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A Microcosm of the American Public Education Crisis Surrounding Race and Income

Janey Fine

Union College - Schenectady, NY

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Schenectady & Niskayuna:
A Microcosm of the American Public Education Crisis
Surrounding Race and Income

By

Janey Fine

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of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis studies the effects that race and socio-economic status have on a student's academic achievement in the American public education system. It compares the experiences of students from Schenectady, New York, a low-income, minority-populated small city, and neighboring Niskayuna, a predominately white, affluent community, by looking at graduation rates, school budgets and resources, teacher salaries, household income, and rates of poverty. Despite the annual budgets and student expenditures being similar amongst the two districts, the rates of poverty and racial disparities are dramatic. Therefore, this research exposes how there are countless variables outside of the school itself that impact a student's academic proficiency.

Much of my research has come from census data and local news sources. However, my largest and most effective source were the two districts' superintendents, who I had the honor of interviewing. Both men offered insight into the reasons for the achievement gap seen between their districts, and furthered my claim by explaining how the culture of poverty and subsequently parental involvement largely effects a student's achievement. This thesis begins with a review of the secondary source literature I used to contextualize my claim and is followed by three chapters focusing on the general history of Schenectady County, the history of education in Schenectady, and a direct comparison of the discrepancies between Schenectady and Niskayuna. It is completed with an epilogue that

shines light on some of the national programs that have been implemented to reform the American education system.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The characteristics that make the neighboring towns of Schenectady and Niskayuna so different are apparent in the physical aesthetics of both. Bodegas, hair braiding salons, and liquor stores line State Street, one of the central thoroughfares in Schenectady. Groups of individuals, mostly African-Americans, gather on street corners at all hours of the day, socializing, fighting, and generally congregating. Many of the row houses have their windows boarded up. An out-of-towner would likely lock the doors of their car while sitting at a traffic light, simply out of fear based on the stigmas they had previously heard about Schenectady. If that same out-of-towner were to turn left on Brandywine Avenue, they would be connected to Union Street in less than a mile. The predominant thoroughfare in Niskayuna runs directly parallel to State Street and harbors many charming restaurants, bakeries, flower shops, and clothing boutiques. The streets are lined with Audis and BMWs, mostly belonging to white families, and the general presence of wealth is evident; from this brief glance at the town, Niskayuna seems like a quaint and endearing community. The racial and socio-economic discrepancies of the two towns are conspicuous and representative of a larger issue of national de facto segregation that separates blacks and whites.

This thesis examines how these discrepancies are likewise evident in American public schools. It is a common misconception that adequate school funding, sufficient learning resources, and intimate class sizes are the dominating indicators of a high performing school district. By looking into the dissimilarities that exist specifically within the Schenectady City School District and Niskayuna Central School District, this research

has uncovered that there are numerous factors that contribute to a students' academic achievement outside of school. The socio-economic status of ones family, often due to limited opportunities based on systemic racism, plays an extremely large role, in students' academic achievement, college readiness, and likelihood of dropping out of the school system.

Literature Review

When discussing issues in American education, there are numerous "hot topics," that are often brought up. Opposing views on the common core have politicized our education system and various policy implementations in recent years such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have put an emphasis on standardized testing and taken the personality out of education. Students are promoted from one grade to the next even if they failed to achieve proficiency, and schools are generally too large. However, the largest crisis in American education remains the glaring achievement gap between the rich and the poor, and subsequently, black and white students. The gap between these students is typically established before students even enter kindergarten, based on the socio-economic status of their family and the upbringing of their parents, and once they enter the school the gap has shown to put black students roughly four years behind their white peers in reading and math. The review of the following literature is meant to show that, while this is seemingly a crisis in American education, it is, in actuality, a crisis of inequality in American society as a whole.

Scholars have closely analyzed the public education system in the United States, an institution that impacts every single American, for decades. They have examined not only

how it has impacted the lives of our nation's citizens, but also the effects of the laws and policies that have changed over time to increase opportunities for all children. Various programs have been implemented to benefit students of marginalized groups and increase academic achievement of the country's most vulnerable students. Regardless of these programs, there remains a massive gap in achievement in our public schools largely due to race and income. Schools that serve affluent, predominately white communities see substantially higher rates of achievement than those serving low-income students, a disproportionate amount being of color.

Despite the significant policy mandates that were meant to provide equal opportunities for American students by alleviating *de facto* segregation in public schools, such as the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1955) which deemed "separate but equal" public schools for black and white students unconstitutional, affirmative action, which is a policy that allows individuals from disadvantaged groups to face equity in terms of employment and educational opportunities, and desegregation busing, which transported students to different schools despite district lines so as to integrate schools, many scholars argue that today there are still great disparities within the realm of public education, specifically for racial and socioeconomic minorities¹. George Theoharis, a scholar of educational inequity, argues that, while efforts to improve our public schools have been made since the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education*, they are still widely segregated. In order to successfully educate all of our nations' students, public schools must first fully integrate by implementing practices that we have seen before

¹ William Schmidt and Curtis C. McKnight, *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools* (New York: Teachers College, 2012).

(busing, merging school districts, school choice, etc.).² Theoharis acknowledges that, while the general consensus was that these policies failed in the 1970s and 1980s, there is statistical evidence that our nation saw a narrowing achievement gap during this time, and therefore, according to Theoharis, complete educational integration is vital for the future success of our public schools.

One of the largest inequities in the public education system in this nation is its funding. Scholar Joe Williams argues that a major reason for the underperformance of American public schools is that they are funded by property taxes, which inevitably creates a major divide between affluent, white neighborhoods (where property taxes are substantially higher) and urban, predominately minority communities, because of de facto segregation that has continued to separate these groups.³ Not only is the United States one of few countries to finance its education system with property taxes, but it also allocates the funds insufficiently, according to Williams, and this is another considerable problem. Sixty cents of each dollar paying for education goes toward actual instruction (teacher salaries and benefits, resources, etc.) while forty cents goes toward legal fees, lobbyists, and transportation. This is problematic because it invalidates the importance of education. Similarly, scholars Penny L. Howell and Barbara B. Miller have examined how, in school districts where property values are higher, more funding comes from local property taxes, while districts in communities with lower property values rely more so on state aid funding, which therefore puts low-income communities at an enormous disadvantage.⁴ Likewise, because tax revenue is divided equally amongst students in each district, in

² George Theoharis, *Forced Busing Didn't Fail: Desegregation is the Best Way to Improve our Schools*, (Washington, WP Company: 2015).

³ Joe Williams, *Cheating Our Kids*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan: 2005), 8.

⁴ Penny L. Howell and Barbara B. Miller, "Sources of Funding for Schools," *The Future of Children* 7 (1997): 40.

communities where districts are larger there is inevitably lower revenue per pupil, putting students in densely populated, typically urban areas at an even further disadvantage.⁵

In his article, *Confronting the Achievement Gap*, scholar David Gardner examines how the unequal funding of public education is the main reason for the poor quality of so many of our schools. Gardner explores how the American education system has continued to disadvantage African-American and other minority students throughout history; the years of slave codes prevented them from receiving education, Jim Crow segregation separated them from their white counterparts and provided them with insufficient resources and incompetent teachers, and today extreme poverty, paired with the stigma of the “inner city”, and thus inadequate funding and ill-equipped teachers, prevents them from gaining equitable opportunities.⁶ He investigated how, since the 1920s, more money has been spent on educating white students than black, and while these kind of blunt disparities are no longer visible, affluent white communities continue to allocate more money to each student than in poorer, predominately minority neighborhoods.⁷ Because low-income communities have less funding for their schools, they often cannot afford teachers of a high quality, thus putting the responsibility of educating some of our nation’s most vulnerable students on individuals who are under-qualified, under-paid, and therefore, not enthusiastically committed to their jobs.

Another major finding in the study of educational inequity is that a student’s personal background can largely impact their success in the classroom. Historian Richard Rothstein argues that, while educational funding is unjust, it is not necessarily the main

⁵ Ibid, 46.

⁶ David Gardner, “Confronting the Achievement Gap,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 88 (2007): 543.

⁷ Ibid, 543.

source of disparities in the public school system, but instead is the socioeconomic status of the student's family and their parent's role in society. He highlights how the Coleman Report of 1966 concluded that school funding actually had little to do with the achievement of the school's students, and instead the range in achievement could be credited to the vast differences that existed socially and economically between black and white students⁸. This is because children from higher social classes start school with more skills and are therefore, more prepared to learn from a young age than those from lower social classes, according to Rothstein and the findings of the Coleman Report.⁹ Today, more than sixteen million children in America are living in poverty, and because of this they are often burdened with chronic stress that consumes them and takes their attention away from homework, studying for tests, and school as a whole; of this population, one in three does not graduate from high school, and a disproportionate amount are of color.

Scholar James Kenneth Nelsen examined another major finding in the Coleman Report: the socio-economic status of ones classmates largely influences that student. Nelsen recognizes the importance of the school choice policy, implemented during the George W. Bush administration, which gives parents the choice of which school they will send their child to, regardless of the district; students from low-income communities have the opportunity to attend more affluent schools, thus improving their achievement because of exposure to affluent classmates.¹⁰ According to Richard Rothstein, on average, middle-class students who begin reading and writing at home will typically have a higher

⁸Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2004), 13.

⁹ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰James Kenneth Nelsen, "From No Choice to Forced Choice to School Choice: A History of Educational Options in Milwaukee Public Schools," *Theses and Dissertations*, 12 (2012): 138-139.

achievement than a low-income student; they will start school recognizing more words than their low-income, typically minority counterparts, and thus begins the achievement gap.¹¹ Rothstein argues that a student's achievement can largely be due to how educated their parents are.¹²

This is a notion that dates back to the ideals of Booker T. Washington, who felt it necessary for African-Americans to live near whites because they were unable to learn from their own parents what white youth were learning, according to a study by scholar Annie Barnes. Booker T. Washington felt that, because African-Americans had been disadvantaged for so many years, it was impossible for them to stop lagging behind white students unless schools were completely integrated, because the gap separating the two races was so ingrained and could not otherwise be corrected.¹³

Multiple scholars agree that the culture of poverty can largely influence the success of not only an individual student but also an entire school. David Gardner's argument builds on Richard Rothstein's; he explores how growing up in a low-income community decreases a child's access to resources (extra-curricular activities, technology, healthy diets, emotional intervention and support) that are pivotal to their growth and development, and can directly contribute to their underperformance in school. In addition, Gardner observes how children who grow up in poverty, specifically African-Americans, develop an external locus of control, which puts the influence of their life's outcomes on external, environmental sources, rather than growing up with the belief that they can

¹¹ Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Washington: Economic Policy Institute, 2004), 19.

¹² *Ibid*, 21.

