

**A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY
OF THE
IMPACT OF RACE AND CLASS
ON
ACADEMIC SUCCESS
AT
ITHACA HIGH SCHOOL**

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INTRODUCTION

The Ithaca City School District is justifiably proud of the outstanding academic achievements of its students. By most measures of academic success this is an outstanding educational system. Ithaca High School sends a high proportion of students on to higher education; many of them attend the most prestigious colleges in the country. IHS students attain standardized test scores well above national and state averages, and Regents passing rates are exceptionally high. Ithaca students frequently win regional, state, and national honors in a wide variety of academic competitions. IHS produces a remarkable number of National Merit Scholarship finalists year after year. Clearly, Ithaca schools are doing many things right.

Yet in the midst of success there is failure. A disturbingly large number of students are left out. These students are not engaged in the most challenging courses, are not planning to attend college, do not perform well on standardized tests, and, in the face of the new state standards, are at great risk of not graduating from high school. Often they are at odds with the disciplinary system, exhibit poor attendance, or drop out of school entirely.

There has been the recognized that minority students are overrepresented among this less successful group, yet the similar underachievement of many white students indicates that race or ethnicity cannot alone explain the entire problem. Based upon our own family backgrounds and our experiences in the schools we attended, we have long suspected that socioeconomic class is a significant factor. However, hard data to support this conjecture was heretofore lacking.

Last spring we were fortunate to gain permission to investigate the impact of both race and class on academic success. We hope that this report will help focus attention on the broad set of problems many of our students face in achieving success in an otherwise outstanding school system.

All students can learn. The fact that our District currently fails to attain this goal is distressing. It is our hope that recognizing both race and class as important factors in academic success will enhance the pursuit of effective remedies.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

We set out to examine how race and class influence a student's chances for academic success at Ithaca High School. Specifically, we asked whether being of low socioeconomic status or a member of a minority group (particularly African-American or Latino) was negatively associated with academic success, as measured by staying in school, planning for college, academic placement level, class rank, and placement in special education.

(Throughout this study, in order to preserve confidentiality, we made every effort not to use names of individual students. When cross-referencing different databases, we relied as much as possible on student registration numbers.)

METHODOLOGY

We chose as our sample the 1995-96 Ithaca City School District eighth graders, currently the IHS class of 2000. Our retrospective study categorized those eighth graders by both race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

The three categories used for race/ethnicity were based on District enrollment data.

Race/Ethnicity Definitions:

White

African-American or Latino

Other

The “Other” category, encompassing a broad group of Asian students and a small number of Native American students, was not included in this study.

We chose to base SES categorization on student eligibility for low or reduced price meals. We used meals program eligibility in eighth grade for identification because there is anecdotal evidence that high school students are less willing to participate in this program than are middle schoolers.

SES Definitions:

Low: approved for free/reduced price meals as 8th grader

Unknown: not approved

It is important to note that there is probably a wide range of SES within the “Unknown” group. It is likely that this group includes some students of low SES who did not apply for the meals program, as well as many students of higher socioeconomic status.

We then compared this sample of 1995-96 eighth grade students with the May 1999 District enrollment list to determine which students were still attending schools in Ithaca.

QUESTION 1: Is there an association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and continued enrollment in the District?

We examined the original sample of 8th graders to see who remained enrolled in the ICSD three years later. No attempt was made to determine reasons for withdrawals; some may have moved from the district, others may have quit school. It is also important to note that not all of these students were enrolled at IHS (some were now at ACS) and not all were enrolled at grade level (some were current 10th graders, others seniors).

Analysis 1(a): Withdrawal Rate vs. Race/Ethnicity

	Withdrawn	Still enrolled	Total
African/Latino	18 (32%)	38 (68%)	56
White	140 (31%)	306 (69%)	446
Total	158 (31%)	344 (69%)	502

The withdrawal rate was 31.5% overall, 32.1% among the African/Latino group, and 31.4% among whites.

This difference is not statistically significant. (ChiSq = 0.013, P = 0.91)

Analysis 1(b): Withdrawal Rate vs. SES

	Withdrawn	Still enrolled	Total
Low SES	51 (46%)	59 (54%)	110
Unknown	107 (27%)	285 (73%)	392
Total	158 (31%)	344 (69%)	502

The withdrawal rate was 31.5% overall, but 46.4% among the Low SES group, and only 27.3% among the others.

