6_121420_Final.pdf?dm=1694110499

253 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Arkansas*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-arkansas>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Florida*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-florida>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Missouri*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-missouri>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2023). *Untapped potential report: Texas*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/education/untapped-potential-report-texas>

254 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2020). *Piecing together solutions: The importance of childcare*. https://chamber-foundation.files.svdcn.com/production/documents/EarlyEd_Minis_Report6_121420_Final.pdf?dm=1694110499

255 Center for American Progress. (2024). *U.S. child care deserts: Interactive map*. <https://childcaresdeserts.org/>

256 Gilliam, W. (2010). *Pre-kindergartners left behind: Expulsion rates in state pre-kindergarten programs*. Foundation for Child Development. <https://www.fcd-us.org/prekindergartners-left-behind-expulsion-rates-in-state-prekindergarten-programs/>

257 National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness. (2017). *Understanding and eliminating expulsion in early childhood programs*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/understanding-eliminating-expulsion-early-childhood-factsheet.pdf>

258 Ibid.

Black children make up 18.2% of states' pre-K enrollment but 43.3% of pre-K suspensions.

Even with the high overall ECE expulsion rates, Black children are still suspended and expelled at disproportionately high rates compared to their peers. National data from 2017-18 (the most recent available) show that Black children made up only 18.2% of pre-K enrollment but accounted for 43.3% of children receiving at least one out-of-school suspension and 38.2% of expulsions. While Asian, Hispanic, and White children were all suspended and expelled at lower rates than their proportional representation in public ECE programs, Black students were suspended at rates two-to-three times their rates of enrollment. Black boys made up 9.6% of public ECE enrollment but accounted for 34.2% of suspensions and 30.4% of expulsions. In other words, while Black boys represented less than one-tenth of enrollment, they accounted for more than one-third of out-of-school

suspensions and nearly one-third of expulsions.²⁵⁹

Preschoolers with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices²⁶⁰ and account for more than half of expulsions.²⁶¹

Research indicates that early childhood teachers are more likely to discipline children whom they perceive negatively. These negative perceptions are particularly pronounced for children with disabilities, especially those who are Black, Hispanic, and/or Native American.²⁶²

Early Intervention Services

Black children are less likely than their peers to be identified for critical early intervention services, including special instruction, speech and physical therapy, and psychological and social work services.²⁶³ Black children with developmental delays are also 78% less likely than their peers to receive the services they need, and Black children tend to be identified later for these services.²⁶⁴ One study found that by age 2, Black children were five times less likely than White children to receive early intervention services that could support their health, growth, and learning.²⁶⁵

Disciplinary Actions for Pre-K Students in U.S., 2017-18

	Percentages of Students in Pre-K	Percentages of Pre-K Suspensions	Percentages of Pre-K Expulsions
American Indian/Alaska Native students	1.1%	1.7%	0.3%
Asian students	4.1%	0.4%	0.0%
Black students	18.2%	43.3%	38.2%
Hispanic/Latino students	29.3%	11%	17.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%
White students	43%	37%	37.6%
Two or more races	4.1%	6.5%	5.9%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2017-18 data

259 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. (2021). *An overview of exclusionary discipline practices in public schools for the 2017-18 school year*. <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/crdc-exclusionary-school-discipline.pdf>

260 These are practices that remove students from the classroom, i.e., typically out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

261 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. (2021). *Discipline practices in preschool*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-DOE-Discipline-Practices-in-Preschool-part1.pdf>

262 Allen, R., Meek, S.E., Alexander, B.L., Palomino, C., Blevins, D., Catherine, E., McIntosh, K., Hemmeter, M., Powell, T., & Soto-Boykin, X. (2022). *A holistic approach to ending exclusionary discipline for young learners: A review of the data, research, and multidimensional solutions*. The Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University. <https://cep.asu.edu/resources/exclusionary-discipline>

263 Gillispie, C. (2021). *Our youngest learners: Increasing equity in early intervention*. EdTrust. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Increasing-Equity-in-Early-Intervention-May-2021.pdf>

264 Ibid.

265 Feinberg, E., Silverstein, M., Donahue, S., & Bliss, R. (2011). The impact of race on participation in part C early intervention services. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*. 32(4), 284-291. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e3182142fbd>

Racial Segregation in ECE

Just as more racially integrated schools can benefit students in K-12 education, there are also significant benefits of diversity in ECE at the school and classroom levels.²⁶⁶ Research consistently shows academic, cognitive, and social and emotional benefits for all students from diverse and inclusive preschool settings.²⁶⁷ However, there are even higher levels of segregation in ECE than in K-12 schools. The Urban Institute found that ECE programs are more racially segregated on average than K-12 schools, and that ECE programs are more than twice as likely as schools serving kindergarten and first-grade students to enroll nearly 100% Black or Hispanic students.²⁶⁸ Another study found that almost half of Black and Hispanic early learners in publicly funded preschools

Early childhood settings are even more racially segregated than K-12 schools.

attend schools with enrollments of 90% students of color or higher.²⁶⁹

While residential segregation is one driver of segregation in ECE, these numbers also reflect challenges in access and costs. State and federal policies may also leave out working- and middle-class families who do not meet income and eligibility requirements for subsidized care or state-funded programs – but are priced out of other options, therefore limiting their access to high-quality ECE.²⁷⁰

Looking Ahead: Recommendations/Strategies for the Future

The complexity of the nation's early care and education system, together with its cost and many families' limited access to high-quality ECE, present a number of critical challenges that must be addressed to better prepare young learners for success in school. ECE professionals and policymakers must work together to address opportunity gaps in ECE funding and finance, policy and practice, and student supports.

