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The End of School Desegregation and the Achievement Gap

by DAVID J. ARMOR*

The findings of *Brown v. Board of Education*¹ greatly boosted the widespread view that school desegregation would enhance African American achievement and close the black-white achievement gap. Among other things, *Brown* held that official segregation created feelings of inferiority among black students that “may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.”² The Court said this finding was “amply supported by modern authority,”³ which consisted of a number of major social science studies cited in the famous Footnote 11, including a statement signed by thirty-two social scientists. A logical corollary to the harm finding is that desegregation should end the harmful effects of segregation and bring about educational and social benefits for black children. I have called these two postulates the original “harm and benefit” thesis.⁴

Few legal scholars give weight to the harm and benefit thesis in the overall structure of the *Brown* decision, refusing to believe that the Justices relied on social science evidence as the primary basis of their conclusions.⁵ Rather, most legal scholars believe the fundamental legal principal in *Brown* was the Court’s other statement that “[s]eparate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”⁶ As such, laws or policies that separate students on the basis of race would

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1. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

2. *Id.* at 494.

3. *Id.*

4. See DAVID J. ARMOR, FORCED JUSTICE: SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND THE LAW 8 (1995).

5. See FRANK I. GOODMAN, DE FACTO SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: A CONSTITUTIONAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS, 60 CAL. L. REV. 275, 437 (1972).

6. 347 U.S. at 495.

be unconstitutional, regardless of whether segregation was harmful or whether desegregated schools produced better outcomes for black children.

The harm and benefit thesis, however, was strongly embraced by civil rights advocates as the cornerstone of *Brown*. It soon became clear why: if the constitutional objection is harm rather than unequal treatment, it was fairly easy to extend *Brown* to cover all types of segregation, such as the de facto school segregation brought about by a combination of geographic school assignment ("neighborhood schools") and private housing choices of parents. The constitutional wrong then became school segregation regardless of its causes, especially ones caused by housing segregation. Desegregation (i.e., the racial balancing of schools) could thus be elevated to a fundamental, permanent right rather than a temporary remedy to counteract the effects of Jim Crow laws.⁷

The Supreme Court never accepted this logic, and in later decisions continued to emphasize that the constitutional offense was state-sanctioned segregation, not racial imbalance.⁸ Indeed, the *Swann* decision explicitly *disapproved* the notion that "any particular degree of racial balance [was a] substantive constitutional right."⁹ The insistence on state action as a requirement for illegal segregation was repeated in many later Supreme Court decisions.¹⁰

The well-established de jure standard did not deter civil rights leaders and many social scientists from promoting school desegregation as a matter of permanent educational policy whether the policy was enacted by school boards, legislatures, or the courts. The fundamental rationale for the supporters of school desegregation continued to be the harm and benefit thesis, although the specifics of the thesis changed over time.

The best statement of the modern harm and benefit thesis is found in an amicus brief signed by fifty-two social scientists in *Freeman*.¹¹ For example, the harms of segregation and the benefits of desegregation have been extended to most students of color and to white students as well. Hispanics were included because they are

7. U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS, RACIAL ISOLATION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1967).

8. *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Bd. of Educ.*, 402 U.S. 1, 24 (1971).

9. *Id.*

10. See, e.g., *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974); *Spangler v. Pasadena Bd. of Educ.*, 427 U.S. 424 (1976); *Freeman v. Pitts*, 503 U.S. 467 (1992).

11. Brief for respondents, *Freeman*, 504 U.S. 467.

disadvantaged and have also experienced discrimination; whites were added because segregation deprives them of the benefits of racial diversity, especially improving their attitudes and reducing racial prejudice. Desegregation itself has become a much broader concept than in *Brown*, requiring changes in attitudes, political support by all groups, and even classroom racial balance if its benefits are to be realized. This broader thesis also underlies the more recent "diversity" movement, which argues that social benefits accrue from maximizing racial and ethnic representation in all types of settings.

In my opinion, belief in the harm and benefit thesis is the main reason why civil rights leaders and some social scientists have been critical of the trend in unitary status decisions, whereby many school districts have been released from court supervision and allowed to return to non-racial student assignment to schools.¹² The fear is that a return to geographic school attendance zones ("neighborhood schools"), combined with housing patterns, will inevitably lead to de facto school "resegregation," and this resegregation in turn will mean a loss of educational benefits, particularly for minority students.

To what extent is this concern justified by current evidence? Has desegregation improved minority achievement, and is there reason to believe that a return to de facto segregated schools will actually reduce minority achievement? In short, will an end to desegregation prevent a closure of the current achievement gaps between white and minority groups? This paper will attempt to answer these questions using a variety of evidence, from national studies and case studies that I have conducted in desegregated school districts over the past decades.

I. DESEGREGATION AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

There is a well-known substantial and persistent academic achievement gap between U.S. African American and white students.¹³ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has been administering achievement tests to American youth for over thirty years, has best documented this gap.¹⁴

A sampling of this data is shown in Charts One and Two, which

12. See GARY ORFIELD & SUSAN E. EATON, *DISMANTLING DESEGREGATION* 19-22 (1996).

13. See generally THE BLACK-WHITE TEST SCORE GAP (Christopher Jencks & Meridith Phillips eds., 1998).

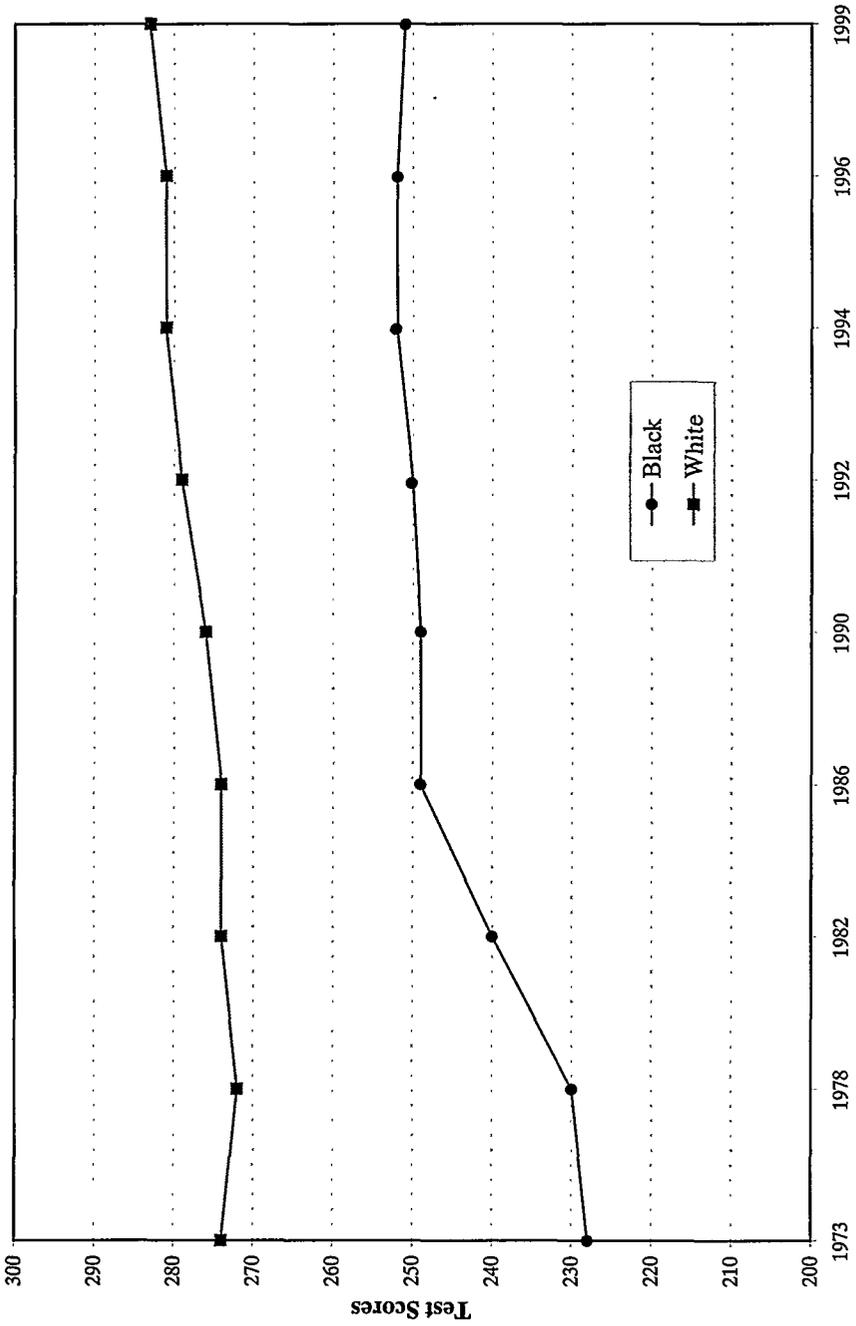
14. J. R. CAMPBELL, ET AL., NATIONAL CTR. FOR EDUC. STAT., *NAEP 1996 TRENDS IN ACADEMIC PROGRESS* (1997).

