

The Role of Schools in Reducing Racial Inequality: Closing the Achievement Gap

UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN RACE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The relationship between race, class, and school performance has been one of the most consistent features of education in the United States (Fass, 1989; Tyack, 1980). The educational outcomes of racial minorities and poor children typically have reflected broader patterns of inequality: Minority and disadvantaged children tend to do less well in school than affluent White students (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Miller, 1995). Rather than serving as the "great equalizer" as envisioned by Horace Mann, one of the early architects of American public education (Katznelson & Weir, 1985), schools in the United States more often have been sites where patterns of privilege and inequality are maintained and reproduced. Even in places such as Berkeley where children of different backgrounds attend the same schools, it is common for White children to outperform non-Whites, and for the children of the poor to do less well than their more affluent counterparts.

The consistency and predictability of these patterns contribute to the commonsense notion that differences in academic performance among children are "normal" and can be explained by "essential" (such as biological, cultural, or familial) differences that exist within the U.S. population. Historically, differences in achievement and academic performance have been attributed to innate differences in intelligence and genetic endowments (Hernstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969). Although such explanations presently are regarded as politically objectionable, the fact that they are reintroduced into the public discourse periodically by scholars and journalists (although generally not geneticists)¹ suggests that they have an enduring appeal. It also should be remembered that the presumption that non-Whites generally—and Blacks, Native Americans, Hawaiians,

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Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans specifically—were inferior peoples, serve as the primary means through which slavery, colonization, and more contemporary forms of subordination and exploitation have been justified (Fredrickson, 1981; Horsemann, 1981). While the influence of the ideology of White supremacy may seem less relevant today in post-civil rights America, there is considerable evidence that its legacy and concomitant presumption of non-White inferiority are still very much a part of the present.

An analysis of schools in the East Bay (Richmond, Berkeley, and Oakland) reveals in a stark and graphic manner the ways in which the academic outcomes of children are linked to the racial and class characteristics of neighborhood. It turns out that the higher the elevation of the school, the higher its aggregate test score. Conversely, the closer the school is to sea level, the lower the test scores of its students. Such a pattern is perplexing unless one knows about the characteristics of neighborhoods in the East Bay. Generally, poor and working-class people of color live in flatland neighborhoods, while more affluent White people live in the hills. Given these demographic patterns with respect to the composition of neighborhoods and schools, the relationship between school location and the test scores of children hardly seems surprising or unusual; the scores follow a pattern that Americans historically have come to expect as "normal."

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Since the 1960s, explanations of school performance that have the greatest popularity tend to emphasize the importance of cultural differences. For example, it is widely believed that Asian American students tend to do well academically because their culture emphasizes the importance of hard work and the pursuit of academic excellence (Lee, 1996; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Takaki, 1989). Over the past 25 years, the number of Asian American students entering the most elite universities in the United States has increased substantially (Takagi, 1992). In many parts of the United States, the fact that students from the broad assortment of groups labeled as "Asian" outperform Whites and other groups on a number of academic indicators has reinforced their status as a "model minority."

In contrast, African American, Native American, and Latino student are perceived as being held back by their culture. Oppositional attitudes a poor work ethic, and, in some instances, a culture of poverty frequently are identified as causes of lower academic achievement for students from these groups (Ogbu, 1987b). Repeating the arguments of Shelby Steele

(1990), Berkeley linguist John McWhorter (2000) argues that African Americans suffer from a culture of "victimology." He contends that "victimology stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor," and he adds that it "condones weakness and failure" (p. 28).

Books like those of Steele and McWhorter generally sell quite well. There seems to be an insatiable appetite for work by Black scholars that blames Black people for the problems they experience. Books like theirs sell well even though cultural explanations of academic performance fail to account for those who deviate from established patterns, including individuals like Steele, McWhorter, and me. More significantly, such theories occupy a dominant position among researchers and practitioners. Even though cultural arguments cannot explain, for example, the large number of Asian students at Galileo High School in San Francisco or Richmond High School who drop out of school, the idea that Asian students constitute a model minority persists. There is no evidence that these students do less well in school because they have an insufficient amount of Asian culture. However, their difficulties are dismissed as some sort of odd exception, while stereotypes about the cultural origins of Asian student success remain firmly intact (Lee, 1996). Broad generalizations about culture are so widely embraced and so deeply embedded in popular thinking about race and school performance that they manage to survive even when there is empirical evidence that appears to undermine their validity.

One of my former students at the University of California, Berkeley, Julian Ledesma (1995), tested the strength of the Asian model minority stereotype in a paper that he wrote for one of my courses. He surveyed students and teachers at Fremont High School in Oakland about which ethnic group they believed was most academically talented. The vast majority of those he surveyed identified Asian students as the highest performers. This was true even for the Asian students he interviewed who were not doing well in school. Given that Asian students were overrepresented in honors and advanced placement courses at the school, and given that several of the school's valedictorians had been Asian, their responses were hardly surprising. However, in his analysis of student performance data, Julian showed that the academic stars at the school who happened to be Asian were not representative of Asian students as a whole. In fact, the grade point average for Asian students at the school was 1.9. He pointed out that because Asian students were perceived as academically successful, little effort had been expended to provide them with the kind of academic support or special services that had been made available to other students.

In addition to reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes, cultural explanations of academic ability also fail to account for the high degree of diversity within racial groups. Differences related to class and income, the educational background of parents, the quality of school students attend, or the kind of neighborhood students live in significantly affect student achievement (Miller, 1995). Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to generalize about the performance of racial groups, they often are ignored. Consequently, although there are a considerable number of White students who do poorly in school, substantially less attention is paid to this problem than to the issues facing minority students. Academic failure among White students, like the existence of poverty among White people in the United States, is a phenomenon that is rendered invisible by the overemphasis on race in American social policy. Because racial disparities in measurements of intelligence and academic performance have been used to rationalize racial inequality and discrimination in the United States (Herrstein & Murray, 1994; Lehtman, 1999), deviations from established patterns often have been overlooked. It is even more troubling that because culture is treated as an overriding explanation of academic ability, we often have ignored other factors that influence school performance and that we actually might be able to do something about.

During the late 1980s, I was one of several researchers working with the Task Force on Black Student Eligibility that was established by the University of California to study the factors influencing the enrollment of Black students in the University system. The Task Force had been created because the number of Black students who were eligible for admission to the University had been declining steadily for several years (Making the Future Different, 1990). For one of my assignments, I was asked to identify urban public high schools across the state that consistently produced a significant number of high-achieving Black students. My search identified three high schools that for 3 or more years had produced seven or more Black students eligible for the University of California. As I learned more about these schools, I discovered that high academic standards and high-quality academic programs were common to all three. It also turned out that the three schools were led by strong African American principals who devised and implemented academic enrichment programs to support student achievement.

Explanations of academic performance that emphasize the importance of culture generally ignore the fact that what we think of as culture—customs, beliefs, and practices associated with particular groups—is constantly subject to change. Particularly in a country like the United States where

the steady influx of immigrants and the popular culture produced by the mass media exert profound influence over values and norms, the idea that culture could be treated as a static independent variable is very misleading and results in misconceptions. Yet, this is precisely what a number of scholars who study the relationship between race and education have done. Even though several of the better-known scholars are regarded as experts in the study of culture (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Fordham, 1996; McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1987b), they continue to propagate the idea that culture determines academic performance. With knowledgeable scholars uncritically embracing broad generalizations about the relationship between culture and academic achievement, it is not surprising that we also find widespread acceptance of this perspective among educational practitioners and the general public.

Undoubtedly, one reason for the popularity of cultural explanations of academic performance is that they are less overtly racist, placing the blame on culture is less controversial than locating the problem in the genetic make-up of a racial group. Unlike genes, culture is not immutable. Through education, social mobility, and assimilation, one can be freed from a "deprived" or even "pathological" culture and become part of mainstream America.² This is undoubtedly why African American scholars such as John McWhorter and Shelby Steele go to great lengths to describe their personal backgrounds. By describing their own accomplishments at length (McWhorter in particular does this in the most self-serving way), they can distinguish themselves as high achievers relative to other African Americans. In so doing, they set themselves up as model individuals and living proof that it is possible to escape the harmful effects of African American culture.

The fact that scholars like Steele and McWhorter blame Black students and Black people generally for academic failure, has made them extremely popular with conservatives. Cultural explanations are attractive because by placing the cause of disparities in achievement within the attitudes and behaviors of students and their families, they absolve schools and U.S. society generally from any responsibility for reversing academic trends. After all, there is little that schools or for that matter any other social institution can do to change a person's culture. If those who fail or underperform are from groups that are "culturally disadvantaged" and do not value education, is it fair to hold schools responsible? Of course, this logic shares a disturbing consistency with a broad array of deeply embedded racially biased beliefs that historically have permeated American society—beliefs that have rationalized the differential treatment accorded to Black people and other racial minorities on the basis of their presumed inferiority. Yet, when they are used to explain the relationship between race and academic

achievement and framed in terms of culture, such arguments are more palatable because they are perceived as less racist (especially because often they are made by minority scholars) or pernicious.

MOVING FROM CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS TO DECISIVE ACTION

Genetic and cultural explanations of differences in achievement continue to circulate widely throughout U.S. society. In my work with schools, such explanations come up frequently whenever disparities in student achievement are discussed. Too often I have found that such explanations are used to rationalize why schools are unable to help students achieve at higher levels.