¹³ Annie S. Barnes, *Retention of African-American Males in High School: A Study of African-American Male High School Dropouts, African-American Male Seniors and White Male Seniors* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1992), 5.

control their own life's outcome.¹⁴ Generally, African-Americans and other minorities develop this external locus of control because they experience success at rates slower than their white counterparts. Gardner argues that, while they may work exceptionally hard, their efforts are often recognized less than whites, which can lead them to believe there is an external force preventing them from experiencing the same kinds of successes seen by the white majority; in this case the success being educational achievement and equity.¹⁵

Scholars have also shown how students who enter schools from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely than others to eventually dropout because of a lack of support at home and a lack of educational motivation at school; low-income students are more likely to get in trouble in school (suspension/expulsion) and end up leaving school for the long term.¹⁶ Historian Melissa Roderick argues that there are specific policies, such as the Zero-Tolerance policy, in place in numerous schools that can potentially exacerbate the rate at which low-income, minority students tend to drop out of school. Roderick, like Rothstein, examines how the background of a students' parents plays a large part in their likelihood of dropping out of school; differences in parental education accounts largely for the gap in achievement between black and white students. Unlike the findings of George Theoharis, Roderick exposes how schools with a wider range of differentiation amongst socioeconomic status and race actually have higher dropout rates. This is likely because, in a school with high differentiation, students at-risk of dropping out (those with lower

¹⁴ David Gardner, "Confronting the Achievement Gap," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 88 (2007): 544.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 544.

¹⁶ Melissa R. Roderick, *The Path to Dropping Out: Evidence for Intervention* (Westport, Connecticut: Auburn House, 1993), 42.

achievement) receive less attention and fewer resources, thus adding to the external locus of control.¹⁷

Gary Orfield refutes Melissa Roderick's argument by examining how, on average, graduation rates are lower in school districts that have higher levels of poverty and are, therefore, inevitably and substantially more segregated.¹⁸ He delves into statistical information about graduation rates in American public high schools, exposing how a disproportionate number of minorities (black, American Indian, and Hispanic) dropout compared to their white and Asian counterparts. Of the sixteen million children living in poverty in the United States, only 18% will enter a four-year college, and ultimately only 9% will receive a bachelor's degree by the time they are twenty-five years old. While these statistics show how disadvantaged low-income minorities are in terms of public education, it is certainly false to claim that they are representative of these students' lack of potential. Many scholars argue that the reason these disparities exist is because these groups are being oppressed by a system of inherent racism.

Robert M. Hauser and Judith Anderson, in their book *High School Dropout, Graduation, and Completion Rates*, examine how dropout rates are only the final stage in an overwhelmingly huge problem around disengagement amongst minority students in school. They claim that, while there are a number of different factors that lead a student to drop out, predominately poor grades and disinterest, the key to preventing this crisis is to notice various patterns and behaviors of disengagement, such as continuous absences, a lack of retention, and little involvement in extra-curricular activities, early on in a student's

¹⁷ Ibid, 34-35.

¹⁸ Gary Orfield, *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 24), 29.

academic career. In an *Education Week* article published in 2011, Hunter College Sociology professor, Donald Hernandez, argued that high school graduation rates could be predicted by third grade reading levels. His argument is based on a study by the American Educational Research Association which released a report that students growing up in poverty who cannot read on grade level by third grade are thirteen times less likely to graduate from high school on time than a proficient, wealthy peer.¹⁹ Other historians argue that an additional lack of support from teachers and administrators in low-income schools creates a positive feedback system which therefore results in an increase in disengagement and thus puts at-risk students at an even higher risk of dropping out of school.²⁰

According to scholars Jacob Kang-Brown and Jennifer Trone, the Zero-Tolerance policy is one way that minority students easily become increasingly disengaged in school. The Zero-Tolerance Policy requires out-of-school suspension or expulsion on the first offense for a variety of behaviors ranging from bringing illegal weapons or drugs to school, smoking tobacco, or fighting on school grounds. While this policy has led to an overall dramatic increase in out-of-school suspension and expulsion nationwide (forty percent since the 1970s), there is sobering evidence that this policy disproportionately affects male students of color; black middle school boys are suspended nearly four times as often as their white counterparts.²¹ Annie Barnes argues that African-American males, in particular, face an unjust amount of oppression by the American public school system, and

¹⁹ Sarah D. Sparks, "Study: Third Grade Reading Predicts Later High School Graduation," *Education Week* (2011), accessed November 18, 2015.

²⁰ K. Osterman and S. Freese, "Nurturing the Mind to Improve Learning: Teacher Care and Student Engagement," *The Academic Achievement of Minority Students: Perspectives, Practices, and Prescriptions* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000), 296.

²¹ Jacob Kang-Brown and Jennifer Trone, "A Generation Later: What We've Learned About Zero Tolerance in Schools," *Vera Institute of Justice: Making Justice Systems Fairer and More Effective through Research and Innovation*, accessed November 18, 2015, p. 3.

this is evident in terms of the demographics of suspensions and expulsions of students due to the zero-tolerance policy.²² In the 2009-2010 school year nearly one third of all middle school aged black boys were suspended. A single suspension can largely increase a student's likelihood of repeating a grade, which is one of the greatest predictors of eventually dropping out, and therefore the Zero-Tolerance policy alone triples a student's likelihood of ending up in the juvenile justice system.²³

There is currently no evidence that the harsh punishments that come with the Zero-Tolerance policy and other policies of the same nature discourage students from engaging in certain behaviors. On the contrary, several scholars have argued, they are simply feeding the school-to-prison pipeline, a notion that recognizes the disproportionate number of minority students who dropout of school and in turn end up in the criminal justice system.²⁴ Therefore, while it can be claimed that the Zero-Tolerance policy is leading to an increase in high school drop-outs, many would argue that these students are, in actuality, being pushed out by their schools and the education system in general. Rather than acting as a gateway to learning and higher education, schools are often a gateway to prison in urban, low-income communities. According to a PBS Travis Smiley episode entitled *Education Under Arrest*, nearly one third of youth in juvenile detention centers are arrested at school by campus police officers. Likewise, Sam Dillon, a New York Times journalist, acknowledges a study that found a high rate of imprisonment among high school dropouts, specifically among African-American men. According to Dillon, one in four black

²² Annie S. Barnes, *Retention of African-American Males in High School: A Study of African-American Male High School Dropouts, African-American Male Seniors and White Male Seniors* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1992), 8.

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

male high school dropouts end up in jail or prison, as opposed to their white, Asian, and Hispanic dropout counterparts, whose likelihood of ending up in prison or jail is one in fourteen.²⁵

In many American cities, black males are more likely to go to prison than college, and it can be argued that the public education system in the United States can be considered a starting point for many towards a life in the criminal justice system. This claim is evident in Michelle Alexander's, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, where she argues that there is a new racial caste system in place that is disproportionately incarcerating African-Americans as a form of systemic racism.²⁶ Historian Todd Clear addresses how, like the public education system, the criminal justice system largely oppresses minorities, specifically African-American males.²⁷ He argues that, while prison in the United States has always been associated with socioeconomic status, (more individuals from poor communities are imprisoned than any other socioeconomic group) in the last thirty years criminal justice policies have had an excess effect on an even more specific subgroup of our society: African-American men and women.

According to numerous scholars, it was the War on Drugs and the laws that came with it that has led to the drastic increase and disproportion of incarcerated African-Americans. Because discrimination is outlawed in the United States, many feel comfortable arguing that this disproportion results in these specific individuals being prone to criminal behavior and thus are deserving of harsher punishment, but according to Michelle

²⁵ Sam Dillon, "Study Finds High Rate of Imprisonment Among Dropouts." *The New York Times* (2009), accessed November 18, 2015.

²⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 190.

²⁷ Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50.

Alexander, the disproportionate number of minorities in the criminal justice system is due to systemic racism that continues to infiltrate our society.²⁸ Alexander explains how in 1982 President Ronald Reagan launched the War on Drugs, despite the fact that less than two percent of American citizens considered drug use to be the most pressing issue in this nation at that time.²⁹ Since the inception of the War on Drugs, African-American men, specifically those without high school diplomas, have been incarcerated at an extremely disproportionate rate to any other race.³⁰

In the 1980s, poor, urban areas were infiltrated by what is now known as the crack epidemic. This resulted in a societal change which deemed African-American men (the typical user and distributor of crack) seven times more likely than white men to be imprisoned.³¹ This is because there are extremely strict punishments for use and distribution of crack cocaine because of beliefs that it is exponentially more dangerous than powder cocaine (whose typical users are affluent, white males) and other mind-altering substances. Since the onset of the War on Drugs, first-time users of crack now face prison time as opposed to the previous punishment of probation.³²

It is an assumption that the use of crack cocaine leads to criminal behavior, and because it is cheap and, therefore, seen more often in poor, urban areas where the population is predominately African-American or Hispanic, these individuals are considered dangerous and should therefore be imprisoned. However, Todd Clear exposes

²⁸ Michelle Alexander *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

³¹ Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63.

³² *Ibid*, 52.

how this assumption is, in fact, a myth, and that crack and powder cocaine have identical physical effects; they are simply two forms of the same drug, and both substances are less likely to increase violent behavior than alcohol abuse.³³ During the 1980s, a sentencing disparity was passed by the Criminal Justice system called the 100:1 ratio. In short, this created sentences for individuals arrested for crack cocaine use at an unjustifiably longer length than those arrested for powder cocaine use. According to both Clear and Alexander, this is an extremely discriminatory bias because of the simple fact that the majority of people arrested for crack cocaine offenses were low-income, urban blacks. The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 changed the ratio to 18:1, which is substantially lower but still ensures a racial disparity, in that a truly fair ratio for crack cocaine and powder cocaine offenses is 1:1.

Many would argue that if whites were being incarcerated for drug offenses at the rate that African-Americans are, the laws around these offenses would have long been amended.³⁴ Evidence of this belief is around the liberalization of marijuana laws that occurred in the 1970s. Historian and professor of law at Georgetown University, David Cole, argues that when marijuana became a popular recreational drug for middle and upper class whites, the laws around the drug became dramatically less criminalized because society as a whole deemed it unacceptable to punish whites at the rate that previous marijuana users (low-income minorities) were being punished. Overall, Cole argues that, when marijuana was confined to urban areas the general society was okay with the severe prison sentences that came with it, but in the 1960s when it spread to nearly every strata of

³³ Ibid, 55.

³⁴ Michelle Alexander *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 112.

American society, Americans were eager to examine the problem of the harsh punishments³⁵. According to Cole, this is flagrant discrimination.

Michelle Alexander argues that rather than the United States government focusing on treatment programs to reduce overall drug use, they have emphasized punishment, thus targeting low-income communities and specifically African-Americans. She describes how, during President Bill Clinton's administration, funding for public housing projects was cut by billions of dollars, while correctional funding was boosted by nearly twenty billion dollars. Additionally, through the "One Strike and You're Out" policy, Clinton made it exceptionally easy for public housing projects to exclude any individuals with a criminal record – thus preventing already targeted low-income minorities from access to mainstream society by making them homeless.³⁶

However, these are not the only discriminatory practices and policies that the United States Criminal Justice System and government has in place. The Sentencing Project is a non-profit organization that works to promote policy reform in the United States Criminal Justice System, specifically around racial disparities and practices. There is a major focus on racial disparity in police activity in the 2011 report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee released by the organization. The report exposes how most Americans, and therefore most American police officers, have an inevitable racial bias against black Americans; they are commonly associated with negative words such as dangerous, aggressive, violent, and criminal. This is why, according to the 2011 report, when police are quick to make decisions about arrests, they are more likely to assume

³⁵ David Cole, *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System* (United States of America: 1999) 152-153.

