Historical Overview

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education to end racial segregation in public schools. Despite this promise of equal educational opportunity, the conditions of California’s schools have deteriorated since the 1980s with the most serious problems in low-income communities of color. In 1978, California voters passed Proposition 13 which capped property tax and eliminated it as the main and stable source of education funding. This made it harder for school districts to get the funding they needed to maintain their schools. People who live in wealthier districts have been able to use political power to find alternative funding sources for schools, while the lower income districts have been “left behind.” California spends about $7,000 per student which is much less money per student than spent by other states. It now ranks 46th in spending and about $1,900 below the national average per student. While California once had high student achievement scores, California’s 8th graders now rank 47th in reading and 45th in math. No Child Left Behind legislation attempted to achieve educational equity by holding schools and students accountable for their performance on standardized tests without addressing the inequitable conditions between schools. Academic performance continues to vary markedly by race/ethnicity and income.

In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10 which led to the creation of First 5 California Children and Families Commission. First 5 funds local counties to promote early childhood development from prenatal to age 5 in areas such as school readiness, quality childcare and health care coverage. It provides resources important to school success that are less available to low-income and people of color. It is unclear whether these efforts are sufficient to reduce achievement gaps.

“American racism persists even without racists. The lingering affects of Jim Crow still haunt our institutions, isolating minorities in ghetto neighborhoods and in decrepit schools that don’t send kids to college.”

—Anthony P. Carnevale

Education
What Research Tells Us

Education: Critical to Wealth and Health

A strong relationship exists between income and health (see Income and Employment section) and educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of income. Although a high school education is not a guarantee of financial stability, people who graduate from high school earn much higher salaries and are twice as likely to be employed than people who have not graduated from high school. Families headed by those with a high school diploma or less are steadily falling into the bottom 20% of family incomes.

Education has been considered the great equalizer in American society. Education opens up employment opportunities to higher quality work, which in turn can increase “wealth, health and happiness.” Even independent from income, education is associated with improved health outcomes. Studies have shown that each additional year in school is associated with increased life expectancy and better health. Just how education is linked to better health is not clear. Research suggests that people who complete higher levels of education have better cognitive and psychological resources, such as problem solving, practice with teamwork, dependability, structure and routine. Other research suggests that the working conditions of low-skilled, low-wage jobs are significantly more dangerous, stressful, offer the worker less control, and are more unhealthy than jobs for more highly educated workers.

Health also affects education. Health conditions are a common contributor to the decision to leave school; pregnancy, parental or sibling illness, chronic conditions (such as asthma), learning disability and physical disability are all examples of health-related reasons for dropout.

Children Get Uneven Starts in Life

The ability to succeed in school and later in life is heavily influenced by factors that are determined even before a child starts school. The window between the prenatal period and the first few years of life is critical to a child’s brain development and health. Stable and supportive family environments and safe and stimulating physical environments are essential. Young children are particularly susceptible to the effects of stress and poverty—conditions that are often experienced by people of color and families headed by single parents.

Given that one of the strongest predictors of tenth grade reading ability is the knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten, it is clear that schools alone cannot completely make up the gap that is already apparent by the time children reach school age. Investment in early childhood development has been shown as an effective long-term strategy to increase school achievement, improve health, reduce crime and reduce reliance on public assistance.

Unequal Opportunities for School Success

The historical forces that led to racial segregation and poverty for high proportions of people of color have left today’s students of color with fewer opportunities to attend good schools. Nationally, almost half of African American and nearly 40% of Latino students attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm. In California, the statewide Healthy Kids Survey concluded that schools with the highest percentage of African American and Latino students “face a double jeopardy of educational disadvantages both in terms of poverty and the more negative school environments that are less conducive to learning.” Another study concluded that these schools are “so seriously inadequate that they do not provide an equal opportunity for a quality education.” It found that these schools were much more likely to have: a lack of qualified teachers, high teacher turnover rates, poor
working conditions for teachers, serious shortages of educational materials, rundown physical facilities and a lack of programs involving parents.21 These unequal school conditions are mirrored by unequal student performances.

