

# School Segregation in America's Most Progressive State

GRETCHEN MILLER



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: In the era of "fake news," I entered Professor Abramsky's journalism class eager to learn about journalism, one of the vital components of American democracy. Our task was to cover a story under the prompt of "California in the age of Trump." I took this assignment as an opportunity to examine California as an overwhelmingly progressive state, and how this reputation translates into the everyday life of students. After a quarter full of research and interviews with UC Davis professors and non-profit directors, I found that California is one of the most segregated states in the country for black and Hispanic students, and that students in these segregated schools receive less resources and are less likely to pursue higher education. Education is essential to upwards mobility, and I hope this article brings awareness to the fundamental problem of unequal access to education that infests America's Golden State.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Gretchen Miller's "School Segregation in America's Most Progressive State" is a project that she developed while a student in my journalism class. Ms. Miller was fascinated by a paradox: how does a state that touts its progressive, liberal credentials at every opportunity, post such abysmal numbers when it comes to education access? Why do geography, class, and race continue to play such determining roles in whether or not a student will have access to decent schools, to AP classes, to qualified teachers, and so on? The result is an extraordinary piece of reportage, combining elements of the best of feature writing with well-earned editorial opinion. Throughout, Miller shows readers the importance of the topic, and gets readers*

*to care about the issue through carefully developed stories. It is a mature, eye-opening, piece of writing, one that ought to be a wake-up call to anyone in California who cares about social justice and equality of opportunity. I am absolutely delighted that this article is appearing in Prized Writing. It deserves a wide readership, and ought to help contribute to the ongoing debate about how to overcome these deep structural problems in California's educational systems.*

—Sasha Abramsky, University Writing Program

It's November of 2018, and America is nearing the two-year anniversary of Donald Trump's inauguration into the highest office of power in the country. Those part of the anti-Trump movement have organized marches against him, written op-eds in the *New York Times* exposing the chaos inside the White House, and voted to reclaim the House in the midterm election. But no opponent has been as forceful as the state of California, which continues to be hailed as the leader of resistance against the Trump presidency. It's a declared sanctuary state for undocumented immigrants. It organizes efforts to prevent the erosion of Obamacare. It has sued the Trump Administration more than 20 times over environmental policies. For these reasons and more, California is thought of as one of the most progressive states in America. But the reality is more complicated—and nothing demonstrates this more starkly than the problem of school segregation.

School segregation plagues the state, and diminishes the chances of achieving full equality and rights for minorities. No matter the strides California takes to stop Trump's anti-minority policies from spreading, racism is already deeply embedded in the state. California is one of the worst states in the country for equal education.

"School segregation has never stopped. Ever." Sandy Holman would like to make this clear. Holman, the director of the Culture C.O.-O.P.—an organization geared towards providing equal education for all—works within the California education system and has seen first-hand the racially segregated schools which, she says, have always been prevalent. Put differently, the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, has done virtually nothing to help students of color receive the same

comprehensive level of education white students get.

In fact, in the past ten years, school segregation has been on the rise in California, according to a [2016 study](#) published by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. Since the mid-2000s, students of color have faced less exposure to white students in their schools, and vice versa. The same study includes California as one of the states with the highest levels of school segregation. Students of color living in the state, particularly black and Latino students, feel this effect the most. The Civil Rights Project ranks California as the most segregated state for Latino students, with only 15.4 percent of students receiving exposure to white students. For black students, California qualifies as the second most segregated state, with 17.4 percent of students receiving exposure to their white counterparts. As schools are racially segregated, those attending schools with black and Latino majorities have fewer academic opportunities. A [GreatSchools report](#) finds that only 2 percent of black students and 6 percent of Latino students attend schools with high academic opportunity, compared to the 59 percent of white students and 73 percent of Asian students who attend similar high-achieving schools.

This data comes to life in many cases, including two school districts in the Bay Area: Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) and Ravenswood City School District. These school districts are located right next to one another, with only the 101 freeway separating the two. PAUSD ranks as the highest-performing school district in California. The graduation rate for students is 100 percent, and the district spends around \$16,154 per student, according to an article published by [NBC Bay Area](#). On its website, PAUSD boasts about technology-driven programs that utilize iPad apps and interactive whiteboards; in addition, PAUSD has plans to begin funding for a “multi-million dollar media arts center” this year. In the majority-white school district, [only 2 percent](#) of the student population is black and 12 percent Latino in PAUSD.

Across the freeway, Ravenswood City School District is located in the East Palo Alto area. East Palo Alto is known as a predominately minority community where low-income black and Latino families live. This is reflected in the demographic makeup of the school district: 80.9 percent of students are Latino, 8.2 percent are black, 69 percent of students are English-learners, and 95 percent of students are “considered socioeconomically disadvantaged,” according to a [2013 report](#) released by the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of San Francisco Bay Area.

The graduation rate for Ravenswood students is 69 percent, according to the [John W. Gardner Center](#). In 2011, the [California Department of Education](#) categorized three of Ravenswood's schools as being in the lowest 5 percent when it comes to academics.

"Ravenswood is one of the worst performing school districts," says Debra Watkins, founder of A Black Education Network (ABEN), an organization that aims to help black students in their education. "And it's right across the freeway from the best performing school district. One is predominately white, and one is predominately composed of minorities. That's segregation."