³⁶ Michelle Alexander *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 57.

negative behaviors than positive from African-Americans than they are from whites or other races.³⁷ This report specifically studies the disparities seen in traffic stops and drug law enforcement - while there have been increases in both black and white drug related arrests since 1980, the numbers do not appropriately correspond to an increase in black drug activity.

It is common for African-American youth to find alternative employment in drug production and trafficking, as they can see more success in this field than in a more typical educational or occupational environment; there is a seeming ease in this kind of lifestyle because it is often seen as more supporting than the school system which can make students feel increasingly vulnerable and unsuccessful.³⁸ Beth Hatt completed a study entitled *Still I Rise: Youth Caught Between the Worlds of Schools and Prisons* that found that more than one third of youth from urban areas were exposed to drug trafficking by family members or friends and those who did have family members involved in the drug trade were substantially more likely to become involved themselves.³⁹ Many underprivileged, black youth turn to the drug trade for the respect and success that they do not find in the classroom; they develop stronger confidence on the streets than through academic achievement or traditional employment. The earlier this occurs in a students life, the more likely they are to become incarcerated and recidivate, as the more years of schooling an imprisoned individual has, the less likely they are to recidivate.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Report of the Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System," *The Sentencing Project* (2013), accessed October, 2015, p. 4.

³⁸ Beth Hatt, "Still I Rise: Youth Caught Between the Worlds of Schools and Prisons," *The Urban Review* 43 (2011): 487.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 485.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 487.

The succeeding chapters will focus on the ways in which this national crisis in education has impacted two communities in the Capital Region of New York State: Schenectady and Niskayuna. Chapter 2 will briefly summarize the general history of Schenectady County, the role that thriving industries played in its history, and a shift in its demographics due to the national phenomena of white flight and suburbanization. Subsequently, this chapter examines how the national portrayal of Schenectady has largely changed since its settlement in the mid-seventeenth century. Chapter 3 of this thesis will focus specifically on the history of education in Schenectady County and the ways in which the system of schooling has progressed overtime to include minorities and those from lower socio-economic statuses. Lastly, Chapter 4 will look closely at the current discrepancies between Schenectady City School District and Niskayuna Central School District; it can be seen as a microcosm for the American education crisis surrounding race and class.

Chapter 2: History of Schenectady County

Schenectady's foundation and history have largely shaped the way it exists today. As one of the first settled towns in New York State, there was, from the beginning, an extremely large emphasis on the importance of education and, as time moved forward, industry. The city saw much economic and population growth until the mid-twentieth century, until the downfall of various businesses resulted in migration out of the city limits and into the surrounding smaller towns and hamlets. Since then, the city has seen a massive shift in demographics, away from a once white, upper-middle class population towards an African-American, low-income majority. While there were years of prosperity in Schenectady, its Golden Era has long passed, and today it is a stigmatized city in New York's Capital Region.

General History of Schenectady County

Located on the Mohawk River about 160 miles north of New York City sits Schenectady, New York. Settled by Arent van Curler and other Dutch explorers in June of 1661, Schenectady's history is unique. While it's population never reached over 100,000, it was as relevant and important an industrial town during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as other Rust Belt cities such as Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Buffalo, whose populations were substantially larger. Over the last three centuries it became a massive hub for the railroad and scientific advancement that resulted in considerable economic prosperity.⁴¹ Since the second half of the twentieth century, as major industries began to downsize in Schenectady and the phenomenon of suburbanization took off, the city itself

⁴¹Don Rittner, *Schenectady* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), p. ix.

has experienced a decrease in population and an increase in crime and poverty, while the surrounding towns that make up Schenectady County have seen population growth and economic prosperity.

The small city almost did not survive even a generation. In 1690, less than thirty years after its settlement, French Canadians, allied with the Mohawk Indians, attacked the city in what is today known as the Schenectady Massacre. Men, women, and children were shot and homes were lit on fire. While many managed to escape the burning community, approximately sixty individuals were killed in total. While devastated, the survivors of the massacre were determined to rise above the tragedy and flourish within their new settlement nonetheless; this is what they did for the following decades. During the succeeding years, the city experienced prosperity and growth until it was once again devastated when a fire destroyed much of the city in 1819. Because of the massive Pine Bush that separated Schenectady from Albany, fires were fairly common in this region and posed a constant threat. In 1819, a tannery engulfed in flames brought the city down; 196 buildings were destroyed and approximately 200 families lost their homes. Along with its physical structure, Schenectady lost its optimism and self-confidence in the fire, as so many lost all of their possessions and their jobs. However, when nearby towns, specifically Glenville, heard of the devastation, they quickly gathered supplies and offered support to those unfortunately affected by the disaster.⁴² Though it was not until the following decade, with the appearance of various infrastructure developments, such as the Erie Canal and the railroad, and industrial companies like ALCO and General Electric, that the city was able to fully regain its confidence and assert itself as a relevant and successful town, this

⁴² Don Rittner, "The Great Schenectady Fire of 1819," *Times Union*, November 6, 2014.

occurrence brought numerous towns together, and created a sense of community within the recently organized Schenectady County.

The city of Schenectady and nearby towns of Niskayuna, Duanesburg, and Princetown were considered a part of Albany County until Schenectady County itself was incorporated in March of 1809. Duaneburg was first recognized as a town in 1788 while Niskayuna was first settled much earlier in 1640, even before the city of Schenectady. Glenville and Rotterdam were formed from Schenectady in 1820, and the villages of Scotia and Delanson became popular suburban villages for city employees to reside towards the end of the nineteenth century. Scotia, the home of a military encampment during the War of 1812, became known for its broom production in the late 1800s, and later housed many General Electric employees, while Delanson became a popular home for railroad workers due to its close proximity to the tracks. Both communities today are considered “bedroom” villages because of their drastic changes from commercial to solely residential neighborhoods due to the expansion of the automobile and the decline of the railroad industry.

Today, the county is made up over 200 square miles of land and is home to the city of Schenectady, the towns of Duanesburg, Niskayuna, Princetown, and Rotterdam, and the villages of Scotia and Delanson.⁴³ In 2014, the population of the county was just above 155,000 individuals, nearly 80% of which is white, 11% black, and 6.6% Hispanic. 12.7% of the Schenectady County population is living in poverty, and the median household income between the years of 2009 and 2013 was just above \$56,000.⁴⁴

⁴³“Village of Scotia.” Village of Scotia. Accessed February 25, 2016. www.villageofscotia.org/about-scotia/history/.

⁴⁴ “Quick Facts.” *United States Census Bureau*. Accessed January 13, 2016.

History of Business & Industry in Schenectady

Until the earlier part of the nineteenth century, Schenectady had solely been a settlement on the bank of the Mohawk River, which connected explorers to the Hudson River and thus to lower New York. Though the founding of Union College in 1795 was considered monumental, as it brought passionate individuals to Schenectady who were dedicated to bettering society and serving the west, it was not until 1825 when construction began on the Erie Canal, and later when ALCO and General Electric established factories, that Schenectady became an industrial and economic center and received its reputation as “The City That Lights and Hauls the World.” Following the tragic fire of 1819 and the resulting depressing nature of the town, the building of the Erie Canal provided hundreds of jobs and brought many new settlers to the area; it allowed Schenectady’s economy to revive. Five years later came the construction of the railroad, which immediately turned Schenectady into an undeniably significant American city. It became one of the few, main railroad centers in the country; there were four major railroads within the city limits.⁴⁵ These two achievements, while integral, simply set the foundation for a city that would soon become an industrial hub for the duration of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

In the latter years of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Schenectady saw its Golden Era. Thomas Edison moved his company, Edison Machine Works, north of New York City to establish a factory in Schenectady in 1886, and the city officially changed. While Schenectady was already considered thriving at this time, the factory’s establishment brought a huge flood of immigrants to the city, bringing the

⁴⁵ Marlon F. Westover, *Schenectady: Past and Present* (Strasburg, VA: Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc., 1931), p. 35-37.

population up from 14,000 to well over 36,000.⁴⁶ In 1889 Edison Machine Works became Edison General Electric Company, and quickly the city of Schenectady became famous and well known as the Electric City.⁴⁷ In 1902, the American Locomotive Company (ALCO) was founded in Schenectady and was essential in producing much of the military machinery used in both World Wars, which employed hundreds and resulted in the continuous success and growth of Schenectady. As the city grew nightclubs, golf courses, clubhouses and so forth were also formed, which contributed to the city's formation of a unique culture. Schenectady experienced a true Golden Era from 1880-1930 due to the presence and success of GE and ALCO, with over 40,000 workers at the industry's heights after World War II.⁴⁸ The population of the city peaked in the 1930s at over 95,000 citizens, and remained that high through the 1950s, following the Second World War. However, towards the middle of the twentieth century the railroad industry began to decline, and with that came the closure of ALCO operations in Schenectady in 1970. In the later years of the century, General Electric, too, saw a gradual decline and massive downscaling in employment size. When the GE research lab moved out of Schenectady and into Niskayuna in 1955, high-paid employees began to live in suburban Niskayuna rather than within the city. The company remained incredibly successful until the start of the 1980s, and it was during this decade and throughout the 1990s that the company saw extremely challenging times and lost some of their greatest employees to other companies. Today, while General Electric Power Systems remains the largest employer in Schenectady County, the total

⁴⁶ *The Schenectady City School District: Celebrating 150 years of Excellence.* (Schenectady, NY, 2004).

⁴⁷ Joel Henry Monroe, *Schenectady Ancient and Modern* (Geneva, NY: W.F. Humphrey Press, 1914), p. 241.

⁴⁸ Larry Hart, *Schenectady's Golden Era* (Scotia, NY: Old Dorp Books, 1974). p. 6.

number of employees is 3,400, substantially lower than the workforce of 40,000 once seen in the company during Schenectady's Golden Era.⁴⁹

The National Phenomena of White Flight & Suburbanization

The years following the World Wars resulted in myriad changes in American society, many of which pertained to the racial make up of communities nationwide. Between the 1940s and 1970s, as Jim Crow Segregation reached its most brutal years and then was outlawed with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, millions of blacks from the south migrated to northern, urban areas in what became known as the Great Migration. They were attracted northward because of ample economic opportunities due to the growth of industrialization and manufacturing. During these same years whites, who had previously inhabited these same urban areas, began to flee the cities to settle in surrounding suburban towns. The black population rose from 4% in 1960 to 16% in 1970 in various northern and western American cities, while the white population dropped 10% over the same years in the same cities.⁵⁰ This notion, commonly referred to as "white flight," explains the process by which whites left urban areas as a direct result of blacks entering; they sought to avoid racially diverse communities. In cities where the black population was increasing and that of whites was decreasing there was an increase in home vacancies and a decrease in housing prices. These cities also saw a slower rate of new home construction.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Brian U. Stratton, *City of Schenectady Comprehensive Plan: Reinventing the City of Invention*, Community Profile. p. 14.

⁵⁰ Leah Platt Boustan, *Was Postwar Suburbanization "White Flight"?: Evidence from the Black Migration*, (The Quarterly Journal of Economics, MIT Press, 2010), p. 417-443.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 420.

