Trends in Educational Achievement of Minority Students since Brown v. Board of Education

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Since Brown v. Board of Education

Prior to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that ordered racial integration of public schools, segregation produced and perpetuated unequal educational chances for African Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans. This landmark court decision gave a strong impetus to the Civil Rights Movement and a spate of anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation designed to equalize educational opportunity and, ultimately, eliminate race gaps in education and economic outcomes. The 1960s inspired great hope that the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement would yield high social dividends toward the twin goals of reducing socioeconomic inequality and promoting racial and ethnic integration. Achieving a color-blind meritocracy – one consistent with the vision of the architects of the Great Society – seemed well within the reach of social policy.

Philosophically, the meritocratic foundations of our democratic society remain intact. However, support for the social policies needed to achieve the integrated society envisioned after the 1954 Supreme Court decision has eroded as the demographic composition of the population has become more diverse along race and ethnic lines (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Kuklinski, et al. 1997; Olzak, Shanahan, and West 1994; Orfield, Eaton, and the Harvard Project, 1996; Tienda, 1999). Moreover, recent trends indicate that in some ways we are further away from the goal of economic equality than we were in the mid-1970s (Marshall, 2000; Danziger and Gottschalk, 1995). Persisting educational disparity is a major reason for persisting economic inequality. This is even more true after 1973, when the returns to education rose, especially favoring college educated workers (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1993; Carnevale, 1999).¹

Our purpose here is to present a broad overview of educational trends to illustrate group differences in educational attainment over time and to document where ethno-racial groups stand as they begin the 21st century. To trace the evolution of educational attainment since the landmark Supreme Court decision mandating integration of segregated schools, we assemble comparative data from published statistics on minority schooling from 1950 to the present.

Two vexing developments set the stage for changing educational opportunity in the United States. First, despite impressive gains in educational attainment since the 1960s, improvements since 1980 have been very modest, especially for Hispanics, who continue to leave school before graduating at four times the rate of non-Hispanic whites (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999a; Current Population Surveys, 1999; 2000).² Second, gaps in graduation rates of majority white and nonwhite youth have widened at all education levels, but especially among the college-educated (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). These troubling trends signal deepening cleavages between race and ethnic groups; worse, if allowed to follow their current course, they could undermine the social and economic foundations of our democratic institutions. Our purpose in raising these issues is not to replay past societal failures, but rather to question whether it is possible to achieve a color-blind meritocracy without first equalizing educational opportunity at all levels of education.

¹ This is not to say that discrimination in access to employment does not also operate to create economic disparities.
² Throughout the text the term “dropout” refers to status dropout. Status dropout is defined as persons age 16-24 who attain less than a high school diploma or equivalent and are not enrolled in school at the time of interview. For more information see: National Center for Educational Statistics (2001b).
To begin, we trace the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the school-age population in the United States and illustrate key social and economic correlates of group membership that exacerbate educational disparities, such as residential concentration, living arrangements, poverty, parental education, access to computers, and linguistic diversity. Subsequently, we discuss how the educational pipeline reduces the pool of students able to compete for college admissions. The concluding section discusses the practices that can reverse the trends toward rising educational inequality by leveling the playing field when children enter the educational system and preventing achievement gaps at the lower and middle grades. We argue that increasing diversification of the student population requires strong policies of inclusion and representation because this is a minimum condition for shaping a common voice and preserving the meritocratic foundations of all educational institutions.

**Demographic Trends**

Three master trends characterize the changing demography of the school-age population since the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that outlawed school segregation. These are: 1) rapid race and ethnic diversification of the school-age population; 2) a growing presence of foreign-born students at primary, middle and secondary schools; and 3) increased regional and urban concentration of minority students. The spatial dimensions of population distribution are important for appreciating how segregation continues to delimit educational opportunity to the present day.

In 1950, the U.S. Bureau of the Census enumerated 150 million inhabitants, of which just under one-third were of school age. At that time, 14 percent of youth were classified “minority” (i.e., nonwhite). The vast majority of students — 12% — were black and just 2 percent Hispanic and other races combined. During the 1950s, the U.S. population increased by 30 million. Twenty-five million more were added to the population during the 1960s. Because this growth was driven by higher fertility, the school-age population as a share of the total rose from 31 to 37 percent during “the baby boom.” Thereafter, the proportion of youth began a gradual decline, and currently accounts for just over one-quarter of the total population. However, because the U.S. population base has continued to grow, the absolute size of the school-age population has remained stable since 1970 — circa 75-76 million.

