

On June 19, 2020, all 11 school districts in Marion County, representing over 135,000 students, turned off the lights at a stadium in their district for 8 minutes and 46 seconds – the amount of time officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck. Alongside this symbolic event, the superintendents released a [joint video](#) launching a “No Racism Zone” initiative. The initiative included a collective commitment to teach anti-racism in schools, provide resources for parents to educate themselves and their children about the importance of combatting racism, and post “No Racism Zone” signage on school campuses. Superintendents made statements committing to “examine policies and practices” and “ensure all students are provided with the conditions necessary to succeed.”

More than one year later, this report is intended to support and amplify this initiative by sharing key data, research, and recommendations that address some of the most significant racial disparities in Marion County’s education systems, spanning early childhood through postsecondary education. In the joint video from the superintendents, Dr. Timothy Hanson, Superintendent of Metropolitan School District of Warren Township, perhaps said it best: “It requires more than a statement – it requires action.” This report seeks to help enable that action.

A thorough review of racial equity in educational opportunities reveals Black and Hispanicⁱ children born and raised in Marion County are likely to experience a disproportionate and chronic lack of access to a high-quality education from birth all the way through college. This report reviews data from all students enrolled in public district and charter schools, as well as private schoolsⁱⁱ (Figure 1), highlights the most significant racial disparities discovered, and advises on how to better promote improved educational outcomes for Black and Hispanic students.

Figure 1: Marion County Student Racial Composition by K-12 School Type, 2020-21 School Year

A MAJORITY OF PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MARION COUNTY ARE BLACK OR HISPANIC

| | Total Students | % White | % Asian | % Black | % Hispanic | % Multiracial |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|---------|------------|---------------|
| School Corporations | 128,170 | 31% | 6% | 35% | 22% | 6% |
| Public Charter Schools | 30,918 | 32% | 1% | 41% | 19% | 5% |
| Private Schools | 20,257 | 59% | 5% | 13% | 17% | 5% |

Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Department of Education via public records request.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

What the data show. While there are some indications of racial equity gaps in accessing quality early childhood programs, data collection of early childhood education enrollment and outcomes in Indiana is highly limited. For example, data on preschool enrollment disaggregated by race is only available for children from low-income families who qualify for state subsidies. Additionally, information on early childhood education quality is only available for centers that participate in the state’s Paths to Quality (PTQ) rating system, which is optional. Even with these data limitations, however, there are observed gaps in access to high-quality care. Among Marion County’s children from low-income families who attend preschool programs that participate in PTQ, 65% of Black children vs. 76% of white children are enrolled in high-qualityⁱⁱⁱ programs.¹

ⁱ Note the term “Hispanic” is used throughout this report (vs. Latino or other terminology) because that was the racial group definition predominantly reflected in the public data sets analyzed by the author.

ⁱⁱ Private school data provided by the Indiana Department of Education include all state-accredited nonpublic schools and third-party accredited nonpublic schools that participate in the choice voucher program.

ⁱⁱⁱ “High-quality” is defined as receiving a Level 3 or Level 4 rating on the state’s Paths to Quality (PTQ) rating system. For children receiving vouchers during this period across multiple providers, the provider where the child attended the longest was selected for the analysis.

What the research says. Recent research suggests that enrollment in a high-quality early learning program can have a lasting positive impact on school and life outcomes,² including improvements in academic achievement,³ educational attainment,⁴ employment, earnings, criminal justice involvement, teen pregnancy, and health,⁵ but that nationally the quality of early childhood education programs attended by Black children is on average lower than that of programs attended by white children.⁶ Given that there is some preliminary evidence of this trend holding true in Indiana, systems leaders should assemble the data needed to fully understand these gaps.

Recommendations. Moving forward, policymakers should pursue the following initiatives:

- 1) Fund and develop a statewide coordinated early childhood data system that includes all providers of early childhood education. This is aligned with the consistent annual recommendations of the Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee.⁷ For example, North Carolina’s Early Childhood Integrated Data System links together education, health, and social services data to inform and improve policy and practice statewide.⁸ The national Early Childhood Data Collaborative has published a set of data collection “fundamentals” for states to follow.⁹ These data are necessary to fully identify where racial inequities exist in the state’s early childhood education system.
- 2) Mandate participation in the PTQ rating system. A 2019 survey found that 10 out of 42 states^{iv} administering state accountability systems for early childhood programs require all licensed programs to enroll in the rating system.¹⁰ Upon initial enrollment in the rating system, providers are assigned the lowest rating by default, which incentivizes them to actively pursue implementation of the criteria for a higher rating, since this information is public and viewable by all parents. Increasing PTQ participation would enhance transparency and consistency and help empower parents – especially parents of Black and Hispanic children – to identify and access the highest quality programs.
- 3) Strengthen the rigor of the PTQ system. The current rating system is largely based on program characteristics (e.g., implementation of a consistent daily schedule, delivery of professional development) rather than children’s measured learning outcomes. In partnership with the National Institute for Early Education Research, with support from Lilly Endowment Inc. and in coordination with the State of Indiana, in the spring of 2021, [Early Learning Indiana](#) launched a statewide project evaluating measures of instructional practice and evidence of child achievement.¹¹ Based on the results of this project and national research, policymakers should revise the PTQ rating system to become more reliant on measuring outcomes that are closely associated with holistic readiness for kindergarten and beyond.