summarize the NAEP trends in math and reading scores for 8th graders over a period of nearly three decades. The math trends show a very large black-white gap in 1973, which was reduced appreciably by 1986. Since that time, white math scores have risen gradually while black scores have remained constant, so that the math gap has continued to widen for the past fifteen years or so. Likewise, the reading gap started out very large in 1971 and closed significantly by 1988. After 1988, white reading scores rose while black scores declined, so that by the end of the decade a large gap exists between black and white students in reading skills. Therefore, while these gaps in basic skills have diminished somewhat over this thirty-year period, black students still trail white students by nearly a full school year. Put in another way, the average black 8th grader is scoring at about the same level as the average white 7th grader.

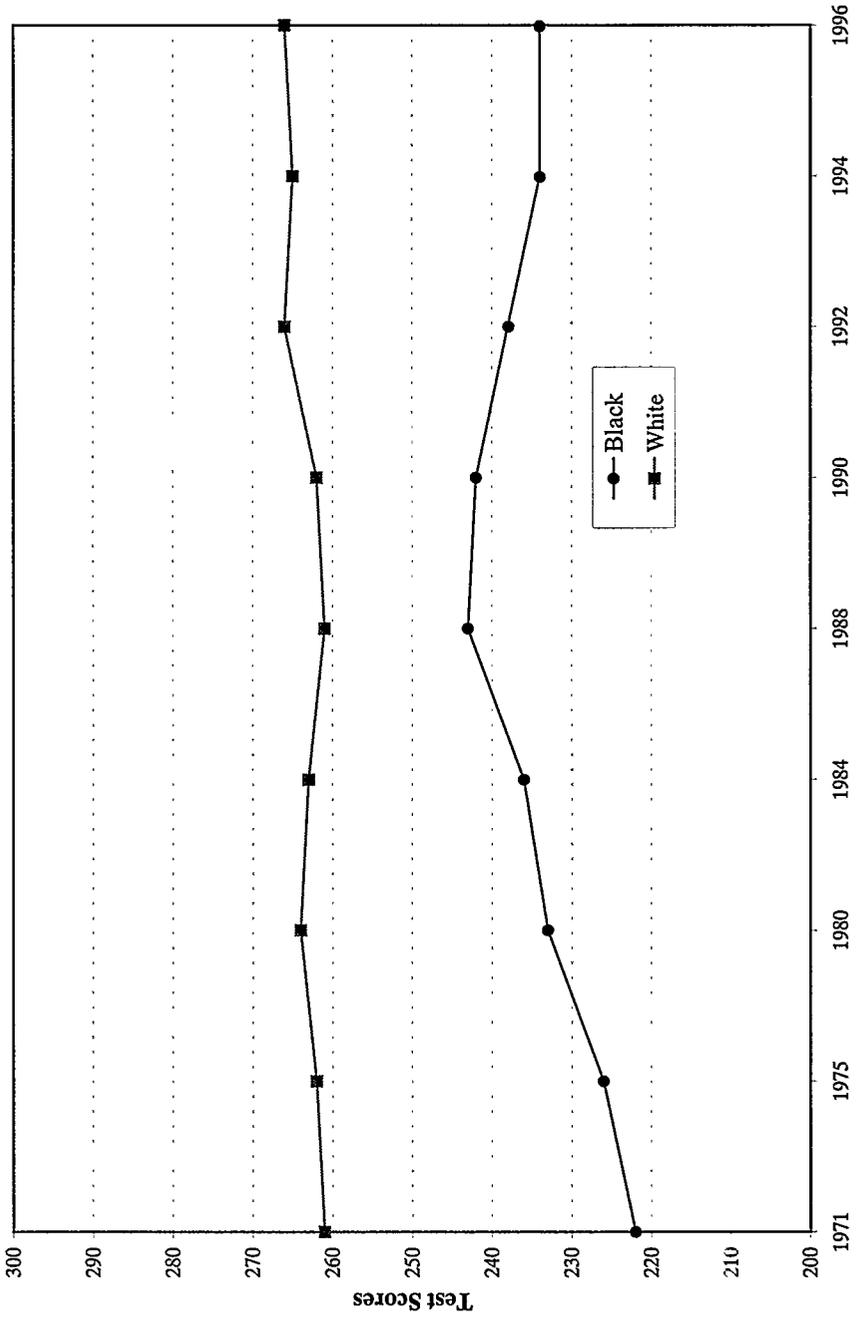
What has caused this pattern of black achievement scores, first rising and then leveling off again or even declining? What role has desegregation played in this, if any? There are a number of potential explanations for these changes, and desegregation is only one of them. Substantial school desegregation did take place during this period, but other changes also occurred at the same time. State and federal compensatory education programs grew rapidly during this time frame, particularly Title 1 and Head Start, as well as a number of state and local funding programs aimed at helping minority and poor students. Certain minority socioeconomic characteristics also improved during (and just before) this period, and it is well established that the socioeconomic status of families has a strong effect on children's academic achievement.¹⁵ Can we decide whether some of these factors are more or less important in explaining changes in the continuing black-white achievement gap?

