
*Research to Make a Difference*

# UC/ACCORD

**Closing the Racial Achievement in Diverse California High Schools**

**Jean Yonemura Wing**

*A multi-campus research center harnessing UC's research expertise to increase the quality and equity of California's diverse public schools, colleges and universities.*

# Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Diverse California High Schools[i]

Jean Yonemura Wing, UC Berkeley

## *Defining the Problem Areas*

The racial gap in high school achievement limits college, career, and life choices of many African American and Latino students. They foster racial divisions in and out of schools; weaken the economy; and exacerbate the state's poverty- and crime-related problems. Closing the gap requires identifying the features of schools that contribute to it and then changing them. Four years of research at diverse Berkeley High school—tracking the experiences and achievements of the class of 2000—identified several alterable features that contribute to the achievement gap:

- Curriculum choices permit (and often encourage) some students to leave high school unprepared for college or without the skills and credentials to secure living-wage jobs;
- "Mass-production" organization and rules that process and sort students in large "batches" and deprive students of supportive and learning relationships with adults;
- A school climate that treats racial disparities as normal, even natural;
- An absence of publicly available advocates and networks within and outside of school, similar to the supports that advantaged students often find or buy in the private sector.

## *Recommendations*

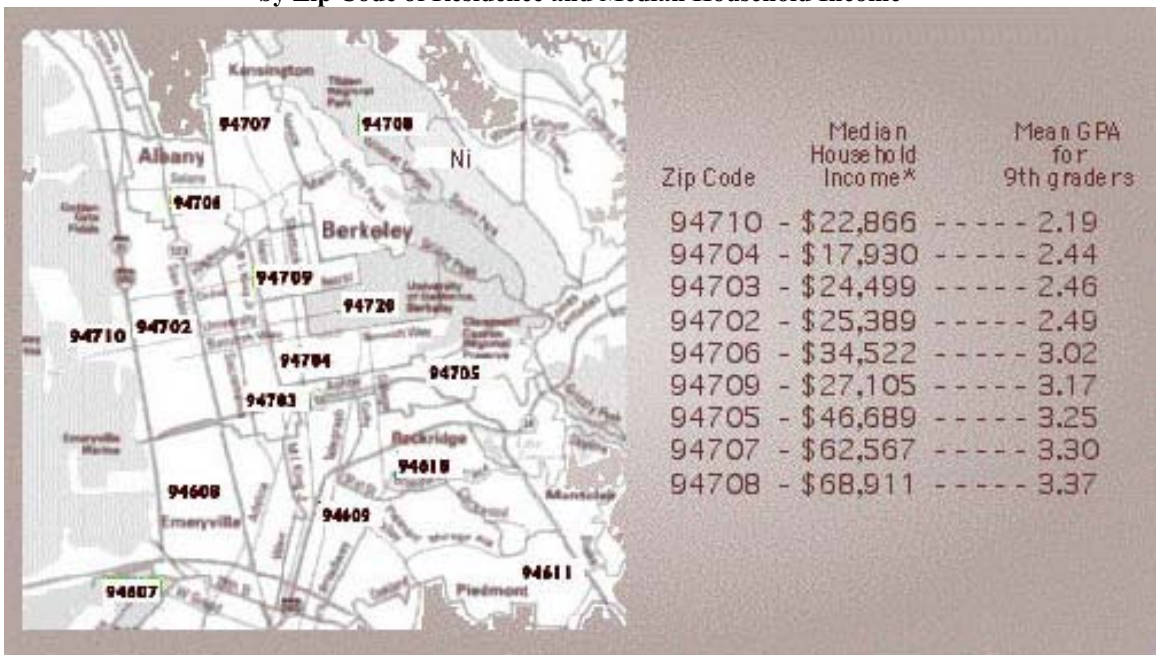
These findings suggest that policymakers and other education decision-makers could help close the racial achievement gap by:

- Aligning high school graduation requirements with UC and CSU admissions requirements, so that every California high school graduate is prepared for college and for well-paying work.
- Assigning highly qualified teachers to teach students most in need.
- Providing individual attention so students who are behind schedule can catch up with graduation and college entrance requirements.
- Providing leadership and policy incentives to promote relationships and support the school's responsibility for student success 24/7, that is, beyond the classroom and school hours. This can be accomplished by networks of caring adult support.
- Supporting programs that divide large high schools into smaller "schools" dedicated to having all students succeed and that make supportive adult networks available to students.
- Insisting that a racial school achievement gap is a reliable indicator of alterable flaws and inequities in the schooling process. In this sense, the quality of a school cannot be assessed by its accomplishments on average, but by the extent to which it achieves educational outcomes for its most vulnerable groups comparable to those groups that are typically the highest achieving.

*Integration in Buildings; Segregation across Classrooms*

The *New York Times* called Berkeley High "the most integrated high school in America." No racial group is the majority, and the school enrolls both the affluent and the homeless. However, students' educational experiences and outcomes are so different and unequal that Berkeley High has also been called "two schools under one roof."[ii] The following map shows that students from the affluent Berkeley hills zip codes had significantly higher ninth grade GPAs (grade point averages) than did students from Berkeley's working class and poor "flatlands" zip codes.