This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 14.5, P < 0.0001)

CONCLUSION:

Being of low socioeconomic status places a student at much greater risk of withdrawing from the Ithaca City School District. There is no increased risk associated with Race/Ethnicity.

FURTHER ANALYSIS: ACADEMIC SUCCESS

We next focused our attention on those 1995-96 eighth grade White or African-Latino students who were still enrolled at IHS as members of the 1998-99 junior class. We excluded students not at IHS, students not enrolled as 11th graders, and all students who had enrolled in Ithaca since eighth grade. We examined the associations between Race/Ethnicity or SES and several indicators of academic success.

Each student in our sample remained classified with respect to the two variables: socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity. For our additional analyses we further divided the students into four groups:

- **Low-W: low SES White;**
- **Low-A/L: low SES African/Latino;**
- **Unknown-W: White students not approved for meals program in 8th grade;**
- **Unknown-A/L: African/Latino students approved for meals program in 8th grade.**

Again, it is important to remember that there is probably a wide range of SES within the “Unknown” groups. They may include some students of low SES who did not apply for the meals program among students of higher socioeconomic status. In addition, the SES of the White and African/Latino subgroups may not be comparable, making it difficult to separate the impact of race or ethnicity from that of socioeconomic status within the “Unknown SES” category.

In the following analyses there are minor variations in the totals. Some of the data were simply unavailable. Other data were difficult to cross-reference for a few students. Some datafiles were compiled as early as October 1998 and others as late as May 1999, with a few students dropping out during this period of time.

QUESTION 2: Is there an association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and a student's intention to attend college?

The Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test is administered in the fall of a student's junior year. The student's decision to take this exam is the first "on the record" indication that he or she is considering attending college. We examined the percentage of students from each group who took the PSAT.

Analysis 2(a): PSAT vs. Race/Ethnicity

	Took PSAT	No PSAT	Total
African/Latino	24 (75%)	8 (25%)	32
White	212 (82%)	46 (18%)	258
Total	236 (81%)	54 (19%)	290

The percentage of students who indicated an interest in attending college by sitting for the PSAT was 81.3% overall, 75% among African/Latino students, and 82.2% among Whites. This difference is not statistically significant. (ChiSq = 0.96, P = 0.33)

Analysis 2(b): PSAT vs. SES

	Took PSAT	No PSAT	Total
Low SES	26 (59%)	18 (41%)	44
Unknown	210 (85%)	36 (15%)	246
Total	236 (81%)	54 (19%)	290

The percentage of students who indicated an interest in attending college by taking the PSAT was 81.3% overall, 59.1% among low SES students, and 85.4% among the others. This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 17.0, P < 0.0001)

Analysis 2(c): PSAT Rates, by Race/Ethnicity and SES

	Low SES	Unknown
African/Latino	10 of 15 (67%)	14 of 17 (82%)
White	16 of 29 (55%)	196 of 229 (86%)

This difference in PSAT rates is found primarily among low SES students, with the LowSes-White group (at 55%) less likely to take PSATs any other group.

CONCLUSION:

Being of low SES is associated with a significantly reduced likelihood that the student expresses intent to attend college by taking the PSAT as a junior. No adverse risk is associated with Race/Ethnicity.

QUESTION 3: Is there an association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and academic level of a student's courses?

Subjects were divided into three categories, defined by their enrollment in:

L: at least two local level courses;

R: primarily Regents courses, perhaps with a few local or honors courses;

H: at least three honors or Advanced Placement courses.

Analysis 3(a): Academic Level vs. Race/Ethnicity

	L	R	H	Total
African/Latino	13 (42%)	14 (45%)	4 (13%)	31
White	29 (11%)	94 (37%)	134 (52%)	257
Total	42 (15%)	108 (38%)	138 (48%)	288

There are significant differences in academic level based on Race/Ethnicity. Compared to Whites, African/Latino students were overrepresented (41.9% vs. 11.3%) in local level courses and underrepresented (12.9% vs. 52.1%) in honors/AP courses. (ChiSq = 27.0, P < 0.001)

Analysis 3(b): Academic Level vs. SES

	L	R	H	Total
Low SES	16 (36%)	23 (52%)	5 (11%)	44
Unknown SES	26 (11%)	85 (35%)	133 (55%)	244
Total	42 (15%)	108 (38%)	138 (48%)	288