For example, I was invited to speak at a high school located in an affluent community in Marin County, California, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. The school had spent the previous 3 years engaged in various reform projects—restructuring class schedules, adopting an integrated curriculum, and creating two new career academies. As the school was approaching the end of its reform process, I was invited to speak to the faculty on the topic of diversity. Their interest in the topic stemmed from the fact that over the course of 10 years, the school had gone from serving a predominantly White and affluent student population to one in which 90% of the students were poor Mexican immigrants. During that period several major problems had developed at the school, including a rising drop-out rate, lower SAT scores and college attendance, and gang-related conflicts among students.

Before addressing the topic of diversity, I asked the teachers whether they believed that the changes they had adopted at the school would lead to an improvement in academic outcomes for their students. After a good deal of discussion on this question, a consensus emerged among the faculty. Several teachers stated that little change in academic performance would occur because the families of their students simply did not value education. As one veteran teacher put it, "These people are just barely getting by. They're working two and three jobs for very little money. How can we expect them to support their kids' education?" Others were less sympathetic but echoed this teacher's sentiment that the students came from a culture that did not value education. They believed that their students simply were conforming to the low expectations they had learned at home.

I then probed to learn more about their knowledge of their students' culture and to find out what they actually knew about the families of the

students they served. In particular, I wanted to know whether they had spoken to any parents while they were carrying out the reforms, or if they could tell me anything about their students' families and the neighborhoods where they lived. As it turned out, most of the teachers knew very little about the lives of their students outside of school, and no one present could even say where most of the students lived. Where poor people could live in this affluent community is not readily apparent because the average home in the area was valued at over \$700,000 in 2000. Several of the teachers said that they had heard their students talk about a "zone" located near a canal, and they believed that was where most of the students lived. However, not one of the teachers present had ever visited the area. Growing defensive because of my questions, the teachers explained that they had not spoken to any parents because their planning meetings occurred during the school day while parents were working.

As I started my workshop focused on "diversity," I pointed out that without a partnership with parents and others who knew and understood the social reality of the students, finding a way to reach them in school and improve their academic performance would be extremely difficult. This assertion generated no opposition since the teachers had already acknowledged that their attempts at working with students without the support of parents had been futile. I also pointed out that since many of the students were old enough to drop out of school if they wanted to, there was a strong possibility that many of them and their families believed that education was important.

Interestingly, these two revelations seemed to have a dramatic effect on the tenor of our conversation. At the teachers' insistence, the remainder of our workshop focused on a discussion of how the school might go about engaging parents in a constructive dialogue over how to support the education of their children. We also spent time identifying agencies and churches that provide services to the Mexican immigrant community. We discussed how these organizations could be enlisted to support the efforts of the school.

My experience at this high school illustrates how easy it is for stereotypes and assumptions about the values and culture of students and their families to influence the way schools respond to their needs. A great deal of research on teaching has shown that educators often equate differences (such as in culture, language, or race) with intellectual deficiencies, and that such beliefs often have a profound influence on the expectations that are held toward students (Banks, 1981; Davidman & Davidman, 1994; Nieto, 1992). In the case of this school, race, class, and linguistic barriers limited the ability of the faculty to conceive of educational programs and interventions that they believed would elevate the academic performance

of their students. These barriers also had the effect of negating the possibility that parents would be engaged as partners in the process of delivering high-quality education to their children. In my experience working with schools, I often have found that even when educators assert that they want to get parents involved in the education of their children, parents are more likely to be excluded and treated with disregard if they are poor, uneducated, and non-White.

This example also sheds light on why many schools fail in their efforts to raise the academic performance of low-income minority students, and why it is that high levels of academic failure among such students often are treated as inevitable and impossible to alter. In schools where low student achievement has been present for a long time, it is not uncommon for educators to develop a variety of ways to rationalize their students' failure. Blaming uncaring parents, lazy students, or a society that does not provide adequately for the needs of poor children serves as an effective means to avoid taking responsibility for one's role as an educator. Once failure is normalized and the causes of failure are attributed to some set of factors beyond one's control, reversing patterns of achievement can be nearly impossible.

Yet, this case also reveals a kernel of possibility. When given the chance, the faculty at this school was very much interested in learning more about the needs of the students and their families. As they learned more, they were willing to consider how they might make modifications in their work to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Moreover, when prompted to examine the assumptions they had made about the culture of their students, many readily conceded that they had formed judgments that were not based on accurate information. Finally and most important, the vast majority of these teachers genuinely wanted to see the academic outcomes of their students improve, and although they had little faith that the changes they had made would bring this about, I have no doubt that their desire for greater academic success was real. From my own experience, I have learned that when the hopes of teachers are encouraged and transformed into concrete actions for improving the quality of teaching, the possibility of bringing about substantial change in schools can be realized.

EXCEPTIONS TO RACIAL PATTERNS: IMMIGRANT AND MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK STUDENTS

The issues surrounding the relationship between race and achievement seem to be particularly complex when we consider what appears to be a paradox in the performance of two broad categories of students: recent

immigrants and middle-class Black students. Several studies reveal that immigrant students of color, many of whom are from low-income families, often are academically successful (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Ogbu, 1987b; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).³ This finding shows up not just for Asian immigrants but for immigrants from a variety of other nations and regions as well. As a result of their academic success in high school, a disproportionate number of immigrant students, especially from certain Asian countries (e.g., Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Vietnam), presently are overrepresented at several leading universities in the United States (Takaki, 1989).

Of course, the relative success of immigrant students should not be overstated. Many immigrant students are not doing well at school. Latino immigrants in particular, such as the students at the high school previously mentioned in Marin, are at greater risk of dropping out of school (Garcia, 2001; Valencia, 1991), less likely to attend college, and more likely to join gangs (Vigil, 2002) than students in the general population. Additionally, school and community conditions in the areas where immigrants settle and the amount of education they received prior to arriving in the United States significantly influences academic performance (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Even with these important qualifiers, the significant number of low-income immigrant children who excel in school is an undeniable phenomenon, and one that requires an explanation given the rampant failure and mediocre performance of so many domestic minority and nonminority students in the United States.

In contrast to the disproportionate success of many immigrant students, many middle-class Black students tend to underperform academically even though they come from relatively privileged families (Ferguson, 2000; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). On most standardized tests, including the SAT, middle-class Black students tend to perform less well than even low-income White and Asian students (Ferguson, 2000). This is one of the reasons why the new percentage-based admissions policies that have been adopted in California, Florida, and Texas as a replacement for affirmative action have failed to significantly increase Black and Latino enrollment at state-run public universities (Frost, 2003). Even in racially segregated high schools, the highest-achieving students, who are most likely to benefit from these new policies, are more likely to be immigrants than U.S.-born Blacks or Latinos (Frost, 2003).⁴

While several factors directly and indirectly influence the relative success of immigrants and the underachievement of middle-class Blacks and Latinos, I believe that these patterns are related largely to the ways in which racial and gender identities are constructed in school settings. Several studies have shown that students are influenced by the perceptions

and expectations of the adults who teach them (Brookover & Erickson, 1969; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995). We know relatively less about how student perceptions of their racial identities affect their outlook and performance in school. Patterns of achievement suggest that race, class, and gender are related to academic performance. Certain categories of students, namely, African American and Latino males, are consistently overrepresented at the lower rungs of the achievement ladder (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Miller, 1995). However, we know relatively little about the subjective dimension of this phenomenon or how awareness of these patterns might affect how students see themselves.

We do know that race is more than just a social identity (Omi & Winant, 1986). Race is also an ideological construct, one that is loaded with meanings and beliefs about superiority and inferiority (Miles, 1989). When one identifies as a member of a racial group in the United States, one necessarily takes on the history, stigma, and stereotypes associated with that group. For subordinate groups in particular, membership within racial categories carries with it certain political commitments. These commitments often generate a sense of solidarity among members that can create a shared outlook and perspective on social and political issues. For some young people, the commitments associated with racial membership can lead them to shut off possibilities of participating in activities and courses that are perceived as being outside the invisible but real racial boundaries. When this occurs, individual options can be severely limited.

Schools are rarely neutral on matters related to race. In many U.S. schools, a firm and clear racial hierarchy is in place, one in which Blacks and Latinos are overrepresented in categories related to negative behavior, and Whites are overrepresented in positive categories. Race shows up as a salient feature in friendships and peer groups (Peshkin, 2000), course enrollment patterns (Oakes, 1985), club membership (Steinberg, 1996), and matters related to punishment and discipline (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). For this reason, understanding the process through which young people come to see themselves as belonging to particular racial categories is important because it can have profound implications for the norms and behaviors they embrace in connection with their social and academic performance.

For many years, a number of researchers have recognized the significance of the link between the process of identity development (unrelated to race) as it occurs among adolescents, and academic performance. The subjective positioning of students has been found to have bearing on motivation and persistence (Newman, 1992), on relationships with peer groups and teachers (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Stenberg, 1996), on confidence and deviance (Gottfredson, 2001), and on overall self-esteem (Obiakor,

1992). Yet, despite the substantial body of research in this area, there is far less agreement among scholars about how the development of racial identities among adolescents influences the stance and orientation they adopt in relation to school.

