

## **School Segregation, Educational Disparities, and Impacts on Haitian Youth in South Florida**

Tekla Nicholas and LéTania Severe  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** This paper examines the ways in which the legacy of school segregation in South Florida has affected the education of Haitian students and continues to limit their prospects. The high schools that serve neighborhoods with concentrated Haitian populations achieve shockingly poor academic results, which negatively affect Haitian student academic achievement.

Haitian immigrants have high hopes for their children who grow up in the U.S. where public schools are available to all. They have a strong faith in education as the key to success in America. However, despite putting a high value on education, many Haitian students in South Florida are finding academic success to be an unattainable dream. Throughout its history education in Florida has been characterized by racial disparities, and this history of inequality affects the way Haitian immigrants and their children are being incorporated into American society today. The South Florida schools that serve the neighborhoods where most Haitians live are not providing the educational foundations necessary to make these dreams come true. In this paper, we demonstrate the effects of *de facto* school segregation and academic inequality on the children of Haitian immigrants.

### **The Academic Achievement of Haitian Students**

In the widely-cited Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) more than 5,000 students with immigrant parents in South Florida and southern California were surveyed at several points from eighth or ninth grade to early adulthood, in order to analyze the impact of various factors on academic success (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found a clear correlation between ethnic origin and academic achievement that persisted even when other variables were controlled. Among the groups studied, Haitian students were found to have some of the lowest GPAs and test scores. However, Haitian students and their parents share high aspirations and expectations for academic achievement, qualities that are generally associated with high-achieving groups. This presents a paradox that has not been well explained by existing theories.

Why do the children of Haitian immigrants demonstrate this ethnic disadvantage in academic achievement? Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have argued that these poor academic results are a result of “segmented assimilation” (p. 61). They suggest that the academic outcomes of Haitian students reflect adversarial attitudes toward education that develop as a consequence of assimilation into a black urban underclass. However, they do not resolve the conflict between this hypothesis and the very positive attitudes toward education evinced by Haitians in the CILS study.

Incorporating their many years of previous research among Miami Haitians, Stepick, Stepick, Eugene, Teed, and Labissiere (2001) undertook a further analysis of the CILS data. They concluded that the most important factor in the paradox of high aspirations and low academic performance of Haitian students was the negative “context of reception” experienced by Haitian immigrants (Stepick et al., 2001, p. 231). This refers to the unwelcoming environment

faced by Haitian immigrants to the U.S. who suffered hostile government policies and a high level of racial and ethnic prejudice in the U.S. In addition, Haitians were disadvantaged by their low levels of parental education, and by speaking a language shared by no other group. These disadvantageous beginnings created an environment that contributed to intergenerational conflict and poor academic performance among the children of Haitian immigrants. Although many aspects of social disadvantage were noted in this analysis, none were linked directly to disparities in the schools. In this paper, we argue that school segregation in South Florida and its history of tolerating educational inequality are important characteristics of the context of reception that have not been adequately considered.

### **School Segregation in South Florida**

Segregation has been a fundamental mechanism for inequality in the United States, particularly within the public school system. However, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision declared school segregation unconstitutional asserting that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education Topeka*, 1954, p. 495). The decision of the Court made clear that the separation of students by race was in and of itself detrimental. Although we think of this as a part of American history, *de facto* school segregation continues to persist more than 50 years later (Borman et al., 2004; Orfield & Lee, 2005).

Following the *Brown* decision, many states vigorously resisted its requirements, especially in the American South. In Florida, politicians asserted segregation as part of Florida Law and continued to support the operation of a dual or racially segregated school system throughout the state. It was not until the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, that the southern region of United States began to experience significant rates of desegregation (Borman et al., 2004; Dunn, 1997; Moore, 2004). This act allowed the federal government to place schools under court-mandated order to desegregate and punish those that refused. In 1969, Miami-Dade was charged with operating a dual school system and was placed under court order to desegregate. Broward County Schools were similarly charged the following year.

