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Racial Disparities in Milwaukee Schools

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Racial Disparities in Milwaukee Schools

Milwaukee Public Schools are still failing their African American Community.

American schools remain segregated after nearly 65 years since the historic U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. The Board of Education* decision. Milwaukee's educational system is one of them. Since 1976, Milwaukee Public Schools have been grappling with this persistent issue and has become a place of "hypersegregation," a place much worse than before. Milwaukee's educational system today has succumbed to the unacceptable conditions of many years ago.

African American students within the Milwaukee Public Schools have been the most negatively impacted by educational segregation resulting in lower test scores, high suspension rates, and low graduation rates. This persistent segregation between white and Black children that challenge the education and career prospects of Black children from early on demonstrates that school segregation continues to cast a very long shadow.



MPS and others in the broader community continue to explore ways to improve the educational performance of minorities. School reform and restructuring have been initiated through various efforts, such as school-based management, school attendance plans, and school choice. However, Milwaukee remains just as segregated as before. New data shows that there could be other possible ways to desegregate schools that Milwaukee has not tried just yet.



WISCONSIN IS FACING major backlash for developing one of the largest educational gaps between white and Black students in the nation. These results are largely based on the student outcome of Milwaukee's schoolchildren. In relation to the increasing segregation within Milwaukee Public Schools, test scores have declined throughout the decade resulting in Wisconsin having the largest achievement gap of any state.



States with Highest Standardized-Test Scores Gaps /
WalletHub

Read: ["The Achievement Gap in Milwaukee Public Schools: Outcomes by Gender, Race and Income Level"](#)

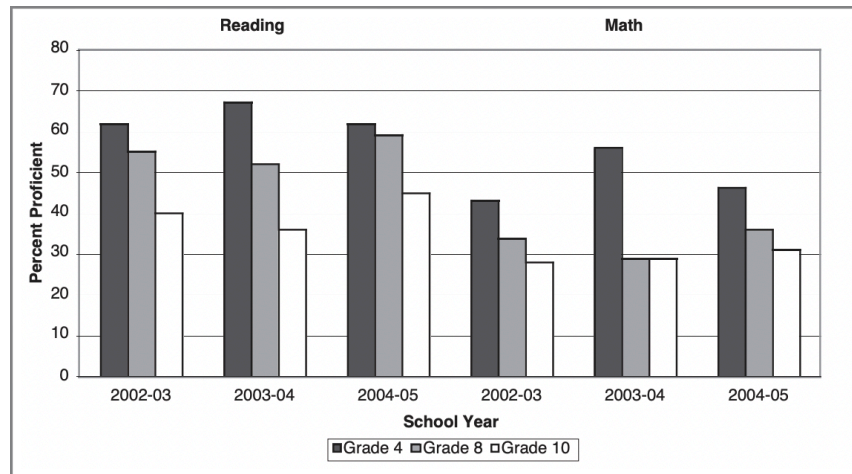
The test scores taken by many students in Milwaukee schools have not been rising for several years, despite the number of initiatives being taken.

In 2019, [Rich Kremer](#) of the Wisconsin NPR published a news article emphasizing Wisconsin's educational achievement gap based on testing scores released from The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Within the article, he shared that "On average, Black eighth grade students scored 47 points lower on the math exam than their white counterparts. Black fourth grade reading scores were 39 points lower than scores among white students."

Many Milwaukee residents found this news shocking as they started to question whether this could be a social or intellectual issue. As it may seem like the result of Milwaukee's failure to narrow the disparity due to its high concentration of minority students, the complexity of this issue still remains today due to a variety of variables.

"Fourth-graders, reading; 11% were at or above proficient; 65% scored below basic, the most of any state."

Not only did the data show how large the testing gap is between Black and white students, but it also showed that only a few Black students were above proficient in either math or reading for their grades. [Lydia Mulvany](#) of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel shared some shocking news stating that "Fourth-graders, reading; 11% were at or above proficient; 65% scored below basic, the most of any state," along with 55% of eighth graders rated below basic in reading and 62% of eighth graders and 46% of fourth graders rated below basic in math.



Percent of Students Scoring at Proficient or Above from
2002-2005 / Sammis White

During the early 2000s, a majority of students within Milwaukee Public Schools were scoring proficient scores, but these percentages dropped dramatically by the beginning of 2013 and are still dropping today. Only 9% of eighth graders and 11% of fourth graders were at or above proficient for reading, while for math, 8% of eighth graders and 12% of fourth graders were at or above proficient.

