



GAO REPORT – K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination

Sixty-two years ago, the Supreme Court struck down lawful school segregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, stating that education was “perhaps the most important function of state and local government” and affirming that the right to the opportunity of an education was a right that “must be made available to all on equal terms.”

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) was asked to examine changes in student racial isolation or integration over time; implementation of state and local education agency (LEA) policies that affect attendance areas or admissions; voluntary actions designed to further integration; and impact of racial and socioeconomic isolation in public education.

Nearly a half-century of research shows that segregation negatively impacts student outcomes and exacerbates unequal opportunity experienced later in life. A GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education confirmed that race and poverty continues to drive inequities in education and that housing segregation patterns contribute to school segregation.

KEY FINDINGS

Changes in Student Racial Isolation and Integration:

- Of the more than 93,000 K-12 schools in this country, 90% are traditional public schools, 7% are charter institutions, and 3% are magnet centers.
- In reviewing data from school years 2000-01 and 2013-14, racial and socioeconomic isolation in K-12 public schools grew from 9 to 16 percent. In that same period, students who were eligible for free or reduced-lunch increased by 143%.
- Sixty-one percent of all high poverty schools are populated by at least 75% students of color. Hispanic students were the largest minority group (25%) of the total student population in schools for school year 2013-14, compared to Black students at 16%.
- Black and Hispanic students have poverty rates that are 2-3 times higher than the rates of White students.
- The growth in racial and socioeconomic isolation was concentrated in schools where 75-100% of the students were Black or Hispanic and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
- While the concentration of poor Black and Hispanic students in traditional public school decreased from 94% to 81% between the 2000-2001 and the 2013-2014 school year, their presence increased in charter schools (from 3% to 13%) and in magnet schools (from 3% to 5%), during that same time period.
- Hispanic students tended to be “triple segregated” by race, economics, and language.

Impact:

Students who attend racially and socioeconomically isolated schools were offered fewer math, science, and college preparatory courses. There were also disproportionately higher rates of students held back in 9th grade, suspended, or expelled.

- Less than half of these schools offered AP math courses, compared to the availability of such courses in almost two-thirds of schools that are more racially and socioeconomically diverse.
- Among *all* schools, low-income and minority students were far less likely to enroll in these more rigorous courses.

- GAO also found that, despite ‘high-poverty,’ majority black and Hispanic school students comprising only 12 percent of all K-12 public school students, they accounted for 22 percent of all students with more than one out-of-school suspension.

Voluntary Actions Designed to Further Integration:

- In jurisdictions where education officials implemented steps to improve racial and socioeconomic integration, the results improved for all students in low-poverty and low-racial isolated schools. Specifically, the rate of graduation for Hispanics increased when poverty was controlled as a factor.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL SEGREGATION

Racially and socioeconomically diverse learning environments benefit students’ academic and life outcomes. There are clear detrimental effects of concentrated poverty on academic achievement that integration policies can mitigate and avoid. In addition, students from all races and socioeconomic levels benefit from exposure to different cultures and ideas. Finally, low-income and minority students benefit from attending higher resourced, integrated schools that set high expectations for all students.

GAO’S METHODOLOGY

Using the Common Core of Data, GAO analyzed the (1) poverty level of schools and (2) Black and Hispanic student composition of schools, as a basis for grouping and comparing schools. GAO categorized schools based on both the percent of students in a school eligible for free or reduced-price lunch *and* the percent of Black or Hispanic students collectively in a school, dividing data into three school groups as follows:

1. Schools whose student populations were comprised of 0 to 25 percent students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (i.e., low-poverty) *and* 0 to 25 percent Black or Hispanic students (referred to as “L/PBH schools”),
2. Schools whose student populations were comprised of 75 to 100 percent students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (i.e., high-poverty) *and* 75 to 100 percent Black or Hispanic students (referred to as “H/PBH schools”), and
3. Schools that fall outside of these two categories (referred to as “all other schools”).

When examining resource inequities – including discipline rates – GAO used the Federal Civil Rights Data Collection.

GAO’S RECOMMENDATIONS

“GAO recommends that Education more routinely analyze its civil rights data to identify disparities among types and groups of schools and that Justice systematically track key information on open federal school desegregation cases to which it is a party to better inform its monitoring.”

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE DEMOCRATS’ RECOMMENDATIONS

Committee Democrats, in partnership with Democrats on the Judiciary committee, are introducing *the Equity and Inclusion Enforcement Act* to empower parents and communities to address – through robust enforcement – racial inequities in public education.

Committee Democrats are also calling upon Chairman Kline to launch a series of hearings to examine the obligation of states and school districts to fulfil the promise of *Brown* and opportunity presented by the ESSA to take meaningful and deliberate action, supported by the Federal government, to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation in public K12 schools. The report, *K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination* (GAO-16-345), was requested by Education and the Workforce Ranking Member Bobby Scott (VA-03), House Judiciary Ranking Member John Conyers (MI-13) and retired Congressman and former Ranking Member George Miller in May 2014.