15. Jencks & Phillips, *supra* note 13.

1. NATIONAL MATH TRENDS FOR GRADE 8



2. NATIONAL READING TRENDS FOR GRADE 8



It is true that most desegregation plans were implemented during the 1970s and early 1980s, a period that coincides with the largest black achievement gains.¹⁶ Using a summary index of racial balance, Chart 3 demonstrates that desegregation occurred rapidly between 1968 and 1972, when most Southern school systems implemented plans. Desegregation then progressed at a slower rate until about 1982, during which time most Northern systems adopted desegregation plans.¹⁷ Note that the level of racial balance stayed relatively stable between 1982 and 1995, indicating that desegregation was not being dismantled to any significant degree.

The fact that black achievement rose while desegregation progressed led a number of early observers to conclude that school desegregation was an important cause of the black achievement gains.¹⁸ Interestingly, most who speculated about this did not have any information about whether the gains occurred primarily in desegregated schools, which would seem important in deciding whether desegregation per se was the active causal factor. Later studies offered alternative explanations.¹⁹

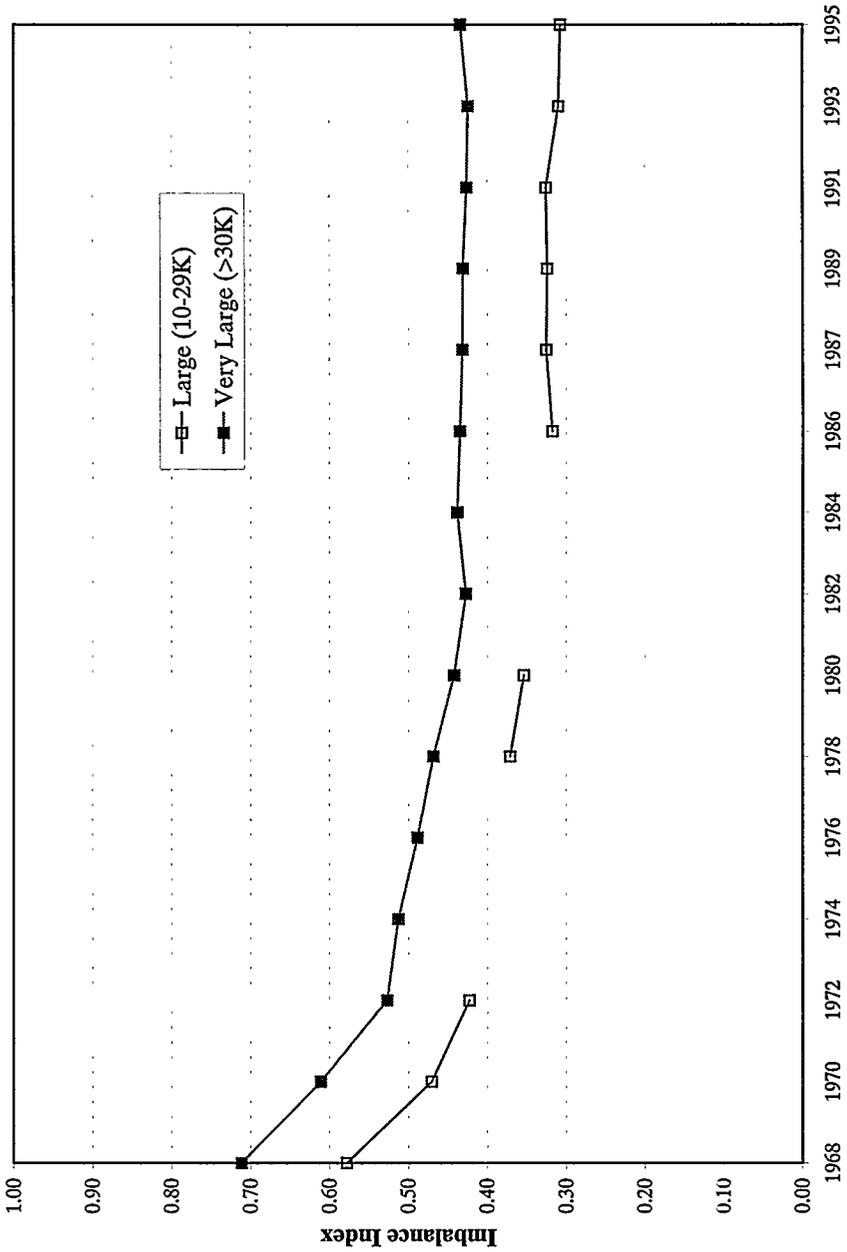
16. Christine Rossell & David J. Armor, *The Effectiveness of School Desegregation Remedies, 1968-1991*, 24 AM. POL. Q. 267, 267-302 (1996).

17. The chart shows the index of dissimilarity, which attains a value of 1.0 when schools are perfectly segregated and zero when all schools are perfectly balanced. The data is from a national representative sample of school systems which was drawn in study sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of Education.

18. See Greg Anrig, *Test Scores on the Rise for Blacks*, THE TRENTON SUNDAY STAR-LEDGER, May 27, 1984; see also NANCY W. BURTON & LYLE V. JONES, RECENT TRENDS IN ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS OF BLACK AND WHITE YOUTH, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER 10 (1982); COMMON DESTINY (G. D. Jaynes & R. M. Williams eds., 1989).

19. See David J. Armor, *Why is Black Educational Achievement Rising?*, 108 THE PUBLIC INTEREST 65, 65-80 (1992); see also DAVID W. GRISSMER, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND THE CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILY (1994).

