



*The second of a two-part special series*

**News & Analysis on Urban School Reform  
from The Piton Foundation**

# the **term** paper

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## POST-BUSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS ARE FOCUS OF STUDY

*Editor's note: The study excerpted in this issue of The Term Paper was written by researchers Catherine Horn and Michal Kurlaender for the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Horn is an assistant professor at University of Houston's School of Education. Kurlaender is an assistant professor at the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. Term Paper editor Alan Gottlieb wrote the introduction and edited the excerpt for length and content. A full version of the study is available on the Civil Rights Project website: [www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu). It is also available on The Piton Foundation website: [www.piton.org](http://www.piton.org).*

### INTRODUCTION

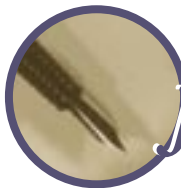
Latino and African American test scores dropped in Denver elementary schools that experienced a decline in Anglo enrollment at the end of court-ordered busing, according to a new study from the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

The study also finds that busing's end apparently did not improve the test scores of Anglo students in early post-busing years. Further, achievement of minority students, particularly Latinos, climbed in schools where Anglo enrollment increased post-busing.

Although the study used data that disaggregated test performance by race, the findings suggest that schools where socio-economic segregation increased experienced lower performance among minority students. Researchers examined results of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills administered to DPS elementary school students between 1994 and 2000. Elementary schools in Denver returned to neighborhood attendance boundaries at the start of the 1996-97 school year.

The study analyzes only ITBS math scores, researchers said, because the increasing number of limited-English students in the district can confound reading and writing test data.

This study, the second of two commissioned by The Piton Foundation, has several limitations, according to researchers. First, historical data were burdened with missing and incomplete information, and these gaps limited the analyses



## from THE EDITOR

**WE KNOW THE TRUTH.  
NOW WHAT?**

The more deeply one studies the topic, the more obvious the conclusion becomes: racially and socio-economically isolated schools are bad for low-income children.

This issue of *The Term Paper*

features the second part of a two-part study on that topic conducted by the Harvard University Civil Rights Project. In our January issue, the study's first section demonstrated how Denver Public Schools have become more

segregated by race and class since court-ordered busing ended a decade ago.

The study presented here shows how this segregation led to lower achievement by low-income and minority students in the years



that could be conducted. Also, student level data no longer exists for ITBS scores from the 1990s. Consequently, the available data were presented as school-level aggregates, which created analytical limitations.

However, this study, combined with recent studies of newer Colorado Student Assessment Program test results, conducted by Piton and the Colorado Children's Campaign (see accompanying article), strongly suggest that the academic achievement of DPS' minority students has declined since busing ended. And, those studies found, achievement gaps continue to widen between low-income minority students and middle-class Anglos.

### DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

For more detailed background on the *Keyes v. Denver School District No. 1* court case that led to 20-plus years of court-ordered busing in Denver, see the January 2006 issue of *The Term Paper*.

The legal and demographic shifts that have taken place in DPS since busing ended a decade ago provide an opportunity to study the impact changes to desegregation policy have had on academic achievement, as measured by test scores.

Remarkably, few studies have focused on changes in student achievement as a result of changes to school racial and socio-economic composition at the end of federal court oversight of urban school districts across the country.

This study attempts to address that deficiency.

For purposes of the study, we characterize schools by the extent to which racial/ethnic shifts occurred after the 1995 decision to end busing in Denver.

Figure 1 shows that half of DPS elementary schools went through a noticeable change in Anglo representation concurrent with the reversal of *Keyes*. The end of court-

in relationship to the level of change they experienced in Anglo enrollments between 1994 and 2000.

This relationship is particularly important to underscore in Denver, where a school's percent Anglo enrollment is very highly correlated with the school's percent free or reduced lunch-eligible population. In general, the higher the percentage of Anglo population, the lower the free and reduced-priced lunch percentage.

Moreover, demographic trends in enrollment over the past two decades reveal a steady increase in the proportion of Denver students eligible for free or reduced lunch. This is of great concern, because previous research on school desegregation, and school quality more broadly, has consistently concluded that concentrations of poverty have negative educational consequences on all students.

And minority students are more likely to be enrolled in schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students, as measured by free/reduced lunch eligibility.

Figures 2 and 3 display scatter-plots of the relationship between a school's percent Anglo enrollment and its associated percent free or reduced lunch-eligible population in 1994 and 2000, respectively.

Together, these figures show that in both 1994 and 2000, most schools with a low Anglo enrollment were also schools where the majority of the students were of a low socio-economic status. Similarly, schools with higher Anglo enrollments were also schools with more affluent students.

When we compare the figures to one another, it is particularly noteworthy how much stronger the association between Anglo enrollment and free/reduced lunch eligibility

## *This and other studies suggest that the academic achievement of DPS' minority students has declined since busing ended.*

mandated busing, coupled with demographic changes, resulted in moderate changes in the presence of Anglos at many Denver schools and very dramatic changes in eight schools.

For example, Mitchell Elementary, which lost a citywide Montessori magnet program when busing ended (see accompanying article) saw Anglo enrollment drop 37 percentage points between 1994-98.

Six other schools saw a dramatic shift in the opposite direction. Consider Steele Elementary where 1994 to 1998 brought a 32 percentage point increase in Anglo students.

Twenty-one schools saw a moderate decrease in Anglo representation; five saw moderate increases. It should be noted that most schools witnessed their biggest changes immediately following the 1995 ruling, with the largest shifts in racial composition occurring in 1996 and 1997.

We chose to present the four-year changes of 1994 to 1998 to more adequately represent the racial composition of schools prior to the end of court-ordered desegregation in 1995 and after the district's school assignment plan post-desegregation had somewhat stabilized.

### DATA AND CHRONOLOGY OF DPS TESTING POLICY

For more than 15 years, DPS administered the ITBS to students

across elementary grades 1 through 5. ITBS is a nationally normed test of student achievement across various grades and subject areas.

The assessments are vertically scaled, allowing for student growth to be tracked over time. ITBS scores have been used as a measure of academic progress and as means of diagnostically assessing strengths and areas for growth for students in individual schools.

DPS began to phase out use of the ITBS in 2002, focusing its reliance on the criterion-referenced CSAP, which assesses student achievement against the State Model Content Standards. At the elementary school level, CSAP is currently administered at grades 3-5.

Because of a lack of clear equivalence between ITBS and CSAP performance, and because of a lack of adequate data to prudently equate these two measures, this study utilizes only school-level aggregated ITBS math data from 1994 to 2000. However, an accompanying article examines CSAP scores and achievement gaps in DPS.

### RACE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The relationship between race and socio-economic status is strong in urban schools across the country. Predominantly minority schools are often disadvantaged relative to predominately Anglo schools. Therefore, we chose to categorize schools

had become in Denver during the period under study. There were many more schools with very low Anglo enrollments and correspondingly high levels of free/reduced lunch-eligible students in 2000 than there were in 1994.