There is a large body of research on racial identity development (Cross, Parnham, & Helms, 1991; Phinney, 1990; Tatum, 1997), but most of these studies have not considered the process through which racial identities evolve and shape academic performance. Despite overwhelming evidence of a strong correlation between race and academic performance, there is considerable confusion about how and why American minority students come to perceive a linkage between their racial identities and their academic ability, and how these in turn shape their aspirations and behaviors toward education and school.

The scholars whose work has had the greatest influence on these issues are Ogbu (1987a, 1987b, 1990) and Fordham (1996), both of whom argue that Black students from all socioeconomic backgrounds develop "oppositional identities" that lead them to view schooling as a form of forced assimilation. Having positioned themselves as marginal outsiders, Ogbu and Fordham argue that Black students and other "non-voluntary minorities" (e.g., Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans) come to equate academic success with "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). For these researchers, such perceptions lead to the devaluation of academic pursuits and the adoption of self-defeating behaviors that inhibit possibilities for academic success. The few who aspire to achieve academically (kids like Cedric Jennings, mentioned in Chapter 1) must pay a heavy price for success. According to these researchers, Black students who perform at high levels often are ostracized by their peers as traitors and "sell outs," and are compelled to adopt a "raceless" persona to avoid the stigma associated with membership in their racial groups (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

In contrast, others (Gibson, 1988; Matut-Biachi, 1986; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) have argued that immigrant students of color are largely immune to the insidious association between race and achievement that traps students from domestic minority backgrounds. So-called "voluntary minorities," whether Mexican, Asian, African, or West Indian, are more likely to perceive schooling as a pathway to social mobility, and for this reason they are also more likely to adopt behaviors that increase the likelihood of academic success. Having been raised in societies where people of their race or ethnic group are in the majority, they typically have not been subjected to socialization processes that lead them to see themselves as members of subordinate or inferior groups. Less influenced or cognizant of the history of racial oppression in the United States, these students are more likely to accommodate the dominant culture and conform to the

prescriptions that are regarded as essential for achieving success in school (Spring, 1994; Waters, 1990). Even if they avoid complete assimilation, they are more likely to conform to the expectations of their teachers and adopt behaviors that contribute to school success (Gibson, 1988; Ogbu, 1987a, 1987b).

When viewed in combination with Steele's (1997) work on the effects of racial stereotypes on academic performance, a compelling explanation for the identity-achievement paradox begins to emerge. Through his research on student attitudes toward testing, Steele has shown that students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability. According to Steele, when "stereotype threats" are operative, they lower the confidence of vulnerable students and negatively affect their performance on standardized tests. Steele (1997) writes, "Ironically, their susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it" (p. 614). For Steele, the debilitating effects of stereotypes can extend beyond particular episodes of testing and can have an impact on overall academic performance. Yet, because he does not locate the problem in the culture of students, Steele suggests that schools and universities can adopt a number of strategies to reduce the stigma experienced by women and racial minorities and thereby reduce the effects of stereotype threats.

If we attempt to combine the arguments that have been made about immigrant students with those of Steele, we could extrapolate that recent immigrant students are less likely to be susceptible to the threat associated with negative racial stereotypes because their "newness" to the U.S. social landscape protects them. Not having been socialized to see themselves as inferior, immigrant students are less likely to see themselves as are also less likely to "resist" aspects of schooling that require conformity and assimilation to values and norms that domestic minorities regard as White and middle class, and therefore inimical to their sense of identity (Solomon, 1992).

In contrast, because of the ways in which they are socialized and become racialized in school settings, middle-class Black students are more likely to identify with the styles and behaviors of lower-class members of their racial/ethnic group. This occurs in part because, unlike the White middle class, the Black middle class is closely connected through family ties, residence, and popular culture to the Black lower class (Portilla, 1999). Rather than risk being ostracized for differentiating themselves from their peers, middle-class Black students may adopt attitudes and behaviors that undermine their possibilities for achieving academic success. As I will describe later, they may avoid academically enriching activities and courses

if these are perceived as "White," and they may adopt self-defeating behaviors that reduce their likelihood of success in school. These behaviors will occur unless decisive steps are taken in schools to prevent students from linking their racial identity to negative school performance. Several national studies have shown that Black students watch more hours of television than any other group, place greater priority on social acceptance and popularity, and are less likely to engage in leisure reading than White students (Clark, 1983; Ferguson, 2000). Undoubtedly, such tendencies also contribute to the underperformance of middle-class African American students.⁵

The experience of my eldest son is illustrative of the ways in which the construction of racial identities in school settings can undermine the academic performance of talented middle-class Black and Latino students. Until he entered tenth grade, Joaquin was an exemplary student. In addition to doing well in school, he was a talented musician (he played piano and percussion for several years) and an exceptional athlete (soccer, basketball, and wrestling). Not only was it rare for me to receive complaints about his behavior in school, but most of the adults that worked with him described him as courteous, respectful, and a leader among his peers.

However, when Joaquin entered tenth grade, his grades declined dramatically. Not only did he receive failing grades for the first time in math and science classes, but he began cutting classes and getting into trouble at school. As my wife and I struggled to figure out what was happening to Joaquin and how best we could support him, I gradually began to learn that much of the change in his performance was related to the expectations he had set for himself. By tenth grade, most of Joaquin's closest friends were failing in school. These were primarily African American kids from working-class families who had grown up in our neighborhood in south Berkeley, one of the poorest sections of the city. Although most of his friends seemed to be doing fine academically while they were in elementary and middle school, on entering high school their behavior and academic performance took a turn for the worse. Lacking sufficient guidance and support at home, distracted by less academically focused peers, and finding out that they could cut school with impunity due to the permissive culture at Berkeley High School, many of Joaquin's friends were in danger of dropping out of school entirely by tenth grade.

When we confronted Joaquin about the decline in his performance, he consistently made reference to how much better he was doing than his friends. When we encouraged him not to compare himself with them but to strive to do his best, he responded that we didn't understand what he was going through. Frustrated by my inability to help him change his performance in school, I struggled to understand. However, it was not until

he reminded me to think about what it had been like for me to be in high school myself that I "got it." As a high school student I had coped with the isolation that came from being one of few students of color in my advanced classes by working hard to prove that I could do as well as or better than my White peers. However, outside of the classroom I also worked hard to prove to my less studious friends that I was cool. For me this primarily meant playing basketball, hanging out, fighting when necessary, and acting as though I was one of the "fellas." In fact, it also meant that I was forced to adopt a split persona: I behaved one way in class, another way with my friends, and yet another way at home.

During his tenth-grade year, Joaquin was in the midst of figuring out how to pull off a similar personality make-over. His failing grades and poor behavior were clear signs that he had not yet found a way to balance his desire to succeed academically and to be accepted by his friends. As a result, he was at risk of failing in school despite his abilities and despite the support and pressure to succeed he received at home.

Fortunately, during his junior year Joaquin did find his own way to achieve a balance between school success and social acceptance. By his senior year he distanced himself and became critical of his old friends and school. Once again his grades improved and he returned to playing piano (and began producing music) and rejoined the soccer team. In fact, by his senior year he was associating with a more diverse group of young people and seemed far less concerned about how he would be judged by others for crossing borders related to race and class. Unlike his old friends who slipped through the cracks because they lacked support at home and school, Joaquin was able to recover academically. His lowered grades made him less attractive to the best colleges, but his relatively high test scores enabled him to be admitted to a reputable private liberal arts college.

Joaquin's brief bout with academic failure provided me with an important lesson on how a student's social frame of reference can profoundly influence his achievement in school. My own research on this topic suggests that the process through which racial identities are developed is not nearly as dichotomous as portrayed by researchers like Ogbu and Fordham (Noguera, 2001b). Rather than framing the identities adopted by students as either oppositional or conformist, we can understand that a range of possibilities for expressing one's racial identity exists. That high-achieving minority students will adopt a raceless persona (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or construe doing well in school as "acting White," is just one possibility.

There are also many examples of Black and Latino students who manage to do well in school while retaining a sense of pride in their racial and cultural identity. I was one of those students and I know many others. I

did well in school and I never felt that I needed to "act White" in order to succeed, or to disassociate myself from my Black and Latino peers. During my high school and college years I was an activist. I was one of many students who became active in political movements in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the struggle for ethnic studies and the anti-apartheid movement. My political activism enhanced and furthered my intellectual development in that it provided me with motivation to read and write, to study with discipline and purpose, and to grapple seriously with ideas. My identity as a Black, working-class student of Caribbean and Latin heritage, grounded me and provided me with the fortitude to perform well in elite institutions, places that were often alienating and inhospitable to people from my background.

As a teacher in inner-city high schools and as a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University, the vast majority of talented students of color I have worked with have had a positive and clear sense of their racial identity. They often have been motivated to succeed out of a desire to help their families and give something back to their communities. I generally have taught very large courses, and I have had the pleasure of teaching and getting to know many students from diverse backgrounds. The vast majority of those I've come to know are people who managed to balance academic success and retain a sense of pride in their identity and heritage.

Typically, the ones I remember best are the ones who had to overcome the greatest obstacles to succeed. Students like Jerry Arriano, who grew up poor in a single-parent household in the Mission District of San Francisco. He attended Balboa High School—one of the worst schools in the city—and struggled through remedial courses in his first few years at UC Berkeley. Jerry went on to excel at Berkeley and is now preparing to graduate from the University of California, San Francisco Medical School. There are others like him: Durnilla Hewitt, Estela Mejia, Keenan Jackson, Javier Hernandez, Jesse DeLeon, and Eddie Javious all came from severely disadvantaged backgrounds and were not well prepared to handle the rigors of college. Yet, these individuals adjusted to the alien culture of college, defied the negative racial stereotypes, and performed exceptionally well, not only in college but in their professional careers. Although the individuals I've listed are in different fields—medicine, law, education, public policy—each has retained a strong sense of his or her racial/ethnic identity and has found a way to pursue a career that enables him or her to serve the needs of disadvantaged communities and constituencies.