Black migration of the twentieth century was not the only cause of white suburbanization; technological advancements, such as the accessibility of the automobile and improved infrastructure allowed the economically advantaged white population to relocate to the fringes of the city and commute rather than live in urban communities that were beginning to experience “urban problems.” These problems included increasing crime rates, mismanagement of monetary funds, and a higher concentration of low-income individuals, which continues to be highly correlated with minorities.

Today, rather than simply leaving cities to move to nearby suburbs, many whites are moving even farther outside of the city limits into gated communities and housing developments. What started as a phenomenon that separated blacks and whites by city and suburb has now turned into segregation of suburb-suburb and city-city as wealthier blacks have, too, left the cities for majority black suburbs and young whites have moved back into gentrified, urban communities, which are predominately home to other young whites. Real estate agents continue to guide families and individuals towards neighborhoods where residents are of similar races, extending de facto segregation. “Black communities” have stayed predominately black because of local government efforts to construct low-income housing and to rent homes to minorities, while “white neighborhoods” have stayed white based on local government actions that actively keep minorities out.⁵² The Kerner Commission of 1968 was a report that warned the nation that it was headed towards two separate societies, one made up of affluent, whites in the suburbs, and the other made up of blacks concentrated within urban, central areas.

⁵² Alana Samuels, “White Flight Never Ended,” (The Atlantic, July 30, 2015). Accessed February 24, 2016.

Though this report was published during the hindmost part of the Civil Rights Movement, its findings seem to ring true even today.

Segregation of communities has impacted numerous components of society, one of the largest being education. A disproportionate number of minorities are low-income, and because the American public school system is largely funded by property taxes, this directly results in less money to be spent in minority schools compared to those in affluent, white communities. As upper-class whites left the cities, they brought their higher tax bases with them, which contributed to the decline of economic prosperity within cities and therefore the decline of the quality of public schools. An effort implemented in many cities to end the controversy around school desegregation in the 1970s was court-ordered busing; black and white students were bused across school district lines so as to integrate schools. This failed in logic in many northern and western cities where the cities had gotten bigger and the suburbs had continued to expand farther outside. Therefore, hundreds of buses were needed to redistribute thousands of students throughout many square miles. It ended up denying black families the agency to determine where they would send their children to school, and truly did not create a racial balance within American schools.⁵³

Changing Demographics in Schenectady County

The phenomena of “white flight” and suburbanization certainly impacted Schenectady County, especially as the thriving industries increased their numbers of

⁵³ Tanner Colby, “The Massive Liberal Failure on Race,” (Slate, February 3, 2014), accessed February 23, 2016.

employees. As the highest-paid researchers were able to settle outside of the city in the neighboring towns, low-income and minority individuals and families filled home vacancies in the city. Thus, the white population in Schenectady decreased while the black and Hispanic population increased. Since both ALCO and General Electric peaked in the 1950s, the city of Schenectady has seen a downward trend in population size, which is not unlike other urban municipalities in the upstate region of New York State.⁵⁴ The population of the city has continued to decrease in each census since 1950, and today it sits at just over 66,000.⁵⁵ From 1990 to 2000 the city saw a 5.7% decrease in population, and then a 7.14% decrease from 2000 to 2010, while neighboring Niskayuna's population grew 6.4% in the same years.⁵⁶ Likewise, while Schenectady's median household income dropped 10.5% in the same census records, Niskayuna's saw a slight increase at 2.7%.⁵⁷ Similarly, while the population of each ethnic group of minorities saw drastic increases in the 2000 and 2010 censuses, the population of white residents decreased by nearly 20%, a directly result of the phenomena of suburbanization and white flight.

Today, the city of Schenectady is considered one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, while the county as a whole is seen to be made up of various picturesque and charming small towns and villages. According to statistics taken from the FBI's uniform crime reports from 2014, during that year there were over 3,000 reported incidents of crime in Schenectady, 575 of which were considered violent, over 1,000 were incidents of

⁵⁴ Stratton, *City of Schenectady Comprehensive Plan* p. 5.

⁵⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 Census of Population and Housing*, Table 1, Issued December 2012.

⁵⁶ Census View, *Schenectady, New York Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts*. Accessed February 19, 2016.

⁵⁷ Brian U. Stratton, *City of Schenectady Comprehensive Plan: Reinventing the City of Invention*, Community Profile. p. 14.

theft, and rape and murder made up over 60 crimes. Based on this information, Schenectady is only safer than 7% of the cities in the United States. In short, individuals have a 1 in 115 chance of becoming a victim of a violent crime in Schenectady. In Niskayuna, during the same year there were 386 reported incidents of crime, 7 of which were considered violent. Therefore, the town of Niskayuna is safer than 77% of the cities in the United States, and individuals have a 1 in 3178 chance of becoming a victim of a violent crime.

Much of the crime in Schenectady has to do with the presence of gangs. In 2011, nineteen Schenectady men were charged on nine counts of felony for their involvement in the Four Block Gang. Many of the members were sentenced to life in prison while others received twenty years; they were involved in shootings, possession of illegal weapons, and distribution of narcotics, including 280 grams of crack cocaine, five kilograms of powdered cocaine, and at least a kilogram of heroin.⁵⁸ The gang was established in 2007 in the Hamilton Hill neighborhood of Schenectady. For the years preceding the investigation around the gang, they maintained exclusive control of the drug trade in the area, shooting and victimizing individuals that attempted to sell in their territory. The investigation began following four suicides of teenage girls in Schenectady during the 2008-2009 academic year. The girls were each involved or closely connected to the gang, either through friends or family members. There was also internal pressure for the girls to join the gang themselves, or a junior gang made up of younger members. This kind of violence and crime has resulted in a generally negative depiction of Schenectady in the media and

⁵⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation: Albany Division. "Indictments Unsealed Charging Four Block Gang Members and Others with Racketeering and Narcotics Conspiracies." FBI.gov <https://www.fbi.gov/albany/press-releases/2011/indictments-unsealed-charging-four-block-gang-members-and-others-with-racketeering-and-narcotics-conspiracies>

popular culture. What used to be considered a thriving city where industry flourished can now be quite clearly seen as a gritty and unappealing city.

The urban crisis that exists in Schenectady can be seen in cinema. In the 2012 drama, *The Place Beyond the Pines*, starring Ryan Gosling, Bradley Cooper, and Eva Mendes, director Derek Cianfrance used Schenectady as the backdrop to tell the story of a corrupt police force, violent youth, crime committing and drug using population. The city is depicted as dark and broody, and the scenes that occur in Schenectady High School make the students out to be slackers and “burnouts.” This negative portrayal can be seen in another recent film, *Syndecdoche, New York*, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman. The 2008 film, directed by Charlie Kaufman, somewhat stretches the boundaries between fiction and reality, as the main character experiences various physical and mental ailments which prevent him from living a truly successful life. Like *The Place Beyond the Pines*, this film depicts Schenectady as a depressing, dark, and gloomy city where opportunity is slim. This is apparent as Hoffman’s character leaves the city for New York when he is presented with the chance to do so.

It seems obvious that, with the decline of the two major corporations and the phenomenon of suburbanization, Schenectady has become a less than desirable city for individuals and families to settle, while the surrounding towns are seen as safe, sheltered, and desirable. As levels of poverty have increased, the city’s public schools have seen low graduation rates and insufficient levels of academic proficiency. While the portrayal of the city in popular culture seems biased against it, unfortunately it is not an improbable depiction. What was once The Electric City, with an emphasis on the importance of a quality education and economic prosperity, has lost much of its appeal.

Chapter 3: History of Education in Schenectady County

Education was at Schenectady's epicenter long before it was defined as a city that thrived on its presence of large industries. Since its settlement in 1661, the culture of Schenectady has strongly emphasized and valued the importance of quality education. While the traditional institution of education that continues to exist today was not fully developed in the area until nearly two hundred years later in 1848, numerous systems of schooling were implemented prior. What started as a privilege for young, white, males eventually turned into a mandatory foundation for all children of the area regardless of race, class, or gender.

In 1684 the first Church School was founded due to a priority in reading and religion. Few children attended the school, but it remained of utmost importance nonetheless. Education in Schenectady was considered advanced at this time, though arithmetic was deemed unimportant. It was thought to take time away from the "fundamental subjects" which surrounded reading. Because of this, knowledge of the alphabet was the sole qualification, aside from availability, for one to pursue a career as an educator.⁵⁹ It was commonplace for individuals to serve as educators for days and weeks at a time, based on when they were available to do so, and then move on to other professions. Teaching was not considered a desirable position and the pay was low. It was not for many years that the qualifications for the profession of teaching increased to that of greater credentials and the salary was raised.

For most of the eighteenth century education in Schenectady, like everywhere else in the United States at this time, was a family responsibility. There were dozens of small

⁵⁹Jeanette G. Neisuler "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 16.

schoolhouses throughout, but they were only attended by children of families that could afford to send them, not just in terms of money but time, as well. Between 1725 and 1769 schools were mostly operated by clergymen or itinerant teachers; the focus remained on reading and religion and the subjects were taught by repetition and reinforced by use of the whip.⁶⁰

The first organized system of schooling was built in 1785 with the creation of The Schenectady Academy on the corner of Union and Ferry Streets. The two-story brick building cost \$3000 to erect and by 1792 was responsible for educating a student body of one hundred at an extremely high caliber. The students learned the sciences, different languages, and mathematics. At this point, families who could afford to pay for schooling did so, and the Academy offered a scholarship fund to those families in the community who could not afford to pay for education.⁶¹ It was the Schenectady Academy that, in 1786, was chartered as a college and later became Union College.

In the earliest years of the nineteenth century, a gap between the wealthy and indigent people of Schenectady became apparent as New York State laws continued to emphasize the importance of education. The state government distributed thousands of dollars throughout the state to encourage the growth and development of common schools. The city of Schenectady used the money that it appropriated to elect numerous commissioners to supervise schools, which allowed for these and other schools in the state to become some of the best in the nation.⁶² However, the schools were only accessible to

⁶⁰ *The Schenectady City School District: Celebrating 150 years of Excellence.* (Schenectady, NY, 2004).

⁶¹ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 20.

⁶² Harlan Hoyt Homer. *Education in New York State*, (Albany, NY.: State Education Department, 1954), p. 12.

those students whose families could afford to pay the tuition, thus leaving the impoverished and under-privileged without access to education.⁶³

Because education remained of paramount importance in Schenectady, but was only accessible by the economically advantaged, assistance was provided to the poor at the turn of the nineteenth century to create an inclusive academic environment in the city. The Pauper School Act, created in 1809, established a tax for the rich to help fund the schooling of the poor. Those individuals who were living below poverty levels were asked to publicly declare their socio-economic status and in return were considered eligible for the benefits allotted by the Act. Just a few years later, in 1815, the first Sabbath Schools were opened in Schenectady. These were schools originally meant to teach children of the poor; they proved that all students could learn, even if they came from underprivileged backgrounds. The Lancaster School System, too, made education accessible to more children than ever before because of its extremely low tuition. A national institution of education, the Lancaster System required students to pay just one dollar per academic quarter and eventually this cost was reduced to twenty-five cents.⁶⁴ The system was, initially, a massive success; by 1840, once an entire generation had been through it, only seventeen people in Schenectady were considered illiterate, compared to over one hundred illiterate individuals in the nearby city of Albany, which was the tenth largest city in the nation at this time.⁶⁵

The success of the Lancaster School System could be seen in three major outlets. First, it made education accessible to nearly everyone, disregarding socio-economic status.