Steps to Improve Early Care and Education

Funding and Finance

- Expand the federal Head Start program to serve more children and families.
- Make state pre-K programs available to all children and families.
- Invest in proven home visiting programs serving young children and families.

Policy and Practice

- Strengthen the mixed-delivery system of education and support for children throughout the early years.
- Raise salaries and provide greater supports for ECE teachers.

Student Supports

- Connect the ECE system more directly with K-12 schools to improve children's transitions.
- Improve young children's readiness for school.
- Introduce proven strategies to reduce student discipline rates for young children.

266 Plasencia, S., & Melnick, H. (2024). *Strategies to foster integration in early childhood education*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/639.507>

267 The Hunt Institute, The Century Foundation, The Education Trust, & Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center. (2022). *Strong foundations: Promoting diverse and inclusive preschool settings*. <https://hunt-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Strong-Foundations-Promoting-Diverse-and-Inclusive-Preschool-Settings-2022.pdf>

268 Greenberg, E., & Monarrez, T. (2019). *Segregated from the start*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/features/segregated-start>

269 Piazza, P., & Frankenberg, E. (2019). *Segregation at an early age: 2019 update*. Center for Education and Civil Rights, Penn State College of Education. https://cecr.ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/Segregation_At_An_Early_Age_Piazza_Frankenberg_2019.pdf

270 Plasencia, S., & Melnick, H. (2024). *Strategies to foster integration in early childhood education*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/639.507>

Funding and Finance

ECE costs are prohibitive for many families and children, and the availability of high-quality ECE is woefully inadequate. Policymakers must *increase federal funding and available slots for Head Start, and state funding for programs that serve children ages 0 to 5 and in pre-K*, so that more children can access these programs and benefit from high-quality instruction that can increase their opportunity to succeed in kindergarten and the early grades.²⁷¹

Further, policymakers should expand eligibility for ECE programs: The current income requirements for Head Start are below the federal poverty line, preventing many low-income families from potentially receiving these services. An even better solution would be to *establish universal ECE programs* that only require that children be of appropriate age and can serve all children without the sorting and segregation that often accompany programs with income eligibility.²⁷²

Research suggests that high-quality home visiting can improve children's school readiness and address racial disparities in maternal and child health.

Policymakers should also *expand access to home visiting programs*, which connect families with a support provider such as an ECE specialist, nurse, or social worker to support their children's development.

Research suggests that high-quality home visiting programs can increase children's school readiness, add to parents' abilities to support their children's development, improve child health, and increase families' economic self-sufficiency.²⁷³ These programs have also been shown to combat racial disparities in

Presenting families with a range of options can increase affordability and availability of child care, prevent program closures, and benefit the economy.

maternal and child health.²⁷⁴ While home visiting programs exist in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., only about 2% of potentially eligible families actually receive services²⁷⁵ due to limited resources, complex blended funding streams, and geographical challenges.²⁷⁶

Policy and Practice

Beyond federally funded programs alone, state and national policymakers and ECE professionals must *expand and strengthen families' access to the range of ECE programs within the ECE mixed-delivery system*. By more effectively distributing funding and available slots across licensed-center and family-based ECE programs, community-based organizations, Head Start and Early Head Start, and public schools, policymakers can increase access and broaden the range of options for young children and their families.

Presenting families with this range of options can increase affordability and availability of child care, prevent program closures, and impact the economy by increasing employment opportunities for both child-care providers and parents who need child care so they can work.²⁷⁷

A stronger mixed-delivery system can also increase support for private ECE providers, often small businesses owned and operated largely by women of color.²⁷⁸ The Urban Institute found that increased availability of care, particularly during nontraditional hours, supports more families of color and those in low-income communities, and that a range of care options is key.²⁷⁹

271 Grace, C., Thornburg, K., Keith, S.N., Altman, M., & Boyle, A. (2024). *Strengthening support for our youngest children: Steps for improving Head Start*. Southern Education Foundation. <https://southerneducation.org/publications/head-start-report/>

272 Plasencia, S., & Melnick, H. (2024). *Strategies to foster integration in early childhood education*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/639.507>

273 Zero to Three. (2014). *The research case for home visiting*. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/the-research-case-for-home-visiting/>

