JOHN DIAMOND & AMANDA LEWIS

Despite the Best Intentions

Why Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools

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How Racial Inequality Thrives
in Good Schools

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Contents

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Prologue

It all started with a phone call. We were busy with beginning-of-the-semester activity, when the phone rang. It was Maurice Webber, an assistant principal at Riverview High School, reaching out. Riverview is a comprehensive high school in the suburbs of Metro, a large Midwestern city. Mr. Webber had spent the entirety of his career there—30-plus years spanning his time from brand-new instructor to celebrated teacher, from teacher to dean, from dean to assistant principal. He was nearing retirement and was frustrated, he said—thoroughly dissatisfied with all the explanations of why black students, in his district and elsewhere, were not doing as well in school as white students. From where he sat, Riverview seemed to have everything going for it. Unlike popular images of failing urban public schools, it was a highly resourced suburban school in a liberal community. His colleagues, he believed, were well-meaning and highly skilled. How, then, to explain the disparity in achievement between white and black students even at Riverview?

Maurice Webber wasn't the only person at Riverview to be concerned. Closing what is referred to here and elsewhere as the "racial achievement gap" had been an explicit goal of Riverview teachers and staff members for a number of years, without transformative results. Their failure to make headway was deeply troubling. Why weren't the district's resources and faculty's good intentions enough? On the cusp of retirement, Maurice Webber

was calling us to ask if we might speak to some of the low-achieving black students and help him understand what was going on.

We accepted Mr. Webber's request not only because of our mutual concern for these students' outcomes, but also because we recognized that Riverview offered a kind of best-case scenario for exploring these issues. It is an award-winning suburban school that enjoys strong financial support, the recipient of abundant goodwill within a community that has prioritized public schooling. The town's schools have been voluntarily desegregated for decades; many families opt to live there precisely because the schools are diverse.[1] Black families there tend to be much better off financially than those living in nearby municipalities such as Metro City. Riverview seems to have everything going for it.

The high school serves about 3,500 students, approximately 90 percent of them white or black, in equal measure, with the remaining percentage comprised of Latina/os and a small but growing Asian population. About 30 percent of the students are low income.[2] While the majority of the teachers are white, the teaching staff has become more racially diverse over the past few decades. African American teachers made up less than 5 percent of the staff in the late 1960s, but by the academic year 2005–2006 they comprised almost 20 percent of the school's faculty.

Riverview is a well-resourced school district. In 2006–2007, it spent more than $18,000 per student, twice as much as the state average and nearly twice as much as nearby Metro City. More than 80 percent of its teachers hold master's degrees (again, about twice as many as in Metro City). The high school is also impressive physically. Its assets include multiple swimming pools and gymnasiums, and modern facilities for science, art, and vocational training. In many ways the school has the feel of a small college campus. Athletic facilities stretch out at the rear of the building, and a large, well-manicured grass lawn leads to the main entrance. On warm days, students play Frisbee in the school's courtyard, sit and read on the front lawn, and a few even stand in the student parking lot across the street from the main buildings to smoke cigarettes during break periods or at lunchtime.

Riverview itself is a largely middle-class community with a median yearly household income of nearly $70,000, high owner-occupancy rates, and low poverty rates.[3] To be sure, while all groups in Riverview are on average far better off than their peers in the neighboring city, there are still real racial differentials in resources favoring whites over blacks and

Latina/os. Still, median family incomes for all groups are above national averages, while poverty rates are well below. The community has a thriving commercial district, significant arts and cultural facilities and events, abundant historical architecture, well-maintained parks, and numerous town-supported recreational activities. For the many reasons apparent to those who spend time there, a national magazine recently named Riverview as one of the most desirable places in the country to live. It is a self-described "diverse" and "progressive" community—a liberal city.

On paper, Riverview seems like a place where all students should have ample opportunities to succeed academically and thrive personally. Put differently, Riverview presents a "least likely case" in which to find deep racial divisions in educational outcomes. In many ways, the school is a picture of racial integration and high student achievement (e.g., all groups are outperforming their peers in the city next door). There are numerous good reasons why parents want to send their children to Riverview schools and to Riverview High in particular.