In *Losing the Race* (2000), John McWhorter writes with shame and disappointment about the African American students at UC Berkeley who frequently missed his classes, arrived late, turned in poor work, or failed

to turn in anything at all. He claims that the vast majority of the Black students he taught are individuals who live by excuses and display no serious interest in their education. How could it be that John McWhorter and I, both of whom were teaching at UC Berkeley, could have had such different experiences in teaching Black students? I don't limit my analysis to Black students because I have taught disadvantaged students from diverse backgrounds and found that they face similar obstacles. I can only postulate that our disagreement appears to be tied to the lessons we have drawn from our childhood experiences. McWhorter attributes his professional success to his talent and intelligence, and he uses himself as proof that racism is not an obstacle that prevents Black people from succeeding. In contrast, I regard the success I have experienced as evidence that many others could make it if given the opportunity. Some of my students have told me that, like John McWhorter, they occasionally were harassed by their peers in high school for acting White simply because they did well in school. However, unlike McWhorter, most of these students draw on this experience to think about what they can do to counter and redirect such self-destructive patterns of behavior.

My own research and experience suggest that high-performing students of color are more likely to be successful if they attend schools that support and affirm their racial and cultural identities (Noguera, 2001b). The three high schools previously identified in the Black Student Eligibility study for the University of California were places that actively encouraged students to feel pride in their race and culture even as they encouraged students to excel. Numerous other researchers have found that schools and classrooms that deliberately incorporate the culture of their students into the curriculum and pedagogy are more likely to be successful with students of color (Banks, 1981; Boykin, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1992).

The idea that schools can affirm the values, culture, and aspirations of the students they serve is a possibility that rarely is considered by scholars like Obgu, Fordham, or McWhorter. In fact, they accept the idea that minorities must assimilate and conform to the dominant culture, and place the onus for accommodation on students. While it is important to recognize that all students need to learn the normative codes that will enable them to succeed in mainstream U. S. society (Smitheman, 1977), I believe there is much that schools can do to increase student achievement. Improving teacher-student and school-parent relations, and adopting policies that actively encourage minority students to take rigorous courses, are just some of the measures that can be taken (Fashola & Slavina, 1997).

There are also a number of researchers who have shown that there are many adolescents who succeed academically by adopting multiple personas and identities. Such students adopt the cultural norms that are val-

ned in school settings, while embracing the speech, style of dress, and larger identity construct associated with their racial group outside of school (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1988). Such students may experience stress as they learn how to code switch, and on some occasions they may feel compelled to choose between one persona or another (Smitherman, 1977). However, many academically successful students of color learn to code switch effectively, and more often than not they learn to do this on their own without an adult explicitly teaching them the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988).

Understanding the process through which racial identities are constructed in school is important in order to devise strategies that enable us to counter the insidious ways in which race and achievement become linked. In Chapter 4, I will draw on research from 4 years of work at Berkeley to demonstrate how the link between racial identity and student performance becomes operative within school settings. However, in departure from both Ogbu (1987b) and Steele (1997), I will describe how the structure and culture of school contributes to the creation of this linkage. Finally, I will describe how the concerted efforts of educators, parents, and students can make it possible to alter school conditions so that the link between racial identity and achievement can be broken. Such a break will make it more likely that minority students can be freed from the harmful effects of racial stereotypes as they pursue their education.

CHAPTER 4

Unequal Outcomes, Unequal Opportunities: Closing the Achievement Gap in Berkeley

To the outsider or uninformed observer, Berkeley might seem to possess all of the conditions necessary to have excellent public schools. Home to a world-class public university (the University of California, Berkeley), a national research center (Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory), and numerous independent bookstores and publishers, Berkeley is a place where education and the pursuit of knowledge are the vocation of many residents and much more than a casual pastime. It is an affluent and sophisticated city, a place where new ideas—both the innovative and the idiosyncratic—are born, and a place where civic participation in the affairs of the city is extensive and widespread.

With its liberal, highly educated population, Berkeley has long been in the forefront among cities that have embraced progressive social reforms. From integrated housing, to curbside recycling, to disability rights, to rent control, Berkeley has shown a willingness to enact experimental social reforms long before they were popular or embraced elsewhere (Nathan & Scott, 1978). Sometimes referred to by outsiders as "The Peoples' Republic" or more denisively as "Bezerkeley," the city consistently has been a leader in setting trends on matters related to social policy and has provided a safe haven for those who challenge conventional thinking. Free needle exchanges for intravenous drug users, access to marijuana for medicinal purposes, and provision of domestic partner benefits for municipal employees, are just some of the reforms embraced by Berkeley long before they were openly discussed or considered elsewhere.

As might be expected, Berkeley's commitment to progressive ideals and its willingness to act on them also have been evident in education. In 1968, Berkeley became one of the first school districts in the nation to vol-

untarlier desegregate its schools (Kirp, 1982). Significantly, it did so not through passive acquiescence but through a bold assertion of public support and by adopting a plan that called for the burden of busing to be shared by Blacks and Whites.¹ When opponents of desegregation attempted to undo the reform by recalling the members of the school board, Berkeley voters, in a rare display of public support for racial desegregation, squelched the backlash and resoundingly affirmed their support for the new busing plan (Kirp, 1982).

Throughout the 1970s, Berkeley schools experimented with a variety of reforms that its leaders hoped would improve the education offered to its minority students. In 1969 Black students at Berkeley High School (BHS) demanded and were granted the first African American studies department established at a high school in the United States. The logic behind this concession was that separate and distinct approaches to educating Black and White students were necessary and desirable. Such thinking led to the creation of several smaller separate high schools in the mid-1970s, including the Umoja House for Black students seeking a culturally defined educational experience, and the Kaza House for Chicano students seeking something analogous for themselves. Ultimately, these experiments in racial separation were brought to an end by the U.S. Department of Education, which determined that maintaining racially separate schools was a violation of several civil rights statutes and was therefore illegal (Kirp, 1982). Despite this reversal, the thinking that created these kinds of race-based policies continued to influence district policies (Noguera, 1993).

THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP: FROM NOBLE GOALS TO TOUGH ISSUES

Despite this impressive track record of public support, Berkeley schools are characterized by extreme disparities in academic outcomes among students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. At every school in the district, student achievement on most standardized tests follows a bimodal pattern with respect to the distribution of student scores (see Table 4.1). The majority of White students score at or above the 80th percentile on most norm-referenced tests, while the scores of Black and Latino students generally hover between the 30th and 40th percentiles (Berkeley Alliance, 1999; Noguera, 1995d). Similar patterns emerge when the composition of special and compensatory education programs is compared with the composition of gifted and talented and advanced placement courses. Black and Latino students overwhelmingly constitute enrollment in the former, while affluent White students populate the latter. Wide disparities in achieve-

Table 4.1. Berkeley Unified School District Academic Outcomes, 1999

	1999 BUSD Student Performance on Stanford 9		Grade Point Averages for BUSD Eighth-Grade Students (by school)			
	60th-90th NPR*	1st-30th NPR	ML King	Willard	Longfellow	
Black	18.0	63.1	2.14	1.74	1.46	
Asian	47.7	37.9	3.34	3.03	2.26	
Hispanic	24.9	61.4	2.64	2.33	1.64	
White	81.2	8.6	3.42	2.98	2.44	
*National Percentile Ranking						
Source: Berkeley Unified School District, 2001.						

ment are also evident in the grades assigned to students, in attrition rates, and in suspension and expulsion rates at all schools in the district (Diversity Project, 2000).

Given its long history of liberalism and its reputation for embracing progressive causes, one might expect that Berkeley citizens eventually would have become outraged at the persistence of such glaring disparities. Yet, a careful analysis of the political dynamics that have shaped policy in Berkeley's schools reveals that the community actually has tolerated a degree of racial inequality in student academic outcomes that any objective analysis would indicate is quite extreme. In fact, until recently, there was surprisingly little effort to address this problem.

I became aware of what I came to regard as Berkeley's complacency on this issue shortly after I was elected to the School Board in November 1990. Toward the end of one very late meeting, the Board was presented the results of a battery of examinations that had been administered to students in the spring of the preceding year. The results showed once again that racial disparities in the scores and the bimodal pattern were firmly in place. Since I was new to the Board, I was unfamiliar with how such issues were to be addressed. Although it was already quite late (nearly midnight), and all of us were tired, I felt it necessary to query the district's senior administrators about how to interpret the test results. I asked, "What are we supposed to do with this depressing information?" I was told that because the exams were authorized by the State of California, the Board had to formally acknowledge receipt of the results. I pushed further to find out how the district intended to respond. With most of those present growing impatient due to the late hour of the meeting, I was told by the new superintendent that the district was committed to finding solutions to the prob-

lem and the matter would not be swept under the rug. I soon learned that this would not be the case.