A Look at Alameda County

Educational Attainment and Life Expectancy

The higher the high school graduation rate of a neighborhood the longer its residents are likely to live (Figure 23). Alameda County residents who live in neighborhoods with less than a 70% high school graduation rate live on average 7 years fewer than residents in neighborhoods with at least a 90% high school graduation rate. According to Census 2000, 82.4% of Alameda County adults (25 years and older) had graduated from high school.

Unequal Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnicity

In the 2005-2006 school year, 12.8% of Alameda County high school students had dropped out of school by 12th grade (Figure 24).2 African Americans and Latinos had the highest dropout rates: 1 in 4 African Americans and 1 in 6 Latinos had dropped out. Whites and Asians had much lower dropout rates; only 1 in 15 White or Asian students dropped out of high school.

Reading and Math Proficiency by Race/Ethnicity

Using English Language Arts (ELA) and Math testing, California schools classify students into 1 of 5 levels of performance expected for their grade level: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic. ELA is tested annually from 2nd to 11th grade and Math is tested from 2nd to 7th grade. The achievement goal set by the State Board of Education is for all students to meet either the proficient or advanced level.

Recent test scores show a large and persistent racial/ethnic gap in both reading and math proficiency. Asians and Whites far outperformed African Americans and Latinos. Achievement declined steadily for all racial/ethnic groups starting in the 4th grade until the end of testing in the 11th grade (Figure 25 on page 58). In the 4th grade, about 8 out of 10 White or Asian students scored proficient or advanced in ELA for their

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a. This is the 4-year dropout rate. The dropout rate is considered to be an underestimate because it is not always known whether a student has transferred or dropped out. Many schools assume for reporting purposes that missing students have transferred.
grade, while fewer than 4 in 10 African American or Latino students achieved this standard. By 11th grade, only 6 in 10 White or Asian students and only 2 in 10 African American or Latino students could read at the targeted level.

Math achievement followed the same pattern as reading (Figure 26). White and Asian students far outperformed African American and Latino students, and the percentage scoring proficient or better decreased by grade level.

White and Asian 3rd graders had the same reading scores as African American and Latino 7th graders. The same was true of math scores. This means that African Americans and Latinos are performing at 4 grade levels lower than Whites and Asians (Figure 27). Unequal educational environments are likely to contribute to these gaps in achievement.

**Academic Performance Index by School Poverty Level**

The Academic Performance Index (API), the cornerstone of the state’s accountability system, is a weighted
index based on schools’ student subject-specific scores on California standards-based tests and other indicators. Figure 28 shows a pattern of lower school API scores as school student enrollment in the Free or Reduced Price Meal Program (FRPMP) goes up. Schools with higher rates of students enrolled in the FRPMP, an indicator of school poverty, had lower academic performance. In many cases, these are the same schools that predominantly serve African American and Latino students.

Unequal School Conditions

While data are not available at the school level, we see striking inequalities in teaching and learning conditions at the level of school district. Table 5 compares the 2006-2007 profile of students, teachers and academic performance of a relatively poor school district (Oakland) with an affluent one (Piedmont). Compared to student enrollment in Piedmont, Oakland had 15 times more Latino and African American students, 9 times more English Learners, and more than 200 times more students enrolled in the Free or Reduced Price Meal Program. With regards to teacher experience and pay, Oakland teachers were 8 times more likely to be without full credentials, were 6 times more likely to be in their first or second year of teaching and were paid, on average, $13,500 less than Piedmont teachers. The high school dropout rate was 1 in 5 in Oakland whereas there were no dropouts in Piedmont. Based on a scale from 200 to 1000, the API of Oakland was 651 while Piedmont averaged more than 250 points higher, with an API of 916. Finally, 7th grade students

Table 5: Comparison of Two School Districts: Oakland and Piedmont

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oakland</th>
<th>Piedmont</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number enrolled</td>
<td>47,012</td>
<td>2,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Latino</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent African American</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent English Learners</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent FRPMP</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent without full credentials</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent in their 1st or 2nd year of teaching</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest salary</td>
<td>$38,778</td>
<td>$42,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest salary</td>
<td>$69,714</td>
<td>$81,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average salary</td>
<td>$53,869</td>
<td>$67,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-yr dropout rate</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance Index</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent 7th grade ELA proficient or better</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent 7th grade Math proficient or better</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source and Notes: California Department of Education, 2006-07. Dropout rate is for 2005-06. API scale ranges from 200 to 1000.
were 3 to 4 times more likely to be proficient in reading and in math if they attended a school in Piedmont instead of Oakland.