All of this suggests that when we interpret achievement trends and their association with Anglo enrollment changes, we are also talking about these changes in relationship to changes in the students' socio-economic affluence.

### ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS BY RACE

To illustrate achievement trends of schools relative to the racial/ethnic shifts around the time of busing's end, we present two figures. The first shows the association between a school's average ITBS math percentile and its Anglo enrollment in 1994 (Figure 4), shortly preceding the end of court-mandated desegregation. The second shows the same association in 1998 (Figure 5), shortly after the return to neighborhood schools.

In combination, the graphs make two important points.

First, there is evidence of much more segregation (as measured by percent Anglo enrollment) in 1998 than in 1994, as indicated by the "clumping" of schools in Figure 5 in the zero to 20 percent Anglo enrollment band relative to the more dispersed spread of schools across a wider range of Anglo enrollment in Figure 4.

In fact, in 1994, there were virtually no elementary schools with fewer than 10 percent Anglos enrolled; by 1998, that proportion had jumped to one-third of all elementary schools.

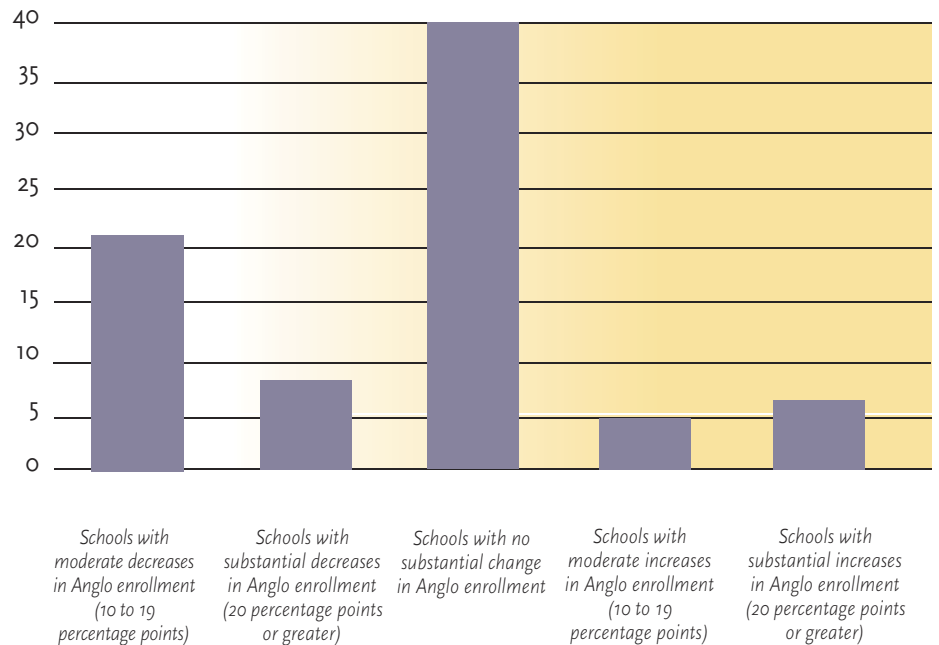
Given that the reversal of Keyes shifted DPS back to a neighborhood-based school assignment plan, and Denver displays significant residential segregation patterns, this is not surprising.

Second, there is a substantially stronger association between Anglo

enrollment and average math test scores in 1998 than in 1994.

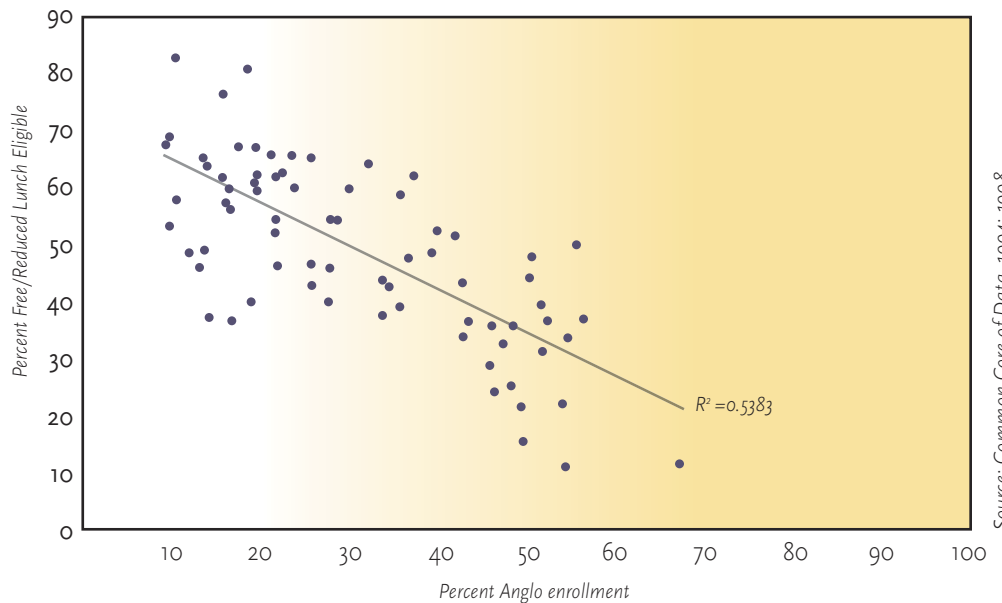
In other words, in 1998, just two years after the end of court-ordered school desegregation, the variation in school test scores is more strongly correlated with the presence of Anglo students in the school than it was four years earlier.

**Categorization of School by Type of Racial/Ethnic Change Experienced from 1994-1998 (Figure 1)**



Source: Common Core of Data, 1994; 1998.

**Relationship Between School Anglo Enrollment and Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible—1994 (Figure 2)**



Source: Common Core of Data, 1994; 1998.

### ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS BY SCHOOL TYPE

We now present a series of figures representing 3rd and 5th grade ITBS math percentile scores over time. The charts show scores in five types of schools, grouped by changes in Anglo enrollment from 1994 to 1998.