Over time, I came to realize that Berkeley had grown accustomed to the idea that its African American and Latino students would always lag behind. White students on most measures of achievement. I also came to understand that this complacency was not due to malicious neglect or overt racism. Rather, it was an issue that had come to be regarded as impossible to solve because sophisticated Berkeley citizens attributed its cause to class rather than race. It was widely assumed that because students of color disproportionately came from families with less income and education, it would not be possible to close the gap in achievement. I also learned that racial disparities in academic outcomes had come to be accepted as a "racial phenomenon" and thus only "racial" solutions had been considered (Noguera, 1993).

Over the years, the failure of Black and Brown students had given rise to a number of racial remedies—from Black and Latino studies programs to a new ethnic studies requirement, to mentoring and tutoring programs targeted specifically at these groups. Many of these initiatives were championed and designed by educators and parents of color. Frustrated by what they regarded as indifference on the part of the district, many community advocates argued that racially and culturally relevant interventions were the only way to solve the problem. However, in the effort to solve what they regarded as racial problems with racial remedies, I perceived an inadvertent willingness to absolve the district of responsibility for addressing the problem. Defining the issue of student achievement in narrow racial terms contributed to a failure to consider how the resources of the entire district could address the failure of poor Black and Brown students. In a community known for its progressive ideals, there was a disturbing willingness to tolerate inferior educational opportunities for lower-performing African American and Latino students.

The most obvious example of Berkeley's willingness to tolerate blatant forms of racial disparities was evident at the continuation school known as East Campus (renamed Berkeley Alternative High School) where, as noted in Chapter 1, I had started teaching in 1988. Serving approximately 160 students, most of whom were sent there because of poor grades, poor attendance, or poor behavior, the school was comprised almost entirely of African American students. Through my conversations with guidance counselors at Berkeley High School, I learned that White students who failed or missed too many days of school were assigned to independent study and rarely sent to East Campus. When it was started as the MacKeanley School in the 1970s, it had a reputation as an alternative "hippie" school and was predominantly White. However, by the mid-1980s, the school had

been moved to a new facility, and in almost every sense imaginable was marginal to the district, geographically and otherwise.

During my 3 years at East Campus, the academic performance of students at the school received so little attention that basic information such as graduation, drop-out, and college attendance rates of students were not even maintained. Although there was no evidence that the school served its students well, the district made little if any effort to improve the quality of education provided by the school. Tucked away on the margins, this small racially segregated school had been accepted as a dumping ground for students regarded as incorrigible and uneducable.

East Campus is only one example of disparate treatment accorded to students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Throughout the district, other forms of racial inequity can be found in the quality of programs such as special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that cater primarily to minority students, and in the disciplinary practices of the schools. To understand how these disparities are normalized and thereby tolerated and accepted, it is necessary to understand how efforts to address them have been politicized over the years. Educators and parents in Berkeley have been far more likely to criticize and blame each other for the persistence of poor achievement among minority students than to take constructive action to address the problem. Politicization in turn has contributed to paralysis, and finger pointing has contributed to a lack of clarity about the nature of the problem and limited the possibility that action could be taken to improve academic outcomes for failing students.

TWO SCHOOLS IN ONE: SORTING STUDENTS AT BERKELEY HIGH SCHOOL

Persistent racial disparities, finger pointing, and paralysis have been most clearly evident at Berkeley High School, the only comprehensive secondary school in the district. BHS is a relatively large school with approximately 3,000 students and nearly 200 teachers, counselors, and administrators. According to the district's data, approximately 40% of the students at BHS are White, 40% are African American, 10% are Latino, and 10% are Asian American (Berkeley Alliance, 1999). These percentages are undoubtedly inaccurate because approximately 10% of the students who responded to a survey administered by the Diversity Project to the Class of 2000 identified themselves as mixed race (Diversity Project, 2000). One-fifth of the student population is identified as limited in English language proficiency, and among these students over 50 languages are spoken.

As is true for the rest of Berkeley, racial differences tend to correspond closely to differences in socioeconomic status. The vast majority of White students reside in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods in the hills and north Berkeley, while the majority of African American and Latino students come from low-income communities in the flatlands of south and west Berkeley. Additionally, approximately 25% of BHS students do not reside in Berkeley at all. They enroll in BHS either through interdistrict transfer or by surreptitiously claiming Berkeley residence. The vast majority of these students are Black and reside in poorer neighborhoods in Oakland and Richmond (Diversity Project, 1999).

On the basis of almost every significant indicator, BHS is a school that does not serve its Black and Latino students well. Nearly 50% of Black and Latino students who enter BHS in ninth grade fail to graduate, and among those who do, few complete the course requirements necessary for admission to the University of California or the California State University systems (Berkeley Alliance, 1999). African American students constitute the overwhelming majority of students who are suspended or expelled from the school for disciplinary reasons (Diversity Project, *Final Report*, 2000), and they constitute the majority of students enrolled in special education classes. Finally, the ESL program functions as a separate and distinct school within the larger school, and its students, most of whom are Latino and Asian, are effectively denied access to college preparatory classes and other resources available at BHS.

In contrast, for most White students, BHS is a highly successful school offering a vast array of educational opportunities and enriching experiences. The vast majority of White students graduate and matriculate to 4-year colleges and universities, and a significant number are admitted to Ivy League colleges and the University of California (Report on College Admissions, 1996). BHS consistently produces several National Merit scholars, most of whom are White, and the jazz band, debating club, and school newspaper (all of which are almost exclusively White) have received several national awards. With its varied and innovative curriculum, BHS is one of few public schools that actually attract White students away from private schools.² Their parents, many of whom are professionals with advanced university degrees, know that BHS offers more honors and advanced placement courses than many private high schools. For this reason they have refused to abandon this urban public school. In fact, many White parents and students perceive the diversity of the school as an added benefit, and some regard their decision to send their children there as a progressive political act.³

To serve what many have perceived as the divergent needs of these two broad categories of students, BHS effectively has become two schools

within one facility. For some, it is a college preparatory school as good as or even better than many elite private schools. For others, it is as bad as any other inner-city school serving economically disadvantaged Black and Latino students. Officially, BHS is only one school with one principal, faculty, and football team. But for students and anyone else who spends time there, divisions along racial and class lines are evident and present in nearly every aspect of the school.

Patterns of racial separation are most evident when one enters the school grounds at the beginning of the school day. Across the sprawling campus, students can be seen huddled in racially distinct groupings. Black Africa that has been painted in front of the administration building near a center of the campus on the steps of the Community Theater. Along Martin Luther King Way on the periphery of the school, groups of Latino students generally can be found hanging out near and around a Mexican mural. Smaller groups of Asian students find their place along a wall adjacent to the science building. Each grouping is racially distinct, but the lines between them are permeable as can be seen from the significant number of students who mingle in mixed groups or who cross over to interact with individuals from another group.

This form of racial separation is the most noticeable, and because it appears to be voluntary and a matter of choice, there is a sense that this is what students prefer. Yet, racial separation is not limited to the clustering that occurs outside of the school. It shows up in classrooms and clubs throughout the school, and these forms of separation are not voluntary. Rather, they are products of the school's sorting practices and its structure and organization. Although the separations created by tracking—the practice of sorting students into courses based on some measure or estimate of their academic ability (Cakes, 1985)—are less visible, their impact on student outcomes is far more profound. Despite its obvious divergence from Berkeley's long-term commitment to racial integration, racial separation in all its forms, like racial disparities in academic achievement, is a social phenomenon that has come to be accepted as normal at BHS.

THE DIVERSITY PROJECT: CHALLENGING RACIAL INEQUALITY AT BERKELEY HIGH SCHOOL

In 1994, the school was jolted out of its passive acceptance of the status quo when a documentary on the school aired nationally on public television. Based on interviews with and profiles of students and teachers over the course of a school year, *School Colors* portrayed a school mired in deep

racial separation and polarization. More than just a documentary on a particular high school, *School Colors* was used as evidence of the failure of racial integration in public schools 40 years after the *Brown* decision.

Reaction to the film within BHS was strikingly uniform. Teachers, students, and parents of all kinds angrily condemned the film as a distorted depiction of their school. They argued that the film lacked balance because it failed to show the positive aspects of the school and the many interracial relationships that exist there. They complained that the film makers omitted scenes that would have contradicted their pessimistic message, and they charged that the producers who had been given complete access to the school had abused their trust. Many at BHS believed the film makers knew, before they even arrived at the school, what story they wanted to tell. Now exposed before a national audience, the city that had given birth to voluntary racial integration of public schools was being used as living proof that the experiment had failed.

At the time of the film's airing, I was still serving on the Berkeley School Board. I felt particularly betrayed by the film makers because I had been instrumental in helping them to gain access to the school. However, unlike the others who quickly dismissed the film and its message, I watched the film over and over again, and even showed it to many of my classes at UC Berkeley. The more I saw the film, the more I recognized the extent to which it had captured accurately what was going on at BHS. I knew that while the issues at BHS were more complicated than had been conveyed in the film, it had succeeded in capturing some troubling truths about the school. Through their intensive examination of racial dynamics within the school, the producers created a medium through which the performance of racial identities could be observed clashing and interacting with the institution and the social conventions operative there. Although I still had criticisms about some of the ways in which racial issues were portrayed, I realized that the film did reveal some of the complex ways in which racial inequality is reproduced and the peculiar role of individual choice and agency in that process.