The minority share of youth rose relatively slowly during the 1950s and 1960s, reaching 15 percent by 1960 and 16 percent a decade later (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960; 1970). However, the gradual increase in the race and ethnic diversification of the population changed dramatically during the 1970s — partly due to an increase in the volume and diversity of immigration; partly due to higher fertility of minority populations; and partly to changes in the Census Bureau’s methods used to enumerate minority groups, particularly Hispanics and Asians. By 1980 nearly one-in-four of the 77 million persons ages 5 to 24 were classified as minority. Ten years later, 30 percent of school-age youth were black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American. And, as Figure 1 shows, this proportion exceeded one in three by 2000. Although the diversification of the school-age population appears gradual when evaluated on a decade-by-decade basis, the pace of change is quite striking from a fifty-year perspective – approximately two generations in demographic time. Figure 1 reveals that the minority share of the K-12 population more than doubled in 50 years, increasing by a factor of 2.5. The absolute size of the

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3 Unless otherwise specified, the term “school-age” refers to youth ages 5-24.
4 The baby boom spans from approximately 1948 to 1964.
minority college-age population grew slightly faster, at 61 percent. These trends indicate that diversification simultaneously affected primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities.

![Figure 1](Image)

**Race/Ethnic Composition of the School-Age Population: 1950 and 2000**

Both the direction and timing of these demographic shifts have important implications for educational opportunities and outcomes. Changes in the ethno-racial composition of the school-age population occurred in tandem with equally profound shifts in other spheres including the residential distribution of youth from rural to urban and suburban areas (Long, 1988); in the diversification of educational institutions (Barrons, 1992; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999a); and in the structure of employment away from manufacturing and toward the service sector and technical jobs requiring higher levels of skills (Levy, 1987; Danzinger and Gottschalk, 1993). Combined, these trends have raised the value of post-secondary schooling while increasing competition for slots in the most prestigious colleges and universities.

During this same period the volume and composition of immigrants arriving to U.S. shores also had a profound impact on the American educational system. The foreign-born share of the total population decreased slightly during the 1950s, stabilized during the 1960s, and increased substantially thereafter (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Not only did the volume of immigrants admitted to the U.S. increase after 1970, but also the regional origins of new arrivals became more diversified (Farley, 1996; Rumbaut, 1996). Because the majority of immigrants and their children now hail from Latin America and Asia, the foreign-born share of Hispanic and Asian students rose appreciably. In 1960, 16 percent of all Hispanics were foreign-born, but by 1990, over one-in-three were born outside the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960; 1999). This share remained constant during the 1990s, but since the population base increased by 25 million in absolute terms, there were more immigrant children enrolled in educational
institutions. Large-scale Asian immigration is a more recent phenomenon than Hispanic migration. Because the Asian population base is much smaller, the impact of recent immigration is even more striking. In 1960, one-in-three Asians were foreign born, but by 1990 over 3-in-5 Asians were immigrants (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960; 1999). This share remained quite stable during the 1990s, as INS implemented new measures to regulate the numbers of immigrants admitted. As evident in Figure 2, recent immigration trends have left an indelible imprint on the school-age population at the turn of the 21st century. Nearly three in four Hispanic and 81 percent of Asian youth are either foreign born or children of immigrants. By contrast, only 10 percent of black school-aged youth are foreign born or children of immigrants, and an even smaller share of white youth so qualify.

Figure 2
Immigrant Generation Status of School-Age Population: 2000

![Figure 2: Immigrant Generation Status of School-Age Population: 2000]


These demographic shifts pose formidable challenges for educational systems, but not uniformly at the national, regional and local levels. Not only are minority youth geographically concentrated, but they are also disproportionately more likely than their white peers to attend central-city school districts (Current Population Surveys, 2000). If all schools afforded equal educational opportunity, differences in geographic location would be irrelevant for the contours of race and ethnic inequality. Unfortunately, this is not the case (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999a; 2001a). Moreover, the distribution of minority students among urban, suburban and rural schools has also become more unequal since the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954 (Orfield, Eaton and the Harvard Project, 1996).

Regionally, black students remain concentrated in the South and in the major industrial cities of the Midwest and the Northeast (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Hispanics have increased their presence throughout the Southwest, even while they established a strong representation in South Florida, the Eastern Seaboard, and in selected pockets of the Midwest, where agricultural and industrial jobs lured employment-hungry workers during the 1950s and 1960s (Bean and Tienda, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Compared to blacks and Hispanics, Asians are more regionally dispersed, but also have a strong presence on the west and east coasts, as well as several pockets in the south and southeast.
At the state level, the impact of recent demographic trends on population composition has been highly unequal. According to Census 2000, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans combined comprise half California’s population and over half of New Mexico’s population (Newsweek, 2000). Furthermore, 45 percent of Texans are nonwhite, as are approximately one-third of New York, New Jersey, and Florida residents. Just over one-quarter of Illinois inhabitants self-identify as black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American. In many counties and cities within these states, people of color represent a clear demographic majority.\(^5\)

Within state jurisdictions, not only is the minority school-age population disproportionately concentrated in large, central cities, but this concentration increased over time as well. The pie charts displayed in Figure 3 provide detail about the ethno-racial profile of urban central-city school districts. In 1971, 39 percent of central-city student populations were minority, but 29 years later, this share had climbed to 64 percent. These changes in the school-age population occurred during a period of suburbanization and depopulation of the largest urban areas, which further polarized educational opportunity among pre-collegiate students (Orfield, et al., 1996).