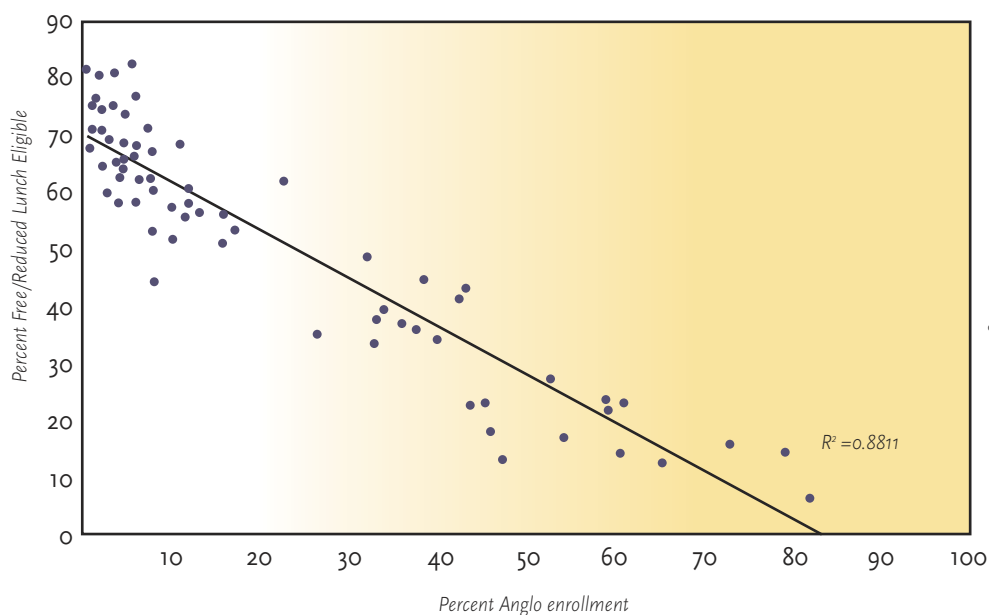
These are elementary schools that

we classify as having no substantial change (a 0 to 10 percentage-point difference in Anglo enrollment); moderate increases in Anglo enrollment (represented by a 10 to 20 percentage-point increase); substantial increases in Anglo enrollment (represented by a 20 percentage-point or greater increase); moderate decreases in Anglo enrollment (rep-



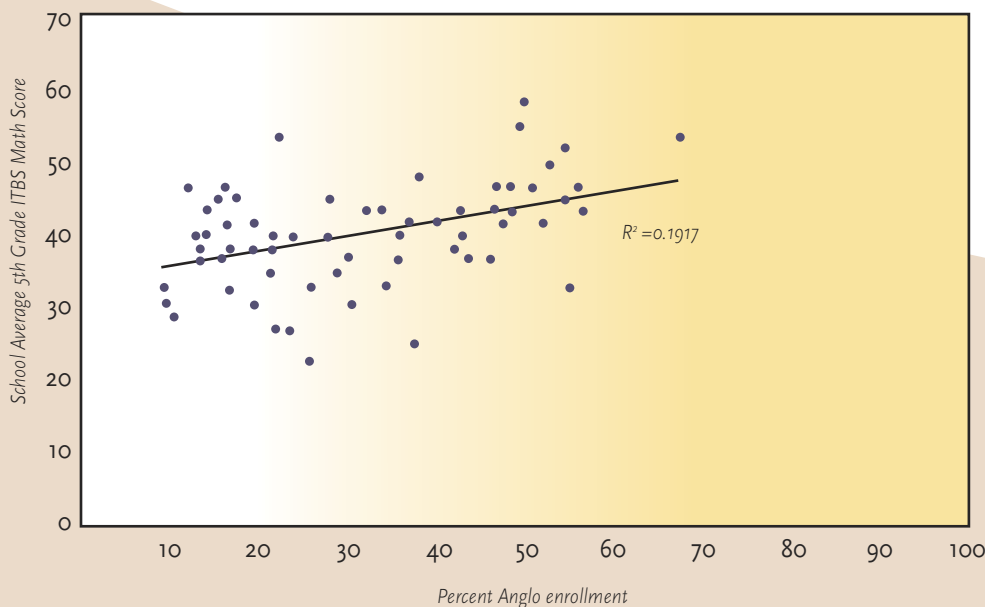
*African Americans in schools  
where there were substantial increases in  
Anglo enrollment experienced a pronounced  
increase in math percentile scores.*

**Relationship Between School Anglo Enrollment and Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible—2000 (Figure 3)**



Source: Common Core of Data, 1994; 1998.

**Association between Average School Math Test Scores and Anglo Enrollment in Elementary Schools—1994 (Figure 4)**



Source: Common Core of Data, 1994; Denver Public Schools school-level ITBS data, 1994.

represented by a 10-20 percentage-point decrease); and substantial decreases in Anglo enrollment (represented by a 20 percentage-point or greater increase).

**3RD GRADE**

Figures 6 through 8 present the school-level mean ITBS 3rd grade math percentiles from 1994 to 2000 for Anglos, African Americans, and Latinos, respectively. For example, Figure 6 shows that Anglo students in schools that experienced no substantial change in racial/ethnic composition from 1994 to 2000 had a mean ITBS score at the 44th percentile in 1994. For African American and Latino students in the schools that similarly saw no substantial change, the mean ITBS score was at the 35th and 36th percentile, respectively, in 1994 (Figures 7 and 8).

A simple way to interpret these figures is to compare achievement patterns in schools that changed with schools that did not. We see some similar trends across all three racial/ethnic groups and some differences.

- First, in 1994, ITBS percentiles were relatively closely grouped together across all school types for each racial/ethnic group, respectively. This suggests that there was no systematic difference in achievement levels, on average, among schools that would later experience substantial changes in Anglo enrollment versus those that would not.
- Second, for Anglos specifically, school-level average math percentile scores do not appear to have improved as a result of either moderate or substantial increases in Anglo enrollment in some schools (Figure 6).

Data indicate Anglo students' scores have shown a modest decline in schools where Anglo enrollment has dropped, relative to their counterparts in schools experiencing no change.

- Third, for African American students in schools that experienced moderate or substantial gains in Anglo enrollment, realized modest

achievement gains relative to African American students in schools that had no racial/ethnic change during this period (Figure 7).

Similar to Anglos, average achievement scores for African American students in schools with moderate or substantial decreases in Anglo enrollment declined some during this period.

- Finally, Latino achievement trends are similar to African Americans but more pronounced (Figure 8). Latinos, more than all other groups, experienced achievement gains in schools where Anglo enrollment increased relative to schools that saw no change or declined where Anglo enrollment moderately or substantially reduced.

#### FIFTH GRADE

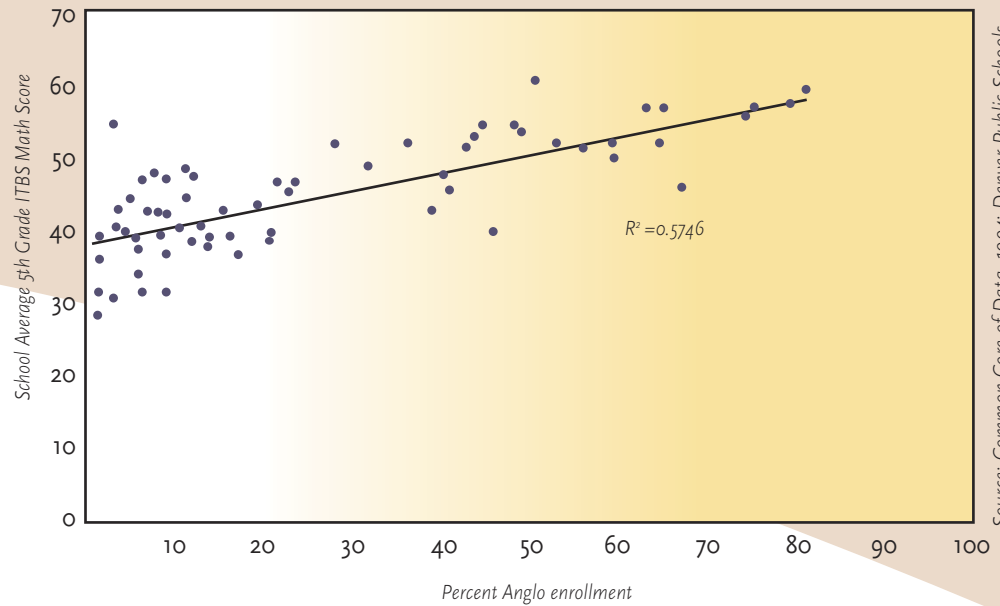
ITBS score trends for fifth-graders largely mirror those described earlier for third-graders. As was the case with third-graders, within racial/ethnic subgroups, differences appear to be partly explained by drops in Anglo enrollment (and its corresponding relationship to socio-economic status).

