



Why Segregation and Racial Gaps in Education Persists 70 Years After the End of Legal Segregation

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Next year will mark seven decades since the U.S. Supreme Court declared racially segregated public schools to be unconstitutional. Even the current Supreme Court's conservatives [have embraced](#) the decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. **Yet, 70 years after Brown, a key obstacle to racial equality in education continues to be white resistance to racial integration and adequate funding for the education of Black and Hispanic children.**

In the 1950s and 1960s, white resistance took the form of [a revolt](#) against integration and busing. Private “[white academies](#)”—also known as segregation academies—sprang up to preserve the advantages held by the previously white-only public schools. Today, one form of ongoing resistance is what scholars label “[hoarding opportunities](#).” By using zoning and districting to create and perpetuate overwhelmingly white spaces and declining to share resources with Black and Hispanic children, white Americans limit the reach of integration and perpetuate inequality.

Not surprisingly, in 2022, [the Government Accountability Office](#) declared that school segregation continues unabated. The agency reported that even as the nation's student population has diversified, 43 percent of its schools are segregated, and 18.5 million students, more than one-third of all students in the country, are enrolled in highly segregated schools (75 percent or more of the students identify as a single race or ethnicity). The Midwest — with 59 percent of all schools classified as segregated — is the leader in segregation. The same GAO study showed that when new school districts are formed, the new schools tend to be far more racially homogeneous than the districts they replace.

Direct evidence of white resistance to racial equity in education can be seen in two [survey experiments](#) my co-authors and I conducted in 2021 that closely replicate findings from earlier periods. **The study shows that white Americans continue to be reluctant to support increased funding for schools for Black children.**

White resistance continues and remains a crucial obstacle to much-needed change.

Our Findings

In our first experiment, Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The first group were asked, “Should funding for public schools be increased a lot, increased somewhat, kept the same, decreased somewhat, or decreased a lot?” The second group was asked about “Black schools” instead of “public schools”, and the third group was asked about “urban schools.” Scholars have shown that “urban” is a “dog-whistle” for race, an implicitly racialized term that links in memory with perceptions of Black people.

The results show that 70% support increases in the public-school condition, compared to 54% in the Black condition, and 63% in the urban condition. There is a 16-percentage point difference in the condition of public schools compared to Black schools, which is statistically significant.

In a second experiment we sought to determine whether similar resistance emerges when the question relates to very young children and specifically children in pre-K. The same white Americans were randomly assigned to one of three groups. The first group was asked: “Do you favor or oppose expanding funding for pre-kindergarten programs so that it is available for poor children nationwide? The \$24 billion a year cost would be paid for by higher taxes.” The second group was asked the same question except that “poor children” was replaced by “poor Black children.” The third group was asked about “poor inner-city children.”

The results show a decline of 3 percentage points between the control (poor kids) and the poor Black kids’ treatment, but this is not statistically significant. However, there is a significant 6 percentage point decline between the control and the “poor inner-city kids” condition.

The experiments suggest that among white Americans’ support for public education funding is robust. But less so for schools that cater to Black students. This resistance is lesser when it comes to pre-kindergarten kids, but it emerges even for this group when the beneficiaries are described in racialized, “dog whistle” terms.

White resistance to desegregation has severe consequences for racial equality and the economy.

Overcoming White Resistance to Desegregation

Research published this month shows that Black students who attended Southern desegregated schools in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s experienced positive lifelong cognitive effects. And data from [the U.S. Department of Education](#) still shows “substantial” racial gaps in reading and math competencies, high school graduation rates and, inevitably, college entry. A recent Brookings [report](#) estimated that if the racial gap in education and employment had been eliminated, the U.S. GDP from 1990 to 2019 would have been \$22.9 trillion larger. This would benefit us all.

The great promise of *Brown vs. Board* was one of equal access to high-quality education. The hope was that income and other social disparities between whites and people of color would dissipate over time. White resistance contributed to America not keeping this promise.

Policymakers, funders, and education advocates must overcome white resistance to strengthen support for programs geared toward Black and Hispanic children. This will help America’s quest to fulfill the promise of *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

This story about segregation in education was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for [Hechinger’s newsletter](#).