

Schools are still segregated, and black children are paying a price

By **Emma García** • February 12, 2020

Well over six decades after the Supreme Court declared “separate but equal” schools to be unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools remain heavily segregated by race and ethnicity.

What are the consequences of this lack of progress in integrating schools for black children?

- It depresses education outcomes for black students; as shown in this report, it lowers their standardized test scores.
- It widens performance gaps between white and black students.
- It reflects and bolsters segregation by economic status, with black students being more likely than white students to attend high-poverty schools.
- It means that the promise of integration and equal opportunities for all black students remains an ideal rather than a reality.

In contrast, when black students have the opportunity to attend schools with lower concentrations of poverty and larger shares of white students they perform better, on average, on standardized tests.

Black children are still relegated to separate and unequal schools

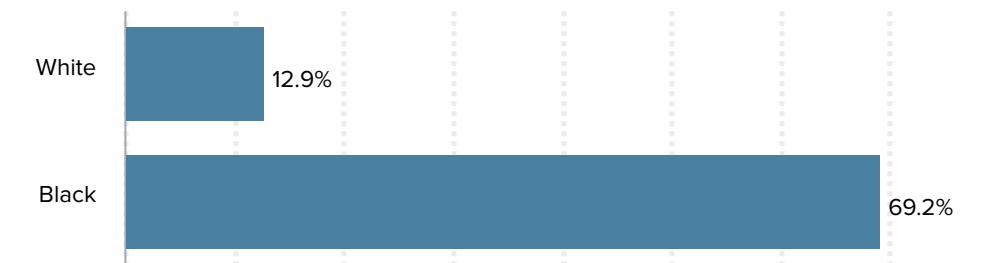
Findings on school segregation and student performance come from the National Center for Education Statistics’ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the most comprehensive study of education performance in the country. We use the most recently released data to describe school segregation and its consequences for math performance of eighth-graders. These data show that only about one in eight white students (12.9%) attends a school where a majority of students are black, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian. (We refer to this group collectively as students of color hereafter.) In contrast, nearly seven in 10 black children (69.2%) attend such schools (see **Figure A**).

As shown in **Figure B**, black students are also in economically segregated schools. Less than one in three white students (31.3%) attend a high-poverty school, compared with more than seven in 10 black students (72.4%).

Figure A

Black children are five times as likely as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity

Shares of white and black eighth-graders attending schools with a high concentration of students of color, 2017



Note: Schools with a high concentration of students of color are those in which 51–100% of students are black, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian.

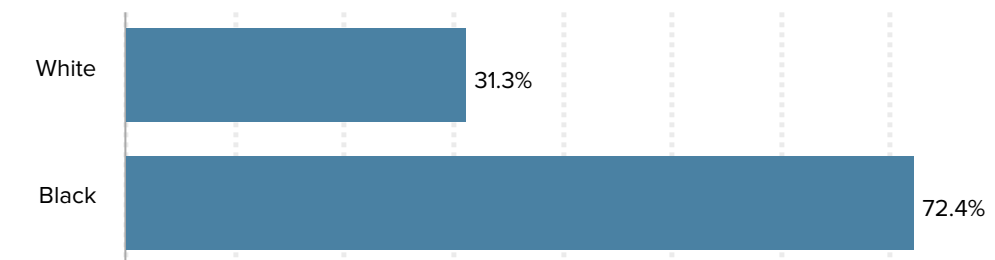
Source: Author's analysis of microdata from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

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Figure B

Black children are more than twice as likely as white children to attend high-poverty schools

Shares of white and black eighth-graders attending high-poverty schools, 2017



Note: High-poverty schools are schools in which 51–100% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Source: Author's analysis of microdata from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

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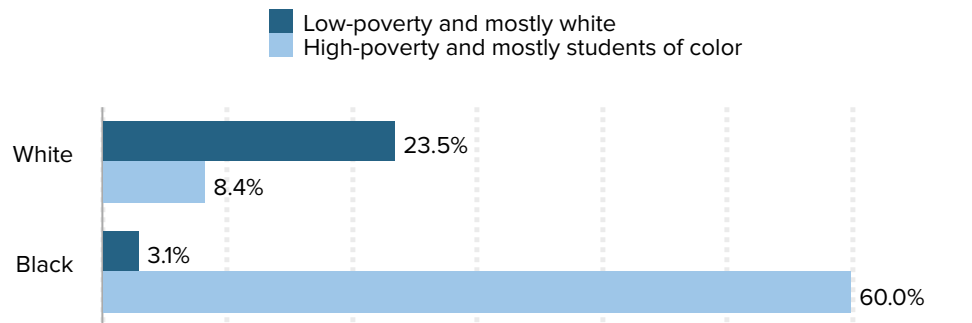
In America, race and poverty are intertwined, doubly disadvantaging black students

The known connection between race/ethnicity and poverty in the United States appears in data on the composition of schools attended by for black children. **Figure C** shows that a

Figure C

Black children are highly likely to be in high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color, but white children are not

Share of black and white eighth-graders attending low-poverty mostly white schools and high-poverty schools with high shares of students of color, 2017



Notes: Schools with a high concentration of students of color are those in which 51–100% of students are black, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian. Mostly white schools are those in which more than 75% of students are white. High-poverty schools are schools in which 51–100% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Low-poverty schools are those in which up to 25% are FRPL-eligible.

Source: Author's analysis of microdata from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

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black child faces a very high probability of ending up in a school where a majority of her peers are both poor and students of color. While less than 1 in 10 white students (8.4%) attend high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color, six in 10 black students (60.0%) do.

In contrast, about a fourth of white students (23.5%) attend schools where most of their peers are white and not poor, while only 3.1 percent of black children attend such schools.

When black children have the opportunity to attend the same schools that white children routinely attend, black children perform markedly better on standardized math tests, which we use here as a measure of education performance.

Figure D shows math scores of black eighth-graders in low-poverty, mostly white schools and in high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color. In high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color, black students scored on average 20 points less on standardized math tests than their counterparts in low-poverty, mostly white schools (255.4 vs. 275.3). In other words, scores are much lower in the type of school that black children are overwhelmingly more likely to attend (high-poverty, mostly students of color) than in the type of school (low-poverty, mostly white) that only 3.1% of black children have a chance of attending.

Though not shown in the figure, the gap between black and white student test scores is larger in high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color than in low-poverty, mostly white schools. By promoting policies that facilitate a shift away from our current

pattern of heavily segregated schools, we would thus help close the gap between black and white students overall.

Figure D

Performance of black students suffers when these students attend high-poverty schools with high shares of students of color

Math performance of black students by school segregation, 2017



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Source: Author's analysis of microdata from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

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Unaddressed school segregation is a major longstanding policy failure. It consigns most black children to schools that put them behind academically. The persistent performance gaps between white and black children that challenge the education and career prospects of black children from early on demonstrate that school segregation continues to cast a very long shadow—from well before *Brown v. Board of Education* to today, and into the future.

This brief, published by EPI to highlight education issues for Black History Month, shows data that are part of ongoing EPI research on student performance and education inequalities. Information using earlier data on segregation and the consequences for performance for other groups, and technical details, are available in Martin Carnoy and Emma García, [Five Key Trends in U.S. Student Performance: Progress by Blacks and Hispanics, the Takeoff of Asians, the Stall of non-English Speakers, the Persistence of Socioeconomic Gaps, and the Damaging Effect of Highly Segregated Schools](#), Economic Policy Institute, 2017.