⁶³ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 28.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 41.

Second, due to its large capacity, it taught the school to manage many children, something that would remain challenging throughout the twentieth century. Finally, because attendees were required to pay tuition, it accustomed individuals to paying for school.⁶⁶ However, eventually there became too many students to handle and not enough money to hire teaching assistants. Thus, the monitor system was born. Implemented by the schoolmaster, this system trained some of the older and brighter students as assistants and assigned them to teach new lessons to the younger students, creating a very impersonal and systematic way of learning.⁶⁷ These monitors turned into disciplinarians eventually, and would often physically punish students; there was also a system of rewards where students would receive earnings for extraordinary work or behavior.⁶⁸

During the 1820s, as the population in Schenectady was thriving due to the Erie Canal and the railroad, an Infant School Society was founded within the city. Students were expected to have learned to read and write before entering the school, and, in turn, this system grew into what is now known as “primary school.” The benefits of education were undeniable and the people of Schenectady continued to show a desire to provide the less fortunate with learning opportunities; it was at this time that female education began to prosper for the first time in Schenectady’s history.

Standards of education increased and expectations were raised. In 1834, on the corner of Yates Street and Union Street, came the Lyceum Society, which presented free lectures to the public on an assortment of topics in the arts and sciences – no topic was

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 41.

⁶⁷ Ellwood F. Cubberly, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston, New York, Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, San Francisco: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919 and 1934), note on p. 131.

⁶⁸ Neisuler, Jeanette G. “The History of Education in Schenectady.” 1964, p. 42.

seen as taboo.⁶⁹ Likewise, the building served as a private, “classical,” school for young boys from well-to-do families. Classrooms were physically similar to those of the Lancaster System, where the teacher’s desk was raised and in the center of the room, a way for the teacher to see each student. However, in this system each boy was separated by a partition so that they could see only the teacher and not each other as a way to decrease potential distractions. Because of this, the school had very high expectations for the boys and attainments were remarkably high. The Lyceum Society stayed open until 1911, educating a large number of men who later went on to hold exceptionally high positions, including Chester Arthur, the twenty-first president of the United States and a graduate of Union College.⁷⁰

That same year, the building that was once home to the Lancaster School was sold to Union College because its structure could not handle the increase in population due to the thriving industries in the city. There were, at this time, four hundred students receiving an education in the building, and, therefore, it became a burden for the teachers and the school system as a whole.⁷¹ A new Lancaster building was accordingly built to hold a greater capacity of students; females were placed upstairs and males were placed downstairs. The Lancaster System was vital to the growth and development of the education system in Schenectady, because it instilled the necessity of regular attendance in most students; previously attendance had been met only when it was convenient for the student or the families.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 62.

⁷⁰ Staff, History.com. *Chester A. Arthur*. www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/chester-a-arthur. 2009. Accessed January 25, 2016.

⁷¹ Neisuler, Jeanette G. “The History of Education in Schenectady.” 1964, p. 68.

A monumental day in the history of Schenectady's education was April 15, 1854 when New York State's eighteenth governor, Horatio Seymour, founded the first free school system for the children of the city of Schenectady: the Schenectady City Public School, thereby making Schenectady the first and only school system in the United States that could educate its children from the lowest grades through college.⁷² Taxes were slightly increased and allocated to the construction of three different school buildings, teacher salaries, and other resources.⁷³ The board had been prepared for approximately 450 students, but, on the first day that the schools opened, in October of 1855, over eleven hundred arrived. There was no option but to close the school immediately and not reopen until December when the system was more equipped to handle so many students.

Changes were made to the Schenectady school system when compulsory education laws, which required all children to attend school, and mandated desegregation occurred. Eight years after the Civil War, in 1873, New York State banned segregation in its schools, and thus the Schenectady schools welcomed African American students.⁷⁴ Though the population of African American students was not significant (approximately thirty-seven were previously enrolled in the African School that existed in the basement of a church on Jay Street) the influx of new students caused a major problem. The schools were, once again, not equipped to handle so many students. The primary department, what was previously known as the Infant School Society, struggled largely with this, because many teachers were not properly trained to teach these students. The primary years were starting to be considered some of the most pivotal ages in a child's development, and

⁷² *The Schenectady City School District: Celebrating 150 years of Excellence.* (Schenectady, NY, 2004). p. 8.

⁷³ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 79.

⁷⁴ *The Schenectady City School District: Celebrating 150 years of Excellence.* (Schenectady, NY, 2004).

therefore, the superintendent at this time, Dr. Howe, recognized that it was insufficient to hire teachers for these aged students simply to babysit, but more legitimate teacher training was necessary.

With the prosperity of Thomas Edison's Edison Machine Works in 1886 and consequent rapid increase in population came problems in the schools; there was a demand for space that could not be easily met. Within the next five years the population of the city had reached its all time high until that point at over 70,000; the city introduced kindergarten at the elementary level to cope with the issues of overcrowding in the schools.⁷⁵ At the turn of the twentieth century the traditional four-year high school was developed and by 1905 there were over four hundred students attending Nott Terrace High School.⁷⁶ The compulsory education laws that had previously mandated that all children receive an education became challenging for the city of Schenectady as numerous illiterate, foreign born, skilled laborers migrated to the area to work for the booming industries. Because there was a widening range in abilities and general knowledge, the schools were ill equipped to handle all of the differences. Superintendent Howe recognized that with an influx of foreigners, many students who were not fluent in English began dropping out of school as early as they were legally allowed.⁷⁷ In an attempt to thwart the rates of student dropouts, he implemented programs for students who were at risk of falling behind. The most successful program was a night class for those children who *were* interested in learning but were frustrated with the fast-pace of daily classes and their own

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 104-115.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 104-115.

inability to keep up due to language barriers and other variables that might have been negatively impacting their academic experience.

Superintendent Howe left an important legacy on the schools in Schenectady. He introduced music, art, and physical education to the common curriculum, and likewise inaugurated a program for kindergarteners. Additionally, he stressed the importance of properly training teachers to, in turn, see greater achievement in the students. By the time he completed his job as superintendent in 1905 the city had grown significantly and was then home to nearly sixty thousand. There were over seven thousand students attending school and nearly 150 teachers.

The first recorded school district in the town of Niskayuna and nearby towns of Clifton Park and Glenville, all smaller hamlets that neighbor the city of Schenectady and make up Schenectady County today, was in 1818. There were various one-room wooden schoolhouses throughout these towns and remained small, yet valued in their communities, until the early years of the twentieth century. It wasn't until 1905 that W. Garner Bee, considered to be the "Godfather" of Niskayuna, formed the Boulevard Homesite Company, which donated four plots of land to build the Van Antwerp School. At this time, the population in Schenectady County had continued to grow as well as the industries that were flourishing in the area and, therefore, the increase in residents was evident not just in the city, but in the surrounding smaller towns as well. The Van Antwerp School in Niskayuna doubled in size in 1924, was added to in 1929 and then once again in 1936. The Boulevard Homesite Company had, at this point, built a high-class suburban residential neighborhood, which allowed residents to live in the suburbs, send their children to Van Antwerp School, and commute to their jobs at places like the General Electric Plant in the

city of Schenectady.⁷⁸ The phenomenon of suburbanization in Schenectady County was underway.

Shortly after Dr. Howe left the Schenectady school district in 1905, Dr. Abraham Roger Brubacher filled the superintendent position. During a period of increasing population growth, he was responsible for numerous positive changes in the schools due to his dedication to the notion that each child must be valued as an individual. He strongly believed that no two children were exactly alike, and, therefore, the teachers were responsible for individually adapting their lesson plans to meet the needs of their various students.⁷⁹ Likewise, because at this point free and equal education was mandatory for each student, Dr. Brubacher believed the resources to go about educating these students should be free and equal as well; he supplied each student with textbooks, dictionaries, globes, and other learning tools to enhance their academic experience.

The language handicap in Schenectady began to turn into a large barrier for educators in the early part of the twentieth century as the population of foreign born individuals (mostly Italian and Polish beginning in the 1860s) increased due to the establishment of various manufacturing opportunities in the city. Ungraded classes, free lunches, and special classes were created to educate these students as well as possible, largely to prevent Schenectady from becoming a stigmatized “factory town” where education was mediocre. Likewise, in 1912 students who were falling behind in classes, those deemed “feeble-minded” by the school system, were put in separate classes so as to receive individualized attention, all the while being spared ridicule by insensitive classmates. These changes to the traditional system were originally seen as setbacks, but

⁷⁸ Francis R. Taormina, *The 60th Anniversary of Niskayuna Central School District*, 2014, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *Superintendent's Report*, 1913, p. 2. (Schenectady City School District, Schenectady, NY).

in the following years Schenectady High School's reputation was one of the best in the state and the schools in the district continued to see astounding successes. Throughout the entirety of New York State, Schenectady had maintained the highest percentage of graduates. By the 1920s there were about 17,000 students receiving an education from 650 teachers throughout twenty-nine school buildings in Schenectady.⁸⁰ The district was truly exemplary.

Unfortunately, the stock market crash of October 1929 and subsequent Great Depression largely impacted the success that had been seen by the Schenectady City Schools. Between 1931 and 1940, student enrollments dropped by approximately 3,000 and 160 teaching positions became vacant. Likewise, three elementary school and one junior high were closed, simply because there were not sufficient funds. However, in 1931 Mont Pleasant High School was opened and the previously known Schenectady High School became Nott Terrace High School; for the first time in decades there was enough room to comfortably educate all students full-time, largely because of the decline in enrollment.

Nearly one hundred years following the official formation of the Schenectady Public School District, in 1953 the Niskayuna school district was centralized and became the renowned Niskayuna Central School District that it remains today. Administrators, staff, and community members who continued to value education worked to satisfy the need for space to comfortably fit all students enrolled by expanding to three elementary school buildings and also worked to improve the quality of educational programs.⁸¹ Through the sixties and seventies Niskayuna Central School District thrived; foreign language instruction was introduced at the elementary level and mandated for three years of middle

⁸⁰ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p.167.

⁸¹ Francis R. Taormina, *The 60th Anniversary of Niskayuna Central School District*, 2014, p. 6.

school, three years of science in middle school were required, arts and music were strengthened, and graduation requirements were increased.