K-12 ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT^v

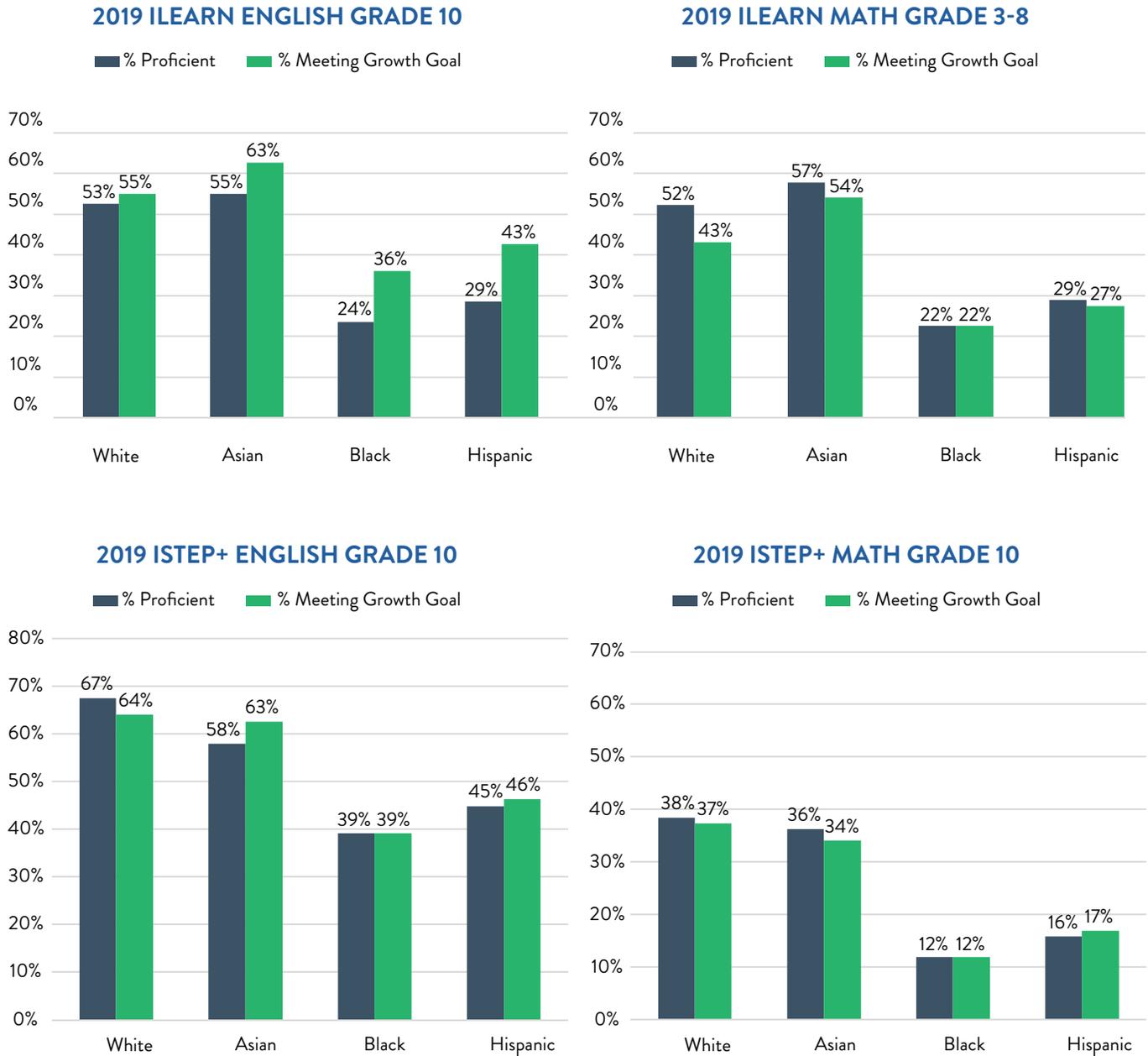
What the data show. Black and Hispanic children in Marion County face pervasive challenges in accessing and acquiring a high-quality education upon entry to K-12 education systems. The percentage of grade 3-8 Black and Hispanic students achieving proficiency in English/Language Arts (ELA) and math is roughly half that of white and Asian students, and Black students in grades 3-8 are twice as likely as white students to be “Below Proficient” in ELA and math – the lowest achievement level of the four performance tiers.¹² By 10th grade, white and Asian students are approximately three times more likely to be proficient in math than Black and Hispanic students, and the percentage of Black and Hispanic students scoring “Pass +” in 10th grade math – the highest achievement level – is nearly zero. Black and Hispanic elementary and high school students are also far less likely to achieve their annual growth goals on state exams, indicating they are unlikely to catch up to their white and Asian peers over time (Figure 2).

^{iv} Includes Washington D.C. which has its own early childhood education data system.

^v Unless otherwise noted, the data that follow throughout this report are presented for 2018-19, the most recent “normal” year before COVID-19 significantly altered the educational landscape in many ways, and include all types of public schools, including charter schools and innovation network schools, as well as state-accredited private schools and third-party accredited nonpublic schools that participate in the choice voucher program. Throughout, the year reported is the spring semester of the academic year; for example, 2019 refers to the 2018-19 school year.

Figure 2: 2019 State Test Results (Grades 3 – 8 ILEARN and Grade 10 ISTEP+)

TOO FEW BLACK AND HISPANIC STUDENTS ACHIEVE PROFICIENCY OR MEET GROWTH GOALS ON STATE EXAMS, WHICH ARE A MARKER OF ACADEMIC PROGRESS

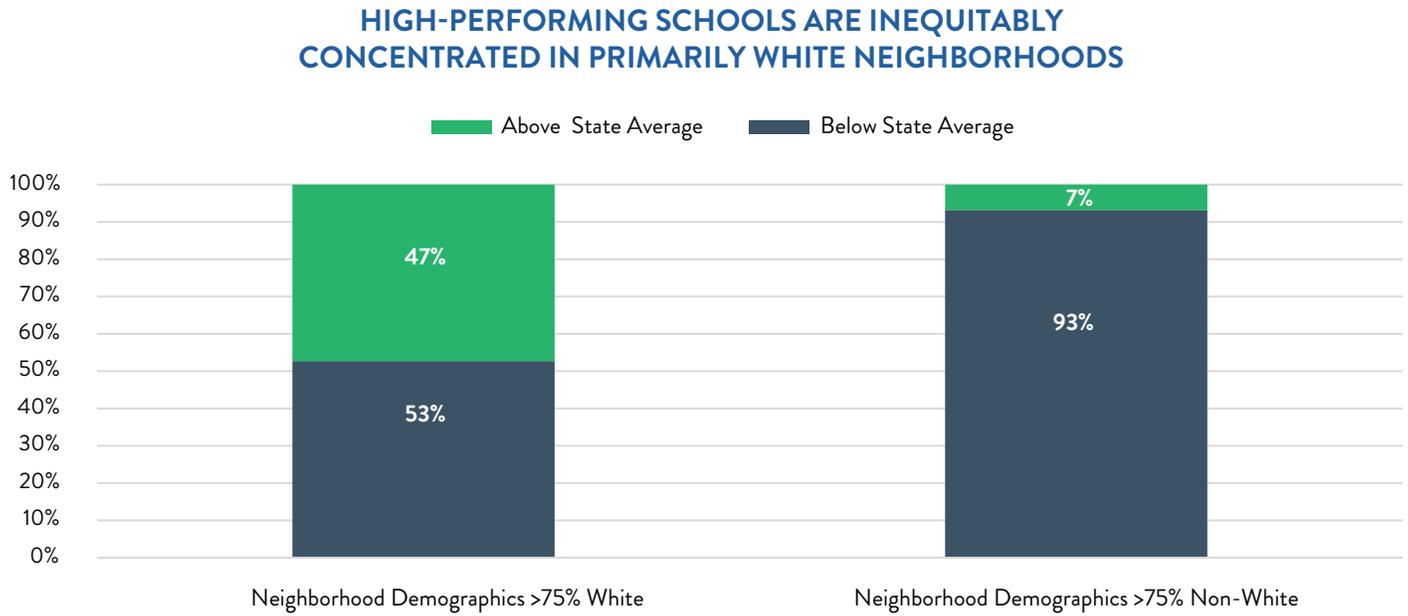


Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Department of Education via public records request and the Indiana Department of Education Data Center and Reports.

While disparities in educational outcomes between Black and Hispanic students in Marion County and their white and Asian peers are commonly known, less talked about is the “opportunity gap” – the lower likelihood Black and Hispanic children have of accessing the highest performing schools. Only 7% of K-12 schools located in neighborhoods^{vi} whose residents are primarily people of color are performing above the state average on state exams – vs. 47% of schools in primarily white neighborhoods (Figure 3).

^{vi} Neighborhoods are defined by grouping individual neighborhoods and subdivisions into larger geographies called “neighborhood areas,” as reported by the City of Indianapolis and provided to the author by IndyVitals, the source of the neighborhood demographic data used in this report.