When Haitian immigrants arrived in South Florida in the late 1970s, both Broward and Dade counties were struggling with the requirements of the *Brown* decision. Broward made progress under a desegregation plan and in 1979 was declared a unitary system and removed from court supervision. However, despite this progress toward integration, two decades after being declared desegregated, Broward County has the dubious distinction of making Florida one of the states with the largest increase in reverse desegregation. The county went from having nearly 90% of its high schools integrated in 1973 to less than 50% in 1994 (Boursiquot, 2003, p. 60-63). The desegregation efforts in Dade County have been largely ineffective (Moore, 2004).

Despite minimal progress in desegregating the schools, in 2001 Miami-Dade County schools were declared to be a unitary system, one that is not segregated. The court found that the district had complied with the court orders in the case and although the district was still highly segregated, it could not be held responsible for the residential segregation at the root of school segregation. This decision reflects current policy trends that seek to eliminate race-based remedies in favor of “race-neutral” voluntary projects to achieve equity in schools. As a result of this ruling, the county is no longer permitted to use race-conscious methods to resist re-segregation and continue its efforts to integrate its schools (Moore, 2004).

Haitian immigrants began to settle in South Florida in substantial numbers in the late 1970s. With scarce economic means, most settled in low-income areas near other Haitian immigrants or in African American neighborhoods. The largest Haitian populations in Florida

are found in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties where more than 150,000 persons of Haitian ancestry reside. Nearly 20,000 students of Haitian ancestry attend Miami-Dade and Broward high schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Haitian children began to enroll in local schools as they were still struggling to deal with racial segregation and desegregation policies. The impacts of the flood of immigrant students combined with the continued underperformance of the majority black schools in these counties created a very negative environment for the educational aspirations of Haitian immigrants and their children.

So how are the children of Haitian immigrants affected by segregation and inequality in South Florida public schools? In this study, we examine the racial composition and academic results of Miami-Dade and Broward high schools. We assess whether Haitian students are affected by *de facto* segregation in South Florida schools and if there is an academic disadvantage associated with the schools they attend.

### Methods

To determine the relationship between racial mix and academic results in Miami-Dade and Broward County high schools, we first categorized them according to the percentage of Black students enrolled in each school. Charter schools and specialty or technical schools were excluded from the analysis, capturing 91% of the high school population. Each county was analyzed separately. Schools were divided into four categories adapted from those used by Orfield and Lee (2005), representing degrees of racial segregation. These categories included: *intensely segregated non-Black schools* (0-10% Black students), *integrated schools* (11-50% Black students), *majority Black schools* (51-90% Black students), and *intensely segregated Black schools* (91-100% Black students). We evaluated the standardized test scores and graduation rates for all schools in each category using math and reading FCAT scores and graduation rates obtained from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2005).

We then evaluated how these schools affect Haitian students. However, determining exactly how Haitian students are performing academically is not easy. School statistics are sorted by several racial and ethnic categories, such as White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American, making it difficult to get information for any particular nationality. In order to determine which South Florida high schools serve substantial populations of Haitian students, we employed a two-step process. First, families of Haitian ancestry were identified by census tract, using Census 2000 data. Next, we determined within which school boundaries the census tracts fell according to Miami-Dade and Broward county school boundary maps (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2007; Broward County Public Schools, 2004). Although this method cannot precisely indicate the population of Haitian students in any given high school, it does establish a reasonable proxy for schools that serve neighborhoods with high numbers of Haitian residents.

Academic achievement in these schools was assessed according to published results of math and reading scores on the 2005 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and 2005 graduation rates (FLDOE, 2005). The FCAT is a standardized test of reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Each component is scored on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest possible score and 1 being the lowest. A score of 3 or above is considered proficient at grade level and, since 2005, students must achieve this level on the 10th grade exam in order to attain a high school diploma. Level 1 is the lowest score a student can receive and it indicates gross deficiencies in math and reading. Our analysis focused on the percentages of students passing the FCAT (scoring level 3 and above) and those who achieved the very lowest scores (level 1).

A final component of our research, still in progress, includes interviews with students, parents, and school personnel associated with South Florida high schools that served concentrated Haitian neighborhoods from the 1980s until present. These interviews are intended to provide explanatory detail and to assess the human impact of our findings.