Despite being illegal on paper, segregation in schools is reinforced by unequal funding between school districts. "The funding that goes to public schools is strongly correlated with the economic resources available in the communities that schools are embedded in," explains Jacob Hibel, a sociology professor at UC Davis who studies educational inequities. "Poorer neighborhoods," Hibel continues, "have schools with less money." East Palo Alto, a community with a [median household income of \\$55,170](#) (\$12,569 below the Californian average), receives less funding for its schools than PAUSD, where the average Palo Alto family has a \$137,043 annual income, according to [Data USA](#). Whereas schools in richer communities are able to fundraise or receive donations, schools in low-income areas cannot obtain these outside resources. The funding they receive goes towards the immediate necessities required to run the schools. "Schools that are strapped for resources are less likely to have art programs or physical education programs. They struggle to adequately serve English learners because that requires hiring extra teachers. They may not be able to meet the needs of their students who have disabilities," Hibel says.

UC Davis junior Caridad Villegas is familiar with this struggle. Growing up in Reseda, a predominately Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles, Villegas attended mostly minority schools up until high school. "I remember how the teachers just didn't care in middle school. One of the math teachers threw a chair at a student once," she recalls. She says there were no guidance counselors to assist students, resulting in students feeling unmotivated to learn. These unenthusiastic attitudes towards education were further fueled by lack of diversity in courses offered. For Villegas and her peers, there were not many elective or science classes offered, so students were not always able to take classes that appealed to

their interests. This is a major problem at segregated schools. “Students exposed to less curriculum in elementary school are not likely to take honors or AP classes in high school, and then their probability of going to a four-year college is much less,” Hibel adds.

In mostly minority high schools, AP courses may not even be offered in the first place, further obstructing students from attending university. “You have to start in ninth grade to take the necessary courses to be eligible for Californian universities. Many inner city schools don’t even offer these courses. They don’t offer students the opportunity to take two years of foreign language, four years of English, or three years of mathematics,” says Dr. Nicki King, the Interim Chair of the Department of African American Studies at UC Davis. “California tolerates this unequal access to higher education.”

**All of this provides** a new lens to the seemingly progressive image of California people are familiar with. While California fights for undocumented immigrants’ rights or to protect minorities from racial profiling, it is failing children of color as it permits school segregation and the unequal spread of resources throughout schools. Education permeates every aspect of life. It affects the life trajectories of people by preparing them for college, which then shapes them for the work force. “The economic penalty of not getting a college degree is greater than it’s ever been,” Hibel says. Not having a college degree means a lesser likelihood of securing a job, which then affects access to health care, housing, and more. As Watkins puts it: “School segregation leads to a lack of upward mobility.”

This upward mobility exists beyond the individual level; it permeates the minority community as a whole. “Having inferior education means that students aren’t receiving the education that gives them the knowledge to go about challenging the status quo,” Holman says. Students of color become conditioned in their ways of thinking, leading to internalized racism. A [2000 study](#) published by researchers at the University of Michigan found that communities in which race is dominant and prevalent—such as at segregated schools—cause those within the communities to accept unfavorable stereotypes. Accepting these stereotypes then leads young people to view themselves in a negative light, thus affecting their mental health. This correlates to higher levels of mental illnesses in poorer, segregated communities, where 55 and 46

percent black and Latino children are more likely to need mental health care, according to [The Atlantic](#). These students' schools are less likely to have guidance counselors or social workers to properly assist those with mental health needs.

In spite of its negative effects, school segregation often goes on unsolved. Within minority communities, especially communities with immigrants, systemic design prevents change. "Immigrants are less likely to push against the system if they don't understand how the system works," explains Michal Kurlaender, a professor of education at UC Davis. In her work, Kurlaender tracked low-income students at a middle school in Sacramento. "There was a seven-month period where these eight graders just didn't have math instruction because they had a long-term substitute who wasn't equipped to teach algebra. It's very hard to recover from that in a sequential system like math. That would never happen in a middle school in Davis because too many parents would push on the system to not allow that to happen."

Outside of minority communities, the problem of unequal education is ignored by the masses. "School segregation in California is overlooked by design," Holman explains. "When the education system was created, white supremacy played a hand in designing it. It kept the power, control, and resources in the hands of white males." California may have less blatant, in-your-face-racism than a state in the deep south, but it's still there. Though California is seen as one of the most progressive states, it has not been immune from racism. "California is subject to all the historical constructs that have been the foundation of this country and have created all the gaps and impacts on all minorities," Holman continues.

Though California cannot disassociate from its history, it is still possible to push forward and help provide resources to students attending segregated schools. Watkins' organization, ABEN, is just one example of the work being done to revolutionize the education system. ABEN hosts a Cultural Immersion Program, where students learn about African culture in the United States, as well as the Greene Scholars Program, designed to support black youth in STEM academics. With these programs, ABEN has closed many gaps for students of color. "One hundred percent of our students go to college, and 90 percent graduate in four years with a BA or a BS. Sixty percent of our students are involved in STEM programs—that's eight times higher than the national average for black students,"

Watkins states.

Other work is being done to provide quality education for all students. As Kurlaendar mentions, some schools have begun to partner with community colleges to ensure higher education for students. In addition, California has seen the establishment of more and more magnet schools—public schools designed to diversify the student population by offering special courses and instruction. Villegas attended one of these schools in high school. “I’m not sure if I’d be attending UC Davis without going to that magnet school,” she says. “It really changed my life.”

Requiring more equality in the dispersion of school funds, enforcing universal preschool with academic focuses, and building more magnet schools to encourage integration are other proposed measures geared towards providing equal education for students in California. While much work remains, there are many routes California can take. But the route of ignorance and dismissal is not something the state should continue down. “California is a window into the future for the whole country. What happens in Californian schools is a blueprint for schools elsewhere, so how California addresses these issues will be majorly impactful,” says Hibel.

Education is one of the most important building blocks of society. It changes the world. Embracing its diversity and aiding the next generation in achieving high-quality education can make California a force like no other. For its own good and for the good of the nation, California must begin providing equal education and access to opportunities for all of its youth.

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