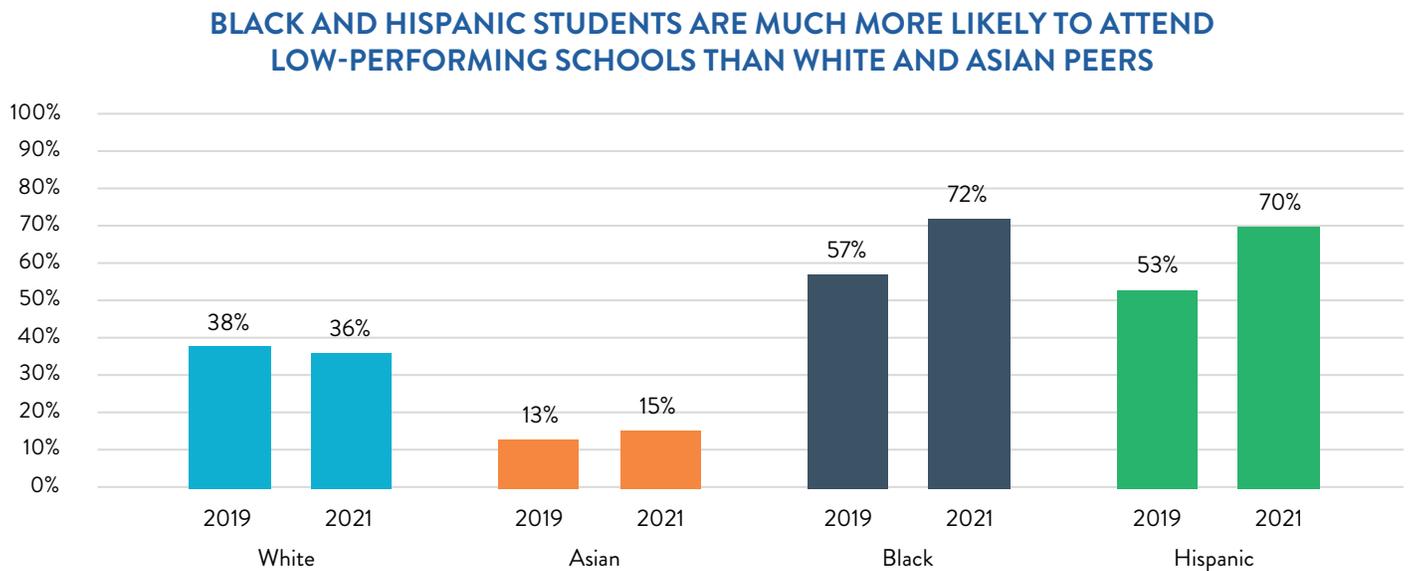
Figure 3: 2019 Percentage of Schools with Proficiency Rates Above State Average, by Neighborhood Demographics



Source: Author calculations based on the 2021 ILEARN and ISTEP+ state exam results for grades 3-8 and grade 10, respectively, available on the Indiana Department of Education Data Center and Reports and 2019 racial demographics for Marion County neighborhoods compiled by IndyVitals and shared via email on June 25, 2021.

The inequitable concentration of high-performing schools in white neighborhoods has likely contributed to a stark countywide opportunity gap, where approximately 70% of Black and Hispanic students now attend low-performing schools.^{vii} Since the arrival of COVID-19, the percentage of Black and Hispanic students enrolled in low-performing schools has increased markedly, while the percentage of white students attending low-performing schools has remained nearly the same (Figure 4).¹³

Figure 4: Percentage of Students, by Race, Attending Low-Performing Schools, 2019 and 2021



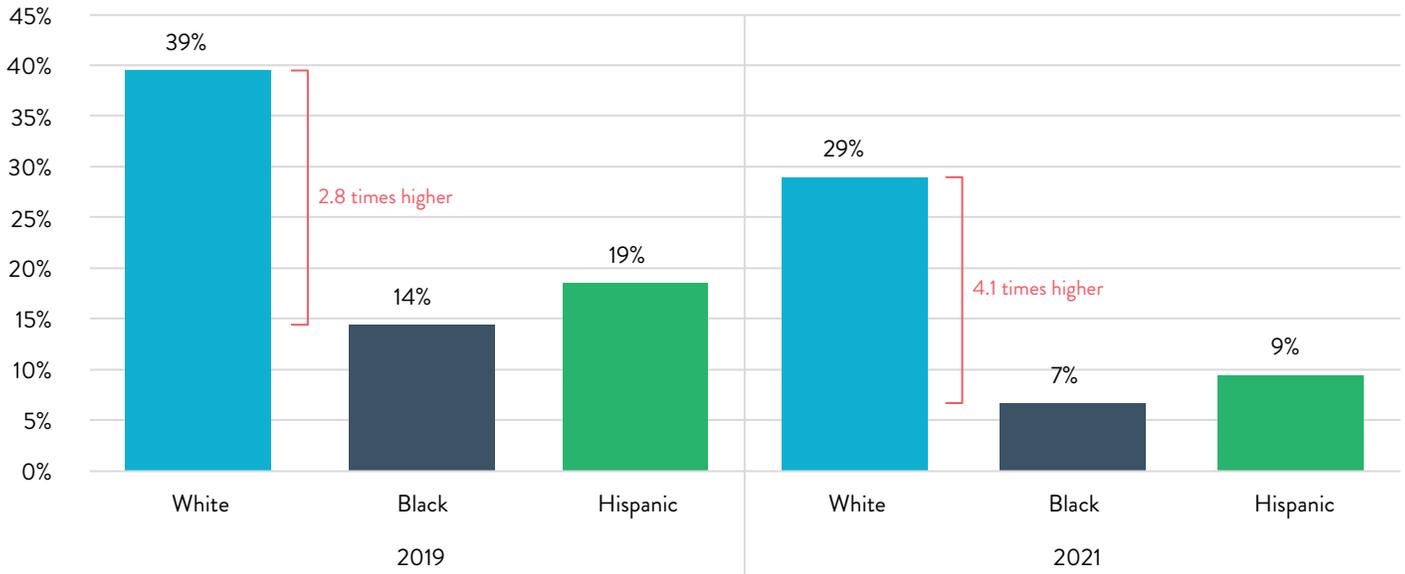
Source: Author calculations based on the 2019 and 2021 ILEARN and ISTEP+ state exam results for grades 3-8 and grade 10, respectively. Data obtained from Indiana Department of Education Data Center and Reports.

vii “Low performing” is defined here as a school where less than 20% of students achieve proficiency in English/Language Arts (ELA) and math.

The learning interruptions caused by COVID-19 disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic students, exacerbating disparities in educational outcomes. While the percentage of white students achieving proficiency in 2021 was approximately 25% lower than in 2019, Black and Hispanic student proficiency dropped by approximately 50% over that same period (Figure 5).