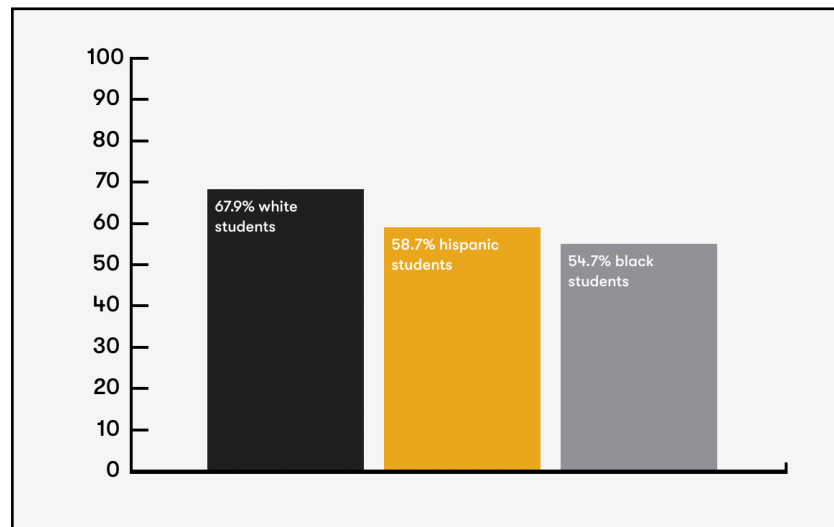
These alarming results caught the attention of many important people, specifically Wisconsin's former Superintendent of Schools Carolyn Stanford Taylor and an assistant scientist named Bradley Carl for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconsin Center for Education Research. They say that efforts are underway to close this large achievement gap by going through the root of the problem: segregation.



ANOTHER ASPECT of the achievement gap is graduation rates. Wisconsin is considered to have one of the highest gaps (25.7% gap) between white and Black students' high school graduation rates compared to any other state in the US. The graduation gap is so severe in Wisconsin due to the very low rates for Black students and very high rates for white students.

Read: "[Wisconsin Schools' Racial Inequality Worst in U.S.](#)"

For the past five years, four-year graduation rates in Milwaukee Public High School have decreased drastically. The graduation rate for Black students was only 54.7%. Erin Richards from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel shared that "The five-year graduation rate is more generous — the most recent rate for MPS Black students is 67%." Unfortunately, this percentage has also fallen since 2011.



Milwaukee Public High School Graduation Rate / The Completion Crisis

After high school comes college. These rates are even more disturbing than the high school graduation rates. In general, only 8% of all Milwaukee students will earn both a high school diploma and college degree, while 12% of Milwaukee's high school graduates will earn either a two-year or four-year college degree within six years. Specifically considering African American students from MPS, only 10% of these graduates will earn either a two-year or four-year college degree.

To truly show that Milwaukee has one of the highest achievement gaps in the nation, out of the 62% of high school graduates from MPS, only 40% of them will actually enroll in college, while a slim 12% will earn a degree.

“Under a quarter of the state’s homeless students, 5,040, attended Milwaukee Public Schools.”

The most recent news (as of 2020) shows that graduation rates could be finally on the rise, but disparities will still remain. Declined enrollment and increased number of homeless students are the most noticeable disparities involving Milwaukee Public Schools. Annysa Johnson from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel shared that “MPS enrollment dipped almost 1,100 to 74,683,” and “under a quarter of the state's homeless students, 5,040, attended Milwaukee Public Schools.”

Enrollment is a key factor in how schools increase their funding. With a mass decline in student enrollment due to many students becoming homeless, less money is funded to the district. Without adequate funding, MPS students do not receive the proper resources to obtain a quality education, similar to the white students in the suburban parts of Milwaukee.



ALONG WITH THE other educational disparities that Black students face today, another one is shown by unequal and harsh discipline. Black students are heard to receive much harsher consequences for their actions compared to other students attending MPS.

Starting in 2012, the suspension rate for Black students in Milwaukee Public Schools was at 85%, making up most of the whole district’s total suspensions. By the end of 2021, the total suspensions were cut in half, but the suspension gap between Black students and their peers still remained.

“Starting in 2012, the suspension rate for Black students in Milwaukee Public Schools was at 85%, making up most of the whole district’s total suspensions.”

