

## **Socioeconomic and Racial Segregation and Discrimination: A Student's Perspective and Analysis of the Impact on Schools**

*Editorial Note:* UCLA student Danielle Burnside participated at the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports in 2024. As part of her involvement, she researched and wrote a paper offering her perspective on the impact of segregated schools and discrimination on students. She calls for the collective effort from schools, teachers, communities, and policymakers to create an inclusive and caring educational environment. What follows are brief edited highlights of her paper.

**R**acially and socioeconomically based segregated schooling and discrimination add major challenges to student well-being. Young people are especially vulnerable because they are in the early phases of developing cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

The policies and practices that maintain segregation, discrimination, and other population disparities are deeply seated aspects of society. They are ingrained into the education system – from the unequal distribution of funds and resources among schools to the biases rooted in the attitudes and actions of teachers, students, and staff.

Researchers report a variety of negative outcomes for students. In general, studies indicate that race and ethnicity are strongly related to physical and emotional health and academic outcomes (Bécares & Priest, 2015; Prince et al., 2018; Rothstein, 2014). With respect to segregated schools, students are reported as having lower average test scores, poorer health, more likely to drop out, less likely to enroll in college, more likely to be incarcerated, and lower earnings as adults.

### **About Discrimination**

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious formation of preconceived notions towards specific social groups, resulting in unfair discrimination towards them. In educational settings, the pervasive nature of unconscious preconceptions subtly mold individuals' actions and choices. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness, especially when it happens in teachers, often results in marginalized groups facing unjust opportunities and treatment. Since this bias can have such a negative impact on student's trajectories, proposals have called for formally monitoring teachers' grading practices and classroom behaviors. Of course, teachers can also monitor themselves. For example, Suttie (2016) suggests that teachers "cultivate awareness of their biases, work to increase empathy and empathetic communication, practice mindfulness and loving kindness, and develop cross-group friendships in their own lives."

Because stereotypes and cultural norms shape our thinking, it's natural to have biases. However, when those at school are unwilling to acknowledge and counter harmful biases, intervention is needed. For instance, racist bullying in schools is viewed as so common that there has been a special focus on school interventions to address the problem (e.g., Wu & Jia, 2023).

Examples of general strategies to reduce discrimination include

- >organizing peer-led workshops, assemblies, and presentations aimed at raising awareness and fostering understanding among students.
- >conducting student led surveys to understand the key issues related to racist bullying behavior at a school
- >providing opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to mix and share their experiences with one another.

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\*The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Also emphasized is the value of diversifying school staff, reviewing school policies, and involving parents in discussions to create a safer, more inclusive educational environment, and ensuring a fair budget allocation process. And as a policy priority, rather than asking students to travel unreasonable distances to access better-resourced schools, there is a call for doing much more to balance racial and socio-economic diversity at all schools, thereby eliminating segregated and isolated sites.

### **Two Examples of Schools Combating Discrimination and Inequities**

Boston Collegiate Charter School went from a school where 93% of their students were white, to cutting the percentage into almost half. One way BCCS maintains diversity is by introducing a random lottery system which admits students from the neighborhood. BCCS had five key pieces of advice. Invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion and not just in moments of crisis, build a community of staff who are equity practitioners, set specific assessment and goals, institute intergroup circles and restorative practices, and connect with families over shared values (Elsayed, 2021).

The Equity in Action Projects, led by REL West, is an example of an approach to fostering diversity and racial equity within school districts. By helping districts understand the needs of Black and Latinx stakeholders, developing racial equity plans, and ensuring that racial equity is central to the districts structures, this initiative fosters a greater sense of belonging and value in marginalized communities (Fong, 2021). They feel their jobs are to point out actions and structures that need to be altered or discarded completely, in order to make sure all students have a welcoming and fair environment.

### **Concluding Comments**

This brief discussion highlights the detrimental impact of racial and socioeconomic school segregation and discrimination on student well-being and academic success. Summaries of research findings indicate socioeconomically and racially integrated schools and classrooms foster academic performance, cognitive and social-emotional development, and have civic and economic benefits.

While recent data from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) indicate that the U.S. student body is more diverse than ever before, public schools remain highly segregated along racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines. “More than a third of students (about 18.5 million of them) attended a predominantly same-race/ethnicity school during the 2020-21 school year. And 14% of students attended schools where almost all of the student body was of a single race/ethnicity.” (<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104737>)

Given available evidence, schools must take proactive steps to create inclusive environments where all students feel valued and supported (Adelman & Taylor, 2018). Creating an inclusive educational environment requires joint efforts from schools, educators, students, communities, and policymakers. By adopting strategies to phase out discrimination, promote diversity, and foster inclusion, schools can create equitable environments where students feel welcomed, valued, and empowered to succeed.

Ultimately, of course, creating an inclusive educational environment demands collective efforts from students, schools, educators, communities, and policymakers.

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