3. TRENDS IN SCHOOL RACIAL BALANCE

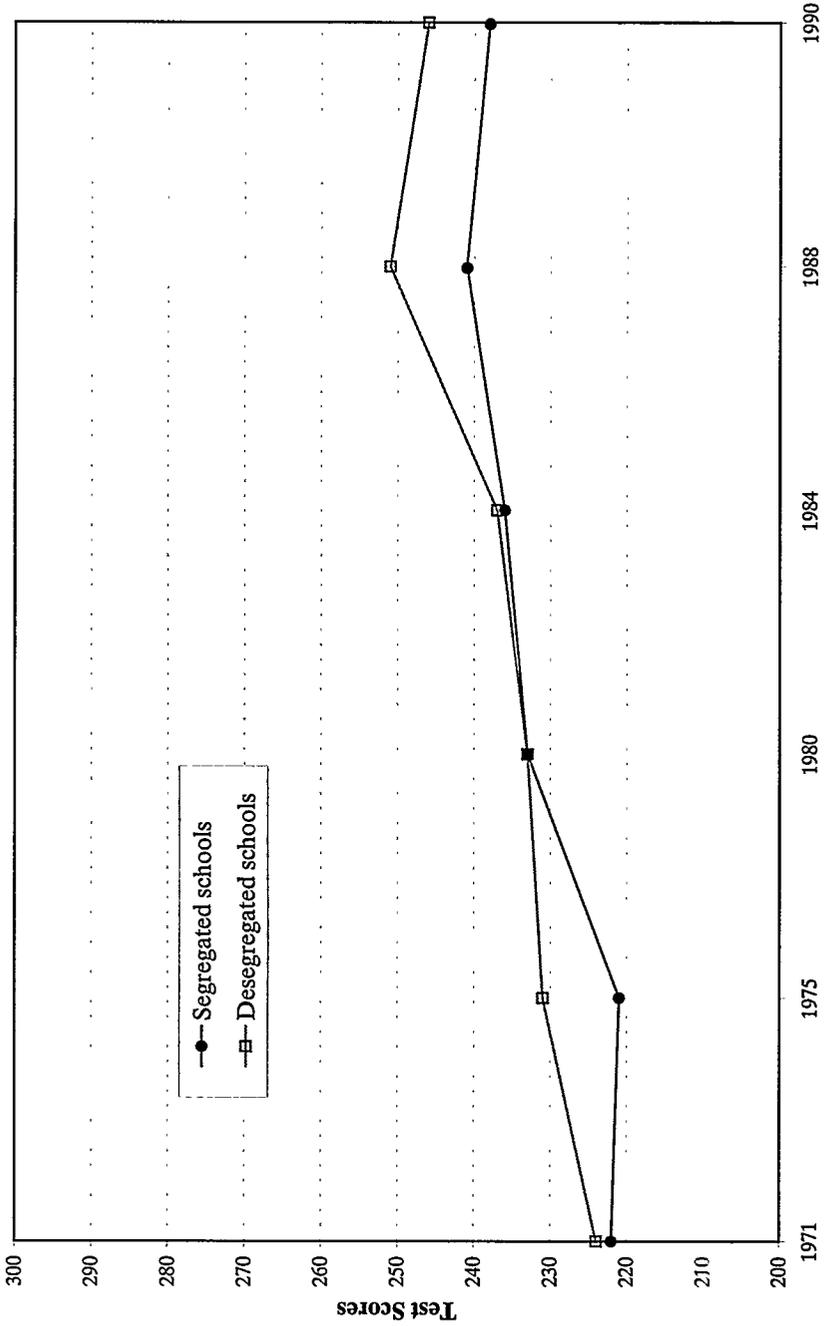


The relationship between black achievement and school desegregation in the NAEP data is clarified in Chart 4, which tracks changes in black 8th grade reading scores in schools that were desegregated (defined as less than one-half black) or segregated. While it is clear that reading achievement gains occurred in both desegregated and segregated schools, the gains were somewhat larger in desegregated schools. The pattern was similar for math scores. It is hard to conclude from this evidence that desegregation was the primary reason for black achievement gains during the 1970s and 1980s, when black achievement increased significantly in non-desegregated schools.

At this point a clarification is needed. The term “desegregation” can take on several meanings, only one of which is relevant to the evidence in Chart 4. Desegregation can mean the act of creating a uniform program of education for all students, regardless of the degree of racial balance in each school building. In this sense a desegregation plan might create equal programs where unequal programs were the rule before desegregation. This definition is closer to that implied in the original *Brown* decision.

But desegregation also means, especially after *Swann*, that the schools in a school system are racially balanced, in that each school has a racial composition approximating the overall system composition. Chart 4 looks only at the effect of racially balanced schools, but this is the most relevant definition for the debate over ending desegregation plans. Those who are critical of ending school desegregation worry primarily about the loss of racial balance and the return to racial isolation, and about the potential adverse effects of a predominately minority school environment on black achievement.

4. BLACK 8TH GRADE READING BY DESEGREGATION STATUS



Another way of evaluating the effects of desegregation on academic achievement is to examine changes in achievement and the black-white gap in school systems that have undergone extensive desegregation. Although hundreds, if not thousands, of school systems throughout the nation have desegregated, certain school systems are better than others for testing the harm and benefit thesis.

Some school systems were desegregated after most middle class white families had left the public schools; Atlanta, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Cleveland are good examples. In these cities even perfect racial balance meant that most schools were predominately minority, and hence not a valid test for the effect of desegregation. Other school systems had only small fractions of minority students when desegregation took place, so that desegregation still meant predominately white school systems.

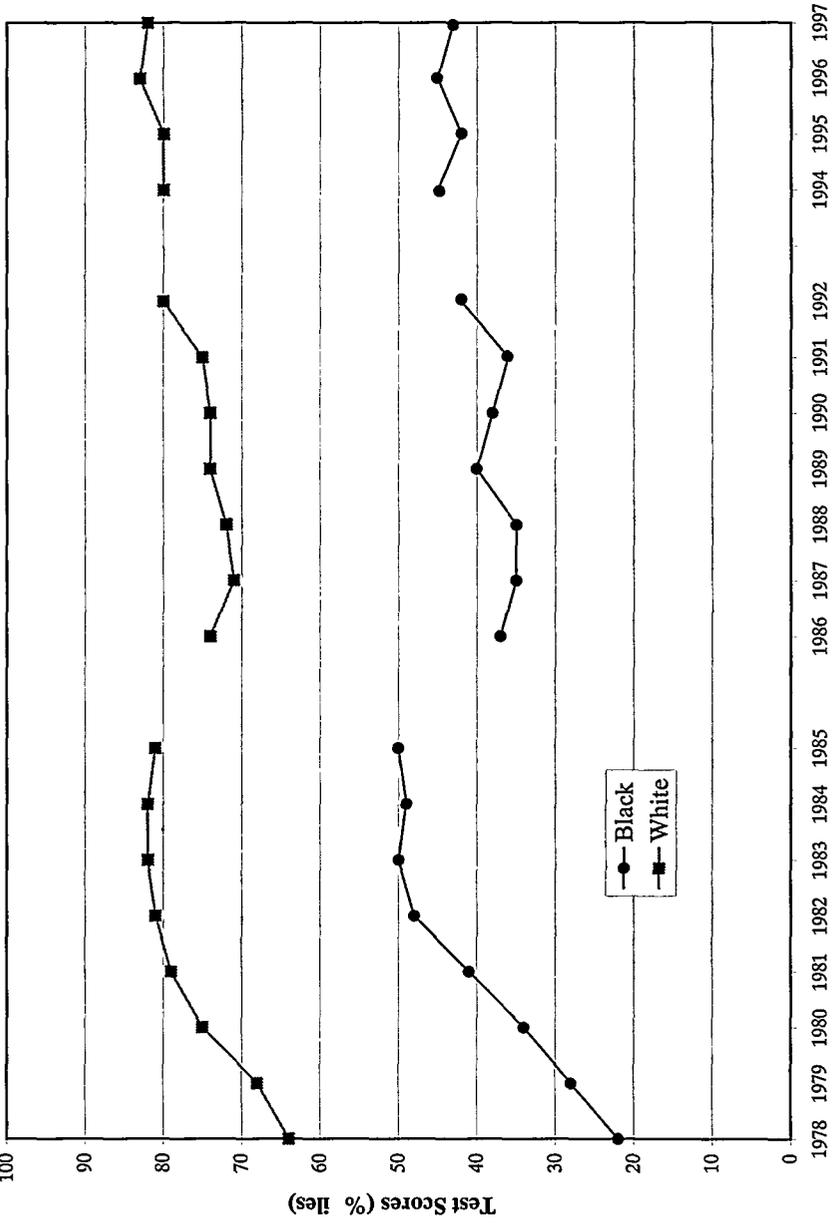
Two of the best examples of comprehensive and meaningful levels of desegregation are Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, and Wilmington-New Castle County, Delaware. Charlotte-Mecklenburg is a county-wide school system where predominately black inner city schools were desegregated with predominately white suburban schools via busing. Because the county system was 80 percent white when desegregation began, it remained a majority white school system despite considerable white flight in the early 1970s. As recently as 1998 it was 40 percent black, 55 percent white, and about 5 percent Asian. Nearly all of its schools were racially balanced from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