Relative to the average performance in schools with no substantial changes in racial/ethnic composition, Anglo students' test scores have shown no increase in schools where Anglo enrollment increased.

African Americans in schools where there were substantial increases in Anglo enrollment experienced a pronounced increase in math percentile scores. Although these schools are few in number -- not many African American students attended schools that saw these substantial increases in Anglo enrollment -- they make an important point about the potential benefits of racial/ethnic diversity for African American test score performance.

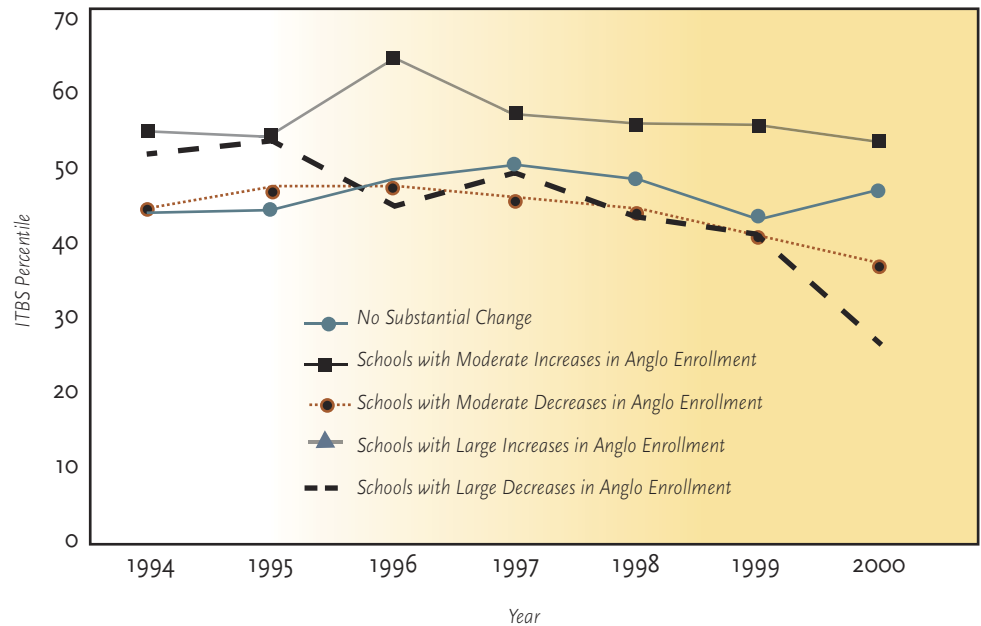
Finally, Latino aggregate school test scores appear to have increased modestly in schools where Anglo enrollment went up even moderately.

Association between Average School Math Test Scores and Anglo Enrollment in Elementary Schools—1998 (Figure 5)



Source: Common Core of Data, 1994; Denver Public Schools school-level ITBS data, 1994.

School Average Anglo 3rd Grade Math ITBS Math Percentiles by School Racial Change Types (Figure 6)



Source: Denver Public Schools school-level ITBS data, 1994-2000.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Anglo enrollment is but one way to characterize the changes in school racial composition. Every major Anglo decline or increase in school enrollment is paired with an increase or decline of another racial/ethnic group.

Nevertheless, Anglo enrollment

continues to be an important reference for understanding the impact of school racial composition, because the inverse relationship between percent Anglo in a school and percent poor (free and reduced lunch eligible) remains strong.

Taken together, the findings of this study identify several important considerations.

- First, a data set of ITBS math

percentile scores from 1994 to 2000 allowed us to examine how the return to neighborhood elementary schools affected aggregate achievement across school types.

Using schools that did not experience any substantial changes in racial/ethnic composition as a comparison group, we found a complex interaction of school racial

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 8)

# RECENT DATA SHOW GROWING DPS ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

By ALAN GOTTLIEB

Recent data analyses conducted by The Piton Foundation and the Colorado Children's Campaign pick up chronologically where the Harvard study left off.

If anything, the results show that a decade after court-ordered busing ended, the situation for low-income students of color in Denver Public Schools is more dire than ever.

Using school-level data, the studies clearly show an persistent and in some cases growing gap in achievement between Anglo (largely middle-class) and minority (predominantly low-income) students in Denver Public Schools.

The accompanying charts

from the Colorado Children's Campaign show how students from different racial and ethnic groups have performed on the Colorado Student Assessment Program math test since the tests launched in 2000.

Only math test scores are presented, to remain consistent with the Harvard University Civil Rights Project study presented elsewhere in this issue of *The Term Paper*.

When reviewing these charts, please note that there are significant differences between the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the basis of the Harvard study, and the CSAP.

The ITBS is a norm-referenced test, meaning scores are judged against national sample of students, whose scores were set as the national average for each subject at each grade

level. Therefore, ITBS scores are presented as percentiles. A student who scores in the 43rd percentile for his or her grade level is scoring below average, which is the 50th percentile.

The CSAP, by contrast, is a criterion-referenced test. This means that answers are scored against an absolute standard of proficiency for each subject area. A student who scores proficient or better is considered to have met state standards in that subject for his or her grade level.

Accompanying CSAP charts show three-digit scale scores. The state Department of Education determines scale-score cut-points to determine whether a student's test results are unsatisfactory, partially proficient, proficient or advanced.

