

Compiling a racial justice report card

by Paul Socolar and Raymond Gunn

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"The School District is failing or refusing to provide an equal educational opportunity and a quality education to children attending racially isolated minority schools."

"The School District has not provided to Black and Hispanic students equal access to . . . the best qualified and most experienced teachers, equal physical facilities and plants, equal access to advanced or special admissions academic course offerings, or equal allocation of resources."

These were the words of Commonwealth Court Judge Doris Smith over seven years ago in a scathing ruling requiring the School District to take steps to improve the District's predominantly African American and Latino schools.

An examination of racial equity in Philadelphia schools conducted by the *Public School Notebook* this summer found scattered signs of progress, but overall the findings were sadly consistent with the picture drawn by Judge Smith in her 1994 ruling on school desegregation.

We looked closely at a wide range of data about students and schools, most of which showed deep and continuing racial inequality. In a series of interviews with close observers, the brightest picture that could be painted of the District is that a more serious push toward equity has been attempted in recent years. But even this effort is in danger of disappearing as new waves of reorganization hit the system.

Data on graduates

One good starting point for examining racial equity is to look at students coming out of the system after high school. The *Notebook* found that the graduation rate for African American and Latino students in Philadelphia remains shockingly low (see chart, p. 13). In fact, less than half of the District's Latino male and female students and of African American males graduate on time in four years.

This is despite the fact that graduation rates for African American and Latino students have improved noticeably since 1996, and the gap in graduation rates compared to white and Asian students has narrowed. Nearly two-thirds of white students graduate in four years.

While the graduation rates of all other groups have been improving, the on-time graduation rate for Asian students has declined by roughly 4% since 1996. For Asian males the rate has dropped to 62.8%; for Asian females, whose rate is still the highest in

the District, it is 73.3%. This decline is one of a number of signs that the District needs to provide more effective supports for its Asian students.

Compounding the significant weakness in graduation rates are big disparities in post-secondary plans for those who graduate from Philadelphia's public schools. Among Asian males and Asian and white females graduating from Philadelphia high schools in 2000, three-fourths or more said they plan to go on to 2- or 4-year colleges. But the college-going rates of other groups of high school graduates are significantly lower (see graphs). According to students' reports of their plans, they range from 66% for African American female graduates down to as low as 40% for Hispanic male graduates.

While the college-going rate for white males is below 60%, researchers say that white males who do not attend college have more employment opportunities open to them than other groups.

Opportunity gap

The School District has touted its progress in raising the standardized test scores of all groups. But the *Notebook's* analysis of the data found that progress in test scores did not whittle away at the significant divide between racial groups (see p. 12). African Americans and Latinos continue to score much lower on these tests, which play a significant role in determining access to the system's strongest academic high school programs.

These disparities often are cast as an "achievement gap" – that African American and Latino students do worse in school. But there is a significant "opportunity gap" as well in Philadelphia. Students of color do not have the same access to high-quality instruction and challenging coursework as their white counterparts. Lacking funding to build many new school buildings, the District continues to operate a large number of aging facilities, which are concentrated in communities of color.

The *Notebook* found evidence of the opportunity gap in many areas. Access to certified and experienced teachers – or even a regularly assigned teacher – is much more of a problem in schools where students of color predominate.

Asians, Latinos and African Americans all continue to be identified to participate in mentally gifted classes in much lower percentages than do white students, though their numbers in these programs have grown. African American and Latino students continue to face long odds in applying to the District's special admission high schools such as Central (see page 18). And they continue to be under-represented in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, which provide a chance for high schoolers to earn college credit and do more challenging work.

Of all Philadelphia public school students enrolled in AP classes last year, 39% were white, 31% were African American, 20% were Asian and 8% were Latino. Whites represented 17% of the total student population, African Americans 65%, Asians 5%, and Latinos 13%.

Signs of progress

Some point to significant, positive changes in the District in the last six years, such as the creation of an Office of Equity, the holding of an annual “All Means All” conference highlighting the need for high standards for all students, and efforts to redirect resources to schools with the greatest needs.

Data about the performance of different racial groups was readily available to the *Notebook* for the period beginning in 1996, whereas prior to that date it was difficult to obtain breakdowns of how these groups were doing.

Equity was a major theme of Superintendent David Hornbeck’s *Children Achieving* agenda.

“The rhetoric about equity was out there in some places,” commented educational consultant and activist Rochelle Nichols Solomon. “That’s significant, but it’s not sufficient.”

Solomon maintained that repeated emphasis in the District on “All children can learn” had begun to change the tenor of conversations about schools here. There were gains in student performance, too, but “everybody’s standards went up, and the gap still remained,” she said.

Biggest obstacle is funding

Parties to the desegregation case in which Judge Smith presides say that the big obstacle to achieving the court’s equity goals has been the failure to secure additional funding, not lack of effort by the District.

“There is a feeling that the District, within the parameters of its resources, has attempted to address the issues it’s been ordered to, pursuant to the court’s orders,” said attorney Michael Churchill, who represents community groups in the desegregation case.

But underfunding continues to be a pervasive problem. The *Notebook* spoke with staff of a number of School District offices providing valuable supports to help schools meet the diverse needs of their students, and found that these offices are understaffed and in some cases underutilized. In particular, the District has strong resources addressing issues of language equity and developing a multicultural curriculum.

Observers expressed concern about whether the District’s various equity initiatives would survive a state takeover or a management takeover by Edison. The state of Pennsylvania has never broken down data about student performance by race to examine these equity issues.

“These things have a way of evaporating very quickly. The approach of the District’s leadership is very critical,” said Solomon.

"People in leadership need to give voice to an equity agenda. It has to be deliberate and bold," she added.

Other key findings of the *Notebook's* study:

- Salary data for District employees show that whites are disproportionately represented in higher level positions and African Americans in lower level positions. Among school personnel, the racial disparity was particularly noticeable in jobs such as department chairperson, counselor and psychologist. The numbers of Latino and Asian District staff are small.
- African American and Latino students experience the harshest discipline. The District continues to suspend students at an alarmingly high rate, particularly African American males. The School District appears to have made little headway at implementing alternative disciplinary strategies. There were 308 suspensions per 1000 students in Philadelphia in 1999-2000. Of these, 93% were out-of-school suspensions. African American (344 per 1000 students) and Latino (317 per 1000) students are suspended at much higher rates than whites (232 per 1000). Rates for Asian students are lowest by far (82 per thousand). There has been little change in these rates since 1995-96. Expulsion numbers are small, but it is a punishment that almost exclusively applies to African American students (53 of 62 expulsions in 1999-2000 were African Americans).
- African Americans are persisting in school at essentially the same rate as whites; in fact, the dropout rate for African Americans is slightly lower. But the effort on the part of African Americans to stay in school has not translated into comparable graduation rates. Dropout rates continue to be highest among Latino students. The dropout rate for Asian males is comparable to that for white and African American males.
- Schools with a significant number of whites are more likely to provide opportunities for parents to participate in school decision-making. In 1999, a study found that only 58% of Philadelphia's "racially isolated" schools (defined as schools that are more than 90% African American and Latino) had functioning school councils, while there were councils at 90% of the schools not considered to be racially isolated.

For more information on the
Philadelphia Public School Notebook:
215.951.0330 x107
psnotebook@aol.com