Figure 5: ILEARN Proficiency (ELA and Math, Grades 3 -8), 2019 and 2021

LEARNING INTERRUPTIONS DUE TO COVID-19 DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED BLACK AND HISPANIC STUDENTS, EXACERBATING EXISTING DISPARITIES IN OUTCOMES



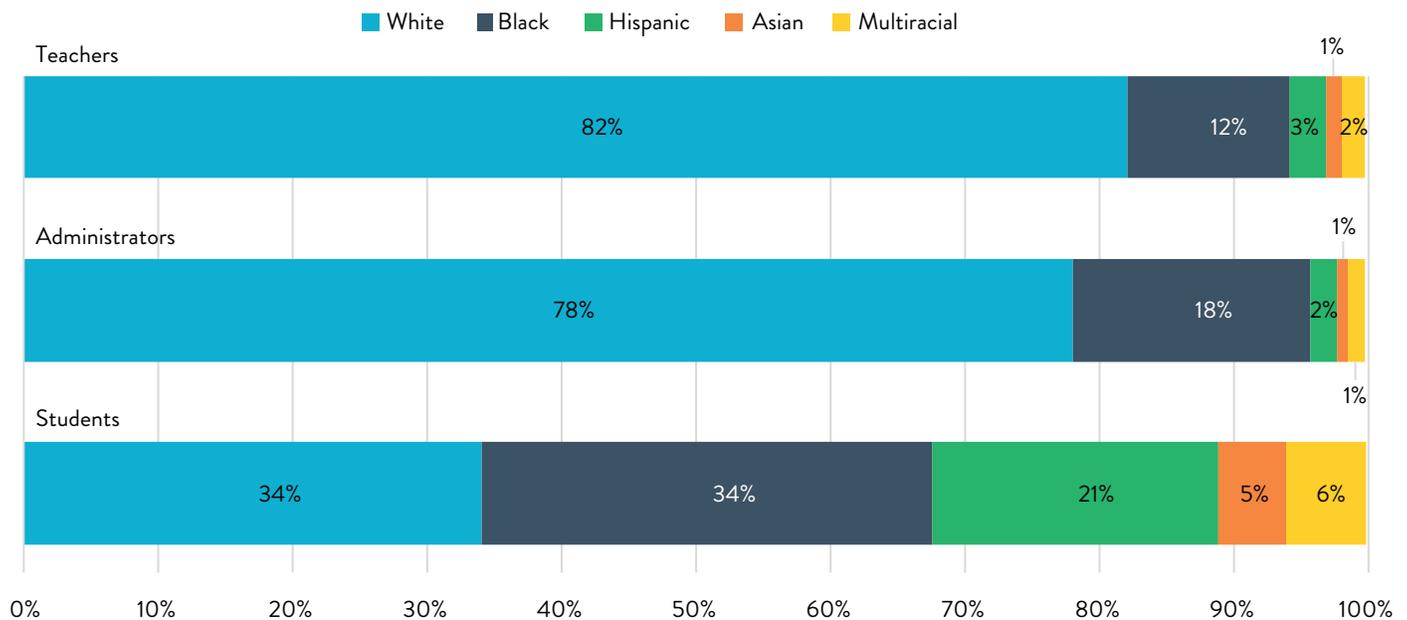
Source: Author calculations based on data obtained from Indiana Department of Education Data Center and Reports.

Measuring differences in leading indicators of educational quality helps shed light on potential contributors to the racial inequities across outcomes noted above. For example:

- Teacher experience and retention:** In 2020, schools in Marion County where the student body was primarily (greater than 80%) white had teachers with 4 more years of experience and had teacher retention rates that were nearly 20 percentage points higher than schools where the student body was primarily students of color. While many factors affect teacher quality, student achievement tends to increase with teacher experience and retention.^{14, 15}
- Teacher-student demographic match:** Countywide, about 80% of teachers and administrators are white, compared to just 34% of students (Figure 6). Research shows having Black teachers significantly improves educational outcomes for Black students (including test scores,¹⁶ graduation, and college-going rates¹⁷) and that Black principals are more likely to hire and retain Black teachers.¹⁸
- Advanced coursework:** White students in Marion County are nearly 3 times more likely to be identified as “high ability” than Black students, which qualifies them for gifted and talented programs. White students in Marion County are also more than twice as likely as Black students to complete at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in high school. Advanced learning opportunities are linked to several potential benefits for students, including increased school engagement, improved attendance, reduced number of suspensions, and higher graduation rates.¹⁹

Figure 6: 2021 Marion County School Staff and Student Demographics

THE MAJORITY OF TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN MARION COUNTY ARE WHITE, WHICH IS NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE OVERALL STUDENT POPULATION



Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Department of Education via public records request.

While this is not an exhaustive summary of all the potential factors contributing to racial disparities in educational outcomes in Marion County, these examples do point to tangible opportunities for reducing inequity.

What the research says. It is important to understand why these disparities in achievement and opportunity exist in the first place. Studies have shown that socioeconomic status is a major contributing factor to racial disparities, given the higher proportion of children of color growing up in poverty in this country and the strong correlation between poverty and educational outcomes. However, a substantial gap remains even after accounting for socioeconomic status.²⁰

Improving educational equity can have lasting impacts on life outcomes for Black and Hispanic children. Research has demonstrated correlations between test score performance gaps and wage inequality between racial groups later in life.²¹ Additionally, an analysis by McKinsey & Company found that closing the gap between Black and Hispanic students and their white peers could add up to \$525 billion (4%) to the nation’s GDP in a single year.²²

Recommendations. Marion County should address the inequities outlined above in the following ways:

- 1) Identify neighborhoods with a combination of high concentrations of residents of color and low availability of high-performing schools. Prioritize intentional replication of high-quality schools – whether district schools or charter schools – in those neighborhoods.
- 2) Dedicate recent federal emergency aid^{viii} to provide learning supports for students whose academic performance has suffered because of COVID-19. This could include individualized tutoring, extended learning time, additional teachers, or home-based learning supports. Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on academic outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, these supports would likely help increase equity between racial groups.

^{viii} In March 2020, Congress passed the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) in response to the COVID-19 health crisis. This \$2.2 trillion bill included \$30.75 billion in emergency aid to the Education Stabilization Fund to help early learning, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions and students address the impacts of the pandemic.

- 3) Implement automatic enrollment policies for advanced coursework²³ in Marion County schools. Under these policies, students who meet benchmark proficiency levels on state tests or complete prerequisite courses are automatically enrolled in more advanced courses such as honors or Advanced Placement (AP). While students may choose to opt out of these courses, such policies would help reduce the barriers that Black and Hispanic students currently experience in accessing these opportunities.
- 4) Develop new programs and partnerships to recruit and retain people of color as teachers and administrators. For example, Marian University and Ivy Tech Community College (Ivy Tech) recently announced a partnership that makes it faster and more affordable to complete a teacher training program, aiming to have at least 50% students of color in the program. More than 40% of Indiana’s college students of color attend Ivy Tech campuses, making it an ideal partner for such an initiative.²⁴ Marion County school districts should make direct financial investments to expand these types of programs and make additional financial investments in other programs targeting the recruitment and retention of staff of color, such as apprentice teacher programs and summer fellowships. In addition, the Indiana General Assembly deserves commendation for establishing the William A. Crawford Minority Teacher Scholarship, which provides a \$4,000 annual scholarship to Black and Hispanic college students planning to teach after graduation.²⁵ The Indiana Commission for Higher Education, which administers the scholarship, should continue to evaluate the impact of this program and consider increasing the award amount even further.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

What the data show. Advocates nationwide have grown louder in recent years decrying the “school to prison pipeline” – a rebuke of increasing numbers of children being pushed out of schools via punitive disciplinary measures and increased school police presence. Too often, these harsh disciplinary practices are disproportionately applied to Black children in our country, and unfortunately Marion County is no exception.

Compared to white students, Black students enrolled in K-12 Marion County public schools in 2018-19 were:

- 2 times more likely to have at least one in-school suspension during the school year
- Nearly 4 times more likely to have at least one out-of-school suspension during the school year
- 6 times more likely to have at least 4 out-of-school suspensions during the school year
- 2 times more likely to be expelled from school
- 9 times more likely to be arrested in school²⁶

The application of exclusionary discipline practices is disproportionately affecting Black children in the community.