Chart 5 shows the achievement trends in Charlotte-Mecklenburg between 1978, a few years after desegregation (racial balance) started, and 1997. In 1978 the achievement gap was very large, a little over 40 percentile points. Interestingly, the achievement of both black and white students rose between 1978 and 1982, and the achievement gap decreased slightly. It is not clear what caused these gains, but since gains occurred for both groups it does not appear to be related to desegregation (racial balance) per se. For example, teachers may have been doing a better job teaching the material covered by the tests, a practice that does not require racial balance. At any rate, a new test was introduced in 1986 and the scores of both groups fell, albeit not quite as low as the 1978 scores. The gap then widened somewhat so that by 1992 the gap nearly returned to what it was in 1978—just under 40 percentile points. Then a new state test was introduced in 1994 which showed a continuing gap of nearly 40

percentile points.²⁰

20. The McGraw Hill CAT test was used until 1985, and the CAT-5 was used between 1986 and 1992. The state test used from 1994 to 1997 is unique to North Carolina.

5. GRADE 6 ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS IN CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG



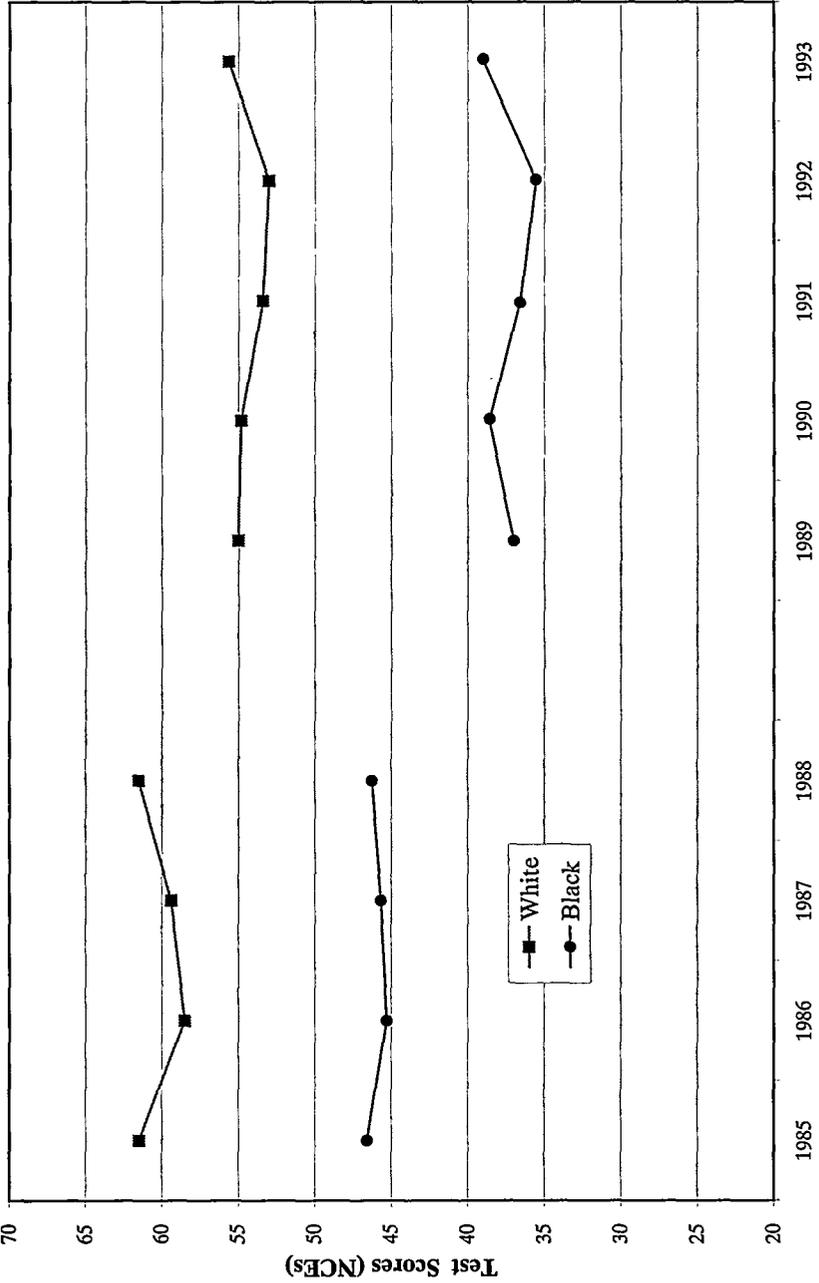
The Wilmington-New Castle County system has a similar history and a similar pattern of achievement. Wilmington was a predominately black urban school system that was merged, by court order, with predominately white suburban school systems to form one large metropolitan school system (it was later broken up into four subsystems).²¹ Starting in 1978, schools were racially balanced by having Wilmington black students attend schools in the suburbs for nine out of twelve years, and suburban white students attending Wilmington schools for three years (usually grades 4-6). Again, the consolidated district had about 80 percent white students to begin with so that, despite considerable white flight, Wilmington-New Castle still had a 65-35 white-black ratio as late as 1993.

The achievement trends in Chart 6 tell a story quite similar to that of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Although there is no early increase in test scores for either group, the black-white achievement gap remains large and steady despite many years of "ideal" racial balance. A new test introduced in 1989 (the Stanford Achievement Test replaced the CAT test) shows a consistent achievement gap that is about the same magnitude as the national black-white achievement gaps documented in the NAEP studies.

It is quite clear, then, that a large academic achievement gap remains between black and white students despite many years of extensive desegregation. This gap is revealed both in national studies and in studies of individual school systems, and the gap exists regardless of the extent and duration of desegregation. Although the gap diminished somewhat during the 1970s and 1980s, it is still substantial. Most importantly, unlike the time of *Brown*, there is no reasonable way that school segregation can be invoked as a primary cause of this achievement gap, nor is there any credible evidence that school desegregation—in the form of racial balancing—has diminished the gap to any important degree.

21. *Evans v. Buchanan*, 393 F. Supp. 428, 446-47 (1975), *aff'd*, 423 U.S. 963 (1975), *rehearing denied*, 423 U.S. 1080 (1976).

6. GRADE 6 ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS IN WILMINGTON-NEW CASTLE COUNTY



II. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF THE GAP

If segregation does not cause the achievement gap and desegregation has little impact on closing it, what are its causes? A complete critique of the harm and benefit thesis should be able to offer alternative explanations for the achievement gap. Education and social science researchers have offered at least two explanations. One explanation involves what we might call school factors, which include financial resources, staffing, curriculum, standards, and any other aspect of the school program. Another explanation involves non-school factors, of which a student's family background is the primary cluster.

