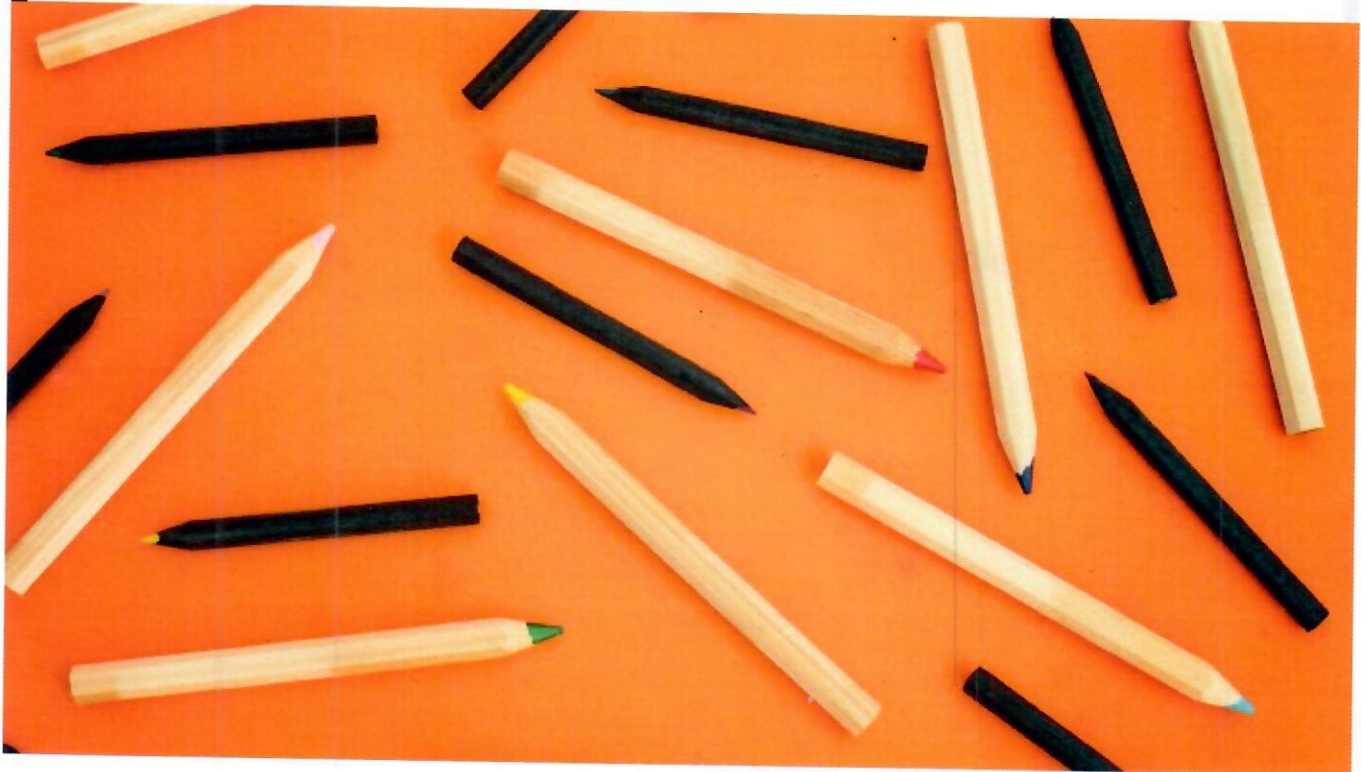


EDUCATION

The Other Segregation

The public focuses its attention on divides *between* schools, while tracking has created separate and unequal education systems *within* single schools.

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CAROL YEPES / GETTY

The segregation of America's public schools is a perpetual newsmaker. The fact that not even 1 percent of the incoming freshman class identifies as black at New York City's elite Stuyvesant High School made national headlines last month. And New York isn't unusual. The minority gap in enrollment at elite academic public schools is a problem across America.

But more troubling, and often less discussed, is the modern-day form of segregation that occurs *within* the same school through academic tracking, which selects certain students for gifted and talented education (GATE) programs. These programs are tasked with challenging presumably smart students with acceleration and extra enrichment activities. Other students are kept in grade-level classes, or tracked into remedial courses that are tasked with catching students up to academic baselines.

Black students make up nearly 17 percent of the total student population nationwide. Yet less than 10 percent of students in GATE are black. A shocking 53 percent of remedial students are black. This disparity across tracks is what social scientists commonly call “racialized tracking”—in which students of color get sorted out of educational opportunities and long-term socioeconomic success.

[Read: New York City high schools’ endless segregation problem]

The level of disparity varies across the nation. A Department of Education Office for Civil Rights report from 2014 called attention to a Sacramento, California, district where black students accounted for 16.3 percent of the district’s enrollment but only 5.5 percent of students in GATE programs. At the other end of the state, in San Diego, 8 percent of students are black, but just 3 percent of GATE students are.