It was largely as a result of the film that I and others who had worked at and with the school for many years came together to create the Diversity Project as an organizational vehicle for addressing issues of racial inequality within BHS. Initiated by a BHS parent who was also a lecturer in the School of Education at Stanford University, the Diversity Project was created in Summer 1996 to address two questions/issues:

1. What are the factors that contribute to the disparity in academic achievement between students of different racial and class backgrounds at the school?

2. What are the factors that are responsible for the racial separation of students within the school?

Comprising more than 30 teachers, students, parents, school board members, and university researchers, the Diversity Project focused its initial year of work on research aimed at finding answers to these two questions. We purposefully created a team including the various constituencies not contribute to further polarization. Our plan was to use findings generated from our research to guide and influence changes at the school. We relied on research not because we believed that there was any magic in using data to analyze the school. Rather, we focused on research because we believed that the inquiry process could provide a new and different way to approach issues that had come to be seen as "natural" and unchangeable. From the start, we understood that we would have to do more than merely document patterns of racial disparity and separation that were already well established. We recognized that in order for our research to bring about a change in student outcomes, we would have to find ways to change the way in which people thought about racial patterns at the school.

To accomplish this goal, we devised research strategies that were designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. *Make the familiar seem strange and problematic*—By using research to enable teachers, students, and parents to question their assumptions about why students do or do not succeed academically, and to understand how these beliefs are linked to assumptions about the nature of racial identities.
2. *Critically examine the organization and structure of privilege*—By making the various constituencies within the school aware of the ways in which organizational practices harm the educational interests of some students while enhancing the opportunities of others.
3. *Empower the disadvantaged and marginalized*—By utilizing the inquiry process to make the needs and interests of those who historically have been most peripheral to the school, central to its operation and mission.

We recognized from the outset that school reform is an inherently political process, and thus there would have to be a constituency to actively push for greater equity in educational opportunities. Without such a force, we feared the parents of high-achieving White students, who were already well organized and who benefited from the status quo, might attempt to undermine equity efforts they perceived as harmful to their interests. For

this reason, we sought to use the research process to create a degree of balance in the school that also would allow parents of students who were not well served to be heard.

MAKING THE FAMILIAR SEEM STRANGE AND PROBLEMATIC

As the Diversity Project attempted to find a way to respond to racial disparities in academic achievement at BHS, we understood that the biggest obstacle to be overcome involved the explanations and rationalizations of this phenomenon that already existed in the minds of most people. Data on the attrition of minority students and on their performance in academic classes had been publicized and made available to the entire school and community for many years. Leaders in the African American and Latino community were aware of this poor track record and had been highly critical of the school in the past. In fact, several community organizations, such as the local chapter of the NAACP and the Black Ministerial Alliance, had become increasingly outspoken in their condemnation of the school because of these persistent patterns of failure. In response to this outrage, the School Board and the district's administration expressed genuine concern but could offer little in the way of concrete strategies to address the problem. It was common knowledge that the majority of Black and Latino students were doing poorly at BHS, but there was little evidence that anything was being done to effectively address the problem.

Given this context, the Diversity Project set as its immediate goal the need to shift the focus of attention away from a search for blame to a search for solutions to the problem. To do this, the Project conducted a survey of entering ninth graders in the Class of 2000 (approximately 700 ninth graders who entered BHS in Fall 1996). We posed questions about their experiences in school and, as we analyzed their responses, we used student records to incorporate data such as grades, test scores, and course selections made by the students. The goal of this inquiry was to find out how students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds were sorted into different academic paths and trajectories within the school. In part, we wanted to know how much of this sorting was done by the school and how much by the students themselves. We also surveyed 85 sports teams and clubs to determine the make-up of extracurricular activities and to learn how these forms of voluntary association contributed to racial separation within the school.

By the end of the school year, we were ready to share our findings with the faculty and broader community. To facilitate discussion, the faculty was

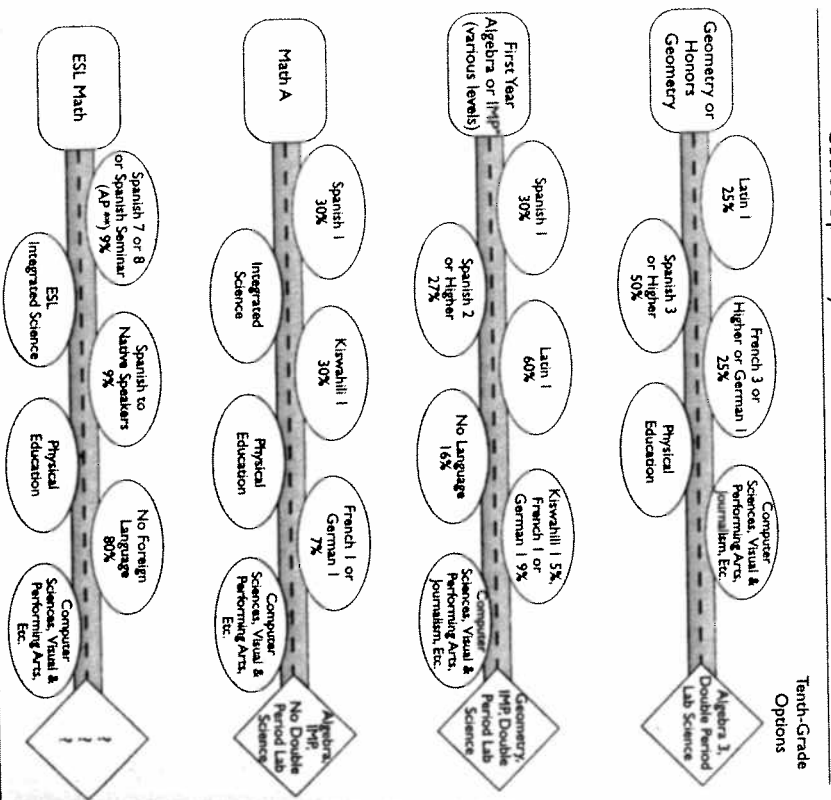
Unequal Outcomes, Unequal Opportunities

divided into four groups and assigned to rooms where large graphics illustrating the findings from our investigation were displayed. In the first room the charts illustrated how the assignment of students to math courses in ninth grade influenced their trajectory into other academic courses and placed in honors geometry, 87% of whom were White and who disproportionately had come to BHS from private schools, were on track to complete the advanced math and science courses needed for admission to the University of California. We also displayed graphics that showed these students were more likely to be enrolled in a higher-level foreign language course (e.g., second-year or above French or Spanish, or first-year German or Latin) and honors biology.

In contrast, another set of graphics showed that students who had been placed in the lowest-level pre-algebra class, 83% of whom were African American and Latino, were not on track to complete the University's science and math requirements (see Figure 4.1). With over 90% of the students failing the pre-algebra course in the Fall 1996 semester, it was clear that no more than a handful would be able to complete the math and science course sequence needed to fulfill the University's entrance requirements. Moreover, students placed in pre-algebra were not likely to be enrolled in a college prep science course, and if they had a foreign language class, it was most likely to be beginning Spanish or Swahili (Diversity Project, 1999). Most BHS through interdistrict transfer or under "care giver status" (the vast majority of whom were from Oakland) had been assigned to pre-algebra.

The course enrollment charts were followed by the presentation of a map of the city of Berkeley broken down by zip code. Within each zip code, the average grade point average (GPA) for students residing within the area was indicated (see Table 4.2). As might be expected, the map revealed a clear and distinct pattern: Students from homes in the poorest sections of the city, with the highest African American and Latino populations, had the lowest GPAs, while students in north Berkeley and the affluent Berkeley hills, had the highest GPAs. Interestingly, although the map revealed patterns that anyone associated with the school would expect, reaction to the map was striking. Teachers were amazed by the consistency of the patterns and wondered about why such a pronounced trend existed. The comment of one veteran teacher captured the sentiment of many of the teachers: "I expected kids from the poorer sections of the city to do less well but I'm amazed that it's this blatant. Something must be going on" (personal interview, May 2, 1997). The map turned out to be such a powerful illustration of the relationship between social class and academic achievement that the June 16, 1997 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle* fea-

Figure 4.1. The Paths Through Berkeley High School Class of 2000:
Course Options by Ninth-Grade Math Placement



* Interactive Math Program

** Advanced Placement

Original Graphic by Jean Wing

Table 4.2. Ninth-Grade Class of 2000 Student Grade Point Average (GPA) by Zip Code of Residence and Median Household Income.

Zip Code	Median Household Income*	Mean GPA for Ninth Graders
94710	\$22,866	2.19
94704	\$17,930	2.44
94703	\$24,499	2.46
94702	\$25,389	2.49
94706	\$34,522	3.02
94709	\$27,105	3.17
94705	\$46,689	3.25
94707	\$62,567	3.30
94708	\$68,911	3.37

* From 1990 U.S. Census data.

tured a copy of the map in a front page article describing the research that had been done by the Project.

Surprisingly, as teachers discussed the findings from the research, there was no argument about the accuracy of the data, nor did the conversation about the data deteriorate into a debate over who was to blame for these patterns. Instead, teachers wanted to know more about what could be learned from the data, and they asked questions to further probe the information that had been collected. For example, they wanted to know how the grades students obtained in math compared with those in English and history (subjects that had been de-tracked for several years already). Others wondered how the grades students received correlated with their attendance in school. Additionally, some wanted to know how effective the academic support programs were that had been set up to help students who were struggling academically.

