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Racial Gap in Schools Splits a Town Proud of Diversity

By Kate Zernike

YACK, N.Y. — Set above the leafy banks of the Hudson River, this cluster of villages north of New York City has long cultivated a reputation as an idyll of diversity and tolerance. Blacks and whites mingle easily in the shops lining the quaint main street. Interracial families seek out the town as a place where they can live without incident.

The charge, then, hit right at the heart. Armed with previously unreleased statistics broken down by race, a group of parents, black and white, accused the school district of systemic segregation: steering blacks away from honors classes and into special education, disciplining blacks at disproportionate rates, allowing test scores of blacks to lag far behind those of whites for a decade.

The release of the numbers divided the community in a way most people here thought nothing ever could. White parents defended the schools, pointing the finger at what they called deviancy and neglect in black families.

While some black parents said the statistics confirmed the discrimination they suspected, others denounced the group's report as perpetuating painful stereotypes. In the tension, car windows were smashed and sidewalk confrontations erupted.

The conflict here offers a cautionary tale. Closing the gap between black and white achievement has become the nation's thorniest education challenge. Impressed by success in Texas, many states hope to do what the parents here did: release scores by race. California began doing so this year; New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Florida all recently announced plans to do so.

This places a new onus on diverse and well-off suburban communities like this, which have long been able to disregard poor performance by blacks in averages lifted by higher scores of whites. The idea, state officials say, is that exposing the disparity forces school districts to seek to eliminate it. But Nyack's experience suggests that the path from releasing numbers to improving schools can be exceptionally rough terrain, that merely acknowledging the existence of a gap, even in well-meaning communities, is a process filled with pain and controversy.

"This has polarized our community like no other issue," said Kim Raso Stewart, a white parent of two children. "It's like us against them."

Nyack would seem to have exactly the kind of schools parents expect to find in the suburbs. With about 3,000 students, the district spends about $13,000 per student — some $4,000 more than the state average. Of the class that graduated in June, 92 percent passed the English Regents exam, and 85 percent passed the Math Regents, both scores well above the state average.

But the report released by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a group called Nyack Partners in Education in February 1999 exposed a troubling pattern.

pages of findings and statistics were these: Honors classes had nine times as many whites as blacks, even though the district over all had about twice as many whites as blacks. Black students were about two and a half times as likely to be suspended and almost three times as likely to be in special education. While 63 percent of whites passed the Math I Regents in 1997-98, only 31 percent of blacks did.

The gap mirrors one in national statistics. While low achievement among blacks was once written off as the consequence of poverty and disadvantage, statistics show it exists across class; children of the most well-off, well-educated blacks perform only about as well as the children of the poorest whites.

In Nyack, some of the gap could be explained by differences in income. Blacks earn on average about half what whites do. But much as there are pockets of white poverty, there is a significant black middle class in Valley Cottage, the largest of the school district's five villages.

The parents' group had received the statistics every year for a decade, but put them out only after growing frustrated that the school district was doing nothing to solve the problems. Only public shame, it decided, would prompt action.

"This has a reputation as an artsy, enlightened community," said Daniel Wolff, a white parent who led the effort. "The truth is, there are these really visible lines between groups of people. The only place the groups are together is in the public schools, where they have to be, only they've set up this system where they don't have to be, because black kids are on different tracks."

The school district objected to the implication that anyone discriminated intentionally. Honors classes, for example, were based on merit, officials said.

Other parents rushed to join the defense, insisting that teachers do not treat children differently because of skin color.

"I believe we're very forward thinking," said Meg Ferrazano, a white parent. "We have multicultural events, we have kids who are friends with each other. I see the kids all get along."

The superintendent, Roberta P. Zampolin, said the problems lay in the home, not the schools, and others picked up that theme.

“The Nyack schools and its professionals are not responsible for the failures of the home, the conduct of absent child-bearers or irresponsible, immoral and criminal parents,” Mrs. Raso Stewart and her husband, James T. Stewart, wrote.

“We got a lot of support for saying that,” she said in an interview. “The numbers don’t lie, but is there an attempt to keep black children back? There’s so much more. What are the homes like, what are the parents like? Do the kids get a hot meal at the end of the day?”

Many black parents, especially among the more affluent in Valley Cottage, lashed out at the parents’ group for releasing the numbers, ridiculing them as liberal do-gooders trying to co-opt blacks in their crusade.