Given Riverview's many resources—well-trained teachers, high-quality facilities, abundant financial support from local property taxes—it is not surprising that the school's academic accomplishments are impressive. The graduation rate for the district's racial subgroups is higher than for their counterparts in the state as a whole. And when those students graduate from Riverview, between 75 and 80 percent attend college.[4] Many Riverview graduates qualify as National Merit Scholars, and national magazines regularly name Riverview as one of the top high schools in the state. In this racially diverse school, students report significant cross-race interaction. When asked to identify the racial composition of their six closest friends in a 2001 survey, 80 percent of black, Latina/o, white, and Asian students reported that either some or most of their friends were of a different race than themselves.[5] Such levels of interaction are an important accomplishment in a society where many schools remain segregated.[6]

In 2002, when we started spending significant time at the school, Riverview High School appeared to have achieved long-term, stable integration. The larger community was a place people moved to for the schools and for its diversity. While several nearby suburban communities have highly ranked high schools, what differentiates Riverview from those places is its racial demographics—those other schools are attended primarily by white students. Thus, Riverview schools are not just good schools but good, diverse schools.

Unfortunately, as Mr. Webber's call indicated, Riverview's good schools do not serve all students equally well. Descriptions of Riverview schools as "integrated" are perhaps overstated. While clearly desegregated, evidence of the schools' real integration is wanting. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated more than 40 years ago:

> Although the terms *desegregation* and *integration* are often used interchangeably, there is a great deal of difference between the two. In the context of what our community needs, desegregation alone is empty and shallow. We must always be aware of the fact that our ultimate goal is integration, and that desegregation alone is only a first step on the road to the good society.[7]

In the case of Riverview, a first foray into the school's hallways certainly conveys an image of an integrated space, as bustling interracial crowds of teenagers move through the corridors on their way to cafeterias, classrooms, gymnasiums, and administrative offices. And yet, students' classroom destinations belie the image of integration. Whether they are on the move toward American history, biology, or geometry class, black, Latina/o, and white students are more often than not heading in different directions. In fact, one key manifestation of the "achievement gap" at Riverview that Mr. Webber worried about is the quite different racial demographics of the school's "high" and "low" academic tracks, with white students far overrepresented in the school's "top" tracks (honors and advanced placement) and black and Latina/o students similarly overrepresented in the school's lower academic tracks.

While Riverview students often attend the same classes during the early elementary grades, their classes become differentiated along racial lines as they move toward the upper elementary and middle school years.[8] Riverview high school has essentially three instructional levels in all subjects—basic, honors, and advanced placement (AP). In a school with less than 50 percent white students, almost 90 percent of AP-class students are white, as are almost 80 percent of honors-class students. In contrast, two-thirds of the students taking basic-level classes are black or Latina/o.[9] As Karolyn Tyson writes, whereas the original movements that led to desegregation in districts like Riverview embodied a hope that "black and white students would come together as equals . . . the movement toward integration . . . was interrupted" before it was ever achieved.[10]

Achievement differentials are apparent not just in academic tracks. For example, multiple datasets show cumulative grade point averages of white and Asian students to be a full point higher than the average for black and Latina/o students.[11] Test score outcomes also follow racial patterns. On the 2006 ACT exam, the mean composite score for white students was about 26, while the score for African American and Latina/o students was about 18.[12]

Finally, while black and Latina/o Riverview graduates are much more likely than their peers in nearby Metro City to attend college, white Riverview graduates are far more likely than their black and Latina/o peers to attend four-year colleges (more than 90 percent for whites versus closer to 60 percent for blacks and Latina/os). While only 5 percent of white Riverview graduates end up in two-year colleges, 30 percent of black graduates and 40 percent of Latina/o graduates do so. Thus, while Riverview graduates' overall college attendance rates are high, the institutions that they attend are stratified by race and ethnicity. These numbers in part highlight why black and Latina/o parents might choose to send their children to Riverview—Riverview students' outcomes are better than those of students in other nearby districts. However, these figures also highlight that even within schools like Riverview, which are considered to be very good, significant racial gaps exist in students' educational outcomes.

