

African-American Students and U.S. High Schools

By 2050, the United States Census Bureau projects that about 50 percent of the U.S. population will be African-American, Hispanic, or Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Given these steep demographic shifts, the performance of students of color and the characteristics of the schools they attend are important factors that must concern all Americans.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, African-American students made up 16 percent of the public school population in 2004 (NCES 2006). These students, disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty, low-performing schools, are vulnerable to poor educational outcomes that undermine their chances for success in life.

The nation's public high schools, in particular, are failing too many African-American youth.

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

African-American high school students are notably falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates.

- In 2003, only 55 percent of black students graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma, compared to 78 percent of whites (Greene and Winters 2006).
- Nearly half of the nation's African-American students, but only 11 percent of white students, attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm (Balfanz and Legters 2004).
- In 2002, 23 percent of all black students who started public high school left it prepared for college, compared to 40 percent of whites (Greene and Winters 2005).
- On average, African-American and Hispanic twelfth-grade students read at approximately the same level as white eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education 2002).
- About half of poor, urban ninth graders read at only a fifth- or sixth-grade level (Neild and Balfanz 2001).
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 89 percent of African-American eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 63 percent of white eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, NAEP 2005).
- The twelfth-grade reading scores of African-American males were significantly lower than those for men and women across every other racial and ethnic group (U.S. Department of Education, NAEP 2005).

Schools, Segregation, and Teacher Quality

A disproportionate number of failing schools, across grade levels, are predominantly comprised of poor, racial, and ethnic minority students. These segregated schools tend to have fewer financial, human, and material resources than schools in more affluent areas. By the time students who attend these schools reach high school, the academic challenges they face have been compounded by years of substandard education.

- More than 60 percent of black students attend schools where more than 50 percent of the school population is identified as living in poverty, compared to 18 percent of white students (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- U.S. schools are now 41 percent nonwhite and the majority of the nonwhite students attend schools that show substantial segregation (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- A high-poverty, majority-minority high school is five times more likely to have weak promoting power (promoting 50 percent or fewer freshmen to senior status within four years) than a majority white school (Balfanz and Legters 2004).
- In thirty-one of forty-nine states, school districts with the highest minority enrollments get fewer resources than school districts with the lowest number of minorities enrolled. These thirty-one states educate six out of every ten minority children in America (Carey 2004).
- In high schools where at least 75 percent of the students are low-income, there are three times as many uncertified or out-of-field teachers teaching both English and science than in schools with wealthier populations (Wirt et al. 2004).
- Black students were more likely than white students to attend schools where trash was present on the floor (29 percent vs. 18 percent), graffiti was present (10 percent vs. 3 percent), and ceilings were in disrepair (12 percent vs. 7 percent) (Planty and Devoe 2005).

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

A 2003 report, published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), shows that African-American students experience disparities in other important areas of education:

- At 15 percent, African-American students were the highest percentage served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the 1999–2000 school year (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder, 2003).
- In 1999, 35 percent of African-American students in grades seven through twelve had been suspended or expelled during their school years, compared to 13 percent of Asians and 15 percent of whites (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).
- In 2001, African Americans scored lower than all other racial and ethnic groups on both the math and verbal portions of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).
- The number of black students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams increased between 1984 and 2000; however, the percentage of African-American twelfth graders who took the exam in 2000 was lower than that of whites or Hispanics (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).



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