Based on seniority, teachers with more experience often transfer to more affluent schools and school districts where there are usually better conditions and fewer challenges. For example, teachers in Oakland are more likely than teachers in Piedmont to work in schools where a high proportion of students face serious barriers to learning such as poverty, community violence or trauma and health issues like asthma, obesity and teen pregnancy. The steady pull of experienced teachers away from high-need schools means that African American, Latino and low-income students are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers. These inequities in teacher experience are even more pronounced when comparing individual schools.

Self Reported Measures of Youth Well-Being and Academic Performance

The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) provides a rich resource for examining associations between self-reported experiences of well being and protective factors and self-reported academic achievement. The CHKS defines protective factors, also known as assets, in three major categories:

- **Caring relationships**: supportive connections to others, having a person who is “there” and who listens non-judgmentally.
- **High expectations**: the consistent communication of messages that the student can and will succeed, a belief in a youth’s innate resilience, and the provision of guidance that is youth-centered and strengths-focused.
- **Meaningful participation**: the involvement of the student in relevant, engaging and interesting ac-

![Figure 29: Student-Reported Well-Being and Protective Factors by Grades Received, Alameda County](chart)

tivities; having the opportunities for responsibility and contribution.

Figure 29 on page 60 represents the survey responses from Alameda County 7th, 9th, and 11th graders. Students who reported that they did better academically in school were less likely to have been in a physical fight at school; moved in the last year; been depressed or skipped breakfast. In other words, their well-being was higher and may have influenced their school performance. Similarly, the perceived levels of access to caring relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation were associated with academic success. These findings demonstrate how strengthening protective factors in the home, community, and school environments of youth can support greater and more equal academic achievement.

Data to Action: Policy Implications

Alameda County’s low-income students and African American and Latino students are more likely to attend schools with the fewest resources, and to have the lowest achievement scores and highest dropout rates. In order to address these gaps in resources and achievement, we need bold policies that are focused at the level of community and school institutions. Serious investments in early childhood development, youth development, and reforms in school funding will support learning from the early years of childhood all the way through high school graduation and beyond. The following strategies are recommended.

Invest in early childhood development

- Provide high quality and affordable child care and preschool for all children. An example of this effort was Proposition 82, defeated in 2006, that would have paid for universal preschool in California.

- Ensure equitable geographical location of preschools and provide subsidized tuition, especially in impoverished and predominantly African American and Latino communities.

Reform K-12 school funding

- Tie school funding to student needs, especially among the most vulnerable. Give priority to closing the opportunity gap between low and high-income students, and between African American/Latino and White/Asian students.

- Invest in recruiting, retaining and supporting teachers for preschool and K-12. Fund competitive salaries and high-quality teacher education, mentoring, and ongoing professional development including cultural competency for all teachers.

- Fund low performing schools to offer support services to students and their families, especially at the elementary level when parents tend to be more actively involved.

Ensure equitable access to high quality instruction, school curricula and programs

- Create incentives for teachers to work in disadvantaged schools.

- Provide sufficient and equitable funding and ensure accountability, adequate facilities, instructional materials, and highly qualified teachers and administrators.

- Improve student college readiness and reduce dropout rates beginning in 5th grade with college mentoring, academic tutoring, and after-school enrichment programs that include families, especially in low performing schools.

- Create partnerships with higher education, community, business, philanthropy, and government in order to develop academic enrichment programs for both students and their families.
Provide positive interventions for vulnerable schools, students and their families

- Through strengthened youth development programs, create personal connections with caring adults to ensure that students successfully transition through school and graduate.24

- Provide rigorous and relevant programs to keep students engaged in meaningful and challenging work.24

- Support children and their families in attaining successful life and educational outcomes by coordinating an array of mental and physical health services in the schools.25
References


**Data Sources**