What the research says. Once suspended or expelled, students are less likely to complete high school²⁷ and more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system.²⁸ Studies have also shown that students who do not complete high school are more likely to be incarcerated than high school graduates.²⁹ With a statewide rate of Black adult incarceration well above the national average,³⁰ policymakers would do well to focus on reducing punitive disciplinary practices and their resulting disproportionate impact on Black children in school.

Recommendations. To interrupt the current racially inequitable and harmful nature of school discipline practices, Hoosier policymakers and practitioners should pursue the following initiatives:

- 1) Establish regular school- and district-level discipline reporting, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, to every school board in the county to ensure public transparency and accountability. All Marion County districts and charter schools should establish measurable annual targets for eliminating racial disparities in school discipline and reducing the overall number of suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests. All Marion County school boards should also make these annual goals a part of their superintendent’s or charter school leader’s annual evaluation.

- 2) Mandate annual professional development for all school and district staff members in relevant topics, including implicit bias and alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline practices.³¹ Allocate the financial resources necessary to expand and maintain non-exclusionary discipline practices.
- 3) Update state legislation to promote best practices in school discipline and limit exclusionary and harsh discipline practices. For example, Indiana state law does not currently prohibit corporal punishment, and instead grants school districts the “right to take any disciplinary action necessary to promote student conduct that conforms with an orderly and effective educational system.”³² Provisions should also be added to state law or district/school policies that would establish more accountability for racial equity in how school discipline is administered.

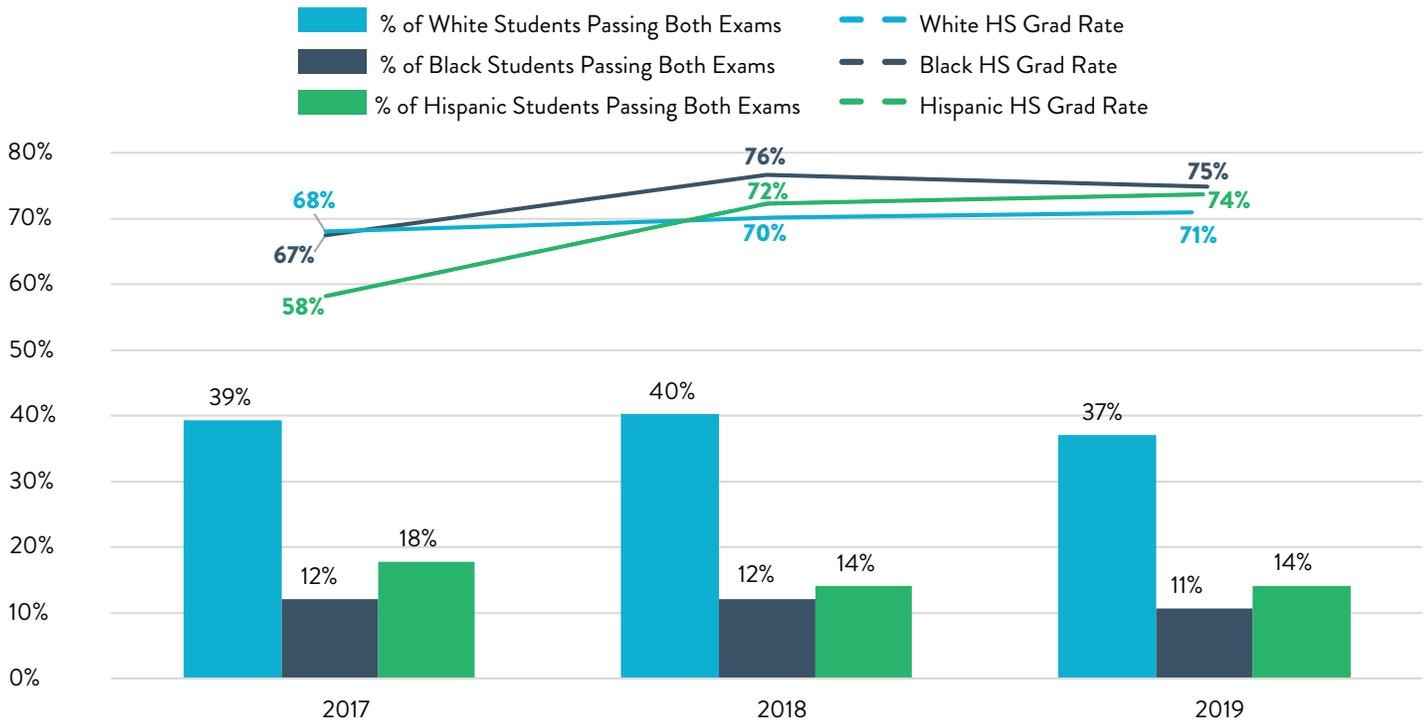
COLLEGE READINESS AND ENROLLMENT

What the data show. At first glance, the recent uptick in high school graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students in Marion County – now even higher than the graduation rate for white students – appears to be a sign of progress for racial equity. However, the use of waiver diplomas for students who have not met Indiana’s requirements for graduating high school has increased significantly, and students of color are increasingly more likely to graduate high school with a waiver.³³ While waiver diplomas are an appropriate tool for some high school students as allowable under Indiana statute, the extent of their current use in Marion County is of concern and warrants a closer review by school boards and state policymakers.

While the graduation rate for Black and Hispanic students increased between 2017 and 2019, the percentage of those students who passed both the ELA and math state exams in 10th grade slightly decreased, widening the gap between high school degree attainment and college and career readiness. Furthermore, with only 11% of Black students and 14% of Hispanic students passing 10th grade ELA and math exams, it is evident that most of the county’s Black and Hispanic students are woefully underprepared for postsecondary success (Figure 7).

Figure 7: High School Graduation Rate vs. ISTEP 10+ Pass Rate (ELA and Math), 2017-2019

FEWER THAN 15% OF BLACK AND HISPANIC STUDENTS PASS BOTH ENGLISH AND MATH STATE TESTS IN 10TH GRADE, DESPITE MUCH HIGHER GRADUATION RATES