![Figure 3](image)

**Race/Ethnic Composition of School-Age Central-City Population**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Currently, just over one-in-three central city students are white; 30 percent are black; one-in-four are Hispanic; 8 percent are Asian; and 1 percent American Indian. These differences are stark enough when mapped against the ethno-racial composition of the student body, but when viewed as group-specific population shares (depicted in the bar-graph in Figure 4), race and ethnic differences in urban school attendance are even more dramatic. Of all black students, nearly half reside in a central-city school district, whereas only 14 percent of all white students do so. Although only 14 percent of Native Americans live in urban school districts, the vast majority of the remainder attends rural schools rather than higher performing suburban schools where white youth are disproportionately concentrated. These differences in the geographic distribution of students would be inconsequential if the quality of schooling afforded in central city, suburban and rural school districts were roughly comparable. Unfortunately, minority

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\(^5\) Given states’ disparate levels of minority concentration, it may not be a coincidence that the leading initiatives to eliminate race-sensitive admissions policies in colleges and universities first began in California and Texas.
students are more likely to attend highly segregated and low performing schools where educational opportunities are limited (Orfield, et al., 1996).

Figure 4
Population Shares of School-Age Youth Residing in Central-City School Districts: 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Overall, these trends in the demography of the school-age population pose formidable challenges for school systems responsible for educating large numbers of minority students, including recent immigrants. But, with the possible exception of linguistic variation, these challenges do not derive from diversity per se. Rather, they are the consequence of persisting inequities in the resource endowments of urban, suburban and rural schools and the inability of local governments to implement significant reform in under-performing schools (Arum, 2000; Kain and Singleton, 1996). In the face of persisting residential segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993), the need to readdress inequities in educational curricula is even more urgent now than in the past, when minority representation in under-performing, central-city schools was lower.

**Socioeconomic Trends**

Additional obstacles to enhancing educational opportunity, regardless of race, lie in the substantial social and economic differences among demographic groups. Key correlates of group membership - such as family structure, poverty, parental education, access to computers, and linguistic diversity - exacerbate educational disparities in the United States. These disparities then contribute to the exclusion of large numbers of minority students from the privileges enjoyed by many whites. Because of their pivotal role in determining educational outcomes, we briefly summarize and illustrate these correlates of educational attainment that produce educational disparities between minority and non-minority youth.

The rise in the share of children reared in single-parent homes is one of the most profound social changes witnessed during the past 40 years (Wojtkiewicz, McLanahan and Garfinkel, 1990). Living arrangements are crucial for understanding race and ethnic differences in educational opportunities and outcomes because youth reared by a lone parent have considerably worse educational achievement than those reared by two parents (Teachman, Paasch and Carver, 1997; Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan, 1994), and because minority youth are more likely than whites to reside with a single parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994;
Wojtkiewicz, 1992). The share of youth living with one parent more than doubled from 1970 to the present, but as Figure 5 shows, this overall change conceals large differences by race and Hispanic origin. In 1970, less than 10 percent of white children and nearly a third of black children lived with a single mother. By 1998, 18 percent of white children, 27 percent of Hispanic children and over half of blacks lived with a single mother.

**Figure 5**

![Range of bars showing percentages of children living with mother only by race and year](image)


Equally striking is the propensity of youth under age 18 to reside with neither parent. Nearly 10 percent of black and 5 percent of Hispanic children resided with neither parent in 1998 compared to only 3 percent of their white counterparts (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Presumably these children lived with more distant family members, friends, or in foster homes. Although their relative proportions are small, their absolute numbers are not. These youth, who experience a myriad of social problems, are especially vulnerable to school failure, and they are among those in greatest need of social support. For a large majority, the idea of high school graduation, much less college attendance, is an alien concept. If current trends in family structure continue, the shares of minority youth residing in vulnerable families will grow, potentially widening race and ethnic gaps in school attainment even more.

Past research also indicates the important role of siblings in determining the educational attainment of youth (Blake, 1989; Powell and Steelman, 1993). Research consistently demonstrates the inverse relationship between family size and completed levels of schooling, regardless of race and ethnicity (Lloyd, 1993). In fact, the influence of family size on educational attainment rivals those of parental education and occupation. The average number of children per household — a proxy for number of siblings — has steadily declined over the past 50 years and has also begun to converge between different ethno-racial groups. In 1970, the typical white family averaged of 2.3 children, compared to 2.79 and 2.69 children in black and Hispanic families, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970). By 1998, the number of children per family had dropped to a mere 1.86 white children, 1.98 black children and 2.09 children among Hispanic families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998b). This convergence is promising in terms of promoting more equal educational outcomes across disparate demographic groups.
Poor youth are more prone to scholastic underperformance and low educational attainment than youth reared in affluent families (Teachman, et al., 1997). On this score, trends in poverty are both troubling and promising. As Figure 6 demonstrates, the black-white poverty ratio hovered around 3 throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, but finally dropped to 2.4 in 1997—following several years of impressive economic growth. While this provides strong grounds for optimism about the educational prospects of black youth, recent signs of a slowing economy are clearly evident. Unfortunately, the historical record shows that minority youth, and particularly African Americans, are the most vulnerable to the risk of poverty when labor markets slacken (Hirschman, 1988; Donahoe and Tienda, 2000). If the economy continues to falter, the improved race gap in poverty may be short-lived.