When desegregation failed to close the achievement gap, some social scientists and many educators changed their argument about the cause of the gap. While not abandoning the segregation argument entirely, many began to blame the achievement gap on inadequate resources and lower-quality teachers, particularly in central-city school districts with high concentrations of poor and minority children. In these types of school systems, so the argument goes, black children are concentrated in schools with few resources and with unqualified teachers, at least as compared to schools attended by middle class white children. This argument was made most pointedly in a recent lawsuit in New York city, where a group called "Campaign for Fiscal Equity" sued the State of New York (in State court) on behalf of the city school system.

There is a large research literature on the impact of school resources on achievement, and it would be beyond the scope of this essay to review that material here. Suffice to say a lack of consensus exists about what kind of school resources can change achievement levels after students start school and by how much. There are also no agreements as to whether any combination of resources and programs can close the achievement gap.²²

If school factors are to explain the achievement gap, two relationships must be demonstrated. First, a school resource must be related to achievement, in that more of that resource (i.e., funding, teacher quality, smaller classes, etc.) can be shown to raise achievement. Second, there must be a difference in the allocation of that resource between black and white students—that is, black

22. See generally GARY BURTLESS, DOES MONEY MATTER? THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL RESOURCES ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND ADULT SUCCESS (1996).

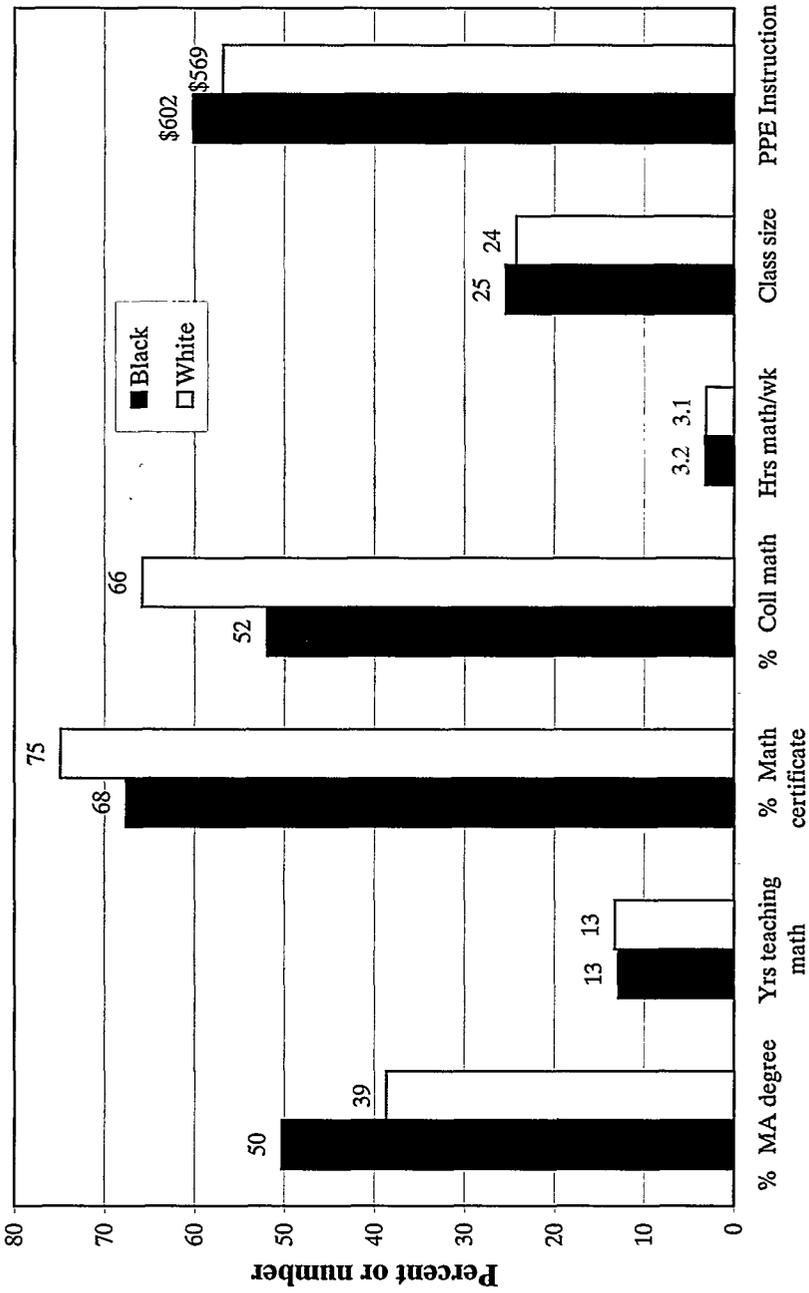
students must receive less of that resource. If this latter relationship is not demonstrated, then the first relationship is moot.

Chart 7 uses data from NAEP to compare the availability of seven commonly studied school resources between black and white 8th grade students; the teacher characteristics are computed for students' 8th grade math teachers. The resources examined are the percentage of math teachers with a Master's degree, number of years they have taught math, percentage of teachers with a junior high math certificate, percentage of teachers with a math major or minor in college, hours of class time spent on math instruction per week, number of students in the math class (class size), and per pupil instructional expenditures at the school district level.

There are no significant differences (or the differences favor black students) on five of the seven resource indicators: having an MA degree, teaching experience, hours of math instruction, class size, and instructional expenditures. Since there is no difference favoring white students on these school resources, the 8th grade math gap cannot be explained by differences in these resources—whether or not they are correlated with achievement.

Two school resources do show a disadvantage for black students. One is the percent of teachers with a certificate in junior high math: 75 percent of white 8th grade students have teachers with a junior high math certificate compared to 68 percent of black students, a difference of 7 percentage points. Another resource with an important difference is having majored or minored in math in college: 66 percent of white students have teachers with a college math background compared to only 52 percent of black students, a difference of 14 percentage points.

7. MATH TEACHER & SCHOOL QUALITY INDICATORS BY STUDENT RACE
 (1996 NAEP, 8th Grade)



The question now becomes: to what extent are these two resources correlated with student math achievement? In a separate analysis, black students with a certified math teacher score 5.5 points higher on the 8th grade math test (controlling for the student's socioeconomic background), and black students with a teacher who studied math in college scored six points higher than those without such teachers. The two teacher characteristics are highly correlated, in that most teachers with a junior high certificate majored or minored in math, and vice versa. Even if we assumed that these two characteristics were not correlated, the net effect of equalizing the certificate rate and the college math rate for black and white students would be to raise black math scores by 1.3 points.²³ Since the black-white 8th grade math gap is just over thirty points (see Chart 1), this school resource difference explains only a small portion of the gap.

I have done similar types of case studies in numerous school systems, examining the school resources available to black and white students within the same system (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Wilmington-New Castle, Tampa, Dallas, and St. Louis to name just a few). Generally speaking, black students are exposed to the same school resources as white students in these systems, and frequently both expenditures and class sizes favor black students due to compensatory programs. To the extent that some school resources are lower for black students (e.g., teacher certification or education), the differences are usually small and, given the modest relationships between these resources and student achievement, the impact of equalizing the resources would be to raise black achievement by a very small amount. Thus, the distribution of school resources explains very little of the black-white achievement gap.