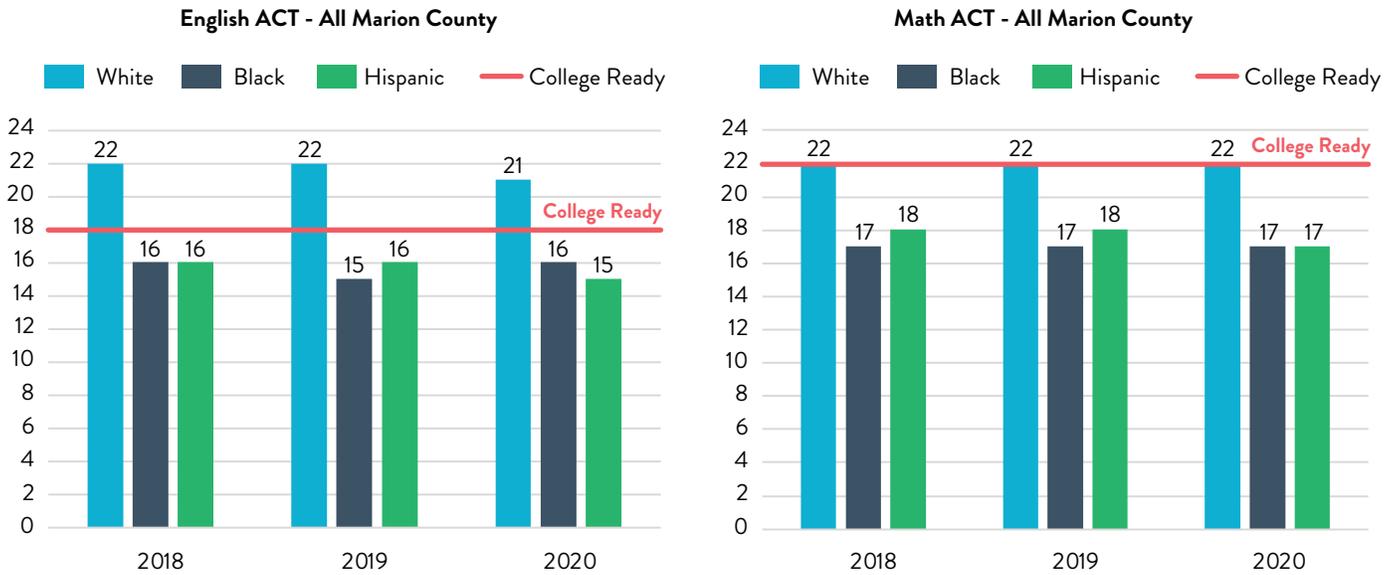


Source: Indiana Department of Education Data Center and Reports.

Similar racial inequities are observed when comparing average ACT performance vs. standard benchmarks³⁴ for college readiness^{ix} in English and math (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Average ACT Scores (English and Math), 2017-2019

ACT PERFORMANCE ILLUMINATES RACIAL DISPARITIES IN COLLEGE READINESS

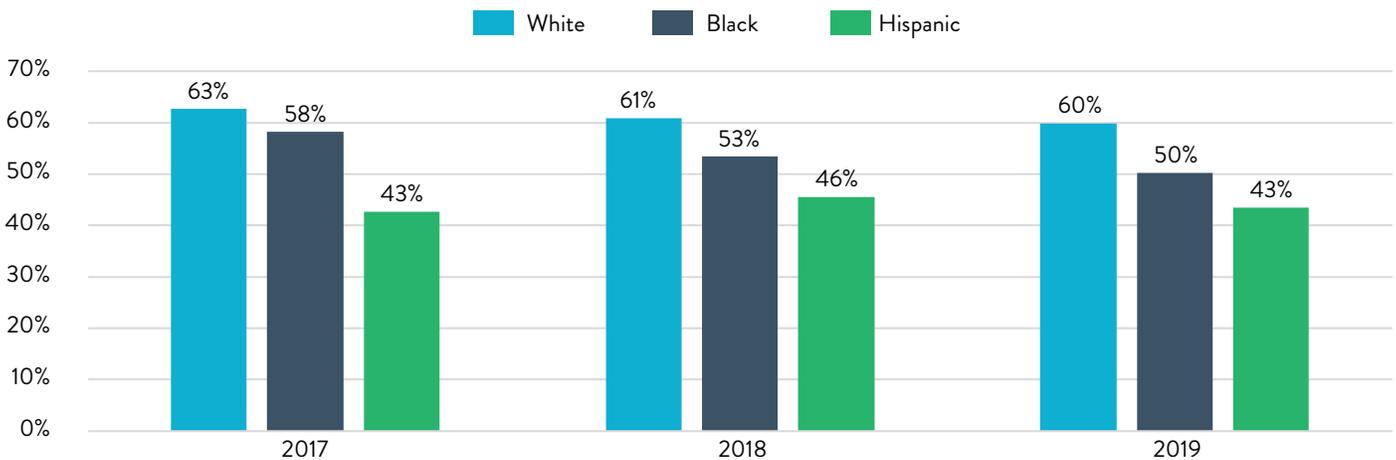


Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Department of Education via public records request.

This unpreparedness is likely among many factors leading Black and Hispanic graduates in Marion County to enroll in college at significantly lower rates than their white peers (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Percentage of High School Graduates Enrolling in College, 2017-2019

FEWER BLACK AND HISPANIC GRADUATES ENROLL IN COLLEGE COMPARED TO WHITE PEERS



Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education via public records request.

^{ix} The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum ACT scores required to have a “reasonable chance of success” in college. These benchmarks correlate with a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better and approximately a 75 percent chance of earning a C or better in the corresponding first year college course.

Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program^x, a state-funded scholarship program for students from low-income families,³⁵ has shown impressive results in mitigating the college enrollment gap, with 88% of Scholars going to college, compared to 35% of students from low-income families and 64% of students from non-low-income families. Moreover, racial gaps between college-going rates are virtually non-existent among students completing the program.³⁶

Despite the promising college access results of the 21st Century Scholars program, there is some evidence to suggest that students of color may be underrepresented in the program. While the data collection is insufficient (40% of Scholars' race/ethnicity is identified as "unknown"), Black students make up only 21% of the 2022 graduating cohort whose race/ethnicity is known.³⁷

What the research says. Research has identified a very strong correlation between the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college enrollment, with college enrollment rates nearly doubling for those students who complete the FAFSA.³⁸ Additionally, every \$1,000 in grant aid per student increases postsecondary enrollment by about 4 percentage points, with an even greater impact for students from low-income families – many of whom are students of color.³⁹ With a FAFSA completion rate in Marion County of only 41.5%, there is tremendous opportunity to improve FAFSA completion and ultimately college enrollment for all students, ultimately elevating their economic opportunities later in life.

Another significant factor affecting college enrollment for all students, especially those from low-income families, is “summer melt” – a phenomenon where students gain college acceptance, signal their intent to enroll, but never show up for the fall semester. Researchers estimate 10-40% of students experience summer melt following high school graduation.⁴⁰ Colleges throughout the country have implemented various interventions to reduce summer melt, including paying student mentors to reach out and assist incoming freshmen with enrollment requirements, implementing “chatbots” that text incoming students and answer their basic questions, and facilitating peer networks among incoming freshmen attending the same college.⁴¹ For example, after Georgia State University launched a chatbot program in 2016, summer melt was reduced by 22%.⁴²

Recommendations. Many of the recommendations outlined above for addressing racial inequities in academics will also likely affect college readiness and enrollment rates. In addition, the state should pursue the following reforms:

