

Occupy Kindergarten: The Rich-Poor Divide Starts With Education

By Jordan Weissmann

Feb. 11, 2012

New research shows that a family's money matters ever more when it comes to their children's education

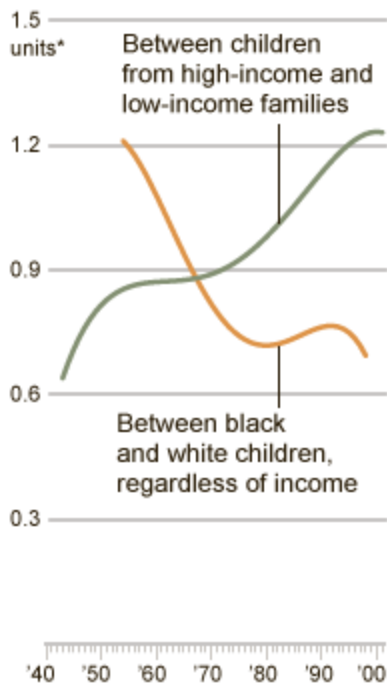


Reuters

Economic class is increasingly becoming the great dividing line of American education.

The New York Times has published a roundup of recent research showing the growing academic achievement gap between rich and poor students. It prominently features a paper by Stanford professor Sean F. Reardon, which found that, since the 1960s, the difference in test scores between affluent and underprivileged students has grown 40%, and is now twice the gap between black and white students. (Graph courtesy of the *Times*.)

Average difference in standardized reading test scores, by birth year of students



**A difference of one unit is roughly equal to the difference in test scores between a fifth grader and an eighth grader.*

Source: Sean F. Reardon, Stanford University

The children of the wealthy are pulling away from their lower-class peers -- the same way their parents are pulling away from their peers' parents. When it comes to college completion rates, the rich-poor gulf has grown by 50% since the 1980s. Upper income families are also spending vastly more on their children compared to the poor than they did 40 years ago, and spending more time as parents cultivating their intellectual development.

It may not simply be a matter of the rich getting richer, and the poor getting poorer -- although that certainly is a part of it. The growing differences in student achievement don't strictly mimic the way income inequality has skyrocketed since the middle of the 20th century. It's actually worse than that. Today, there's a much stronger connection between income and a child's academic success than in the past. Having money is simply more important than it used to be when it comes to getting a good education. Or, as Reardon puts it, "a dollar of income...appears to buy more academic achievement than it did several decades ago."

Even more discouraging: The differences start early in a child's life, then linger. Reardon notes another study which found that the rich-poor achievement gap between students is already big when they start kindergarten, and doesn't change much over time. His own analysis shows a similar pattern.

How come money is so much more important now than before, and so early in a child's development? Thank your local alpha-mom (or dad).

We don't have definitive evidence that can tell us why income matters so much more to a child's education now than it did four decades years ago. But like many other writers, including *The Atlantic's* own Megan McArdle, Reardon suggests it involves a complicated interplay between wealth and culture. Well-off parents today are more able and likely to invest in their child's early education. Like I mentioned, studies show wealthy parents are spending more on their young children and paying more attention to their academic development. One paper found that by the time an upper-income kid starts school, they've spent 400 more hours on "literacy activities" than their less fortunate peers.

We can also look at the way America now segregates itself by education. The greatest predictor of a child's academic success, even more than economic class, is still their parents' education level. But among adults, education and income are becoming more and more intertwined. College graduates couple off and use their resources to raise children who will also go on to succeed academically. When he ran the numbers, Reardon actually found that parental education couldn't explain the entire growth the academic gap between classes. But that doesn't mean it's not a factor.

Even if we still have to tease out the reasons why, we appear to have reached a point where the children of the rich end up better educated, and more likely to succeed, simply because they're children of the rich.

Copyright © 2012 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.