Figure 6

As Figure 6 shows the Hispanic-white youth poverty ratio is below that of blacks for most of the period displayed. This ratio has proven resistant to change, even during the brisk economic growth that characterized the early to mid 1990s. In fact, Hispanic and black youth poverty rates converged during the late 1990s, when black poverty fell more precipitously than Hispanic poverty. This is worrisome because the Hispanic population is growing more rapidly than the black population (see Figure 1), and because Latino poverty is largely associated with low-wage work rather than unemployment (Stier and Tienda, 2001; Tienda, 1995; 1993). Finally, the Asian-white youth poverty ratio hovered around 1 throughout most of the 1990s. Despite initial convergence with whites, it again began to rise during the latter part of the 1990s. This is another troubling sign that may reverberate on educational outcomes in the future.

Low-wage poverty has proven more difficult to modify through policy interventions than poverty stemming from lack of work because most employment policies focus on labor supply (i.e., raising worker skills to increase their employability) to the relative neglect of demand side policies (Bartick, 2001). Supply-side policies tend to have modest employment effects for low-income workers (Blank, 2000; Solow, 2000). But increases in aggregate demand also do little to help the poor unless the policies are targeted to specific groups (Bartick, 2000; Carnevale and Desrochers, 2000).

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5 To facilitate between-group comparisons, Figures 6, 14, 15, 17, and 20 do not show the zero point on the vertical axis.
Figure 7 shows how youth poverty rates co-vary with family living arrangements. However, among youth residing with a lone mother, the risk of being poor also differs according to race and Hispanic origin. Compared to white youth reared in two parent families, whites raised by a single mother are 5 times more likely to be poor. Blacks are 4.2 times more likely to be poor if they live with a single mother compared with two parents, and Hispanic children are 2.4 times more likely to be poor if raised in a female-headed family. The lower poverty differentials by family type does not signal better socioeconomic conditions of minority youth, but rather reflects the higher overall poverty rates of children of color, whether they live with both parents or only one.

![Figure 7: Poverty Rates of Children Under 18 by Family Type](image)


Although family structure and poverty status are important correlates of educational outcomes that co-vary with group membership, parental education is a key socioeconomic attribute that directly shapes race and ethnic differences in children’s scholastic performance and educational attainment (Duncan, Featherman and Duncan, 1972; Hauser, 1971). Parental education drives the expectations set for children and determines financial, material and intellectual resources deployed to promote achievement in school. On this count, Hispanics clearly are the most disadvantaged group. Figure 8 reveals that Hispanic children are more than six times as likely as white children and 3 times as likely as black children to have a father who did not complete high school.

Figure 8 also displays trends in fathers’ education over the past 25 years. There have been significant improvements in paternal education during this period. The decline in the proportion of children whose fathers have not completed high school is most dramatic among African Americans. From 1974 to 1999 the percentage of black children whose father did not have a high school degree dropped from 61 to only 15. While the proportion of white and Hispanic children whose fathers had less than a secondary education also fell during this time, the declines were modest. In 1974, over half (58%) of Hispanic children’s fathers had less than 12 years of completed schooling, compared to 29 percent of whites. By 1999 these percentages had dropped to 49 and 8, respectively. Trends in mothers’ education are very
similar to those reported for fathers, except that mothers tend to have even lower levels of attainment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000).

**Figure 8**
Youth Ages 6-18 with Fathers with Less than High School: 1974-1999

![Bar graph showing the percentage of youth ages 6-18 with fathers with less than a high school education from 1974 to 1999. The graph includes data for White, Black, and Hispanic groups.]


At the other end of the educational continuum, Figure 9 shows that only a small fraction of Hispanic youth have college-educated fathers. Moreover, this share has been relatively stable since 1974, rising only from 8 to 10 percent. By contrast, one-in-three white youth have college-educated fathers and this share rose appreciably over the 25 years depicted in Figure 9, from 20 percent to 34 percent. Blacks are intermediate between these extremes in that 17 percent have fathers with college degrees in 1999. What is noteworthy about blacks is that the share of youth with college-educated fathers more than tripled over the 25-year period, from less than 5 percent to 17 percent. This is encouraging news, yet the parental education gap vis-à-vis whites remains substantial, as white youth are two times more likely than black youth to have college-educated fathers and more than three times more likely than Hispanics. The racial and ethnic differences in mothers’ education parallel those of fathers except that the story is even more bleak because fewer mothers hold college degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000).

**Figure 9**
Youth Ages 6-18 with College-Educated Fathers: 1974-1999

![Bar graph showing the percentage of youth ages 6-18 with college-educated fathers from 1974 to 1999. The graph includes data for White, Black, and Hispanic groups.]