### Findings

Patterns of school segregation differed between the two counties studied. Although in Broward 38% of the high schools were majority Black schools, none were intensely segregated (exceeding 90% Black). Four schools (15%) were intensely segregated non-Black schools, with Black students comprising 10% or less of the population. Miami-Dade demonstrated higher levels of extreme segregation. While a smaller percentage of schools were majority Black (29%), almost half of these schools were intensely segregated Black schools in which more than 90% of the students were Black. At the other extreme, one third of Miami-Dade high schools were intensely segregated non-Black (33%).

These patterns of racial segregation corresponded to disparate academic results (see Table 1). A marked decline in passing scores for both the math and reading FCAT is evident as the proportion of Black students increases in both counties. Similarly, majority Black schools have much higher percentages of students earning level 1, the lowest possible score, on the math and reading FCAT. Graduation rates also follow this pattern, declining as the percentage of Black students increases.

Table 1  
*2004 – 2005 Academic Results by Degrees of Racial Segregation in South Florida High Schools*

Degree of Racial Segregation	% Black	%3+ Math	%3+ Read	% 1 Math	% 1 Read	Grad Rate
<b>Broward County</b>						
0-10% Black Schools (n = 4)	6	81	45	6	24	77
11-50% Black Schools (n = 12)	26	65	30	13	38	74
51-90% Black Schools (n = 10)	68	51	19	23	55	57
<b>Miami-Dade County</b>						
0-10% Black Schools (n = 8)	5	56	22	20	49	64
11-50% Black Schools (n = 9)	33	47	21	27	55	58
51-90% Black Schools (n = 4)	79	37	12	36	68	48
91-100% Black Schools (n = 3)	93	28	7	36	71	44

Nearly two thirds of all Broward County residents of Haitian ancestry are clustered in just 52 of Broward's 278 census tracts. In Miami-Dade County, the census tracts with residents of Haitian ancestry are even more highly concentrated. Two thirds of Miami's Haitian population is clustered in just 48 of the county's 343 census tracts. Many of these neighborhoods lie along the I-95 corridor, which comprises largely Black neighborhoods throughout South Florida. The majority of these census tracts are served by four high schools in Broward and by five Miami high schools (see Table 2). All of these are majority black schools, and include the most highly segregated Black high schools in each county.

The academic achievement variables for these schools demonstrate the expected poor results, with one exception (see Table 2). Most of the schools fall far below the county averages for FCAT scores and graduation rates. However, North Miami Beach High School falls only a few percentage points below the county averages for FCAT results, and its graduation rate is equal to the county average. Interestingly, it has the most integrated student body (68% Black) of the high schools in Miami-Dade County that serve concentrated Haitian neighborhoods. In Broward County, Deerfield Beach High School is much more highly integrated (54% Black) than the other schools that serve most Haitian students, but in this case there is no corresponding academic advantage. Of special concern are the many students who score a 1 on the FCAT math and reading in the Broward and Miami-Dade county high schools serving concentrated Haitian neighborhoods (see Table 2).

Table 2

*South Florida High Schools Serving Concentrated Haitian Neighborhoods – 2004-2005  
Academic Results by School and County Averages*

School	% Black	Graduation Rate	FCAT 2005 Math 3 & Above	FCAT 2005 Read 3 & Above	FCAT 2005 Math Level 1	FCAT 2005 Read Level 1
Broward County	37	67	63	29	15	41
Boyd Anderson	90	46	42	15	28	64
Deerfield Beach	54	57	51	22	24	55
Dillard	90	42	51	14	21	63
Ely	83	61	53	21	24	54
Miami-Dade County	28	60	54	24	22	50
Central	82	38	26	7	50	79
Edison	93	28	16	1	48	82
Norland	94	52	35	9	31	64
North Miami Beach	68	60	51	20	24	54
North Miami	80	51	43	13	29	67

### Discussion

Haitian students are subject to a great degree to the academic disadvantages of racially segregated schools. These negative effects are evident in the poor standardized test scores and graduation rates for these schools. These scores portend very poor outcomes for these students. Most striking are the high percentages of students scoring 1 on reading. Between the two counties, all of these schools have more than half of their students scoring the lowest possible score on the reading portion of the FCAT. This is particularly indicative of the limitations that a great majority of these students must face in all their courses. A student who cannot read well can never be comfortable or successful in the school environment. Although the math scores are not as low as the reading, in each of these schools close to 50% or more of the students fail to achieve acceptable scores in math.