With the changes in society during these decades, the nature of Niskayuna High School changed from simply being a place to offer academic programs to one that was able to address the social and emotional needs of the students. Following the Civil Rights Movement, fair treatment of all students and people in general was not only expected but also required. Learning materials and resources were to be free of any racial or sexual stereotypes. Likewise, because of national problems around unwanted teen pregnancy, health education became mandated in the district. The school, which had previously taken advantage of their ability to censor the student newspaper, was now seeing protests by students advocating for their first amendment right to Freedom of the Press, rock and roll had infiltrated the school, and marijuana was becoming increasingly appealing to the student body. There was a different climate in the high school than ever seen before.⁸²

Unfortunately, by the mid-seventies, Niskayuna's budgets began to tighten and various programs were cut because of their financial burden. Foreign language disappeared at the elementary level, funding for arts and music decreased, and graduation requirements were reduced to lessen expenses. In the early eighties, the Van Antwerp School was officially closed because of the financial problems in the district. Despite these years of economic hardships, in 1983, thirty years after the district was centralized, Niskayuna High School was recognized as one of the best five high schools in New York State.⁸³ As the population in the district increased again by the early nineties, Niskayuna

⁸² Francis R. Taormina, *The 60th Anniversary of Niskayuna Central School District*, 2014, p. 12.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 12.

Central School District was able to expand some of their schools and improve on their academic and extra curricular programs.

Schenectady's public schools remained exemplary throughout the early 1960s. 88% of students who entered the school in kindergarten remained throughout high school. Students with individual problems were receiving increasing personal attention and the relationships between students and teachers were generally positive. Unfortunately, this era of good feeling did not last forever.

Education was quite obviously a massive component of the culture of Schenectady and was viewed as an extremely important institution since the city's settlement in the seventeenth century, but it was meant solely for white men until the early part of the nineteenth century. Women were viewed as the weaker sex and slavery was not abolished in New York until 1837.⁸⁴ Despite the fact that citizens of Schenectady funded scholarships for the indigent, women and blacks were not treated with this kind of compassion for many years.

While a Female Academy was opened in 1807, education for girls in Schenectady did not truly prosper until the 1830s. Although much of the curriculum for girls was around home economics and was artistic in nature, there was a growing emphasis on the sciences and practical topics that allowed women to begin thinking critically for themselves.⁸⁵ Women paid for lessons in each subject individually, and certain subjects were more expensive than others. The typical rate per subject ranged from \$2 to \$10. Therefore, while forms of education for females were becoming increasingly accessible, it remained so simply for those of higher socio-economic statuses.

⁸⁴ Neisuler, Jeanette G. "The History of Education in Schenectady." 1964, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 59.

It was around this same time, in the early years of the nineteenth century, that the Dutch Church of Schenectady authorized a finite sum of money to educate those individuals of color. In 1812 there were approximately three hundred slaves in Schenectady, and until 1873 African-Americans were educated separately in a school that existed in the basement of a church on Jay Street. It was not until 1873 that a law was passed prohibiting discrimination based on race or color. Therefore, when the compulsory education laws were passed in 1875, black and white students, for the first time in New York State, attended school together.

From the settlement of the area by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century through the prosperous ages of ALCO and General Electric's presence in Schenectady of the mid-twentieth century, the county's inhabitants have remained proud of their excelling education systems. Today the county serves over 23,000 students in six public school districts made up of forty-one total public schools. While some districts see greater achievement than others, most offer various enrichment and extra curricular programs making them some of New York State's finest schools. The Schenectady City School District sees some of the lowest achievement in not only New York State but also the nation at large, while the surrounding, suburban districts such as Niskayuna are some of the best. Despite the foundations of the Schenectady School System being of strength, determination, and dedication to an equitable and just education for all children, it has changed drastically over the last fifty years to one of low-achievement and low graduation rates.

Chapter 4: Schenectady & Niskayuna: A Microcosm of the American Education Crisis

Limitations for Urban Blacks Due to the Criminal Justice System

Even in cases where there is strong evidence to prove ones innocence, the Criminal Justice system can be seen as a support for whites and an enemy for blacks. In a study published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse in 2012, drug usage among secondary school students in the United States from 1975-2011 was surveyed and the results showed that, despite black youth being arrested at a rate double that of white youth for drug crimes during those years, white students were more likely to have abused illegal substances than black students.⁸⁶ However, the arrest is simply the first step in a journey of racial discrimination that a disproportionate number of black Americans face. The disparities, according to The Sentencing Project, continue throughout the trial process as African-Americans typically receive harsher punishments than whites and those of other races.⁸⁷

While overt racial discrimination has largely been eliminated from the courtroom and the Criminal Justice System, in general, there is ample scholarship that shows that race and ethnicity remain large indicators in a defendants sentencing⁸⁸. The severity of a defendants sentencing is typically due to their criminal record, not their race, but because police arrest blacks at a higher rate than they do whites, blacks are more likely to develop criminal records, which in turn puts them in a position to receive harsher sentencing than

⁸⁶ Report of the Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System," *The Sentencing Project* (2013), accessed October, 2015, p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

whites.⁸⁹ Likewise, in many instances, low-income individuals require public defenders because they cannot afford to hire a lawyer of their own. However, in certain states, such as Alabama, there are very limited numbers of public defenders and therefore there is a lack of legal assistance. Because of this, more often than not, low-income, minority individuals end up incarcerated when they do not necessarily need to be. It is because of this that black Americans make up nearly seventy percent of the population in American prisons despite only making up twelve percent of the nation's total population.⁹⁰

According to The Sentencing Project, if these current trends continue in the future, one in every three black males in this nation will, at one point or another, serve time in prison, compared to one in every seventeen white males. Today, there are more black males incarcerated or on probation or parole, than there were slaves in 1850, before the start of the Civil War.⁹¹

The drastic increase in the incarceration of African-American men and women has kept them at a distance from societal norms, stunting their ability to live as typical American citizens.⁹² It has also prevented African-Americans from gaining a steady income and therefore has disabled them from supporting their families; the incarceration of low-income African-Americans keeps African-American children in lives of poverty, living in

⁸⁹ David Cole, *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System* (United States of America: 1999) 151.

⁹⁰ Report of the Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System," *The Sentencing Project* (2013), accessed October, 2015, p. 3.

⁹¹ Michelle Alexander *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 1.

⁹² Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49.

low-income communities and therefore in underperforming schools, creating an unfortunate cycle.

The epidemic rates of incarceration of African American males is leading to the decline of traditional families and is further disintegrating already underprivileged, low-income communities. The years between age twenty-nine and thirty-two are considered integral in the establishment of the average American man's career and personal life. It is between these ages that most settle with their families and begin to raise children. It is also, however, the age range of the average male prisoner. With twelve percent of black American males between this age-range incarcerated, it puts them at a severe disadvantage and establishes a loss of freedom even once they are released.⁹³ Because criminal records are stigmatized, imprisonment often creates barriers from various employment opportunities, welfare benefits, and voting rights.⁹⁴ Likewise, marriage has been proven to discipline both partners and prevent recidivism. However, serving time in prison reduces one's likeliness of becoming married, and therefore results in a continuation of deviant behavior and often reentry to prison.

Today, over one million American children have a parent in prison (seventy percent of which are children of color), and this can often result in an exhibition of discipline problems and a decline in school performance. The problem is greater for males, who externalize more often than females, which therefore results in delinquent behaviors which allow them to identify more so with their incarcerated parents.⁹⁵ Children who have at

⁹³ Ibid, 62.

⁹⁴ Becky Pettit and Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Inequality in U.S. Incarceration," accessed October 2015, p. 154.

⁹⁵ Steve Christian, "Children of Incarcerated Parents," *National Conference of State Legislatures* (March 2009): 9.

least one incarcerated parent are more likely to drop out of school, engage in misconduct, and eventually become six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves than children without an imprisoned parent. This likelihood is seen seven times more often for black children than white.⁹⁶ These problems are more pervasive when it is the maternal parent incarcerated rather than the paternal, according to the study.

In all fifty states, more money is spent on prisoners than on students. An increased spending on education would, subsequently, lower incarceration rates, but it seems that a United States priority remains on imprisoning “dangerous” individuals. These individuals are disproportionately and continuously poorly educated, low-income, minorities. If the billions of dollars allotted to corrections were reallocated to educational programs, we might be able to improve our educational system and the issue of racially charged mass incarceration could be dramatically decreased.

The State of New York’s Academic Achievement

New York State itself, despite its seeming liberalism, has some of the nation’s most racially and economically segregated school districts.⁹⁷ In a 2014 report released by The Civil Rights Project entitled “New York State’s Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction, and a Damaged Future,” it is explained that as segregation in New York schools increases and schools become more heavily minority based, they also become more low-income. In 2010, the typical black student in New York attended a school where

⁹⁶ Report of the Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System,” *The Sentencing Project* (2013), accessed October, 2015, p. 11.

⁹⁷ John Kucsera and Gary Orfield, *New York State’s Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction, and a Damaged Future* (The Civil Rights Project, March 2014), p. vii.

approximately 70% of students were considered low-income, whereas in the same year the typical white student in New York went to a school where less than 30% of students were considered low-income.⁹⁸ Segregation in New York schools has lasting implications: there are harsher punishments and forms of discipline in minority-prevalent schools which can often lead to higher rates of suspension and expulsion, dropout rates in these schools are substantially higher than in wealthier, whiter districts, and even in the event where they do enter college, students from minority-segregated schools are less likely to be successful in college.⁹⁹

Despite the segregation of New York State school districts, the graduation rates statewide have increased over recent years. They rose from 74.9% in 2013 to 76.4% in 2014.¹⁰⁰ However, there remains a thirty-percentage point gap between districts of high and low need, and therefore, individuals hailing from economically disadvantaged homes, families, and communities remain disadvantaged, as they are less likely than their economically advantaged counterparts to receive a high school diploma, and the disparity continues in a vicious cycle. According to the New York State Education Department, any student whose family is enrolled in at least one of a group of public assistance programs (free or reduced-price lunch, food stamps, earned income tax credit, etc.) is considered economically disadvantaged.

The succeeding sections will further investigate the claims that high levels of poverty and racial segregation directly result in under-performance in schools. In doing so,

⁹⁸ John Kucsera and Gary Orfield, *New York State's Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction, and a Damaged Future* (The Civil Rights Project, March 2014), p. vii.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ "Statewide High School Graduation Rate Shows Continuing Gains," *New York State Education Department*, December 18, 2014, accessed January 13, 2016.

this research will closely look at the Schenectady City School District and the Niskayuna Central School District.

The Discrepancies Between Schenectady City School District & Niskayuna Central School District

When two school districts, located just two miles away from each other, see various similarities in terms of annual budgets, expenditures per pupil, and class sizes, it is expected that there will, likewise, be similar rates of academic proficiency, college readiness, and graduation. In the case of Schenectady City School District (SCSD) and Niskayuna Central School District (NCSD), spending and resources look nearly equal on paper. However, this is where the alignment halts. The dropout rates and levels of achievement between the two districts show bold disparities. These two neighboring high schools, one home to predominately white, affluent students, the other largely to low-income minorities, can be seen as a microcosm for the nation at large: there are numerous components existing outside of the school, regardless of funds and programs allotted by the educational institution, that strongly impact student achievement.