274 Lewy, D. & Casau, A. (2021). *Addressing racial and ethnic disparities in maternal and child health through home visiting programs*. Center for Health Strategies. <https://www.chcs.org/media/Addressing-Racial-Ethnic-Disparities-Maternal-Child-Health-Home-Visiting-Programs.pdf>

275 Meisch, A., & Isaacs, J. (2019). *Exploring home visiting's unmet need: Comparing who could benefit to who is served*. National Home Visiting Resource Center. <https://nhvrc.org/wp-content/uploads/NHVRC-Brief-120919-FINAL.pdf>

276 Ibid.

277 Early Care & Education Consortium. (2021). *A mixed-delivery system is the most sustainable and efficient solution to meet policy objectives*. <https://www.ececonsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ECEC-Solutions-Paper-Mixed-Delivery.pdf>

278 Ibid.

279 Schilder, D., Lou, C., & Wagner, L. (2023). *Child care use for young children during nontraditional hours*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Child%20Care%20Use%20for%20Young%20Children%20during%20Nontraditional%20Hours.pdf>

ECE programs need to greatly *increase teacher pay and supports*. Extremely low wages for ECE professionals are a major factor in limiting access to quality teaching for many Black students, other students of color, and students in low-income families and communities. Further, lack of access to effective training and development often prevents ECE professionals from increasing their job mastery and satisfaction.

Several states in the SEF region, including North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida, have found some success with a model that combines increased compensation for professionals with retention and educational attainment efforts.

In North Carolina and Tennessee, the *Child Care WAGE\$* program provides annual salary supplements to ECE educators based on their level of education and/or tenure at their early learning program. This model can also be coupled with scholarship programs to help support continuing education.²⁸⁰

North Carolina's 2023 *Child Care WAGE\$* report shows that the program has more than 3,500 participants, 58% of whom are people of color. Turnover for *WAGE\$* participants was cut in half, and 65% of participants now earn more than \$15 an hour – compared to only 23% earning that amount two years prior.²⁸¹

Student Supports

In addition to an increased level of organization and support within the ECE system, education leaders must *build stronger student pathways from ECE into K-12 learning*. With the wide variety in program quality in the current system, ensuring there are clear transitions and greater support for ECE students as they enter kindergarten is essential. To augment this, there must be an increased focus on working to *improve kindergarten readiness for all students*. Research highlights the role of ECE in boosting school success, but addressing racial disparities in kindergarten readiness remains essential.

Finally, ECE programs and professionals must work to *reduce discipline disparities in ECE*. With expulsion rates in public ECE programs three times higher than in K-12 schools and with Black students facing disproportionately high rates of suspensions and expulsions, there is a risk that some ECE programs may deepen existing disparities. Implementing teacher supports, restorative discipline practices, and potential changes in program philosophy can strengthen students' access and opportunity. ECE programs can better support equitable access and opportunities for all students.

280 E.g., see: https://www.decalscholars.com/content/inc_landing.cfm; <https://www.tnwages.org/>; <https://incentives-fl.org/>; <https://www.childcareservices.org/programs/wages/contact/#states>

281 Child Care Services Association. (2023). *Child care WAGE\$ program: Statewide final report- fiscal year 2023*. https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/State_FY23_FullReport.pdf



Miles To Go

Lessons for the Journey Ahead

This report covers a wide range of data in education, but ultimately its argument is simple: Twenty-five years after SEF's last comprehensive report on the education of Black students in the South – and 70 years following the first *Brown* decision – major educational disparities for Black students remain.

These disparities are caused by opportunity and resource gaps that stem from major inequities inside and outside the education system. From school funding to student discipline, access to high-quality education and rigorous coursework, testing, the curriculum and beyond, these inequities require too many students to succeed *in spite of* the current education system rather than *because of it*. We have noted some of the many promising policies and programs that can help more students increase their achievement and academic success, but academic interventions alone will not help us address the problems that in many cases lie at the core of our education system. To truly achieve meaningful results, we must change the inequitable systemic structures that perpetuate these disparities.

The developments discussed in this report, from neighborhood redlining to the *Brown* decision, through desegregation, busing, improvements,

If we address the challenges and opportunity gaps described in this report, we should expect improved results for all students and better life outcomes for all Americans.

challenges, and the resegregation of today, all occurred within the last century. What will the state of the U.S. education system be 25, 70, or 100 years from now? If we address the systemic challenges and opportunity gaps described in this report, we should expect starkly improved results for all students and better life outcomes for all Americans – in the economy, the workforce, and our national quality of life. However, if these challenges are not addressed – or worse, if the trend toward resegregation continues and disparities that impact students grow – we may find ourselves in a far different place.

When the U.S. education system serves all students well, we all benefit. We must make the systemic changes required to produce the outcomes Americans want and that every student deserves.



101 Marietta St. NW
16th Floor, Suite 1650
Atlanta, GA 30303
phone: (404) 523-0001
<https://southerneducation.org>