There were similar reactions to the data derived from the survey that was presented in another classroom. The survey data provided information on what students liked and disliked about BHS, as well as information about how often they studied, whether or not they were employed and for how many hours a week, and where they went when they needed academic support. Many teachers reacted with surprise when they discovered that a majority of students indicated that the diversity of the student body was one of the things they liked best about their experience at BHS. There was a bit of irony in this finding because the vast majority of students also said that most of their friends were not from diverse backgrounds. Students

also expressed considerable support for the "freedom" they enjoyed at BHS. For most, freedom was interpreted as the opportunity to set their own course schedule and the ease with which they were able to cut classes without being caught.

Discussion of the data generated from the student survey and course enrollment patterns opened the door to a more difficult discussion about the implications of the findings for students and the school as a whole. Confronted with evidence that course assignment in ninth grade would determine students' trajectory over the next 4 years, some teachers began to question the fairness of the course assignment process. Teachers learned that course assignments in math were made by counselors who based their decision on a review of student transcripts, without a formal assessment of student ability. They also learned that some of the support classes that had been set up for struggling students had higher failure rates than the classes they were designed to reinforce. Concerns about the lack of structure at BHS (e.g., the absence of a coherent tardy policy and the inconsistent application of penalties for cutting) led to a discussion about the permissive culture of the school. BHS was a place where the "freedom" granted to students effectively allowed large numbers of them to fail and slip through the cracks.

The presentations in the third and fourth rooms focused on how patterns of separation extend beyond the classroom and show up in those areas of the school where membership is based on voluntary association. Our data showed that nearly every club, sports team, and extracurricular activity offered by the school had a racially exclusive make-up. Even more disturbing was the fact that any activity that might be regarded as having the potential to enhance one's academic performance (e.g., academic clubs and the debating team) were comprised almost exclusively of White students.

In our discussions it became clear that because they had been in place for so long, such patterns of separation were rationalized as the product of choices made freely by the students. Some adults at the school condoned these practices as a way of accommodating the diverse cultures and interests present within the school, and they argued that these patterns of separation provided a form of cultural affirmation. However, others saw these voluntary forms of racial separation as a way of disguising the patterns that reinforced the racial disparities at the school. In its report, the Project cited several studies on extracurricular activities that show that students who are involved in sports, music, the arts, and other clubs, generally perform better in school than students who are uninvolved (Steinberg, 1996). Additionally, we used the survey data to show that students who were involved in extracurricular activities were more likely to feel connected to and to identify with the school. Studies have shown that the psychological

effects of such a connection can positively influence academic performance (Steele, 1990).

Our discussions with teachers about the factors that produce racially distinct clubs and sports teams made it possible for the adults who had long come to accept these patterns as unavoidable and normal to consider actions that might be taken to alter them. In the discussions that ensued, teachers pondered whether with some encouragement Latino students, who frequently played soccer on their own time in unstructured pick-up games, could be recruited to the school's soccer team. The advisor for the school newspaper offered to initiate a concerted outreach plan to recruit minority student writers. Similar efforts were proposed to change the racial make-up of activities like football, basketball, and Afro-Haitian dance. Past experience had shown that relatively few students were willing to play the role of Jackie Robinson and cross the school's racial borders on their own. For this reason it was acknowledged that to diversify student participation in clubs and courses that historically had been perceived as racially exclusive, it might be necessary for adults to play an active role in recruiting students of color so that a critical mass in representation could be achieved.

After one year the Project seemed to have succeeded in shifting the focus of the conversation about student achievement away from a search for blame and toward a search for solutions. However, we fully realized that far more difficult work lay ahead as we moved forward in implementing change. We understood fully that those who benefited from the implementation as it was might not welcome efforts to change it. For this reason, pursuit of our second strategy was seen as essential.

EXPOSING THE ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF PRIVILEGE

As is true in society in general, racial inequality at BHS is accompanied by racial privilege. Just as certain institutional practices contribute to the concentration of African American and Latino students in lower-level classes, other policies and practices reward and privilege upper-middle-class White students. Of course, it must be kept in mind that the sorting of students into courses and placing them on different academic trajectories is not based on overtly racist behavior or harmful intentions on the part of counselors and administrators. Rather, these policies and practices appear on the surface to be benign and race neutral. Student placements presumably are based on "objective" measures of academic ability and not some form of racial preference. However, close analysis of the practices used to

sort students and their impact on student learning opportunities suggests that the intentions of those making decisions are less relevant than how low-income students of color are affected by the decisions that are made.

Just as the persistent failure of large numbers of students of color is accepted as normal, so too is the academic success of many upper-middle-class White students. Both phenomena typically are explained on the basis of class rather than race. Given their highly educated parents and access to extensive private resources (e.g., private tutors and college advisors, therapists, computers, and travel opportunities), the outstanding academic performance of many White students is hardly surprising. Many White students at BHS leave elite private schools to enroll in BHS. In general, these students are better prepared and therefore are able to take full advantage of the many resources available at BHS. However, while it is clear that class privilege creates academic advantages, it is also clear that the school does not operate as a neutral and level playing field in the way it responds to the background differences of its students. In fact, there is considerable evidence that suggests that inequity actually is reinforced and exacerbated by the practices and biases of the school.

The prevailing expectation that White students will succeed and the disproportionate power wielded by their vigilant and ever-observant parents have prevented adults within the school from questioning practices that clearly reinforced the benefits these students enjoy. As we continued our research in the second year, members of Project Diversity felt that exposing these forms of privilege was important to create a more balanced discussion about the achievement gap at BHS. We felt that if the conversation about equity ignored the ways in which some students benefited from the organization of educational opportunities at the school, any effort to reform or alter these arrangements that required a reallocation of resources would be vigorously opposed. Our hope was that by showing how certain school practices favored high-achieving students, we might be able to point out the kinds of reforms that could bring about higher levels of achievement for others.

As we began our research, we soon realized that we faced a major challenge in attempting to expose the ways in which the structure of the school privileged high-achieving students. Whereas BHS had several activities that were designed to explicitly address the needs of minority students—separate graduation ceremonies, newspapers, clubs, and courses all designed specifically for Black or Latino students—there were no analogous activities for White students. This is not because there were no activities or courses that catered exclusively to White students; it simply reflected the fact that they were not labeled in that way. Advanced placement courses in English literature or calculus, sports such as lacrosse and

golf, or clubs like Model United Nations are not set up to exclude students on the basis of race. But such activities have catered almost exclusively to White students for many years, and there has been little if any concern about their homogeneous make-up in this racially diverse school.

The survey and school record data generated by the Project showed these racial patterns quite clearly (see Table 4.1). In addition to these data collection activities, we sought to identify institutional practices that directly reward academically motivated students, or students whose parents are eager to ensure that their kids receive the best opportunities available at the school. It did not take long for us to identify examples of these practices because there are several of them at the school. They include the practice known as self-scheduling, which allows students to designate preference for a particular teacher when setting up their schedule for classes for the coming semester. The practice favors students who are prepared to make their selections early and who know which teachers are regarded as the best. As it turns out, most White students take advantage of self-scheduling, while most Black and Latino students do not. Students who do not choose classes on their own are placed in classes that still have space after self-scheduling is over. This means that those who fail to exercise choice are more likely to be placed in classes with teachers who for some reason are not held in high regard. Many White parents have the time and flexibility to come to the school during the day to guide their children through the course selection process. We also learned that there were e-mail lists used mainly by White, high-achieving parents to share information about teachers, courses, and other information relevant to the school. Minority parents are not excluded from these e-mail lists, but no outreach is done to ensure that they are included. Differences in the amount of time parents can spend at the school and in the quality of information they possess, reinforces existing differences in academic ability.

Another example is the practice of waiving the requirement that students in tenth grade take a course in social living. The social living course is designed to teach "life skills"—sex education, drug and alcohol abuse prevention—and generally is regarded as a valuable course. However, during our research we discovered that high-achieving White students systematically avoid the social living class. While they are not ideologically opposed to the subject matter covered, their parents regard the material as fluff and a waste of school time. The parents know that they are allowed to request waivers from the course for personal or religious reasons, and many choose to exercise this option. By avoiding the social living course, the students can enroll in more rigorous academic elective courses that provide them credit toward college (the social living course does not). It is not clear how the news about the right to waive the course spreads among

White parents and students, but the results are quite remarkable: A very small number of the students in this mandatory course are White.

The minimal graduation requirements at BHS provide another example of a practice that favors White students while limiting long-term opportunities for Black and Latino students. Despite its reputation as a school with high academic standards, BHS requires only 2 years of science and 2 years of math for its graduates. This is also the state's requirement for high school graduation, but several schools require more, since the University of California and the State University systems require at least 3 years of courses in both subjects. Most Black and Latino students meet the minimum requirement for graduation, while most White students at BHS exceed the state's requirement and graduate with 4 years of math and science. Their parents push them to take more than they are required to because the parents tend to have a greater understanding of the competitive college admissions process. They also know that advanced placement courses are weighted more heavily in college admissions decisions, and they make sure that their children take full advantage of these courses. The fact that fewer Black and Latino students exceed the minimal requirements in math and science courses allows those departments to offer a greater number of advanced courses to those students deemed qualified to enroll. There is no conspiracy to deny minority students access to higher-level courses, but without an explicit push to enroll them in these courses, they are at a disadvantage when they apply to college.