The media has given a lot of attention to the disparities, and they can easily be seen in the headlines of The Daily Gazette, the local newspaper that has been reporting the happenings of the area for over 120 years.¹⁰¹ The Gazette celebrated in 1979 as Niskayuna High School honored their top seniors with the Medal of Academic Excellence and again in 2004 as one hundred percent of their students passed the New York State Regents

¹⁰¹ Bill Buel, "About The Daily Gazette: We've been in the news business for 120 years," *The Daily Gazette*, August 30, 2012, accessed January 13, 2015. www.dailygazette.com/news/2012/aug/30/about-daily-gazette/

Exams.¹⁰² Likewise, they sympathized in 1998 after thirty-six percent of Schenectady High School students had been suspended at least once in the previous year.¹⁰³ These newspaper headlines have seen little change over the last four decades. Today, as Niskayuna Central School District sees remarkable achievement in its students year after year with graduation rates consistently increasing, Schenectady City School District sees the opposite.

In order to best understand the differences that exist between the two districts, I held interviews with the superintendents of each. The superintendent of the Schenectady City School District, Larry Spring, shared with me his experience in working at high need districts throughout New York State. He emphasized that, despite a seemingly sufficient budget, adequate resources, and plenty of teachers, many of the students in Schenectady deal with external anxieties that are married with the culture of poverty. He explained how 80% of students in the district are considered economically disadvantaged, something that effects them in and out of the classroom. Cosimo Tangorra, the superintendent of the Niskayuna Central School District, has spent most of his career working in low-income, under-performing districts. He discussed how much of the achievement seen in the Niskayuna schools can be credited to the involvement, engagement, and support of the students' parents, something that he explained strictly comes along with communities of low-need. In this district, only 12% of the total population is living in poverty, a number that has increased from 4% in the last five years. While the evidence of the stark

¹⁰² "Niskayuna High School Honors Top Students," *The Schenectady Gazette*, June 12, 1979, accessed January 11, 2016.

¹⁰³ Shirin Parsavand, "Schenectady schools aim to reduce suspensions," *The Daily Gazette*, accessed January 11, 2016.

discrepancies between the districts is apparent through online articles and news sources, speaking to these two school administrators was of utmost importance for this research.

The disparities are undeniable. Schenectady City School District educates 10,000 students and is made up of two early childhood centers, thirteen elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and one career and leadership alternative high school. There are various programs implemented in to support the student body, but extreme levels of poverty in the district have created a massive problem in terms of academic achievement. In the Schenectady City School District, 80% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged and are therefore eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.¹⁰⁴ Subsequently, only 58% of the senior class graduated in 2015, ranking the district with Albany City School as the bottom two spots in all Capital Region schools. Niskayuna Central School District serves substantially fewer students (4,312) in five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. In 2015, Niskayuna graduated 96% of its senior class; 92% went to college. On average, a teacher employed by the Niskayuna Central School District makes an annual salary of \$80,000, whereas a teacher in the Schenectady City School District makes roughly \$20,000 less at \$60,000 each year.¹⁰⁵ This results in a varying quality of teachers amongst the two districts, which can further lead to gaps regarding academic proficiency across an array of subjects. Because of this, 62% of students in the Niskayuna Central School District are considered proficient in math and reading. The number is substantially lower in Schenectady, at only 22%. In 2014, *Newsweek* published its annual list of America's top 500 public schools, and Niskayuna

¹⁰⁴ Lauren Stanforth. "School Dumps Federal Lunch Aid." *Times Union*, January 23, 2013, accessed January 15, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ "Schenectady City School District." Niche.com. Accessed January 15, 2016. <https://k12.niche.com/d/schenectady-city-school-district-ny/teachers/>

ranked number 26 in the nation.¹⁰⁶ Not only did Schenectady not appear on this list, but two of the district's elementary schools have struggled simply to remain open.

Two of the thirteen elementary schools in the Schenectady City School District, Hamilton and Lincoln, are considered "failing" according to a report published in 2015 by Governor Andrew Cuomo. The report, entitled "The State of New York's Failing Schools," explains that in New York State, students in grades 3-8 must demonstrate proficiency in math and English by scoring a 3 or 4 out of 4 on various standardized tests. In 2014, fewer than 40% of New York's students in this range were proficient; two thirds of that state's students were *not* considered proficient. Likewise, in 2014 only 38% of New York State's high school seniors were deemed college ready. "The State of New York's Failing Schools" reports on the 178 schools in the state that can be considered "priority" or "failing" and under these conditions are responsible for educating over 100,000 New York State students (93% of whom are of color and 82% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). To be considered "priority" or "failing" a school must be among the state's bottom 5% in math and English performance or see graduation rates at less than 60% for at least three consecutive school years.¹⁰⁷

The two "failing" schools in Schenectady have thus been placed on receivership programs that require the schools to make sufficient and varying improvements by the end of a two-year period.¹⁰⁸ If the schools do not achieve the set goals they will be placed on an independent receivership program, which brings an external individual or non-profit entity

¹⁰⁶ Bob O'Connor, "America's Top Schools 2014," *Newsweek*, 2014, accessed January 13, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ "The State of New York's Failing Schools." *New York State of Opportunity*. 2015 Report. Accessed January 15, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ New York State School Boards Association, "Questions and Answers on Receivership," July 20, 2015, accessed January 17, 2016.

into the school to manage and operate all aspects of the school to ensure improvements are made.¹⁰⁹ Larry Spring has been appointed receiver for the Lincoln and Hamilton elementary schools. The schools' plans include seeking improvement from the ground up: committing to empowering their students, professional development for teachers and faculty, modifying lesson plans and curriculum, and maintaining positive relationships between students and teachers.¹¹⁰

Small class sizes and sufficient budgets are two variables that are often assumed to improve a school's reputation and in turn its students' proficiency. In Schenectady the student to teacher ratio on average is 15:1, which is nearly equal to some of the highest achieving districts in the state, including Niskayuna where the student to teacher ratio is 14:1. In both schools, therefore, class sizes are comparatively intimate. The Schenectady City School District budget for the 2015-2016 academic year is \$160.6 million, which allocates roughly \$16,000 to be spent per pupil annually. This budget can sufficiently cover the cost of textbooks and other academic resources needed to enhance a student's educational experience. In Niskayuna, the 2015-2016 budget was just over \$78 million, which, based on the difference in the student body population between the two districts, makes the budgets relatively similar. Likewise, the expenditure per pupil in Niskayuna is just \$2,000 more than Schenectady at \$18,000.

Funding and class sizes, however average or sufficient they may be, are not preventing and cannot explain the discrepancy of achievement in the Schenectady City School District and others in the area and state. The needs of the kids in Schenectady are

¹⁰⁹ New York State School Boards Association, "*Questions and Answers on Receivership*," July 20, 2015, accessed January 17, 2016.

¹¹⁰ Lincoln Elementary School. "*Receivership Public Hearing*," September 23, 2015, accessed January 17, 2016.

high, and because of this it is extremely challenging to see progress in academic proficiency. Superintendent Spring emphasized the notion of chronic trauma, something that negatively impacts many of the students in the district. Neighborhood disorganization, food insecurity, environmental instability, and toxic stress are all examples of chronic trauma and often come naturally with poverty. Because the stress is ongoing, the source cannot easily be eliminated. Spring articulated how numerous students have experienced acute trauma, which includes witnessing drive by shootings, drug use, and other violent crimes. As devastating as it is, it is actually easier for the school to manage this kind of trauma, because there is a specific source and can be dealt with directly. Unfortunately, however, it is chronic trauma that more so affects the lives on many Schenectady students. In turn, these students are largely affected in terms of executive functioning ability, their ability to weigh pros and cons, and setting goals for themselves; they see little achievement in the classroom and they lack proficiency.

Unfortunately, as most educators and school administrators would likely say with confidence, in districts of low-income and high levels of poverty, there are many aspects that negatively impact a student's achievement that cannot be changed through a receivership program. The 2015 report that deemed schools in seventeen New York State districts as "failing" and "priority" chose to ignore this integral component that largely effects a students' success in the institution of public education. Hamilton Elementary School, one of the district's two schools considered "failing," serves students in grades Kindergarten-6 in the Hamilton Hill neighborhood of Schenectady. The average length of stay for a student in the school is eighteen months. Many of the families of these students are homeless and simply cannot afford to keep their children in one school district for an

extended period of time.¹¹¹ Each time a student moves, their learning is put on hold for a few months, and therefore academic achievement becomes less of a priority than becoming acclimated to the new environment. With extremely high rates of poverty, as seen in the city of Schenectady, there comes a plethora of conditions that result in instability within the home, food insecurity, anxiety disorders, and so forth. Only 6% of the 6th grade students at Hamilton Elementary School started in the school in kindergarten, and therefore it is inevitable that the school faces challenges in improving academic proficiency. Because of this, it is not surprising that the school has been placed on a receivership program, but it is unlikely and fairly unreasonable that this program will have the capacity to change the levels of poverty that effects so many of the students in school and their academic achievement.

Lincoln Elementary School is the other Schenectady City School considered “failing” by the State of New York. There are significant challenges around educational progress for both students and teachers due to the high rate of poverty and the culture that comes along with it at the school. In one specific third grade class at Lincoln made up of twenty-six students, each one qualifies for free lunch, meaning the incomes in their households are substantially below the federal poverty level for Schenectady. Ten of the students have at least one parent in prison and six have both parents in prison. Additionally, eight students have at least one parent with a severe mental illness and eleven have involvement with Child Protective Services.¹¹² Educating students who live under these circumstances is clearly incredibly challenging, and the challenges can only intensify as the number of students who live in these conditions increases. These devastating characteristics are

¹¹¹ Larry Spring, interview with the author, February 1, 2016.

¹¹² Larry Spring, interview with the author, February 1, 2016.

unfortunately not unique to this classroom, school, or even district. These are problems that thousands of impoverished students face nation-wide.

Living in poverty can largely impact a student's ability to perform highly in the education system. State Aid Funding blatantly disadvantages the neediest populations.¹¹³ To fairly fund the districts, Schenectady, where poverty is so prevalent, needs more funding to properly teach their students and provide adequate amounts of social intervention and emotional support; they simply require more services and therefore more money. Consequently, while the budgets and student expenditure may seem equal, they cannot be considered equitable because more money is needed in a district like Schenectady to see results even remotely similar to a district like Niskayuna.¹¹⁴

Schenectady is a city with high rates of crime and a somewhat prevalent gang association; when a child grows up in this kind of environment and exhibits characteristics of vulnerability, the seeming ease of criminal life is attractive and many often fall prey to this lifestyle rather than receive their high school diplomas. For this reason, the school-to-prison pipeline is more prevalent in communities like Schenectady.

Because of the nature of American society, rates of poverty are largely interconnected with race. In Schenectady, 30% of the population is Black or Hispanic. Likewise, only 20% of people age 25 or older, from 2010-2014, held a bachelor's degree or higher. It is believed that a student who grows up in a home with educated parents is more likely to succeed in the school system, as the parents are more likely to become engaged in the schooling of their child and remain supporting of the academic experience.¹¹⁵ Because

¹¹³ Cosimo Tangorra, interview with the author, February 16, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Cosimo Tangorra, interview with the author, February 16, 2016.