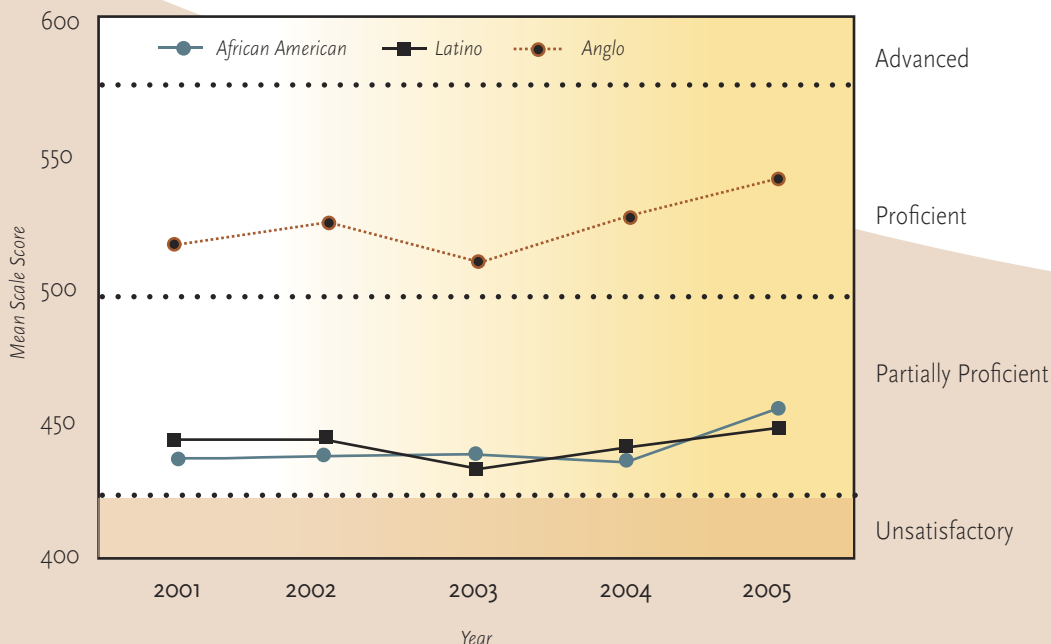
As the charts show, DPS students from all racial and ethnic groups fall short of the mark in math, with the exception of Anglo fifth-graders. Data suggest that the longer students study math in DPS, the farther they fall behind state standards.

African American and Latino students fare far worse than Anglos. By tenth grade, all groups on average score unsatisfactory. African American and Latino students are almost 100 scale-score points below partial proficiency.

In a July 2005 report, "Looking Back to Face Forward: Confronting Growing Gaps and Declining Achievement in Denver Schools," Piton and the Children's Campaign offered several recommendations for how to address these challenges. Among them:

- The district should do everything in its power to promote a healthier economic mix of students in its schools. Research shows that low-income students perform significantly better when they attend schools that are not overwhelmingly poor. Developing attractive school choices in mixed-income neighborhoods is one viable strategy for increasing socio-economic integration.
- DPS should consistently and publicly report the percentage of students that reach proficiency in all subject areas and set reasonable goals for achievement at each grade level. Goals should reflect objectives for all students, disaggregated by race and income, and they should be based on recent successes in

Average CSAP Scale Scores, Grade 5 Math

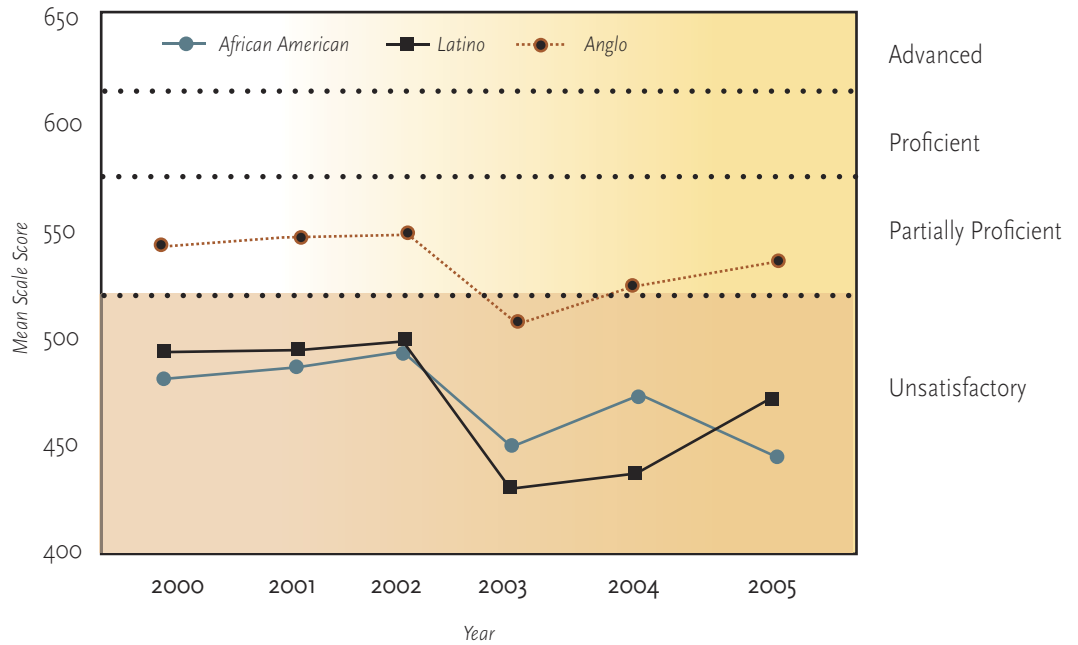


Source: Colorado Children's Campaign analysis of Colorado Department of Education data.

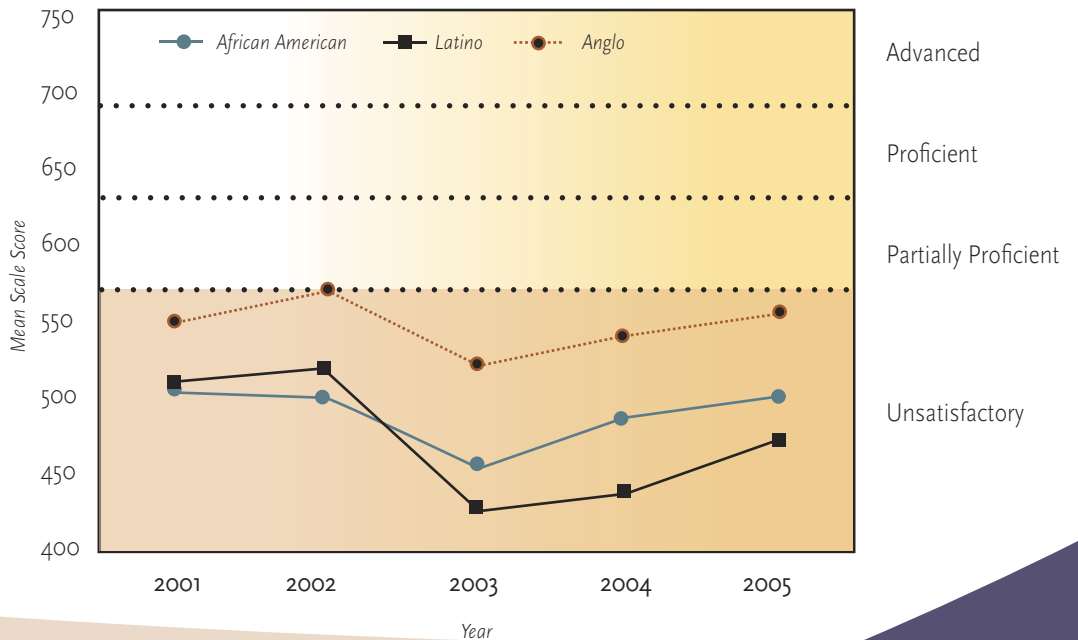
comparable districts.