That minority group membership is tightly coupled with social class also shapes differential access to a broad range of educational resources, such as books, places to study and home computers (Bean and Tienda, 1987: Chapter 8; Kas et al., 1996; Kao, 1995). Disparities in the availability of personal computers, for instance, may be relevant for understanding unequal opportunities and outcomes in a society where easy electronic access is becoming a new axis of social inequality. Evidence in support of this assertion is beginning to emerge (see for example, Attewell and Battle, 1999; Mitchell, 1996). If Internet and computer access are related to success in school, then the distribution of these resources across demographic groups is important for understanding educational outcomes. Figure 10 reveals that white students enrolled in grades 1-12 are 4 times more likely than Hispanics and blacks to have access to the Internet via home computers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). These differentials in access to information are reproduced in Internet usage at school as well. Compared to 83 percent of whites, only 70 percent of black and Hispanic students use the Internet at school. Easy Internet access has become a goal in political rhetoric about connecting American students to the world, but current circumstances imply highly unequal connectivity along race and ethnic lines. Inasmuch as minority youth are more likely than whites to attend poorly endowed schools, these differentials in access to information are reproduced and reinforced.

![Figure 10](image)

**Figure 10**

**Students' Internet Use: 1999**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Taken together, these selected socioeconomic differentials raise a crucially important question about the changing contours of educational opportunity as well as the meaning of race and ethnic differences in educational outcomes. Specifically, to what extent do the differences in educational outcomes reflect group-specific differences in the legacy of prior disadvantage and limited opportunity? While multivariate analyses are beyond the scope of this descriptive profile, we shed light on this question by examining group differences in linguistic diversity and selected indicators of scholastic performance as well as trends and differentials in educational attainment. These outcomes can lead to a fuller understanding of the progress made by minority students through the educational pipeline since the historic Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education.
Elementary and Secondary Educational Trends

How linguistic diversity challenges schools depends more on whether immigrant children and native-born children of immigrant parents are proficient in English and less on whether they are bilingual (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996:Chapter 6; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001:Chapter 6). These issues are trivial for blacks and whites but quite salient for Asians and especially Hispanic youth, among whom the foreign-born population shares have been rising. As Figure 11 demonstrates, nearly one-in-three Hispanic children between the ages of 5-17 has difficulty speaking English, compared to less than half as many Asian youth. Surely this hampers Latino children's ability to comprehend academic subject matter taught exclusively in a language that is difficult for them to understand. It is also significant that nearly three-in-four Hispanic youth live in homes where a language other than English is spoken, compared to 46 percent of Asians. Use of a foreign language at home may signal difficulties in parents' efficacy to provide strong links between their children and the schools (Zhou, 2000). It is unlikely that immigrant parents do not value education; rather, their limited communication skills may significantly reduce their ability to engage with the school system and broker on behalf of their children, as well as to provide help with homework and to support extra curricular school activities. Until immigrant youth and their parents become proficient in English such communication obstacles require creative outreach efforts and human ingenuity, assuming the political will exists.

**Figure 11**

**Linguistic Diversity of Youth Ages 5-17: 1995**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Have Difficulty Speaking English</th>
<th>Foreign Language Spoken at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes American Indian/Alaska Natives

However, linguistic diversity cannot be the primary reason for the scholastic underperformance of minority students. Were this so, Asians would score lower than whites and blacks on standardized tests. In fact, white, black, Hispanic and Asian youth enter the school system at very different starting points. Figure 12 shows that unequal educational opportunity begins to take its toll at the beginning of the educational pipeline. This is clearly evident in the large differences in math and reading scores of minority and nonminority children as early as kindergarten. According to the NAEP Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, even before entering first grade, Asians outperform white, and even more so black and Hispanic children (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). These differences are not simply a reflection of linguistic diversity; they mirror social class and family structure differences as well as student
and parental values that give high priority to educational pursuits (Fuligni, 1997; Kao, et al., 1996; Kao and Tienda, 1995).

![Figure 12](image)

**Figure 12**

Math and Reading Proficiency of Kindergartners: 1998*

*Excludes 30% of Hispanic and 19% of Asian children not tested because of language problems.


Race and ethnic disparities in school readiness carry over through elementary and middle school. As demonstrated in Figure 13, by 4th grade, 60 percent of black and Hispanic students read below basic proficiency, compared to about 30 percent of whites and Asians. By 8th grade, only modest gains in reading proficiency are evident, thereby maintaining the achievement gap by group membership. On a positive note, the racial and ethnic gap in reading performance actually declines at higher grades. However, this may be a conservative estimate of reading deficits because some of the lowest performing students may have already dropped out of school prior to their senior year. By 12th grade, approximately 40 percent of black and Hispanic students continue to read below basic proficiency levels. As shown in Figure 13, disproportionate shares of lower performing students are black and Hispanic. By contrast, nearly half of white seniors read at or above proficiency level.

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7 Kao and Tienda argue that parents' optimism about their children's prospects are decisive in the educational achievement of both first and second-generation youth, who comprise a very large share of the Asian population. They show that Asian youth who are high achievers have immigrant parents. For a discussion of the cultural and social correlates of Asians' high educational achievement, see Kao (1995).