¹¹⁵ Cosimo Tangorra, interview with the author, February 16, 2016.

of the low levels of educated adults in Schenectady, and the fact that many are incarcerated, mentally unwell, or considered dangerous, this is another component that limits success of students. In low-income communities, like this one, it is often challenging for teachers and administrators to form positive relationships with parents. The staffs of schools in these communities frequently have to seek out parent involvement, and often the interactions are less than positive. During the period from 2010-2014, the average median income in Schenectady was \$38,000.¹¹⁶ While the national average for people living in poverty is 14.8%, it is 23.8% in Schenectady.¹¹⁷ Only 12% of the inhabitants in Niskayuna are living in poverty, and this alone is enough to create disparities between the two districts.¹¹⁸

On the contrary, in Niskayuna, from 2010-2014, approximately 58% of people age 25 years or older had a bachelor's degree or higher. This, according to Superintendent Tangorra, is huge. After working in the field of education for twenty-three years, and spending most of those years in low-income, under-performing districts, the superintendent credits Niskayuna Central School District's high rates of academic achievement to the involvement, engagement, and support of the student's parents, something that strictly comes along with communities of exceptionally low-need. In Niskayuna the average median income was above \$95,000 from 2010-2014, and only 4% of the population was living in poverty.¹¹⁹ Over the last five years, however, the rate of poverty has increased to 12%. While this is a concern for the district, as success rates are sure to decline if appropriate levels of support and intervention are not provided, they have not yet seen consequences. Despite the rapidly growing rate of poverty, Niskayuna

¹¹⁶ "Quick Facts." *United States Census Buereau*. Accessed January 13, 2016.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ "Quick Facts." *United States Census Buereau*. Accessed January 13, 2016.

Central School District is still considered very low-need and is able to provide its students with countless opportunities ranging from academic possibilities to social and emotional support. Because not only the district but the Niskayuna community in general are able and dedicated to providing the students with meaningful programs, parents are engaged and supportive, and poverty rates are generally very low, Niskayuna Central School District is able to graduate some of the nation's highest achieving students.

Food insecurity, something that is typical for individuals living in poverty, can negatively impact a person's physical development and create problems which make students unable to bring their full attention to the classroom. A 2015 report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation stated that children who are raised in poverty often lack nutritional food, which is necessary for proper growth and development.¹²⁰ Therefore, many children growing up in Schenectady face these kinds of problems regularly, and many neighborhoods in Schenectady, including Vail and Hamilton Hill, are considered "food deserts," which means there is little access to fresh food. Though there are various bodegas throughout these neighborhoods, they rarely sell fruit and vegetables, and if they do they market them at high costs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture describes a food desert in two ways: an urban neighborhood where the closest grocery store is at least one mile away, or a rural area where people are likely to have cars and the closest grocery store is ten miles away. To be considered a food desert 20% or more of people living within these populations must be living in poverty. Approximately 13% of the residents in the Capital Region live with food insecurity, meaning there are times throughout the year when they do not know where their next meal will be coming from. Wealthy suburbs in the Capital

¹²⁰ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Kids Count: 2015 Data Book." Accessed January 17, 2016.

Region, including Niskayuna, are immune to these kinds of hardships because with ample and diverse specialty food stores, there is regular access to fresh and nutritious food.¹²¹

Schenectady City School District has implemented various food programs to improve their academic standing and see greater results. The district listed on its website that beginning in the 2015 school year, all students in the district would receive free breakfast and lunch each day under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Act of 2010. In order to be eligible to participate in CEP, a district must identify at least 40% of their students as being directly certified for free meals or live in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a program that offers low-income individuals and families access to nutrition assistance.¹²² 80% of students in Schenectady qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and therefore the district is eligible to participate in the CEP and Breakfast in the Classroom Program. According to the superintendent, while these implementations have only been underway for one year and therefore long-term data has not yet been collected, attendance rates in grades K-12 have drastically increased, and the hope is that this will eventually result in increased graduation rates in the district.¹²³

Breakfast in the Classroom, another national program implemented in the district, explains on their website the significance of their program, in that students who are hungry are more likely to repeat grades, miss class, and receive special education services. By providing all students with access to free and nutritional breakfast, the program is directly

¹²¹ Tim Obrien, "Growing Grocery Options Still Leave Some in Food 'Deserts': New Options for Fresh Food Bypass Pockets of Poverty and Rural Areas," *Times Union*, October 18, 2014, accessed February 29, 2016.

¹²² "Community Eligibility Provision: An Amazing New Opportunity," *Food Research and Action Center*, accessed January 14, 2016.

¹²³ Larry Spring, "Superintendent shares his district's success with Breakfast in the Classroom." *American Dairy Association and Dairy Council, Inc.* May 14, 2014.

increasing academic achievement, all the while decreasing the stigma behind coming to school hungry. This is integral for the success of districts like Schenectady where achievement is mediocre at best.

On the contrary, in 2013 Niskayuna Central School chose to opt out of a new national standard for school lunches that would require schools to meet various meal patterns and nutritional standards. Due to a decrease in students buying lunch and general student feedback, the district chose not to implement these standards, and in turn lost federal meal reimbursement. In the Niskayuna Central School District, where students have regular access to fresh and nutritious food, it would actually prove to be cost ineffective to put these national standards into practice because it would result in excess food waste. The unequal access to nutritional foods in Niskayuna and Schenectady prove to be just another disparity that results in stark differences in academic achievement.

In an attempt to thwart the disparities on an academic level, Schenectady High School decided to effectuate the International Baccalaureate Program, commonly known as the IB program, in 2000. Since its inception it has allowed for eleventh and twelfth grade students to engage in a more rigorous and demanding academic program. While it is open and accessible to all students, there are strict guidelines to achieve eligibility to graduate with an IB Diploma, and students must complete a pre-IB program through Schenectady High School in grades nine and ten to prove their eligibility and dedication to the advanced course-load.¹²⁴ In Schenectady High School's 2013 graduating class, 27% of the graduates

¹²⁴ Schenectady High School's International Baccalaureate Program; Student and Parent Information Guide. September 2001, accessed January 16, 2016.

were IB students.¹²⁵ While 22 students earned full IB diplomas, 110 students' scores and portfolios only granted them a partial IB certificate. In order to earn the full diploma, along with fulfilling the challenging requirements of the classes offered in the school, students must pass various examinations.¹²⁶ Students from various districts seek enrollment in Schenectady High School simply to be a part of their IB program; they have a deep interest in learning critical thinking, creativity, and, inevitably, competition.¹²⁷ Currently there are approximately 600 students at Schenectady High School taking IB courses, but only about 5 or 6% will graduate with the diploma.

It is undeniable that the IB program has been beneficial for the Schenectady City School District. They have been able to provide strong academics for the district's top students and in turn sent them to some of the nation's top colleges.¹²⁸ It seems that since the programs establishment, Schenectady High School's reputation has become less stigmatized. However, while there is ample information accessible on the Schenectady City School District's website pertaining to the demographics of the community and the student population, there is little information pertaining to the specific demographics of the IB program itself. Superintendent Spring suggested that the reason for this is because within the Schenectady community, government recognized demographics have become largely meaningless. While there is a large Guyanese population in the area, there is not a way to specifically check this when marking down ones ethnicity. Therefore, the superintendent

¹²⁵ Kathleen Moore. "Annual Ceremony Honors Special Group of Schenectady Graduates." *The Daily Gazette*. January 8, 2014, accessed January 15, 2016.

¹²⁶ Schenectady High School's International Baccalaureate Program; Student and Parent Information Guide. September 2001, accessed January 16, 2016.

¹²⁷ Moore, Kathleen. "Annual Ceremony Honors Special Group of Schenectady Graduates." *The Daily Gazette*. January 8, 2014, accessed January 15, 2016.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

stated that Guyanese students often mark their ethnicity as “black” simply because it is the closest option for how they identify.

The Guyanese students make up a large portion of those who graduate with an IB diploma. However, Superintendent Spring suggested that the program has somewhat segregated the school community from within, as there is an under-representation of African-American and Hispanic students, who would have less ambiguity in checking off these demographics, working towards the IB diploma. A 2011, African-American, graduate of Schenectady High School explained how the IB program was, during his time in the school, predominately white students and often made up of the minority of students in the district who were not considered low-income.¹²⁹ From a student’s perspective, the program absolutely segregated the school from within. Likewise, students who are English language learners and those with disabilities who require special education are, too, under-represented in the IB program, and can be seen in the bottom percentile of their classes. These are the students who are the most vulnerable and are often the ones who end up dropping out of school and therefore not graduating.

While improving graduation rates in Schenectady High School has been a priority for Larry Spring since he began working as superintendent, the rate has mostly stayed the same, and Niskayuna High School continues to outperform Schenectady. The IB program and various free breakfast and lunch implementations are optimistic additions to the district are optimistic reforms that could help bring proficiency and college readiness levels up. Unfortunately, the extreme levels of poverty that the majority of students in Schenectady City School District are living in creates an extreme disadvantage and can

¹²⁹ Jeremy Sagaille, interview with the author, February 16, 2016.

ultimately be blamed for the consistently lower performance levels of students in this district compared to those of Niskayuna, where poverty rates are not comparable. This comparison shows how, despite similarities in budgets and resources in two schools, there are numerous external factors that greatly impact a student's academic experience and achievement levels.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The achievement gap between white and minority students is astounding and there are countless variables that are making it grow. While there are existing problems surrounding lower teacher expectations for minority students, inherent biases of at-risk students, and a lower quality of teachers in urban schools, the larger issue is that the culture of poverty prevents students and individuals from equal opportunities. There is a lack of mobility and a racial bias against minorities from low-income communities, and therefore, these individuals remain marginalized. These students and their parents remain powerless and succeeding generations are faced with the same set of problems. Though this is an education crisis, it is more so a societal crisis surrounding racial and income inequality.

While it is imperative to recognize the urgency of these problems, it too is vital to understand that there have been numerous attempts at reforms to create a more equitable education system. Ranging from the introduction of charter and magnet schools, to alternative teacher certification programs such as Teach for America, education reform has countless supporters and activists. Though each of these programs and implementations have generally good intentions, they have received much criticism, as well, and the reason for this is simple. The crisis of racial and socio-economic disparities in education is extremely complex and if there was a simple way to fix the problems, they would have already been established.

Charter schools are one of many controversial education reform attempts. They are privately managed but publicly funded, and are believed by the vast majority to offer ample opportunities to children in urban areas. However, many argue that they simply further

stigmatize existing public schools because they pick “motivated” students to fill their vacancies. In actuality, most charter schools use a politically charged lottery system to select their students in attempt to see greater successes than traditional public schools. However, there is little statistical evidence that charter schools have closed the achievement gap or led to substantial success, at all. They remain a disputed reform in education.

Alternative certification programs have become commonplace as a way to quickly get intelligent and ambitious individuals into the classroom to fill teacher vacancies. Teach for America, a national organization founded in 1989, is perhaps the most well known of these programs and selects individuals as corps members to teach in under performing schools in low-income communities nationwide. While undeniably founded with good intentions, there are numerous criticisms of the program, largely surrounding the inexperience of the teachers and the notion of the “white savior complex,” largely because most of the corps members teach in communities where they do not hail from themselves.

There have been countless other attempts at reforming and improving the American institution of public education. Through communication and activism, the urgency of the crisis that exists within our schools and our general society can be dealt with sooner rather than later, because an educated society will result in a just and equitable society.

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