- DPS must have a data system that allows for easy audits of individual students and groups of students over time. These audits should provide guidance for resource allocation and accountability. Current systems do not allow school staff, district leadership, or the public to analyze trends or track progress.
- DPS must develop partnerships that ensure public audits of district-wide improvement efforts. More resources must be committed to thoughtful evaluation: the community and civic leadership must understand the challenges and the opportunities facing the district.
- DPS should become a portfolio manager of schools, with clear student performance objectives and multiple improvement strategies. The district needs an explicit plan about the support schools will get to help them reach performance goals as well as a corresponding set of district interventions if a school does not achieve those standards. New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago have developed clear district strategies for supporting, closing and opening new schools that depend on the school's progress and the district's overall strategic plan.❖

**Average CSAP Scale Scores, Grade 8 Math**



**Average CSAP Scale Scores, Grade 10 Math**



Source for above charts: Colorado Children's Campaign analysis of Colorado Department of Education data.

**term***paper*

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composition changes and student achievement.

Overall, we find that changes in school racial composition as a result of busing's end may have had some impacts on average achievement levels for different racial ethnic groups.

Specifically, average Anglo test scores in schools that experienced moderate or substantial changes in Anglo enrollment were not distinctly different from those in schools that did not experience any substantial

changes.

This suggests that Anglo test scores, on average, did not improve as a result of the end of busing, a finding contrary to the argument made by many championing the end of busing.

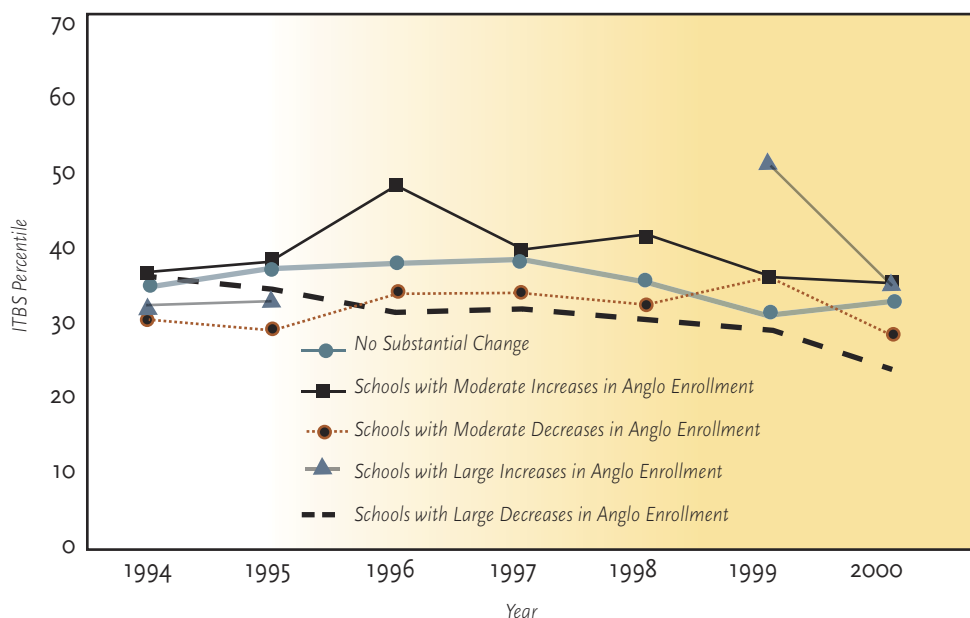
- For African American students, there is some evidence of modest average achievement gains in schools that had substantial increases in Anglo enrollments versus schools that did not change.

- Achievement gains were more pronounced for Latinos in schools where Anglo enrollment increased relative to schools that saw no change.

- Also, although average African American and Latino test scores declined in schools with moderate or substantial decreases in Anglo enrollment during this period, relative to schools that did not experience substantial changes, this was not a consistent trend.

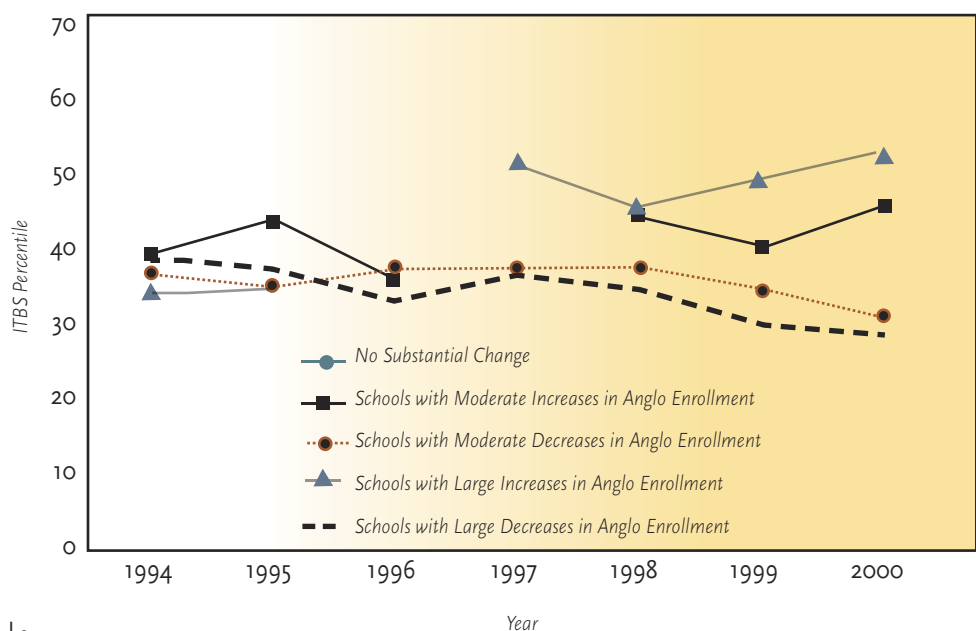
- Finally, as a result of the end of busing, about half of DPS elementary schools went through moderate or substantial demographic changes. Given the substantial changes in DPS student racial composition—characterized by a steady decline in Anglo enrollment, slight declines in African American enrollment, and dramatic increases in Latino enrollment—it would be reasonable to expect a decrease in the number of racially isolated Anglo schools.

**School Average Black 3rd Grade Math ITBS Math Percentiles by School Racial Change Types (Figure 7)**



Source: Denver Public Schools school-level ITBS data, 1994-2000.

**School Average Latino 3rd Grade Math ITBS Math Percentiles by School Racial Change Types (Figure 8)**



Source: Denver Public Schools school-level ITBS data, 1994-2000.

In stark contrast to that expectation, the number of such schools actually increased immediately following Keyes, suggesting that the racial/ethnic neighborhood isolation off-set through busing was no longer being addressed. In fact, school racial composition patterns suggest that despite the stabilization in Anglo enrollment patterns that might have been expected as a result of the end of busing, Anglo segregation continues to rise in Denver Public Schools.

The January 2006 issue of The Term Paper examines this topic in some detail.