The central question we tackle in this book is "Why?" In concrete terms, we ask, Why is it that when you walk into one of the high-track classes at Riverview, you see almost all white faces? Why are the "regular" or "basic" classes predominantly black? Why do we continue to think of places like Riverview as good schools, if not great ones, when they produce such stark inequalities? Beyond "Why," we wonder "How?" How do Riverview students, faculty, and staff make sense of these stark racial realities? How do well-meaning people—skilled and caring educators, liberal white parents, and middle-class black parents—come to live with these patterns on a daily basis? These questions drive this book's two central goals.

Our first objective is to provide a fuller account of what is *racial* about "racial achievement gaps"—an account that goes beyond the individual characteristics of students and peer culture to understand what is going on within the institution of school that contributes to unequal outcomes. How does race matter? Second, and more broadly, we seek to use this close examination of Riverview to shed light on a wider paradox in the post–civil-rights United States. Many if not most Americans today express

support for diversity and claim to be color-blind and largely beyond race, yet we find deeply seated racial inequality on almost every social and economic indicator we can name. How does this inequality persist long after the explicit and deliberate racist policies of the past have been formally outlawed? What are the mechanisms and processes that contribute to racial inequality today, decades after the triumphs of the civil rights movement? In this way, we believe that the racial dynamics at Riverview and places like it are not unique. Rather, we can see that they capture something larger about the way race works in the United States today.

In search of answers to our questions, we began collecting data in 2003, shortly after our early conversations with Maurice Webber. We started exactly where he asked us to, by interviewing low-achieving black students. After interviewing 23 students, we then reached out to their parents and interviewed as many of them as we could.[13] After examining that data, we sought out additional resources to do what clearly needed to be done: Conduct a broader examination of the experiences of individuals across the school. With additional research support from the universities where we worked and the Spencer Foundation, in 2006 we then expanded the project to interview a wider group of black, white, and Latina/o Riverview students, along with their parents. We also interviewed teachers and staff from departments and units across Riverview. In total, between 2003 and 2007, we interviewed just over 170 members of the Riverview community.[14] During this period we also spent regular time at the school, taking on various formal and informal roles. For part of the time, one of us worked for an external organization that had a collaborative relationship with the district and was housed in the school building. We also worked with the school in different roles, including conducting workshops, consulting formally and informally with personnel, and working with different classroom teachers. Our own regular participation in and around the school undoubtedly helped us secure participation in the research from a wide cross-section of the school community. To supplement this observational and interview data, we also drew on survey data collected in Riverview and 14 similar districts.[15]

While it has taken us longer than we had hoped to answer Maurice Webber's request for help, we have taken substantial time, energy, and care to conduct a thorough examination of what is going on in Riverview. Assistant Principal Webber is not the only one who needs an answer. We share in his feeling of urgency precisely because we think the stakes are so

high. In the chapters that follow, we argue that race has a key role in producing achievement differentials, but not in the ways we typically assume. Importantly, while contemporary patterns of racial inequality are similar to those of the past, the mechanisms that produce them are different. Race still operates on multiple levels—shaping how we think about and interact with one another, shaping the resources we have available as we move through the world, and shaping how institutions like schools reward those resources. Many of the hourly and daily practices and processes that are the substance of what we think of as "school" are racially inflected. What is different is that even as these school policies and practices are operating to create advantages for some groups and put others at a disadvantage, they simultaneously appear to be "race-neutral." Their apparent "nonracialness" is crucial; at the same time that their enactment contributes to inequities, their surface "neutrality" helps to provide legitimacy to the differential outcomes they help to produce.[16] To be sure, today they are generally not designed to or even intended to produce discrepant outcomes. Yet good intentions do not mitigate the results. However intended, these patterns still reinforce racial hierarchies and dominant racial belief systems. It is, we argue, in the daily interaction among school policy, everyday practice, racial ideology, and structural inequality that contradictions emerge between good intentions and bad outcomes.

Despite the Best Intentions represents our best effort to answer Maurice Webber's call to shed light on how racial disparities persist in Riverview. We turn now to what is for us an essential piece of telling this story thoroughly and well—gaining a fuller understanding of how exactly racial dynamics shape educational experience in places like Riverview.