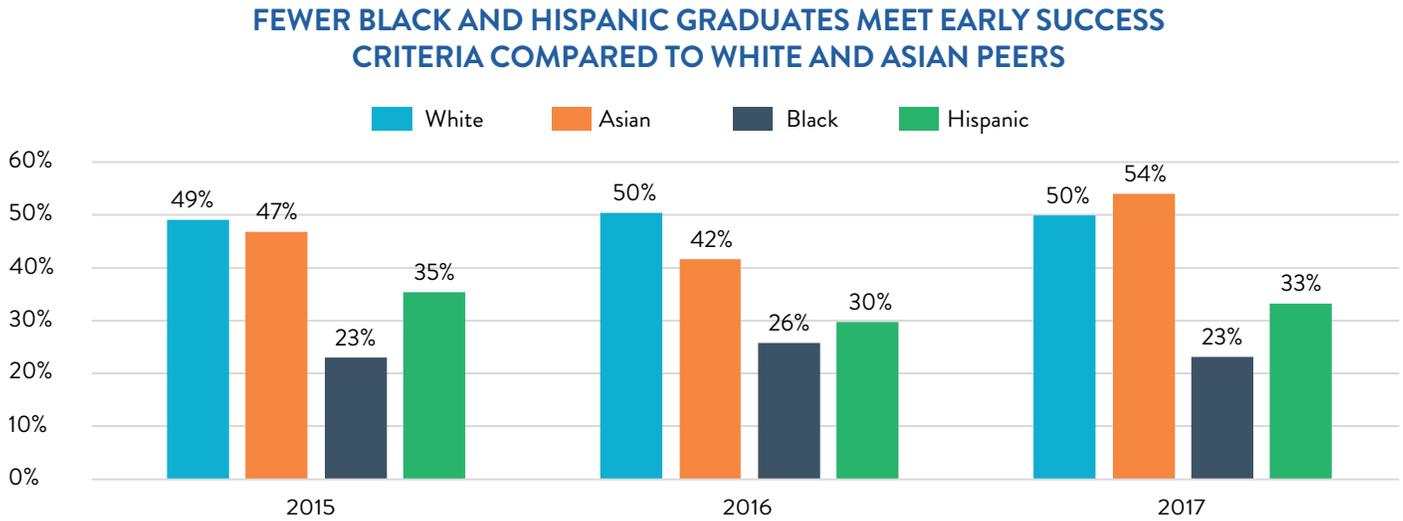
- 1) Require FAFSA completion as a prerequisite for graduating high school to ensure students don't leave money on the table they could use to attend college and ultimately improve enrollment and persistence rates. In 2018, Louisiana became the first state to do so and quickly achieved the highest FAFSA completion rate (76.5%) in the nation – nearly twice the current FAFSA completion rate of Marion County students.⁴³ This also resulted in Louisiana's Class of 2018 achieving the highest college enrollment rate for all student groups – including Black and Hispanic students – in the state's history.⁴⁴ While recent legislation originally proposed a similar mandate in Indiana, it failed to win support even after a modified version replaced the mandate with financial incentives.
- 2) Launch a reliable data collection system to consistently track race/ethnicity for all 21st Century Scholars and for FAFSA completion. Education leaders should leverage this data to identify where racial gaps exist and target interventions to improve 21st Century Scholarship participation and success rates and FAFSA completion rates for Black and Hispanic students. In addition, Marion County schools serving 7th and 8th grades (when students are eligible to enroll in the 21st Century Scholars program) should invest in recruitment campaigns specifically aimed at increasing overall program enrollment and increasing the proportion of 21st Century Scholars who are Black or Hispanic.
- 3) Expand programs that aim to reduce “summer melt.” High school counselors are not typically available to support students in the summer following graduation, which leaves many students without the help they need. High schools should restructure counselors' employment contracts to make them available to students the summer after graduation, prioritizing summer melt interventions for low-income students and students of color. High schools should partner with local colleges to collaborate on summer melt interventions, working toward a more seamless transition for high school graduates as they enter college. Indiana colleges should also invest in expanding programs that have been proven to reduce summer melt, such as chatbots and peer mentoring.

^x The 21st Century Scholars Program covers up to 100 percent of tuition and some regularly assessed fees at in-state, public two-year and four-year colleges. The scholarship pays part of the tuition at private or independent colleges and approved for-profit specialty or proprietary schools. The program also includes activities in high school and college to support students as they prepare for college and career success and stay on track to earn and maintain the 21st Century Scholarship. Note that the 2022 graduating cohort is the group of students who would be on track to graduate high school in 2022; accordingly they were recruited to join the program several years earlier, when they were in middle school.

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

What the data show. Once Marion County youth enroll in college, racial inequity persists across multiple dimensions. Black and Hispanic students meet “early success criteria” (do not require remediation in their first year of college, complete all coursework attempted in their freshman year, and persist to sophomore year) at considerably lower rates than their white and Asian peers (Figure 10).

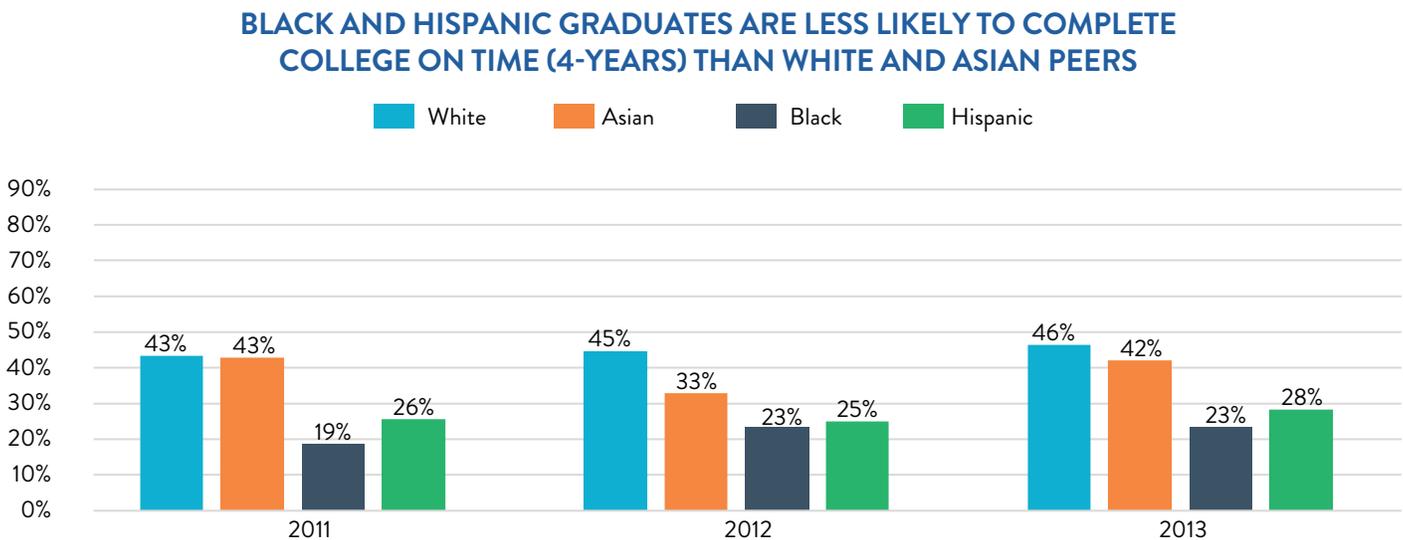
Figure 10: Percentage of Marion County High School Graduates Meeting Early Success Criteria at Indiana’s Public Postsecondary Institutions



Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education via public records request. Data include students who attend Indiana’s public postsecondary institutions.

The gap in early college achievement and persistence leads to racial inequities in on-time 4-year college completion and 4-year college completion within 6 years (Figure 11).