In the South Orange–Maplewood School District in New Jersey, the American Civil Liberties Union stated in a 2014 complaint that racial segregation across academic tracks “has created a school within a school at Columbia High School,” where more than 70 percent of the students in lower-level classes were black and more than 70 percent of the students in advanced classes were white. Though the Office for Civil Rights ordered the district to hire a consultant to fix this, segregation remains an ongoing challenge.

The idea that tracking can create a “school within a school” became a physical reality in one Austin, Texas, school. In 2007, the district moved to split part of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Early College High School into a separate Liberal Arts and Science Academy (LASA), a public magnet high school now ranked the best Texas high school and the 11th-best high school in the United States. The magnet students, who are mostly white and Asian, take classes on the second floor, and the LBJ students, who are majority black and Latino, take classes on the floor below. Yasmiyn Irizarry, a professor of African studies at the University of Texas at Austin whose child attends LASA, wrote that this design was “reminiscent of apartheid.”

The implication is clear: Black students are regularly excluded from schools’ conceptions of what it means to be gifted, talented, or advanced. There are real, systemic factors that fuel the disparity in access to gifted and specialized education. A history of racist policies, such as housing segregation and unequal funding, means that schools with a high proportion of black students often have resource constraints for specialized programs. Teachers’ biases against black

students limit their chances for selective advanced opportunities. Admissions into gifted programs and specialized schools are based on a singular standardized test that often ignores qualifications aligned with a student's training and does not capture black students' potential. Minority students, particularly black students, are also often over-policed, which can affect their educational opportunities.

But part of the problem also comes from the fact that all parents want the best for their children, and some parents actually have the power to make it so. In an extreme, high-profile example, recently dozens of wealthy parents were caught bribing their children's way into elite colleges and universities. But even moderately privileged parents have knowledge that benefits their children—they can teach their kids how to negotiate educational opportunities for themselves—asking for an extension on an assignment or talking their way out of punishment for misbehaving, for example.

More important, privileged parents contribute to these racial disparities in advanced education, intentionally or not, when they hoard educational opportunities for their already privileged children.

[Read: The scandal that reveals the fiction of America's educational meritocracy.]

Privileged parents have the power, autonomy, time, and resources to, for instance, attend school-district meetings to make sure their neighborhood schools aren't closed or rezoned. They also know how to appeal to principals, making a case for why their child must be placed in their preferred teacher's classroom. They have the money to hire tutors so their children can stay on top of their classwork and score well on standardized tests. Some even do school-related work on their children's behalf. These parents do these things for the good of their children, even though they are not good for other people's children.

Yet privileged parents often feel guilty when they are unable to reconcile being a good parent with being a good socially conscious citizen. The sociologist Margaret Hagerman calls this the "conundrum of privilege." Despite knowing that doing the best for their children often means leaving other children, often low-income students or students of color, with fewer opportunities, the knowledge doesn't change their behavior. As Tressie McMillan Cottom writes in her powerful new book, *Thick*, "They are good people. They want all children in their child's school to thrive, but they want their child to thrive just a bit more than most." When it comes

to GATE programs and advanced classes where space is limited, privileged parents hoard the opportunity for their own children, especially in racially integrated schools.

Putting the numbers in context with the sociological explanations reveals that black children aren't included in schools' conception of gifted and advanced precisely because they are not conceived of as "our" children who deserve the best resources and attention.

As a black parent who now carries socioeconomic privilege, given my husband's and my own educational status, I, like other black middle-class mothers, find myself in a unique position: a conundrum of constrained privilege. I want to advocate for my black sons, because I only want the best for them. I also know that advocating for my sons to get into GATE or elite academies could move the needle just a bit to increase black representation. But doing this would mean accepting that my already privileged children would receive additional benefits that other black children might need even more.

Instead of having my son take the GATE entrance exam, I decided to use my social capital to advocate for more holistic changes in our district. I spend about six hours a month either volunteering in a second-grade classroom, or discussing school-assessment measures and budgets with teachers and school administration as a member of the School Site Council, or convening with district personnel about citywide initiatives in my position on the District Accountability Committee. My job status allows me the privilege and flexibility to spend my time doing this extra work. But my racial status means this is a necessity. In every single one of these spaces, I am the only black adult. If I am not there advocating for my son and other black students, the data suggest, no one else will.

The education gap cannot be achieved without closing the racial empathy gap. While my individual actions and choices are important, their impact is limited. Until we can develop better admissions tests, or pass legislation banning these tests altogether, or invest more resources in public schools to incorporate GATE-like curricula in all classes, those of us who are willing and able to do "whatever we can" for our children need to expand our idea of who "our" children really are.