1

Introduction

Dawn, Renee, Miles, Nico, Maria, and Patrick are all students at Riverview High School. They are 15, 16, athletic, artistic, witty, clumsy, tall, medium, goal-oriented, and not. They describe themselves as regular, hard-working, friendly, and shy. They plan to go to Stanford, work for their uncle, play in the NBA, become a lawyer. They are beloved children, annoying siblings, adolescents through and through. They are trying to make their way through the world as best they can with the tools they have. They attend a school that is funded better than many, in a city that is more liberal than most—a school where Mr. Michaels, Ms. Jackson, Ms. Grace, Mr. Fell, and Mr. Bettencourt all work hard every day to help them succeed. And yet, as with most schools, not all of them are successful. That there is variation in student achievement would not be noteworthy if not for that fact that that variation has a racial cast to it—often referred to as "the racial achievement gap." Riverview High School is like many schools nationally in which student outcomes vary significantly along racial lines. This book is our attempt to contribute to an ongoing set of conversations about why that is. We explore how factors inside schools sometimes play a role in these young people's unfolding trajectories. As we explain in the prologue, while a phone call from Riverview High School assistant principal Maurice Webber initially spurred us into action, we had both been concerned about race and educational outcomes for some time.

Mr. Webber's and our concern about racial differences in academic outcomes is not unique—it is mirrored in a wealth of recent attention focused on the "racial achievement gap."[1] Generally, the

term *racial achievement gap* refers to the disparities in test scores, grade point averages, and/or high school and college completion rates between white students and black and/or Latina/o students.[2] As at Riverview, on each of these measures nationally, the average white student outperforms their typical black and Latina/o peers.[3] For example, major gaps exist on a range of standardized tests, including the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the national school report card, and the SAT. In 2006 black students averaged 434 on their verbal SAT scores, Latina/os averaged 457, and whites averaged 527. A similar pattern existed in mathematics, with blacks scoring 429, Latina/os 463, and whites 536.[4]

Differences also exist in high school grade point averages, graduation rates, and placement in gifted programs in lower grades, and honors or advanced placement (AP) educational tracks in upper grades (especially in desegregated schools).[5] Resulting differences in educational attainment (which is influenced by scores and grades) have major implications for one's chances of getting ahead in life. For example, in 2011, college graduates earned nearly $30,000 more per year than high school graduates and about $40,000 a year more than those without a high school diploma.[6] As we show in Table 1.1, over a lifetime, those with college degrees will earn about $1 million more than high school graduates and about $1.5 million more than those without a high school diploma.

When we began this work, the "achievement gap" had been getting a great deal of attention, but the scholarly explanations of what led to the gap had stalled somewhat. Studies using nationally representative survey data, controlling for individual-level measures such as family background and the skills students begin school with, had been unable to fully explain the variance in student performance across race.[7] There was also growing evidence that school-based processes were strongly contributing to the growth in achievement gaps over time. For example, research by scholars such as economists Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt highlighted the fact that black students fell further behind the longer they stayed in school.[8] Thus, while factors outside of school, particularly socioeconomic status and family resources, clearly matter a great deal for educational outcomes, a growing number of scholars had begun to call for a different kind of work. They suggested that in trying to understand why some groups of students continued to underperform, we still did not know enough about what was happening inside school buildings and classrooms. For example,

TABLE 1.1. Synthetic Work-Life Earnings by Educational Attainment[a]

Educational attainment	Synthetic work-life earnings[b]	Margin of error[c]
None to 8th grade	936,000	7,000
9th to 12th grade	1,099,000	7,000
High school graduate	1,371,000	3,000
Some college	1,632,000	5,000
Associate's degree	1,813,000	9,000
Bachelor's degree	2,422,000	8,000
Master's degree	2,834,000	13,000
Professional degree	4,159,000	33,000
Doctorate degree	3,525,000	29,000