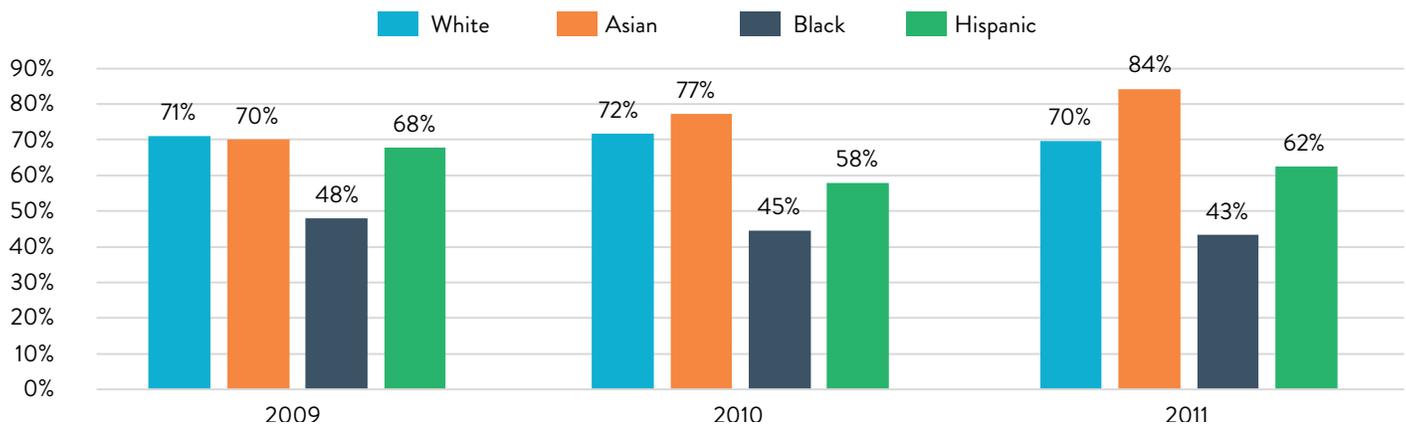
Figure 11: On-Time (4-year) and Extended Time (6-year) College Completion Rates for Marion County High School Graduates Enrolling in Indiana’s Public Postsecondary Institutions



Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education via public records request. Data include students who attend Indiana’s public postsecondary institutions.

Figure 11: (Continued)

SIMILARLY, BLACK AND HISPANIC GRADUATES ARE LESS LIKELY THAN PEERS TO COMPLETE COLLEGE WITHIN 6 YEARS



Source: Author calculations based on data provided by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education via public records request. Data include students who attend Indiana's public postsecondary institutions.

Despite the higher and more equitable rates of college enrollment for 21st Century Scholars, the demonstrable impact of the program on college completion rates is significant but less compelling. Of the students expected to graduate from Indiana's public postsecondary institutions in 2020, 39.7% of 21st Century Scholars completed 4-year colleges on time vs. 33.3% of low-income, non-Scholars.⁴⁵ This indicates getting to college is just half the battle: more supports are needed to address the college persistence and completion gaps for low-income Hoosiers.

What the research says. Postsecondary degree attainment is strongly related to students' future wellbeing. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education reports that Hoosiers with more than a high school education earn approximately \$1 million in additional lifetime earnings compared to those with only a high school diploma. Furthermore, 92% of Hoosiers with a college degree rated their health status as "good or better," while more than 65% of Hoosiers with a high school diploma or lower rated their health status as "fair or poor."⁴⁶ Because a college degree can be one of the most powerful vehicles for lifting youth out of poverty⁴⁷ and experiencing a better quality of life, interventions that successfully close completion gaps for low-income students and students of color should be prioritized for public and philanthropic support.

Researchers have found a significant positive correlation between financial aid and college persistence and graduation.^{48,49} Beyond traditional aid structures, "micro grants," small amounts of emergency funding to help low-income students cover expenses not eligible for financial aid, have been shown to have a dramatic impact on college persistence rates. Georgia State University provides micro grants to students in need, resulting in more than 86% of grant recipients persisting to graduation.⁵⁰ Additionally, programs that pair intensive in-college supports such as tutoring, coaching, and mentoring with financial aid have been successful in improving persistence and completion. After adding a coaching component to the 21st Century Scholars program, Ivy Tech and Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) saw gains in first-year persistence rates of more than 10 percentage points.⁵¹ Low-income students participating in a national program, Dell Scholars, were 9–13 percentage points more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than low-income students who did not participate.⁵²

Recommendations. To address the gaps in postsecondary success based on race/ethnicity and family income, the following recommendations are advised:

- 1) Conduct a study of the 21st Century Scholarship program requirements (what participating students must do to earn a scholarship) and determine which components may be the biggest barriers for students of color. Consider revisions to program requirements that are most likely to increase racial equity in participation.

- 2) Increase need-based support for 21st Century Scholars, for example by expanding financial aid to cover the cost of books and fees not currently covered by the program, as well as other expenses such as transportation, housing, food, and childcare. Additionally, provide coaching to all 21st Century Scholars statewide, like the coaching supports successfully provided by Ivy Tech and IUPUI.
- 3) All Indiana colleges and universities – including private institutions – should provide direct coaching, mentorship, and academic supports for low-income students, who are more likely to also be students of color. In addition, philanthropy and postsecondary institutions should invest in micro grant programs to provide emergency financial support for low-income students to cover needs not otherwise covered by traditional financial aid.

CONCLUSION

The “No Racism Zone” initiative jointly launched by all school districts in Marion County was a meaningful first step toward acknowledging the racial inequities in the county’s K-12 education system and committing to make progress to close those gaps. The initiative is also a rare example of cross-system collaboration that should be expanded to include leaders of the county’s charter schools, early childhood education programs, and postsecondary institutions. The research-based recommendations included within this brief, if implemented, could help Marion County take bold and meaningful steps toward becoming a place where all children, regardless of background, are provided an equal opportunity to receive a high-quality education that leads to a better quality of life for all.

APPENDIX - METHODOLOGY

Numerous student outcome and school performance indicators across multiple education systems spanning from birth to college were examined in Marion County, with the intent of identifying the most prominent racial inequities affecting children of color in the community. Data analyzed included information from public records requests to the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA), Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), and the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE), in addition to publicly available data. The datapoints shared within this brief represent the most significant inequities uncovered through this research process, with an additional layer of prioritization based on the potential for changes in public policy or institutional programming to have direct impact on reducing disparities.

While the purpose of this brief is to shed light on differences in educational outcomes across all races, Black and Hispanic children tend to experience the most significant inequities, whereas their non-Hispanic white and Asian peers are generally experiencing greater educational access and higher educational outcomes. American Indian and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander populations are excluded from this analysis due to the relatively low proportion these groups represent of the total student population in Marion County. As a result, the data shared within this brief focuses primarily on comparisons between white, Black, and Hispanic student subgroups.

Whenever available, all school types – public school district, public charter schools, innovation schools, virtual schools, adult education, and private schools – are included in the datasets to provide a universal perspective on K-12 education in Marion County as a whole.

BEN KLEBAN CONSULTING

Ben Kleban is an independent consultant with a diverse background in education policy, school leadership, and financial management. Most recently, Ben served as an elected member of the Orleans Parish School Board. Prior to his service on OPSB, Ben was the Founder & CEO of New Orleans College Prep (NOCP), a charter school network he led for ten years, growing from a single grade of students to a network of four campuses serving children from birth - 12th grade. Under Ben’s leadership, NOCP achieved significant academic gains for its students, including two successful school turnarounds. While leading NOCP, Ben served on the Louisiana MFP task force, a statewide advisory council for strengthening the public school funding formula in Louisiana. He also co-founded College Beyond, a non-profit that provides coaching and financial supports to improve the college graduation rate of low- income and first-generation college students from across the Greater New Orleans area.

Ben has prior experience as a high school math teacher in Philadelphia and began his career in corporate finance at The Boeing Company. He received an MBA from Harvard Business School and a B.S. in Business Administration from Pepperdine University. Ben now lives in Walla Walla, WA with his wife and three children.

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