The relatively low graduation requirements of BHS also result in White students graduating with more units of credit on average than Black and Latino students. This occurs largely because students who are already turned off to school are less likely to take courses that are not required of them. It means that White students on average actually receive more minutes of instruction than most Black and Latino students. Parents who are familiar with the admissions requirements of elite universities understand the importance of enrolling their children in the broad array of elective courses available to students at BHS. Hence, courses such as Latin, computer science, and economics cater disproportionately to the most affluent and privileged students. By allowing students to choose whether or not to enroll in these courses, BHS rewards those who are most motivated and informed. Even minority students with high grades and demonstrated ability are less likely to enroll in these rigorous courses unless they are encouraged to do so by an adult. Without active recruitment from teachers and counselors, it is unlikely that patterns in course enrollment will change.

Finally, the most common form of racial preference involves the innumerable subtle ways in which differential treatment is accorded to White

students in everyday interactions between adults and students within the school. Through focus group interviews, we learned that students of all kinds are very conscious of how differently they are treated by adults at the school. Black and Latino students walking in the halls are likely to evoke suspicion and even fear from the adults they encounter. In contrast, White students, even those who are cutting classes, are less likely to be stopped and questioned because it is assumed that they have a legitimate reason to move about. Even when students are caught cutting, differential sanctions are applied for infractions of the school's discipline policies.⁴ Black and Latino students frequently receive stiffer penalties than Whites for similar offenses, due in part to the greater ease with which White parents are able to serve as advocates for their children. When confronted with the possibility of punishment for the violation of a school rule, White parents frequently involve attorneys whose intervention often has the effect of intimidating school administrators.

Differential treatment is also present in the way teachers teach students who have been labeled as gifted and talented, versus the way they teach those considered ordinary or academically deficient. In part, this is because some teachers lack the skill or the rapport needed to teach low-achieving students effectively. However, expectations are also a factor because teaching low-achieving students often requires more work, at least in terms of classroom management, than teaching high-achieving students. It is not uncommon for teachers who are regarded as exceptional with high-achieving students to be perceived as boring and uninteresting by their low-achieving students.

Given the numerous examples of racial privilege within the organizational structure and culture of BHS, it was imperative for the Diversity Project to be strategic in the approach it took to address the issue. To avoid the fierce resistance of affluent White parents who we knew would oppose any effort to reduce the benefits their children enjoyed, members of the Project were extremely careful about the language they used when describing potential solutions to disparities in academic achievement. Rather than questioning the existence of advanced courses, we recommended that the school adopt strategies to increase the enrollment of African American and Latino students into these courses. The Project also suggested that the school increase its graduation requirements to 3 years of science and math courses. We also recommended that the school eliminate the awarding of "Ds" as passing grades, since a "D" signified that a student had not mastered the material covered in a course. Because we framed our recommendations as a call for higher academic standards for all students, it became very difficult for those who may have perceived these changes as contrary to their interests, to oppose them. We understood that in a liberal community like

Berkeley, it was not appropriate to defend low academic standards for minority students, or to openly express indifference to their plight.

EMPOWERING THE DISADVANTAGED AND MARGINALIZED

As might be expected, not only are African American students disadvantaged and marginal within the school community, but so are their parents. At most school activities that call for parental involvement and participation, African American and Latino parents are vastly underrepresented. This is also true on decision-making bodies where parents have a say in how resources are allocated, and it is most dramatically true on back-to-school nights when parents are invited to meet their children's teachers. Historically, the auditorium where several hundred parents gather prior to visiting the classrooms of their children's teachers is filled almost exclusively with White parents. Little more than a handful of Black and Latino parents can be seen sprinkled throughout the crowd. Their absence at these events generally has been interpreted as a lack of interest in their children's education.

The members of the Diversity Project decided that if we were going to be successful in our efforts to promote change within the school, we would have to take on this issue. We recognized that just as those who benefited in the present circumstances might attempt to defend the status quo, those who had been poorly served by the school might be most likely to support changes that led to greater equity. Moreover, since we had positioned ourselves as facilitators rather than as advocates for a particular reform agenda, we realized that something would have to be done to create a more balanced discussion about reform at the school. For this reason we consciously devised research strategies that, by increasing their ability to voice their concerns within the school, would enable African American and Latino parents to become empowered as actors and decision makers.

The parent outreach committee of the Project was created to facilitate change in who participated at the school. The committee decided to organize a series of focus group discussions for Latino and African American parents designed to elicit their views on the school. Specifically, we wanted to know what concerns they had about the education their children were receiving, what kinds of obstacles parents encountered when interacting with school officials on behalf of their children, and what kinds of changes they felt would help make BHS more receptive to their concerns.

Over the course of 6 months, more than 70 focus groups were conducted with over 400 parents. To ensure that maximum opportunity

was provided for open communication, all of the sessions with Spanish-speaking parents were conducted in Spanish and held at a Catholic church in the community. Food and child care were provided as an added incentive to attract high levels of participation. Finally, the focus group sessions were tape recorded and transcribed so that a report summarizing the issues raised could be developed and presented to a strategic planning committee that was established in Spring 1998. The committee, which was comprised exclusively of teachers and administrators, was charged with developing a specific set of recommendations for changes at the school based on the findings from the Diversity Project's research.

The parent outreach committee of the Diversity Project also recruited parents to join in conducting the focus groups and carrying out the research. This was important because their participation in the research led this active core group of parents to take on leadership roles as the school moved forward in enacting reforms aimed at institutionalizing parental involvement at the school. Beginning in Fall 1999, the group succeeded in getting the BHS administration to designate a surplus office for use as a parent center. The center was created to provide parents with a place to go when they had concerns about how their children were being treated at the school. The center also provided training to teachers on how to conduct constructive meetings with parents. With grants from local foundations and the two part-time parent organizers, one African American, the other Latino, to serve as staff for the new center.

In addition to creating the parent center, which was actually the first reform recommended by the Diversity Project to be implemented, the research contributed to other organizing efforts among Black and Latino parents that have had a significant impact on the school. Breaking the long-established pattern of nonparticipation, a community forum in May 1998 that was held for the purpose of soliciting responses to the strategic plan, nearly half of the parents present were African American and Latino. Most were parents who had become active in the leadership of the parent outreach group. During the meeting several spoke openly and forcefully about their criticisms of the plan and freely offered suggestions on what they would like to see included in it. After the meeting several teachers commented that it was the first meeting that they had attended in which the composition of the parents matched that of the student body. In Fall 2000, a new organization called Parents of Children of African Descent (PCAD) was created. Drawing on the Project's research, which showed high rates of failure in ninth-grade math, PCAD called for and helped create a new course for students who failed math in the fall semester. Although PCAD's involvement was not welcomed by the school or the math department, the

new course was very successful and the pattern of accepting the failure of large numbers of minority students was fundamentally challenged (Maran, 2001).

Another group comprising primarily Latino parents recently formed to advocate for the needs of Latino students, particularly those in the ESL program. Their efforts have focused on the large number of students who remain permanently confined to the ESL program and therefore are unable to gain access to advanced courses and other resources that are available to students at the school. With the parent center and groups like PCAD monitoring the school and its treatment of students of color, it is unlikely that complacency about disparities in student achievement will return. It is clear that pressure alone will not help BHS to improve. However, without active and ongoing effort to address all forms of racial inequality at the school, it is likely that complacency will return and that adults at the school once again will grow accustomed to the permanence of the achievement gap.

LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF RESEARCH TO COUNTER INEQUALITY

The change process initiated by the Diversity Project has been slow and it is still not clear that our efforts will lead to increased minority student performance. Although some of the reforms that were introduced as a result of our work show promise, many of the factors that I regard as most important in influencing patterns of achievement (teacher expectations, tracking, and effective student support) have not been systematically addressed. For this reason, I readily admit that all of our work may have been for naught; there is no guarantee that patterns that have been in place for years will be permanently altered. However, the greatest asset of the Project has been our persistence. The fact that we committed ourselves to working on these issues for 4 years made it impossible for the school to lapse back into passively accepting the failure of large numbers of African American and Latino students. Even after my work with the Project ended when I left Berkeley and moved to the east coast, the work continued and the focus on creating greater equity at the school has been kept alive by teachers and parents who worked closely with the Project.

Unfortunately, the pace of change has been hindered by dysfunction within the organization of the school and by constant changes in leadership. From 1996 to 2002, four different principals led the school (during 2001-02 the school was led by two co-principals). Although change at the school is needed, each change in leadership has resulted in significant set-

backs for reform initiatives. During the 1999-2000 academic year, 13 fires were reported at the school, one of which was so severe that the central administration building was destroyed (Maran, 2000). Amidst so much turmoil and upheaval, it has been very difficult to keep the school focused on efforts to address equity. However, these setbacks have not deterred a number of parents and teachers from pursuing reforms that they hope will lead to greater equity and higher achievement for all students.

Like many other schools, BHS has seen more than its share of research projects and reform initiatives. Too often, such efforts start with great fanfare but fade and lose momentum as the inertia of tradition and prevailing norms reclaim advantage. To counter this tendency, the Project transferred leadership of the work over to teachers, parents, and administrators who have a long-term investment in the school. This has ensured that the work continued long after the university researchers left. BHS also has received support from the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, a community-based school reform organization, which has helped to sustain these efforts. Time will tell if the vigilance of these groups will result in lasting change.