In light of this, we must look elsewhere for explanations of the achievement gap. The most likely explanation, in my opinion, is the socioeconomic differences between black and white families. The relationship between family socioeconomic factors and student achievement is one of the best-documented relationships in social science research, starting with the well-known Coleman report and ending with a recent study by Jencks and others.²⁴ The socioeconomic differences between black and white families is also well-established. Indeed, the relationships are so strong here that we can explain not

23. The calculation is $5.5 \times .07 + 6 \times .14 = 1.3$.

24. JAMES S. COLEMAN, ET AL., U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH, EDUC. AND WELFARE, EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY (1966); see generally Jencks & Phillips, *supra* note 13.

only the gap but changes in the gap.

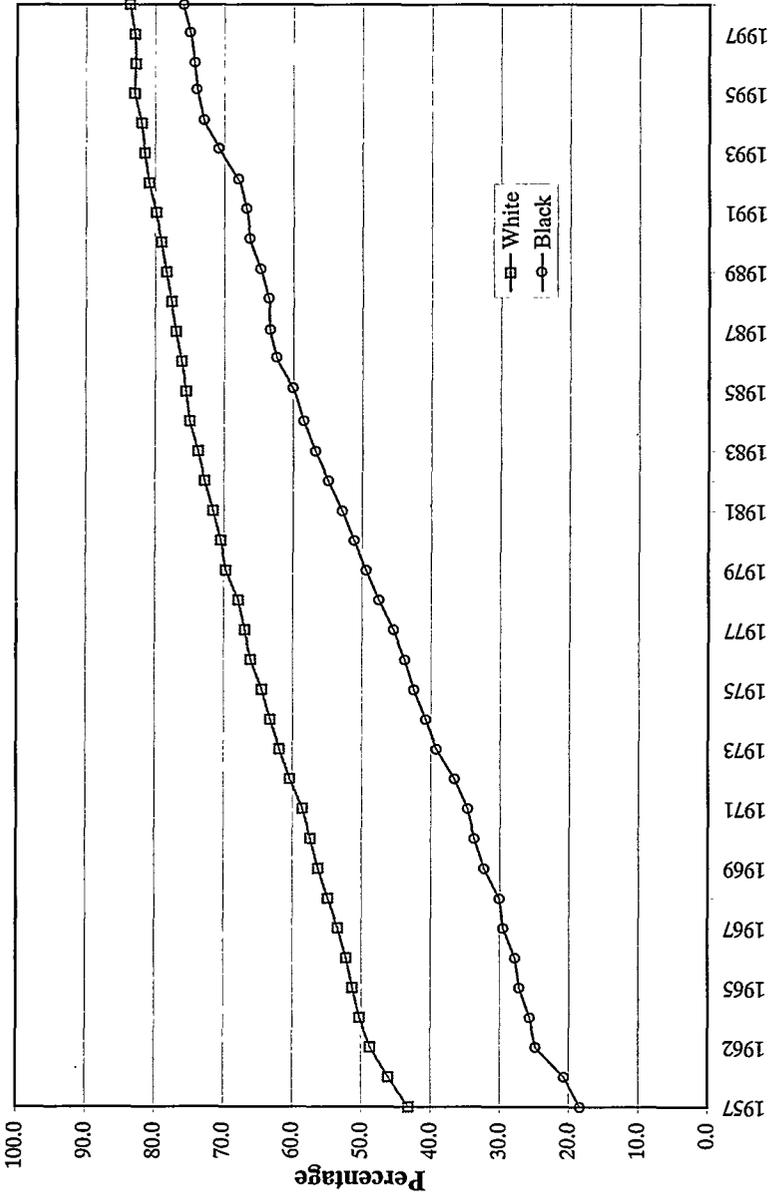
Regarding improvement in black achievement during the 1970s and 1980s, consider the trends in some Census data in Charts Eight and Nine. Chart Eight shows that the black-white gap has nearly closed in high school graduation rates, where blacks made the biggest gains relative to whites in the 1970s and 1980s. Another study has shown that the gap in the rate of having some college declined for parents of NAEP students during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁵ Chart Nine shows that the gap in family poverty has closed somewhat during the last thirty years. These improvements in black education and income relative to whites, along with related factors, can explain a significant portion of the reduced achievement gap.²⁶

A substantial gap remains, however, in black and white family income, amounting to nearly \$20,000 per year, and the current poverty rate gap is equally serious—9 percent for white families compared to thirty percent for black families in 1998. Perhaps more important, the improvement in high school graduation rates has not been replicated in college graduation rates. In fact, the black-white college graduation gap has actually widened somewhat, from about 5 percentage points in 1957 to 10 percentage points in 1998.

25. Armor, *supra* note 19, at 77-78.

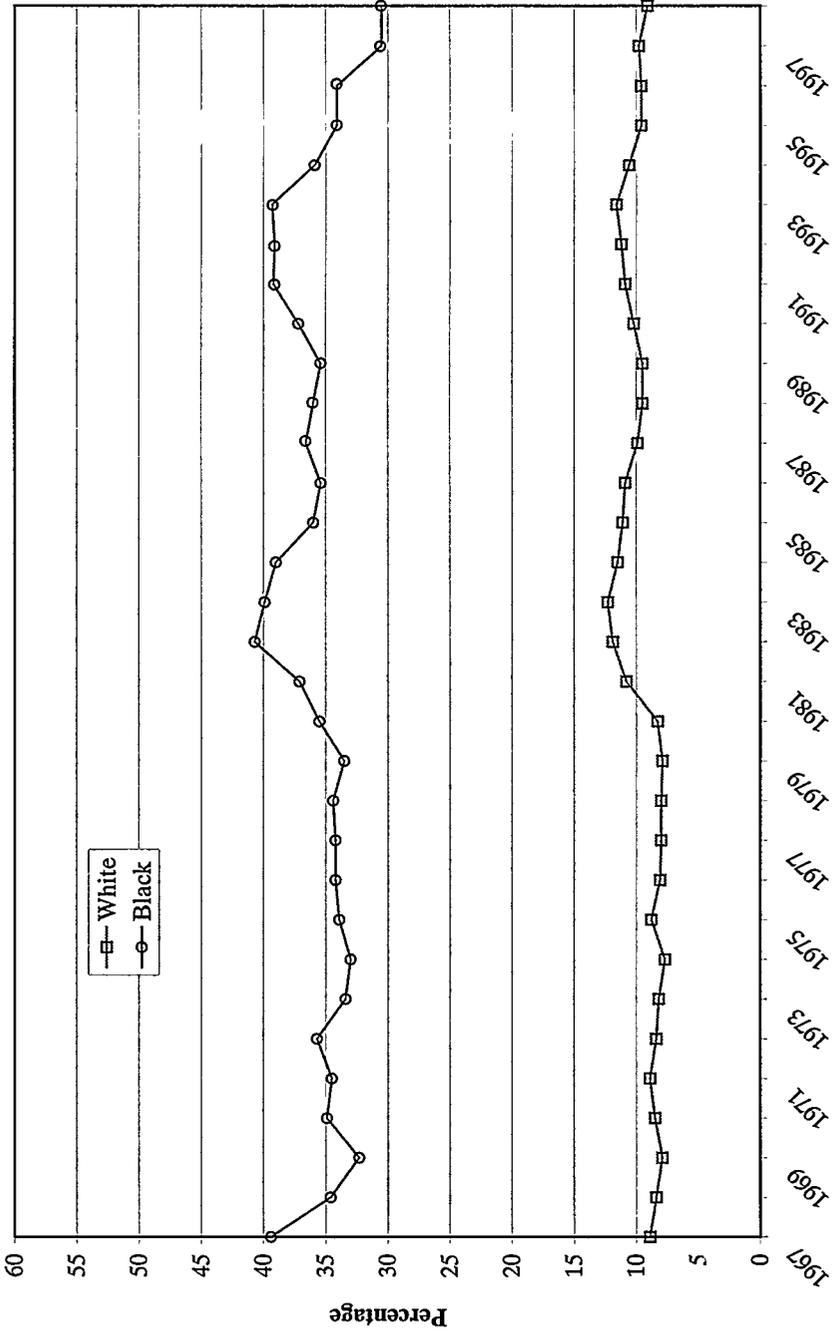
26. David Grissmer et al., *Why Did the Black-White Score Gap Narrow in the 1970s and 1980s?*, in Jencks & Phillips, eds., *supra* note 13, at 182.