Pierre Davis, a school board member who is black, said that when his daughter heard about the report, she said it meant she was “stupid.”

“I’ve spent all this time talking to my kids about ‘you can be anything you want to be,’ ” he said. “For some folks, this is just going to prove the point: ‘Hey, I told you those folks weren’t too bright.’ ”

The school district, too, resisted talking about a gap. Officials commissioned their own study of the issue. But the consultant who produced it, David Tulin, said that when he showed his report to school officials, the superintendent asked him to remove his conclusions describing the schools as “functionally segregated” and threatened to withhold his fee if he did not.

Brian Burrell, the school board chairman, said officials were only trying to limit Mr. Tulin to their original request: recommendations, not conclusions.

Mr. Tulin wrote the incident off as defensiveness. “They felt they were good-hearted people, they’re helping to change the world,” he said. “And when there’s a challenge to what they’ve accomplished, it’s a slap in the face.”

In 150 interviews, the consultant said, almost everyone recognized racial disparity. The problem was talking about it publicly.

“It made the district look bad,” Mrs. Ferrazano said. “Anybody who read the paper would say, ‘Oh my God, I won’t send my child to that school; look at all the problems they have.’ That’s not good for our school, our town, our property values or anything else.”

But to James McBride, a Nyack parent and the author of "The Color of Water," a memoir of growing up as the son of a Jewish mother and black father, the comments only emphasized how whites saw blacks as "them."

"There's an assumption that if you're a black, you're a drag on the town," he said. "The mentality was, 'We're doing you a favor, how dare you complain?' "

The disputes exploded during school board elections this spring. In past years, Mary Wallace, a white parent, and Mr. Davis, who is black, had run as a team. This year, they ran separately; Ms. Wallace stressed the need to address the black-white gap, but Mr. Davis said talking about it was tearing the district apart.

With an unusually high turnout, Ms. Wallace lost, winning half the votes she had received in previous elections; Claudette Clarke, a black parent, won that seat.

"The problem in Nyack is that everybody believes they have moved to this wonderful and diverse integrated community," Ms. Wallace said. "And to be told there's trouble here in paradise, they don't want to hear it."

Voters did approve a new budget that pays for all-day kindergarten, which the parents' group that released the statistics had called for. Like some other black parents, Mr. Davis says he thinks this will ultimately lift achievement. But he argues that the group did not have to talk about race to get it.

But more and more states are beginning to bet that talking about race can help erase stubborn disparities. Starting in 1991, Texas graded its schools in part on how much scores improved for different racial groups. Next year, New York plans to grade schools as meeting or falling below standards based on data broken out by race. Even traditionally good schools could earn a subpar grade if the black population, no matter how small, does not score well.

"The issue for suburban districts is, once you go past the aggregate scores, being able to see that there are pockets of kids who have never done well," said Frederick J. Frelow, a black Nyack parent and an official on the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future at Teachers College at Columbia University.

"It's no longer O.K. to put these kids in the nonacademic track, and it's going to be very disturbing to a lot of communities."

Advocates of separating out data argue that it does not have to be controversial. The danger, they say, is in releasing only numbers about outcomes. Without some sense of why the problem exists, it is too easy for people to reduce the problem simply to blacks' not being as smart.

“Since the data have been so often reported in that context, when black folks hear it, their almost knee-jerk reaction is defensive,” said Edmund W.

Gordon, professor emeritus of psychology at Yale University, who led a College Board task force on the achievement gap. “I think that Nyack school people probably thought they were doing as well as any other school district, but they didn’t know what to do about it, so why open up this can of worms?”

He and others say the key is to hold up models of schools that are defying the national statistics.

Michael Osnato, superintendent of schools in Montclair, N.J., agreed. In Montclair, one of 14 racially integrated communities that set up a network to compare strategies on closing the gap, the discussions were difficult at first, he said. With more talk, more solutions — creating intensive study groups for black students, and demanding that they take tougher courses — begin to emerge, and the easier it becomes to talk about a gap.

But there was also a key difference in those communities: the school administration, not renegade parents or state officials, pushed to talk about the gap.

“It is painful,” Dr. Frelow said, “which is why it’s all the more important that the leadership say, ‘We know it’s hard, we don’t feel good about it, but moving in this direction is important for our future.’ This is a small community; folks just didn’t step up to do that.”