**Ninth Grade Class of 2000 Student Grade Point Average (GPA by Zip Code of Residence and Median Household Income**




In fact, many blame the achievement gaps at "excellent" schools like Berkeley High on income disparities, yet middle-class students of color also perform significantly below their white peers (The College Board*, Reaching the Top*, 1999).[iii] A reputation as an "excellent" college preparatory, public high school (based on its high average achievement scores and college-going rates) hides an alarming failure rate among black and brown students. As long as schools and policy praise and act upon the achievement of school integration while being silent and not acting upon the shame of classroom segregation, schools such as Berkeley High will find little reason to alter their structures.

*High School Policies Ration Opportunity and Achievement*

As long as schools and policymakers keep their attention on the putative equity of an "integrated school" and not on the multiple inequities that lead to unequal outcomes associated with segregated classrooms, schools have little motivation to take the dramatic steps needed**.** The current lineup of policies allows counselors to have excessive caseloads and little opportunity to know or give attention to students who have few other options for learning about college prep course-taking, and who may know few adults who identify them as college-bound.[iv] Another policy that restricts college eligibility is academic tracking. At Berkeley High, students' ninth grade math level placement directly affects what courses they are allowed

to take for the remainder of their high school years. Being placed below grade level in ninth grade math often makes it impossible for students to meet CSU or UC eligibility requirements in math or science. Still other policies include assigning the most highly qualified teachers to teach the most advanced classes in well-equipped classrooms.

Each of the policies above (there are many more) interacts with one another. That's why schools' typical reform approaches have met with such little success. For example, Kevin, a Vietnamese student whose single mother works in a nail salon, worked hard and consistently earned good grades. However, his counselor never suggested that he take AP classes, for which he was qualified. As a result, not only did his college chances suffer, but his "regular track" classes gave him less access to the most rigorous curriculum and most qualified teachers.

### *Existing Beliefs About Race and Achievement Help Maintain the Inequalities*

Beliefs and expectations that it's normal for students of color to achieve less well than whites are embodied in the school's curriculum that allows some students to take classes that don't prepare them for college or for high-skilled work. These beliefs about the links between race and school achievement are so embedded that an all-black remedial Math A class or an almost all-white Advanced Placement Chemistry class are seen as normal—just "the way things are."

### *It Takes a "Village" to Overcome the Structural and Cultural Obstacles to Achievement*

No high school student succeeds alone. All of the successful students at Berkeley High enjoyed a network of adult support for their high achievement and their college going aspirations. Most affluent students have such supports outside of school, including the supports their families buy in the private sector, such as tutors, college advisors, and SAT-prep classes. Many students of color (who have fewer resources to purchase support outside of school) require ongoing and stable relationships with school personnel who believe that giving students "extra" support and encouragement is reasonable and normal, and does not reflect deficits in a student's background or potential. Policies that enable and encourage these relationships can do much to address the achievement gap.

The most academically successful students of color or students from poor families were those who found or created a network of adults at school who cared about their college and career aspirations. James—a member of the Class of 2000 whose high school experiences and achievements were closely monitored over the four years of this study—is a case in point.

> James is an African American student who lived with his grandmother after his mother could no longer care for him, and later supported himself through his last two years of high school. After sinking to a D average in the ninth grade, he resolved do better in school. He enrolled in a school-within-a-school program, where many teachers knew him well and supported his efforts to go to college. James raised his grades to a 3.2, graduated, and enrolled at Howard University. He says that he never could have succeeded without this network of adult support.

*Small Schools within Large High Schools can Better Provide Resources, Support, and Equity*

James was in one of Berkeley High's "small school" program, where he and his peers fared considerably better than students of color in the regular school. This small school enrolled cohorts of about 60 students per grade level, and kept class sizes under 24. Although class size or school size alone did not make the difference, the smaller scale made it possible for teachers to attend to individual students. Dedicated teachers monitored students' progress toward graduation and college admissions, and they engaged parents or guardians in a network of adult support for a small group of students within the large high school. Guidance and follow-up were integral to the program.

For such small schools to address the achievement gap, they must be clearly dedicated to equity in student outcomes. Such local, equity-focused, small school efforts deserve political and financial support. They provide the village for children who must rely entirely on their schools for the resources needed to be successful in high school and prepared for college.

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[i] This research was part of a larger school-university partnership called the Berkeley High School Diversity Project (August 1996-June 2002).

[ii] See Berkeley High School Diversity Project Report, June 1999.

[iii] The pattern of inequality at Berkeley High parallels those in other relatively well funded, integrated high schools in cities such as Santa Monica or Santa Barbara, California, or Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[iv] Berkeley's academic counselors' caseload of 550-600 students forces them to spend their time on scheduling students into classes, rather than providing academic counseling.

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

ALL CAMPUS CONSORTIUM ON

RESEARCH FOR DIVERSITY


Jeannie Oakes, Director

Daniel Solorzano, Associate Director

1041 Moore Hall
Box 951521
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521

310-206-8725 Office
310-206-8770 Fax
ucaccord@ucla.edu

www.ucaccord.org