Figure 13
Students Reading Achievement Levels: 1998

![Bar Charts](chart.png)


Figure 14 presents trends in math and reading scores of seniors by race and Hispanic origin. While the ethno-racial performance differential in math scores is apparent throughout the period, there has been some convergence between 1973 and 1996. This is especially true between 1973 and the early 1990s when both black and Hispanic mathematic achievement scores increased significantly. Many researchers have contributed these gains to greater black and Hispanic student enrollment in high school algebra and geometry courses (see for example, Jones 1984). Temporal data for Asians are incomplete, but their math performance generally exceeds that of whites by a substantial margin (data not shown in Figure 14). It is noteworthy that the Asian-white math proficiency differentials generally lead to less social concern than the white-black or white-Hispanic gaps, for surely all children should be able to achieve at levels comparable to Asian youth.

The time trend in reading scores also shows considerable improvement for minority students, which results in narrower race/ethnic gaps over time.\(^9\) Specifically, black students witnessed a 20-point improvement in reading scores during the 1980s and Hispanic youth a 14-point gain. This is a promising sign of what is possible. Although reading proficiency of black and Hispanic students converged by the mid-1990s, it is troubling that a substantial achievement gap vis-à-vis whites remains.

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\(^9\) Although standard errors fluctuate slightly, the greatest variability in test performance occurs among Hispanics, followed by blacks, with whites having the lowest levels of variation. For instance, the average standard errors for NAEP reading scores are 3.3, 2.2, and 1.1 for Hispanics, blacks, and whites between 1971-1999, respectively (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999b). The same general monotonic pattern by group membership is evident for math scores, although the average level of variability is somewhat lower.
A further implication of low reading and math scores is that underperformance is a precursor to premature withdrawal from school, which in turn lowers the shares of students who aspire to attend college (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Kao, Tienda and Schneider, 1996). Although temporal changes provide signs of hope, there remain equally troubling trends in high school dropout rates. On the promising side, Figure 15 shows that the white high school dropout rate was cut in half—from 15.5 percent to 7.7 percent between 1967 and 2000. Furthermore, the black dropout rate was reduced by more than half, although it remains 5 percentage points above that of whites. On the troubling side is the resistant Hispanic dropout rate, which has hovered around 28 to 35 percent throughout the time period.
One plausible explanation for Latinos’ resistant dropout rate is that the influx of poorly educated immigrants from Central and South America lowers the graduation rate for the total Hispanic population. These groups have parents with very low education levels, and parental education is one of the strongest determinants of offspring’s educational attainment (Mare, 1995). However, this is not the whole story. In support of the immigration explanation are the high dropout rates of first generation Hispanics. Figure 16 shows that slightly over half of all Mexican and 44 percent of other Hispanic immigrant youth fail to graduate from high school. This implicates immigration as an important correlate of race and ethnic differences in educational attainment. That dropout rates of the third generation remain appreciably higher for Hispanics compared to their Asian, white or black counterparts suggests that other factors besides immigrant status also contribute to the educational underachievement of Latino youth. For example, among third generation Mexican origin children whose parents are both U.S. born, nearly one-in-four fail to graduate from high school, yet only 6 percent of third generation Asians discontinue their education before completing the 12th grade. Likewise, among black immigrants, less than 10 percent do not graduate from high school, while 13 percent of those with native-born parents fail to graduate. Clearly, immigration cannot be the entire story.

**Figure 16**

High School Dropout Rates by Immigrant Generation for Persons
Ages 16-24: 1996

![Bar chart showing dropout rates by generation and ethnicity.](chart)


Overall, the “effect” of immigration on educational attainment appears to be driven more by parental socioeconomic standing than by foreign birth per se (Coleman, 1990; Mare, 1995; Kao and Tienda, 1995; Kao, Tienda, and Schneider, 1996). Elevated high school dropout rates do not bode well for the economic prospects of Hispanic students, not only because their labor market prospects are greatly compromised by their truncated educational careers, but also because failure to complete high school restricts access to college and good jobs (Carnevale, 1999; Trejo, 1997). Because the wage returns to college education rose appreciably after 1973, the constriction of the secondary and post-secondary educational pipeline has more deleterious socioeconomic consequences today than in the past (Levy, 1987; Danziger and Gottschalk, 1993). That Hispanics are also the fastest growing segment of the school-age population means that large numbers are likely to become and remain poor throughout their working lives unless strong measures are taken to improve their educational attainment (Carnevale, 1999). These circumstances, as well as the persisting black-white disparity in graduation rates, require strong and decisive corrective measures to unplug the educational pipeline for minorities from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in order to avoid deepening class divisions along race and ethnic
lines in the future. Such measures will not only reinforce the democratic foundations of our meritocracy, but also potentially render it color-blind.