There are significant differences in academic level based on socioeconomic status. Compared to others, low SES students were overrepresented (36.4% vs. 10.7%) in local level courses and underrepresented (11.4% vs. 54.5%) in honors/AP courses. (ChiSq = 34.4, P < 0.001)

Analysis 3(c): Academic Level by Race/Ethnicity and SES

Local	Low SES	Unknown
African/Latino	7 of 15 (47%)	6 of 16 (38%)
White	9 of 29 (31%)	20 of 228 (9%)

Honors/AP	Low SES	Unknown
African/Latino	1 of 15 (7%)	3 of 16 (19%)
White	4 of 29 (14%)	130 of 228 (57%)

Students in the White-UnknownSES group were significantly less likely to be in local level courses, and significantly more likely to be in Honors/AP courses. None of the differences among the other three groups is statistically significant.

CONCLUSION: Both Race/Ethnicity and SES are strongly associated with the level of a student's academic program.

QUESTION 4: Is there an association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and class rank?

We examined preliminary estimates of class rank made midway through the junior year for the Class of 2000. We classified the subjects by whether they fell in the top half or bottom half of the class.

Analysis 4(a): Class Rank vs. Race/Ethnicity

	Highest 50%	Lowest 50%	Total
African/Latino	6 (22%)	23 (78%)	29
White	131 (56%)	102 (44%)	233
Total	137 (52%)	125 (48%)	262

Only 21.7% of the African/Latino students ranked in the top half of the class, compared to 56.2% of the White subjects.

This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 13.1, $P < 0.0001$)

Analysis 4(b): Class Rank vs. SES

	Highest 50%	Lowest 50%	Total
Low SES	9 (21%)	33 (79%)	42
Unknown SES	128 (58%)	92 (42%)	220
Total	137 (52%)	125 (48%)	262

Only 21.4% of the Low SES subjects ranked in the top half of the class, compared to 58.2% of the other students.

This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 19.1, $P < 0.0001$)

Analysis 4(c): Class Rank by Race/Ethnicity and SES

Lowest 50%	Low SES	Unknown
African/Latino	12 of 14 (86%)	11 of 15 (73%)
White	21 of 28 (75%)	81 of 205 (40%)

Students in the White-UnknownSES group were significantly less likely to rank in the bottom half of the class. None of the differences among the other three groups is statistically significant.

CONCLUSION:

Both Race/Ethnicity and SES are significant risk factors associated with low class rank.

QUESTION 5: Is there an association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and whether a student receives Special Education services?

Analysis 5(a): Special Ed Classification vs. Race/Ethnicity

	Classified	Not Classified	Total
African/Latino	12 (38%)	20 (62%)	32
White	36 (14%)	223 (86%)	259
Total	48 (16%)	243 (84%)	291

The percentage of students classified to receive Special Education services was 16.5% overall, 13.9% among whites, and 37.5% among African/Latino students.

This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 11.5, P < 0.0001)

Analysis 5(b): Special Ed Classification vs. SES

	Classified	Not Classified	Total
Low SES	16 (36%)	28 (64%)	44
Unknown SES	32 (13%)	215 (87%)	247
Total	48 (16%)	243 (84%)	291

The percentage of students classified to receive Special Education services was 16.5% overall, 36.4% among low SES students, and 13.0% among the others.

This difference is highly significant. (ChiSq = 14.9, P < 0.0001)

Analysis 5(c): Special Ed. Classification by Race/Ethnicity and SES

	Low SES	Unknown
African/Latino	5 of 15 (33%)	7 of 17 (41%)
White	11 of 29 (38%)	25 of 230 (11%)

Students in the White-UnknownSES group were significantly less likely to be classified to receive Special Education services. None of the differences among the other three groups is statistically significant.

CONCLUSION:

Both Race/Ethnicity and SES are strongly associated with classification to receive Special Education services, indicative of District efforts to address academic difficulty.

SUMMARY

In examining the impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status on a student's chances of remaining in school and achieving academic success, we find both to be significant factors.

African/Latino students are more likely than Whites to:

- enroll in local level courses;
- not enroll in honors and advanced placement courses;
- attain lower class ranks;
- receive special education services.

Students of low socioeconomic status are more likely than others to:

- withdraw from District schools between the 8th and 11th grades;
- not express interest in attending college;
- enroll in local level courses;
- not enroll in honors and advanced placement courses;
- attain lower class ranks;
- receive special education services.