[a] Listed in dollars. Source: US Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey.
[b] Synthetic work-life earnings represent expected earnings over a 40-year period for the population aged 25–64 who maintain full-time, year-round employment on median annual earnings. Calculations are based on median annual earnings from a single point in time for eight five-year age groups and multiplied by 5.
[c] The margin of error can be interpreted roughly as providing a 90-percent probability that the interval defined by the estimate minus the margin of error and the estimate plus the margin of error (the lower and upper confidence bounds) contains the true value.

as Vincent Roscigno and James Ainsworth-Darnell put it, much research on school achievement had "overlooked important micropolitical processes that occur in schools and classrooms."[9] Or, as Dennis Condron expressed it, we need far more "rich detail on processes occurring between and within schools."[10] These holes in our understanding existed partly because of the kind of research that had been done. For example, while nationally representative survey data had given us an overall picture of individual student performance and attitudes, it could not provide much insight into everyday school processes that shape school outcomes.[11] While a number of studies had examined racial achievement gaps, most had been conducted in urban schools.[12] This existing work typically discussed African American students as a monolithic group, failing to attend to variations in students' achievement levels, the social class differences that are becoming increasingly important within the black community, or the growing reality of black suburbanization.[13]

Holes in our understanding also resulted from problems in how much of the research on "achievement gaps" conceptualized (or under-conceptualized) race. What is "racial" about "racial achievement gaps"? Why is Riverview students' whiteness or blackness relevant to their school performance? Like too much educational research in general, research on

achievement gaps had often treated race as a variable, showing that it had statistical significance in examinations of test scores but not explaining how or why it mattered. In this kind of work, "race" is left to stand in as a proxy for an implied something "else."[14] However, race cannot be the "cause" of achievement or of good or bad SAT scores.[15] Race is a social and political category.[16] It marks the way that bodies have historically become "racialized"—meaning how bodies have been assigned to socially constructed "races" and how racial categories have emerged and unfolded—the way elite Englishmen, Dutch settlers, Italian peasants, and Jewish refugees became "white," the way that Chippewa and Choctaw and Iroquis tribe members became "Indians," and the way that members of diverse African ethnic groups (e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa) became "black." Despite historic arguments to the contrary, "race" is not a biological category.[17] Racial categories, their boundaries, and which bodies are understood to belong to which category have not been stable across time, nor across space or geography.[18] While it is crucial to understand that "race" is not a natural or biological category, it is also important to recognize that it can still be socially "real," having fundamentally shaped the organization of social life in the United States for centuries.[19] To paraphrase historian W. I. Thomas, when people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

This discussion of what "race" is, what it does and does not mean, complicates discussions of how race matters for school outcomes.[20] If those identified or racialized as black at Riverview High School are collectively performing in school differently than those identified or racialized as "white," it is not because these groups are fundamentally different in some underlying genetic way. Instead, we must examine the multiple historic and current consequences of racialization—what happened to and continues to happen to people once they were/are placed within particular categories, including the historic and current operation of racism and racial discrimination. In the next sections, we dig deeper into the full and broad consequences of these racialization processes for schooling. What does race have to do with it?

RACE "MATTERS" ON MANY LEVELS

Too often today people continue to talk about race and its consequences in shallow terms—as merely a set of ideas or identities or attitudes. As historian Thomas Guglielmo put it, "It is, to be sure, all of these things—but

also much more. It is . . . very much about power and resources (or lack thereof)."[21] While clearly race has consequences for our individual understandings of self and other, it matters much more—with deep and broad consequences for the very organization of social institutions. In societies like the United States, where race has been a fundamental organizing principle since before the country's founding, racialization led not only to the formation of entrenched cultural belief systems that suggested some people were essentially different (and better) than others, but also led to the development of complex hierarchies in which those racialized bodies were *treated differently* in social, legal, political, and economic realms.

Over time the exact organization of these hierarchies has evolved, along with the belief systems that accompany them. From slavery to Jim Crow to what many now label the "post–civil rights era," how we think about race, and how race organizes our lives, has changed dramatically. And yet, contrary to popular claims that we are in a "post-racial" moment, we are not witnessing the slow demise of the relevance of race. Current shifts are a matter of changes in the form of racial dynamics (e.g., *de jure* segregation being replaced by *de facto* segregation). When rain turns to snow as the seasons change, we might well need different clothing, but we are getting wet just the same.