**Post-Secondary Educational Trends**

Despite the persisting ethno-racial gaps in high school completion, there is much progress to celebrate in higher education because college-going rates are at an all-time high for every racial and ethnic group and the number of post-secondary institutions available to promote this trend continues to grow. Institutional expansion is necessary for broadening educational opportunities, but it is not sufficient to ensure that post-secondary educational outcomes and opportunities will be color-blind. As high tech industries continue to proliferate and a growing number of jobs require a college education, the social cost of unequal outcomes in primary schooling may be very high.

Unfortunately, troubling signs shadow the promise of rising college enrollments. For example, Figure 17 shows that the college enrollment gap between Hispanics on the one hand, and blacks and whites on the other hand, has widened. In other words, the trends in high school graduation are mirrored in college enrollment rates, which have risen by about 14 points for blacks and whites since the early 1970s, but only 7 percentage points for Hispanics. Although temporal data for Asians are less complete, their college enrollment rates are well above those of whites, which is one reason Asians have been dubbed the “model minority” (Kao, 1995).

![Figure 17: College Enrollment Rates of Persons Ages 18-24: 1972-1999](image)


In large measure, ethno-racial differentials in college enrollment rates reflect socioeconomic disparities among white, black, Hispanic and Asian youth, but they also reflect values that make educational attainment a priority for both parents and their children (Kao and Tienda, 1995; 1998). Figure 18 shows that even among low SES families, almost 80 percent of Asian youth enroll in college by the time they are 20, compared to about 30 to 40 percent of others. Clearly the large gap in college-going rates cannot be solely attributed to material resources and family background.

At the other extreme of the SES distribution, college enrollment is not differentiated among whites, Hispanics and Asians, but blacks from families with high socioeconomic status
are significantly less likely to enroll in college than their high status racial and ethnic counterparts. Further research is required to understand why high SES blacks are less likely to attend college than white and Latino youth with similar backgrounds. However, these differentials suggest that corrective measures—such as race sensitive admissions policies—may be necessary to narrow the college enrollment and graduation gaps of blacks and Hispanics vis-à-vis whites that were observed in Figures 16 and 17. Moreover, the disparities among the status groups in figure 18 suggest that a “one-size-fits-all” policy may not have uniform effects on blacks and Hispanics.

![College Enrollment Rates of 20-Year Olds by Socioeconomic Status: 1994](image.png)


That Hispanic youth are more likely than Asians, blacks or whites to reside with poorly educated parents (see Figures 8 and 9 above) significantly lowers their likelihood of college attendance because the “norms and expectations” of college education are largely, though not exclusively, set by parental experiences (Coleman, 1990; Mare, 1995). Hopefully, as the number of college-educated Hispanics rises, so too will the post-secondary enrollment rates of subsequent generations, particularly if the expansion of four year institutions continues. However, in light of the demographic and socioeconomic trends outlined above, the number of generations required for educational convergence does not provide hope for achieving a color-blind meritocracy any time soon. The demographic trends outlined in this paper so far are all the more problematic if immigration continues to increase the number of parents with low levels of completed schooling (Smith and Edmonston, 1997).

Furthermore, the college experience of minorities, especially Hispanics, is further differentiated by their unequal propensity to enroll in two-year as compared to four-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics 1999a). By requiring another transition before college completion, this aspect of educational stratification in higher education contributes to lower rates of college graduation and also narrows the pipeline into graduate and professional schools. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (1999a) reports that over half (56 percent) of Hispanic college students enrolled in two-year colleges, compared to 39 percent of Asians, 42 percent of blacks and just 36 percent of whites. Although a large share of junior college students do transfer to four-year institutions, only tiny shares of transfer students make their way to the most competitive post-secondary institutions, particularly private and four-year liberal arts
colleges. This can be shown using data from the 1994 wave of the National Education Longitudinal Study (National Center for Education Statistics 1996b). Of all college goers only 13 percent of Hispanic and black students attend highly competitive post-secondary institutions compared to 22 percent of their white and 36 percent of their Asian counterparts.¹⁰

Figure 19 demonstrates that of the small share of minority students who do enroll in highly competitive colleges, Hispanics and blacks are more likely than Asians or whites to hail from lower-status family backgrounds. Latinos are also much more likely than other groups of students to be first-generation college goers. These are promising signs that the long-term educational prospects of Hispanics and blacks may improve in the future, presuming that socioeconomic status does not hinder access to higher education for financial reasons. However, this promise will be severely compromised if the elimination of race-sensitive admissions policies forecloses higher educational opportunity for talented students whose socioeconomic circumstances may otherwise restrict access to selective institutions.

![Figure 19: Enrollment in Highly Competitive Colleges: 1994](image)


Improvements in minority representation in higher education since the Civil Rights era notwithstanding, the differentials in college graduation rates by group membership actually increased since 1970, which adds to the ledger of troubling signs. As Figure 20 reveals, this is because the rates of college attendance and graduation of whites rose faster than that of blacks. In 1971, 21 percent of white young adults graduated from college, compared to 8 and 5 percent of blacks and Hispanics, respectively. By 2000, 32 percent of whites ages 25 to 34 had graduated from college, twice that of blacks, and nearly three times that of Hispanics. Asians are an exception inasmuch as their college graduation rates have consistently surpassed those of whites since they were separately identified in statistical systems. That blacks and Hispanics must swim upstream faster to catch up with their white and Asian peers is a tall order given the trends in scholastic performance and educational attainment documented above coupled with recent demographic trends. For Hispanics the challenge is even more formidable because they must do so as their numbers swell at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic distribution.