8. U.S. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES



Source: U.S. Census, Current Population Reports

9. U.S. PERCENT FAMILIES IN POVERTY



There are also serious black-white differences in other social characteristics related to academic achievement, some of which Chart Ten summarizes.²⁷ Of greatest concern is the enormous gap in family structure, where nearly 70 percent of black children are being raised by a single (and often never-married) parent, compared to less than 30 percent for white children. This gap has actually increased, and is one of the important reasons for the persistent gaps in family income and poverty rates. Because most white families with children have two parents, many more white than black families have two incomes. This clearly increases median family income for white families as compared to black families, most of whom are single parents.

Moreover, the average white family has a much smaller child-to-parent ratio than the black family. That is, the typical white family has one parent per child (two parents and two children), while the typical black family has one parent with either two or three children. This means black parents have less time and energy for parenting on an "effort per child" basis; some social scientists have called this "dilution of resources."²⁸

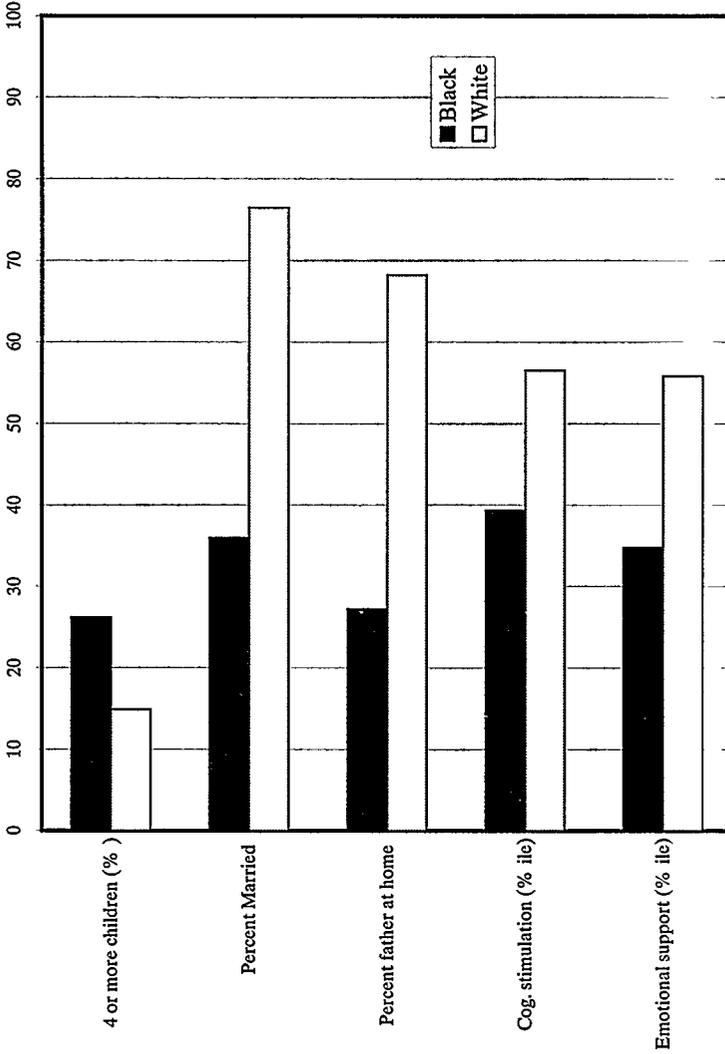
The dilution of parent resources shows up in the two lower sets of bars in Chart Ten. Black parents spend less time than white families on cognitive stimulation for their young children (e.g., reading, teaching words and numbers, etc.). They also have lower scores on emotional support (influenced heavily by the absence of a father figure). These two parenting characteristics are known to be among the most important influences on a young child's cognitive development and the child's later academic achievement in school.²⁹

27. These data are taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), 1994 panel.

28. See JUDITH BLAKE, *FAMILY SIZE AND ACHIEVEMENT* (1989).

29. Meredith Phillips, et al, *Family Background, Parenting Practices, and the Black-White Test Score Gap*, in Jencks & Phillips, eds., *supra* note 13 at 103, 126-130.

10. FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS BY RACE



Source: Children of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1994

While African American gains are impressive in certain areas, especially family income and completion of high school, the remaining socioeconomic gaps are equally imposing. The socioeconomic gains of blacks relative to whites in several areas may well have been sufficient to narrow the achievement gap to the extent shown in Charts One and Two, but the large socioeconomic gaps that persist and even continue to grow can also explain the large achievement differences that still exist.

III. CONCLUSION

The evidence is compelling that neither school segregation nor differences in school resources are responsible for the current achievement gap that exists between African American and white children. Black children achieve lower rates than white children whether a school system is desegregated or (de facto) segregated. Black children have similar school resources than white children, both nationally and locally, and yet black children still achieve at lower rates than white children, both nationally and locally. This achievement differential persists despite many special compensatory programs such as Head Start and Title 1.

For these reasons, I do not think the end of desegregation—if it comes—will have any substantial effect on the achievement gap. Black children in current desegregated schools are achieving at about the same level as black children in current de facto segregated schools.

Although desegregation may have contributed to the equality of school resources, at the present time black and white children have about the same level of resources, yet the achievement gap persists. Assuming that school boards continue their policies of equitable allocation of resources after the end of desegregation, there should be no change from the current pattern of equity of resources between black and white students.

The evidence is overwhelming, in my opinion, that the non-school factors of family socioeconomics explain most of the achievement gap. Despite improvements in black income and education levels, there are still large gaps remaining in income, poverty, and college graduation rates. There are even larger and growing gaps in the critical factors of family structure and family size, which lead to differences in parenting behaviors. All of these characteristics are strongly correlated with a child's academic skills, which means that a black-white skill gap already exists when children

start their schooling. Further reduction in the achievement gap will require increased parity between white and black children with regards to their family environments, especially two-parent families, poverty, and parenting behaviors, all of which are inextricably entwined. Without this parity, the achievement gap is likely to persist throughout the school years.