The challenge for understanding what is "racial" about "racial achievement gaps" comes in part from the challenge of keeping the larger history of race in mind when we are trying to understand daily processes. This is the challenge of paying attention simultaneously to the very bigness and the very smallness of its effects and to the connections between the two. As Matthew Hughey argues in his work *White Bound*, "Dominant meanings of race organize our social relations . . . [and] this social order works to reproduce racist schema and racial inequality through the mundane activities of everyday life."[22] When racial categories are (even subconsciously) assigned in daily interactions, entrenched cultural belief systems get primed, cultural belief systems that emerged and evolved across long histories. Thus, if blacks or whites or Latina/os or Asians at Riverview or elsewhere are thought of as more or less criminal, more or less intelligent, more or less athletically inclined, more or less trustworthy, it is because of how racial thinking and our ideas about different groups developed and evolved across time.[23] How we keep track of and make sense of connections between our daily living and this larger structure and history of race

is no small task. Sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote of this challenge over 50 years ago in his call for the "sociological imagination":

> . . . men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world.[24]

This "quality of mind" is rare because making these connections between daily life and "world history" is not simple or straightforward.

Our racial history is part of our present, it is in our structures, its legacies can be felt in the ways schools are organized, in how neighborhoods are laid out, in the composition of our family trees, in the unconscious stereotypes that get primed when we mentally sort people along racial lines. We walk around with it, and while it is never the only dynamic in the room, it matters. For example, the long history of degrading black and brown bodies and black and brown minds, of characterizing black and brown people as "less than," as dangerous, or "just" deviant is in the room when a teacher perceives a black student's questions as combative or threatening and a white student's as inquisitive.

Clearly, no individual's or student's life and experiences are solely determined by their racial categorization. But the history and present realities of race shape the parameters within which we operate. Our long racial history has resulted in both entrenched material inequalities and entrenched cultural belief systems. In addition to providing ways of making sense of abstract and distant hierarchies, these belief systems also play out in daily interactions. Research in social psychology shows, for example, that these belief systems attach status or value to distinguishing attributes such as race.[25] Resulting *race-based status beliefs* shape how we understand others and ourselves, how we make sense of the racial landscape in which we operate, and how we act and interact. Ridgeway and Erickson define status beliefs as "widely shared cultural beliefs that people who belong to one social group are more esteemed and competent than those who belong

to another social group."[26] Status beliefs both construct and justify social inequality between categories of people.[27] Thus, long histories of racial stratification shape opportunities, shifting racial ideologies set a context for how we understand racial difference, cultural belief systems influence how we interact and respond to one another. Even if not over-determining, all of these dynamics set the context for action.

So, when we ask, "How do you make sense of an award-winning public high school that is known for its rigor, diversity, and quality in which white and black students are so internally academically segregated?," we must think of the question within the larger context of racial contradictions and ironies. How do you make sense of a society founded on principles of justice and liberty for all, which has since its founding formally and informally disenfranchised large swaths of the population? Particularly in a context like the United States, founded on principals of equality, we understand that ways of making *sense* of entrenched racial hierarchies are key to their continuation.[28]

NEW RACISM AND SCHOOLING—STRUCTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND IDEOLOGICAL DYNAMICS

While we seem to be fixated on the "racial achievement gap" now, there have always been "achievement gaps" in the United States between black and white and Latina/o and white children. During the very long period of our country's history, spanning the several centuries of slavery and almost 100 years of Jim Crow, there were large collective gaps between the academic skills and access of blacks and whites. While whites at the time might have understood those gaps to be a result of the inherent intellectual inferiority of blacks, the gaps were ensured and enforced first by laws limiting if not outlawing African Americans' access to education and then by laws permitting access only to separate and unequal schooling. Segregated and unequal schooling was also the norm throughout the Southwest, ensuring that Mexican-American children would remain available to serve as low-wage labor.[29] It would be absurd to characterize the educational situation during those earlier historic moments as "achievement gaps." As James Anderson argues, "It made no sense . . . to focus on test score gaps during the periods when African American [and Latina/o] students were denied basic access to elementary and secondary schools."[30]