¹⁰ Highly competitive post-secondary institutions are defined here in terms of Barron’s institutional selectivity rating of “very competitive,” “highly competitive” or “most competitive” (see Barron’s Educational Series, 1992).
Trends and Prospects

Racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment imply lifelong differences in socioeconomic welfare and underscores the urgency of equalizing opportunity to reverse troubling trends that generate widening gaps among demographic groups. Parents’ education often constructs a floor below which offspring are not likely to fall. However, for some minority populations with historically low levels of education, such as Hispanics and many recent immigrants from Latin America and some Asian nations, parents’ education may also represent a ceiling that youth’s scholastic achievements are unlikely to surpass. This circumstance underscores one of the great dilemmas of equal opportunity, namely that family background remains decisive in shaping individual opportunity beyond what is objectively possible through economic prosperity alone (Coleman, 1990). If educational inequalities cannot be narrowed during prosperous times, they certainly will not improve during leaner years.

Another serious challenge for educational institutions is that intolerance for difference seems to have risen as the diversity of the U.S. population has increased (Tienda, 1999). This view finds support in the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in many public and local debates, and in the repeal of race-sensitive college admissions policies in three states with some of the most diverse populations, especially California, Texas and Florida. The putative grounds for eliminating race-sensitive admission criteria is that by giving unfair advantages to some applicants, preferential admission guidelines violate the very foundations of a meritocracy, which requires fair competition. This position ignores the fact that fair competition is only possible when starting lines are equal and the playing field is level. But as demonstrated above, appreciable ethno-racial differences in scholastic performance are already evident in kindergarten. Moreover, as minority youth progress through the educational hierarchy, their school enrollment rates decline, thereby narrowing the pool of students available for college. The legacy of disadvantage probably cannot be reconciled either with fair competition or a meritocracy.

The important educational challenge for the future, of course, is to ensure that diversity—broadly defined—is not the main correlate of rising inequality. Ironically, this has been
occurring since the landmark Supreme Court decision that banned segregated schools as a step toward equalizing educational opportunities. Although discrimination has been legally outlawed, architects of the Great Society appreciated that more was required to create a just society. Affirmative action policies attempted to go beyond the simple prohibition of disparate treatment on the grounds of race, national origin and sex by encouraging race-sensitive admissions to selective colleges and universities for groups that have historically experienced barriers in accessing higher education. The problem resides not in the philosophy or intent, but rather in the interpretation of what measures beyond outlawing discrimination are justified while protecting the meritocratic foundations of democratic institutions. As the debate about affirmative action gains momentum, colleges and universities will face additional challenges to maintaining a diverse educational pipeline because there is no consensus about what conditions must be equal for opportunity to be equal; there is no common understanding about the meaning of a "fair chance;" nor is there agreement about what solutions produce the fairest outcomes. Stated as questions: Whose freedom to choose must be compromised for whose opportunity? Is it possible to create a more just society without compromising someone else’s freedom to choose?

Affirmative action programs represent our past response to the dilemma of fair chance in an unequal society, and while imperfect, the various attempts to evaluate these initiatives indicate that the benefits may outweigh their costs. This is the conclusion reached by Holzer and Neumark (2000) in a comprehensive article in the Journal of Economic Literature, and is consistent with the main theme of Bowen and Bok’s (1998) landmark study showing that black students who attend selective institutions out perform their statistical counterparts who attend less selective institutions. Based on the available empirical evidence, it appears that affirmative action may be both good social policy and good economic policy. It represents good social policy because it begins to reduce the class cleavages along ethno-racial lines, and it represents good economic policy because it widens the pool of college-educated groups to reproduce the skills needed in the high-tech economy of the future.

While we have not been able to address all of the important questions regarding the correlates of widening and narrowing educational differentials, the challenges we have identified are all the more urgent because of the demographic trends outlined at the outset are projected to continue. Almost half of the school-aged population will be minority by the year 2020 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). The youth of 2020 represent the children of the generation that is currently in college—one in which whites and Asians are greatly over represented relative to their population shares while blacks and especially Hispanics are under represented. While high performance standards and merit-based rewards should remain important criteria in structuring college admissions, the legacy and persistence of urban residential segregation forecloses equal educational opportunity to students whose family circumstances cannot purchase access to quality elementary, middle and high schools. Against a backdrop of rising inequality, the problem of diversity in a meritocracy becomes even more difficult. This is why policies that promote equal opportunity must continue to widen the educational pipeline at all schooling levels. The ultimate injustice in a meritocratic society is foreclosing educational opportunity.
References