CONCLUSION

These insights are as revealing as they are disturbing. Race and ethnicity have been cited as obstacles to student success at Ithaca High School, and are, in fact, often risk factors.

Low socioeconomic status, though less often discussed, is an even more pervasive risk factor for our students. Continued failure to recognize and address this fact will likely prevent significant progress in our efforts to make Ithaca High School an environment where all of our students can achieve success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Many current programs and policies of the Ithaca City School District may have been created without consideration of the impact of socioeconomic status, and thus may not serve our Low SES students well.

The Board of Education should create a task force to study current programs and practices, and draft recommendations designed to equalize opportunities for students of low socioeconomic status.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

The first step in creating increased awareness among all parties must be open discussion of the issues surrounding the experiences of students of low socioeconomic status.

The Board of Education should address the impact of low socioeconomic status on academic success in a public forum, which includes Board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and community representatives.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

The District has recognized that difficulties encountered by minority students should be addressed in the recruitment, hiring, and development of staff, but no such actions have yet been taken with respect to class issues.

The Board of Education should make effective teaching of students of low socioeconomic status a factor in the recruitment and hiring of new staff, and a goal of inservice training for current staff.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

PALS provides an important advocacy group working on behalf of African and Latino students of all socioeconomic levels, but no comparable group exists among parent of low socioeconomic white students.

The Board of Education should encourage and assist in the creation of a community group to investigate the experiences of students of low socioeconomic status and to advocate on their behalf.

RECOMMENDATION #5:

Ithaca High School employs a special assistant to the principal for minority affairs to address special problems those students face at IHS. This study indicates that students of low socioeconomic status face many of the same problems.

The Board of Education should create a position at IHS to provide assistance and support for students of low socioeconomic status.

RECOMMENDATION #6:

One of the most obvious handicaps facing students of low socioeconomic status is lack of access to technology. Many of our students cannot afford a calculator, do not have a computer at home, do not have access to the internet for research, and have no word processing or data analysis capabilities. These students are at a severe and perhaps insurmountable disadvantage as they attempt to achieve success first in our classrooms, and eventually as adults facing an increasingly technology-dependent world.

The Board of Education should make equalization of access a central principle in formulating technology policies for the District.

RECOMMENDATION #7:

The District is currently ill-equipped to distill meaningful information from the hodgepodge of files, databases, and computer systems that exist. This lack of organization prevents the purposeful investigation of important questions which is needed to inform effective policy decisions.

The Board of Education should direct the establishment of a single, well-defined database of information about our students.

RECOMMENDATION #8:

Our preliminary study, while informative, is far from definitive. Small, it examined only one graduating class of our students. Retrospective, it looked back at student experiences and tried to recover data often difficult to find and cross-reference. Using an imperfect indicator of socioeconomic status, it was unable to draw meaningful conclusions about the diverse group of students who elected not to participate in the meals program. Informed decisions to improve educational programs require more and better information.

The Board of Education should undertake additional studies to more fully explore the impact of socioeconomic inequality on academic success.

These studies should:

- **include longer range prospective studies, identifying students early in their school careers, then following and analyzing their experiences over several years;**
- **employ better definitions of socioeconomic status in order to explore its influence more completely;**
- **seek to identify teachers, courses, and instructional activities that enhance chances for success by students of all socioeconomic classes;**
- **examine the association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and student attendance;**
- **examine the association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and student participation in extracurricular activities;**
- **examine the association between Race/Ethnicity or SES and student involvement with the disciplinary system;**
- **seek ways of involving more parents of low SES students in all aspects of the educational process.**

OVERVIEW

Background

The Ithaca City School District is not alone in experiencing profound social class inequities in the performance of students. Low achievement for students from low socio-economic families has been a fundamental pattern in the structure and outcome of American education for over 100 years.

There are numerous books and articles that describe and analyze the system of economic stratification and inequality in America. The stratification triangle used to illustrate the wide gap between the rich and the poor is included in high school and college textbooks. (Barr, 1996) (Brantlinger, Ellen, 1993) (Rose, 1992) (Rothman, 1999) In addition, there is a plethora of research studies that consistently document the significance of class differences in school achievement, standardized test scores and graduation rates. (College Board Report, 1999) (Payne, 1998) (Ehrenreich, 1999) (Ricciuti, 1999) (Wheat, Christopher, 1999) These articles and research studies affirm what is already known; low socio-economic status correlates significantly with low school achievement. The data in our study confirm that this pattern exists in the Ithaca City School District.