What could be the cause for this persistent gap? One possible cause could be that a good amount of educators and administrators come from areas with little to no experience with minorities. No matter what policies are enacted, it is solely up to the teachers and administrators to carry out those policies equally for all students. This may not be happening as the suspension gap continues to be a problem in Milwaukee schools and still will be for years to come as long as segregation continues to be a problem as well.

Read: “Milwaukee Struggles to Lower Black Student Suspensions”



FOR YEARS, Milwaukee Public School board members have struggled to come up with a reliable solution to desegregate their schools. Although they have enacted multiple programs to help, segregation still continues to increase within their system.

One of the most notable programs is Chapter 220. In 1976, this program started off being quite successful as several districts reached a new high of minority enrollment. Several years later, student participation dropped, and segregation rose again, resulting in the program being shut down in 2015. Since then, segregation has remained a persistent issue within Milwaukee Public Schools. So, what steps should the board members take today?

One of the best ways that Milwaukee can learn more about possible solutions is by looking at what beneficial actions other districts have taken in the United States. One specific case is San Antonio. With a total of 14 districts within city limits, one district, the San Antonio Independent School District, contains some of the poorest students from the area. As a result, many high-class families moved to more affluent school districts and charter schools, similar to the situation here in Milwaukee.



Full Rights Image / K-12 Dive

Fortunately, San Antonio has seen positive results from their use of multiple desegregating actions. The five solutions that San Antonio has implemented and is still enacting are 50-50 enrollment, creating attendance zones, offering many academic programs, emphasizing outreach and access and using the block by block approach. Due to all the positive feedback, they believe that they can be a lesson for all districts that are still struggling with segregation today.

One of the most useful solutions Milwaukee should try is building with diversity in mind by designing schools with 50-50 enrollment models. This means that 50% of the students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds while the other 50% come from privileged backgrounds. Within this model, school leaders must ensure that all students are treated equally and given equal access to the most beneficial resources in order to obtain a proper education.

Another important solution is creating smart attendance zones. San Antonio even has schools where there are no attendance zones at all. This allows the schools to draw students from all over the city including some from high class areas. In general, attendance zones can be made to include or exclude certain areas to ensure that the student body remains diverse.

Read: [Creative Approaches Needed to Desegregate Schools](#)

A unique and creative way for Milwaukee schools to draw more attention, especially from parents, is by offering more academic programs that are very interactive. Programs such as dual-language programs, STEAM, and STEM are all programs that tend to attract more middle to high-class families. These programs offer more collaboration among a variety of students, which ultimately creates a truly integrated space for these students to learn and enjoy.

A quick and easy way to promote diversity in Milwaukee schools is by putting a heavy emphasis on outreach and access. Many parents in the Milwaukee suburban areas are scared to cross the line and have their kids attend a new school, especially MPS. The Milwaukee district can make it easier for parents to learn about their school and academic programs by creating an engagement team that is solely used to reach out to parents of all income classes around the area. This way, parents can easily learn how to apply and/or register by phone or online.

The last solution that could be beneficial for Milwaukee Public Schools is the block by block approach. Compared to the other four, this one may require the most effort by the district and school board members. The block by block approach is a way for the district to redefine measures of poverty and disadvantage by using demographic data to examine students' income, adult educational attainment, the presence of single-parent households, and homeownership.

“A quarter of the seats in the 50-50 models need to be for students who live in low-income households with a single parent with low-educational attainment.”

Unfortunately, this approach tends to find the students suffering from poverty, showing board members that at least a quarter of the seats in the 50-50 models need to be reserved for students who live in low-income households with a single parent with low-educational attainment. Although this data can be very emotional for some, this approach is able to promote racial diversity in schools as well.

Although all these approaches were used by another school district outside of Wisconsin, the hope is that the Milwaukee district will put in the effort to try one of these. There is no harm in trying something that has helped other schools with the same consistent problem.

The data shows that these solutions can be helpful and may change the way that Milwaukee Public Schools are viewed. Not only do these solutions drive integration within the education system, but they also provide more academic programs and resources that drive Black students who already attend MPS to succeed and help the schools get involved with the community.

With resegregation on the rise, Milwaukee Public Schools need to take action as soon as possible in order to provide Black students within their system the education they need. Taking one step at a time will only ensure a brighter future for all students attending MPS.

Elizabeth Reece is a student at UWM.