There are many important outcomes (for example, educational and occupational attainment, and inter-group contact and racial attitudes) associated with school desegregation that the paper does not address.

However, previous research has suggested that an absence of these benefits may amount to the greatest loss for students who attend racially isolated schools.

Despite the limitations, these findings are complex and compelling, particularly for Latinos. More than 30 years ago, Keyes recognized the need to consider Latinos in determining whether a district suffered from segregation.

This study reinforces the importance of that consideration. The topic merits much additional research and much richer data to fully understand the long-term implications of the end of court-ordered desegregation for Denver schools. ❖



## BUSING'S END UNMASKED INEQUITIES IN NE DENVER

By ALAN GOTTLIEB

Ten years ago, three of Denver's flagship public schools resided in the low-income Cole neighborhood on the northeast side of town.

Manual High School, integrated by court-ordered busing, regularly sent its top students to elite colleges and universities. Cole Middle School housed the Denver School of the Arts, a nationally recognized magnet program. Mitchell Elementary School was home to a magnet Montessori program that attracted a diverse mix of students from across Denver. Mitchell was known for relatively high test scores among its low-income students.

What a difference a decade makes.

Today, the three schools are among the district's most troubled. Manual is being temporarily shuttered for low-performance by Denver Public Schools at the end of the 2005-06 school year. Cole, branded unsatisfactory for three consecutive years by the state, fell victim to a state school accountability law last year and forcibly converted to a charter school. Mitchell is struggling to recover after plummeting achievement caused it to be completely redesigned by the district in 2005.

Manual, Cole and Mitchell benefited from court-ordered busing for integration for 20 years. Their declines in achievement began as soon as busing ended in the mid-1990s and the schools reverted to neighborhood attendance boundaries.

While it is tempting to attribute the three schools' woes entirely to busing's end, the real story is more nuanced. Inside Manual and Cole, the academic performance of low-income students of color lagged far behind that of their middle-class Anglo counterparts, even in the schools' alleged glory days.

For the most part, classrooms in those schools were segregated. In Manual, students were academically tracked. Large percentages of middle-class Anglo students took accelerated and Advanced Placement classes, while their low-income, minority counterparts were consigned to the lower-level general track.

At Cole, most students in the arts school were middle-class Anglos, and those in the general program primarily were students of color.

Only Mitchell worked to mix classes, races and abilities in its classrooms, and as a result, while achievement gaps still existed, a high percentage of all groups of students performed at grade level or better.

While it's true that at Manual and Cole superficial integration masked underlying problems, decisions on school boundaries made by the Denver Board of Education in 1995 and 1996 exacerbated inequities that have grown more pronounced in the intervening years.

These decisions and their consequences offer a compelling case study

for people interested in school integration, resegregation and the policy implications of politically motivated school boundary decisions.

### SOME HISTORY

#### MITCHELL

Martha Urioste, founding principal of the Mitchell Montessori Citywide Magnet School, took over a school that in 1986 was out of compliance with a federal court order to integrate schools. Mitchell was paired with Force Elementary in a predominantly Anglo section of southwest Denver, and Force parents were avoiding Mitchell in droves.

It took just a few short years of Montessori to boost the Anglo enrollment at Mitchell from 18 percent to 50 percent of the total, Urioste said. The school's test scores shot up as the school's poverty level went down. But Urioste and her staff did not want the high performance of some students to mask the low performance of others.

"We never tracked and we went through a laborious process every year to make sure every classroom was evenly divided between gifted and talented kids, average kids and kids who were not at grade level," Urioste said. "We knew that kind of mix would be important for every child. And it worked."

Teachers identified students who were below grade at the end of third grade, and targeted those students for intensive tutoring. Among the first graduating class of sixth graders, Urioste recalled, only two tested below grade level.

A vexing achievement gap remained between low-income, minority students and Anglo students, most of whom were middle- or upper-middle class. Still, the gap existed at a higher level, with the low-income students mostly at grade level and most of the higher-income students a year or more above grade level.

In 1996, the Montessori program moved to Denison Elementary School in southwest Denver. The school board's decision to move the program created a months-long uprising. But in the end, the board decided that the dozens of students who had been bused out of the neighborhood deserved a chance to go to school closer to home.

DPS placed a seasoned, entrepreneurial principal in Mitchell as the school changed into a high-poverty neighborhood school. Still, with the school suddenly almost 100 percent low-income, test scores began a long and steady decline.

For example, in 1995, African American fifth graders scored in the 41st percentile and Latino fifth graders scored in the 60th percentile nationally on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading test. The following year, with the school resegregated, African Americans scored in the 27th percentile and Latinos in the 24th percentile on that same test. As Denver eased away

*Manual, Cole and Mitchell benefited from court-ordered busing for integration for 20 years. Their declines in achievement began as soon as busing ended in the mid-1990s and the schools reverted to neighborhood attendance boundaries*

from the Iowa test to the Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP) test, scores continued downward. By 2004, Mitchell was rated unsatisfactory and faced possible state takeover.

In the spring of 2005, then-superintendent Jerry Wartgow “redesigned” the school, bringing in a new principal, staff and program. The energetic young staff is working to restore some of Mitchell’s former glory. But it’s a long uphill battle.

**COLE**

Denver School of the Arts opened as a program within Cole Middle School in the fall of 1991. Over the next four years, enrollment in the arts program surged from 180 students to 420. High school students had a short bus ride to Manual High School for academic classes, while middle school students stayed at Cole for the entire day.

In the fall of 1995, with the arts program at its peak, 28 percent of the school’s 740 students were Anglo. Fewer than half the school’s students qualified for free and reduced-cost lunch. Anglo eighth-grade students performed at the 65th percentile nationally in reading and at the 50th percentile nationally in math.

Although Cole enjoyed a positive reputation because of the arts program, it did not serve minority students well. In 1995 African American students comprised 51 percent of the school population. African-American eighth grades scored in the 27th percentile in reading and the 20th percentile in math.

Latino students in 1995 made up 19 percent of the student body. Latino eighth graders scored in the 34th percentile in reading and the 30th percentile in math.

Three years later, with the arts program gone to southeast Denver, Cole’s enrollment had dropped to 568 – 13 of whom (or 2 percent) were Anglo. The school had become predominantly Latino. The free and reduced lunch percentage had doubled to 89 percent. Achievement remained at roughly the same low level as it had in 1995 for Latinos and

African Americans.

It has been all downhill since then. In 2005, Cole had the dubious distinction of being the first school in Colorado – and the second in the nation – to be taken over by the state for chronically abysmal performance.

In 2005, its last year under district control, Cole’s CSAP results showed that just 2.6 percent of eighth graders were proficient in writing, and fewer than 1 percent were proficient in science.

**MANUAL**

Like Cole, Manual, until the mid-1990s, enjoyed a strong reputation that in some ways was undeserved. Integrated by court-ordered busing, Manual served a diverse student body until the return to neighborhood high schools in 1997.