What is alarming is that, in spite of the data, educators and the general public remain silent. Very seldom is any concern expressed about social class injustice in education. On the other hand, the silence should not be a surprise. Class inequities have seldom been a dominant social issue in America. This silence has been especially true in the last 60 years. The myth of America as a classless society, where you can be successful as long as you work hard, is deeply entrenched in national ideology. Coupled with various myths associated with freedom and equal opportunity is the insidious internalization of oppression in the lives of poor people, young and old. The contributions of the labor of working class people to the growth and development of America have never been celebrated in the curriculum, in the pictures that adorn the walls of schools, or in popular media. The reality is that being poor has historically carried and still carries demeaning stereotypes such as being lazy, shiftless, dirty, poor white trash, redneck, and the like. These cultural messages, internalized by poor families and their children, create feelings of apathy, embarrassment, bitterness, and hopelessness. In order to launch a movement that will transform socio-economic oppression in the Ithaca City School District, decision makers must accept the reality of the cycle of systemic oppression, make a commitment to learn more about how current educational policies and practices reinforce the oppression, and finally, become active advocates by instituting a long-term intervention plan that will transform class and race oppression in the Ithaca City School District.

Race and Education

All of the stratification data related to socio-economic status shows a large disproportionate number of African American, Latino(a), American Indian, and Asian American people at the bottom of the hierarchy. These numbers coupled with the large number of white families at the bottom add up to a clear picture that being poor cuts across racial lines. However, most of the time, concerns related to race and class are perceived as separate issues; racism is one problem, classism is another problem. A popular sociological construct describes the difference between race and class with the terms temporary and permanent inequality. Race is permanent because one's skin color is permanent but low socio-economic status for white people is potentially temporary because of skin color. However, this construct is oversimplified and misrepresents the systemic, entrenched nature of class stratification across all races. It is true that dark skin color labels a person permanently and historically the darker the skin the more negative and permanent the oppression. The system of stratification provides a scapegoat at the bottom so others a little higher in the hierarchy can feel better because they have someone lower than they are. African Americans have historically been placed at the bottom. This bottom of the bottom status is very functional for the maintenance of the status quo. As long as poor white people and others with darker skin perceive themselves as better off than the "nigger," they feel grateful. This slightly higher status creates a hierarchy at the bottom of the larger hierarchy because it separates and disconnects the poor from joining together to organize and challenge the injustice they experience as adults and children. In other words, the hierarchical order that divides people of color and whites at the bottom helps to perpetuate the very system of inequality that oppresses both groups. What all this means is that poor African Americans and other racial groups experience double oppression.

The reality is that those at the bottom of the hierarchy of economic stratification have a great deal in common. They have experienced systemic oppression for hundreds of years. They share a common socio-economic class experience defined by limited life chances. Keeping the poor poor, and keeping the dark and white skinned fighting each other for scarce resources is part of the plan to keep them in their place and in conflict with each other. If an interracial group of low income poor families were to organize and challenge the injustice their children experience in school, they could be a powerful force for change.

Ithaca City School District and the community

Ithaca is a unique, vibrant, active community. It is a one-factory town and the factory is education. Residents of Ithaca care a great deal about the quality of education for their

children. Like most American communities, there is wide socio-economic stratification in Ithaca. The Brahmins of most American communities, including Ithaca, have access to education resources the poor don't have. They have both formal and informal influence in the decision making process in district wide and local school decisions. They also are more comfortable contacting their children's teachers. Poor families are underrepresented on school boards, the PTAs, and site based teams. Their children are underrepresented on student councils, student representatives to the school board, honor roles, and the like.

The strong commitment to education in Ithaca can be a strength in confronting socio-economic and race inequities in the Ithaca City School District. It will take a concerted and unified effort across race and class lines with a genuine collaborative plan of action. However, district leadership must be prepared to accept the reality of the problem and openly own and acknowledge flawed policies and practices. In addition, administrators, teachers, and staff must be accountable for policies and practices that perpetuate the low achievement of students from low income families.

Conclusion

Our primary objective in doing this study was to provide data that would challenge the thinking and planning of the school district and the community on issues related to the academic performance of low socio-economic, poor, dark skinned, and white students. We hope our recommendations will be taken seriously because it is time the Ithaca City School District brought the social class issue out of the closet and on to the table.

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