Most striking of all these results are those from Miami Edison High School, which serves the area of Miami known as “Little Haiti.” This school represents the intersection of intense

Black segregation and high levels of poverty. The expected level of math proficiency was not achieved by 84% of students, with 48% of students scoring the lowest possible score on the FCAT math. Even more stunning, only 1% of the students achieved the expected level of reading proficiency, with 82% of students scoring a level 1 on the reading, illustrating the inability of this school to educate its students with the most basic knowledge of reading and math.

Students must receive a level 3 or higher on the FCAT to graduate. However, with so many students scoring a level 1 in reading, it is no surprise that all of these schools have close to 40% or more of their students not receiving a high school diploma. And once again Miami Edison, which serves Little Haiti, has the poorest results, graduating only 28% of its students. These low graduation rates suggest that a high number of students are completing 12 years of schooling without receiving a high school diploma, ultimately leaving them with few options after high school.

### **Consequences of Attending Underachieving Schools**

The findings presented above demonstrate a relationship between the racial composition of South Florida high schools and academic results that affects many Haitian students. However, these statistics cannot explain why this relationship exists. In an on-going phase of our research, several themes have emerged in interviews with students, parents, and school personnel that reflect on the learning environments of these schools. Areas of concern include school violence, restricted access to textbooks, and low teacher expectations. But most compelling are the stories of the students whose dreams for a good education have slipped away.

Unfortunately, there are many cases of students who achieve passing grades but who do not receive a diploma because they are unable to pass the FCAT. One such student is Sherley (a pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality). Her parents are from Haiti, but she was born in Florida. She attended Deerfield Beach High School and had a 3.5 grade point average at the end of her senior year. She was polite to her teachers and always did her homework assignments. However, her vocabulary was quite limited; her grammar was poor, and consequently she struggled with reading comprehension and written responses. Upon graduation, she received only a Certificate of Completion instead of a high school diploma. She was unable to continue on to college as she had planned to do. Worse yet, she will likely struggle throughout her life because her 12 years of education did not provide her with the level of reading comprehension she will need.

The astonishingly poor academic results represented by the test scores of the schools that serve South Florida's concentrated Haitian neighborhoods demonstrate serious educational deficiencies in these schools. Although some argue that these poor academic results reflect a lack of interest in education of individual students and their parents, this is just not plausible. While some students do develop a negative attitude toward school, it is often simply a defense mechanism to hide their sense of failure (Nicholas, 2008). The results of the FCAT exams demonstrate that far too many students cannot read as well as they should, not only in majority black schools, but throughout the Miami-Dade and Broward school systems with the majority black schools performing much worse.

Our analysis, like a similar study by Borman and her coauthors (2004) of Florida public schools, has shown that the racial composition of a school and the school's segregation status are closely associated with the percentage of students passing the FCAT (2004). Race does still matter. These poor test results indicate that African Americans and Black immigrants are disproportionately affected by high stakes testing in Florida. Lacking the skills to meet the

testing standards required for a high school diploma, many students are completing the 12 years of schooling and entering the job market without this essential certification.

Current policy both within the state of Florida and nationally has shifted away from the intent of the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The focus no longer is to create racially balanced schools so that all children can learn but to increase the accountability within U.S. schools as they are. Instead of continuing the battle initiated by the *Brown* decision, national education policy seems to accept that separate *can* be equal.

Haitian immigrants and their American-born children are concentrated to a large extent in some of the schools with the lowest levels of achievement in South Florida. Although they have high aspirations and expectations for education in the U.S., the high schools they attend leave many students unprepared to fulfill their dreams.

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