In 1995, 44 percent of Manual’s 1,039 students were Anglo. One-quarter of the student population was low-income. Anglo students came from affluent neighborhoods south and east of the school. Manual is located in a traditionally African American neighborhood that over the past 15 years has become heavily Latino.

Anglos thrived at Manual. Top students regularly were admitted to elite colleges and universities – Brown, Amherst, Stanford, etc. Admissions officers undoubtedly were lured to Manual students by the combination of strong academic performance and enrollment in an integrated inner-city high school.

But like many academically tracked high schools, Manual was highly segregated within its walls. Anglos – and Asians – were disproportionately represented in high-track classes, while African Americans and Latinos languished in general track classes.

Test scores bear this out. In 1995, African American 10th graders scored in the 30th percentile nationally in reading and in the 16th percentile in math. Anglo 10th graders that same year scored in the 70th percentile in reading and the 62nd percentile in math.

In 1995, the Denver school board made

the politically motivated decision to draw boundaries around Manual that would make it a high-poverty, all minority school. One school board member tried to convince his colleagues to draw more equitable boundaries, which would have sent some wealthy East High School families to Manual.

The board member, J.P. Hemming, was rebuffed by his colleagues, who feared political backlash from powerful East High School parents from the Country Club neighborhood.

Although the school’s overall achievement plunged once new boundaries took effect in 1997, the performance of African American and Latino students remained stable or, in some cases, improved slightly (see chart). However, the Anglo test scores, which helped mask the abysmal achievement of other groups, no longer provided cover for the school. By 2000, nearly three out of four manual students were low-income.

In 2001, hoping to undo some of the damage done by the new Manual boundaries, DPS broke Manual into three small, autonomous schools, with the help of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But the break-up was largely unsuccessful.

A report by the Colorado Small Schools Initiative found that while the schools’ structure changed, teaching did not. And, the report found, “none of the three schools (was) able to adopt a clear vision or a coherent set of school values that directs all classroom and school level practices, in the way that many successful new small high schools have successfully achieved...”

Earlier this year, the Denver school board decided to close Manual for the 2006-07 school year and reopen it a year later, completely redesigned and with only ninth graders that first year. Early indications are that the school will feature some kind of magnet program, in an attempt to draw some middle class families back to Manual.

The decision, arrived at in some haste, created a major controversy that at press time had yet to die down. ❖



(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

immediately after busing ended.

Coupled with other recent studies and analyses of more recent DPS test score data, this study helps build a compelling case that the current trend toward segregated schools works directly against efforts to close achievement gaps.

And since closing the achievement gap is the stated goal of everyone from President Bush and Governor Owens to teachers' unions, perhaps it's time for policymakers to start focusing on this problem, and devising solutions.

The Piton Foundation has long advocated voluntary efforts to economically integrate schools as one strategy to help close achievement gaps. That this can be done through strategically located school choices is clear.

Whether our society has the collective will to make it happen is another question.

In our September issue, The Term Paper will provide detailed case studies of two places where successful efforts are beginning to close gaps. One is the Denver School of Science and Technology, a fledgling charter school.

The other is inside two classrooms at Denver's East High School, where two visionary teachers are teaching "detracked" ninth-grade English classes. Stay tuned.

Just before this issue went to press, I had the honor of attending a talk by Richard Rothstein, a leading educational policy expert. Rothstein put the issue of achievement gaps in a startlingly different context.

He suggested that closing achievement gaps is impossible in the current environment, and that trying to do so is irresponsible. While on the surface his argument might appear repugnant, it is, in fact, profound and revolutionary in its implications.

Below are some excerpts from his talk. People interested in a more detailed examination of this issue, should pick up a copy of Rothstein's 2004 book, "Class and Schools."

*"We are engaged in what can only be called a national orgy of hypocrisy. We claim that we want to close the achievement gap between*

*advantaged and disadvantaged children while simultaneously failing to support and withdrawing support from those social and economic institutions that could enhance equality.*

*Closing the achievement gap is not a reasonable goal. It is an irresponsible goal. It is one that inevitably will enhance inequality rather than equality. And so long as we base our national and state policies on closing the achievement gap by school reform alone, by trying to hold teachers and schools accountable for higher performance by testing children more, by improving the curriculum, by getting more highly qualified teachers, by improving standards, we will not close the achievement gap and indeed we will widen it.*

*This seems to defy common sense. Surely if students are taught well, if teachers have high expectations, if the curriculum is adequate, all children should be able to learn to the same extent. And if they don't, surely it must be because expectations are too low or the curriculum is inadequate or the standards are too low.*

*We are not going to close the achievement gap, we are not even going to substantially narrow it, by focusing only on school reform. We need early childhood programs, not just pre-K, but programs for infants and toddlers instead of poor quality daycare.*

*Unless we fund high quality early childhood programs that provide the same kinds of intellectual context that middle class children have, we are not going to get children to school with the same ability to learn that middle class children have. Unless we put health clinics in schools so that low income children can get the same kind of routine and preventive health care that middle class children get, we will not close achievement gaps.*

*Unless we have a national housing policy that deals with the crisis of housing in low income communities in this country, where rents have been rising much faster than working class incomes, we are not going to deal with that 14 percent of the achievement gap economists say is attributable to differential rates of student mobility.*

*And of course there are many other social and*

*economic policies that directly affect achievement.*

*Closing the achievement gap through schools alone is not only a false goal it is also dangerous. It is dangerous for the following reason. If, as I have suggested, we cannot close the achievement gap by school reform alone, no matter how much we improve the achievement of disadvantaged children; if we are going to hold schools responsible for a goal we know we can't meet we are inevitably going to doom our public education system to a public judgment of failure.*

*We are going to undermine the credibility of public education. We are going to provide further support for those who believe schools are the sole cause of inequality in this country, and will try to privatize them.*

*We will also drive out of the teaching profession, as is happening increasingly, those great, dedicated, wonderful teachers who are doing a good job; who are getting higher achievement from their disadvantaged students, but are being labeled a failure because they cannot get middle class achievement from disadvantaged children.*

*We cannot eliminate social inequality in this country, or in any society, with a program that relies entirely on the school system to cure our social ills."*

It's hard to dispute Rothstein's assertions. And yet they point to an essential paradox that must not be ignored. Even while acknowledging that schools play a limited role in the development of young learners, educators must not use this as an excuse to do less.

What Rothstein provides are explanations, not excuses. In the current reality, educators must do more than their share to fill the holes created by the failures of other sectors of our society.

This needn't let health care, housing and other social services sectors off the hook. In fact, it should serve as a model to others. Only if we all do more than our share will we begin to chip away at the seemingly insurmountable challenge of ensuring that all children have a real chance to succeed. ♦

--Alan Gottlieb

Top right photo courtesy of Denver Public Schools

# *the* **term***paper*

News & Analysis  
on Urban School Reform  
from The Piton Foundation

“Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘Too late.’ There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect.

The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on . . .”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



*The September 2006 Term Paper will present detailed examinations of programs in Denver that demonstrate how an intentional effort to economically integrate schools can close achievement gaps and raise achievement.*

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