



Class Dismissed: Quantifying Achievement and the Reinforcement of Inequality

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Abstract

Academic achievement in American high schools is increasingly defined in terms of quantifiable values. Despite being designed to produce favorable data, explicit standardized-test preparation has an insignificant impact on scores and is counterproductive to the cultivation of attributes necessary for success in higher education and effective civic engagement. Reaffirming trends known since the 1970s, standardized test scores directly correlate to socioeconomic status (SES) across time and space, as this study of six Illinois high schools demonstrates. SES functions to engender test scores independent of curriculum decisions and to a higher degree than racial/ethnic demographics alone. Educational inequality cannot be addressed without broader systemic changes to the American political economy. To implement such changes, it is incumbent upon teachers to transcend class-specific curriculums, foster the imagining of different social realities, and develop students' propensity for collective action through critical pedagogy.

Key Words: *standardized test preparation; socioeconomic status; median household income; per pupil expenditures; race reductionism; critical pedagogy*

The Study: Approach and School Profiles

Approach and Methods¹

The following is an analysis of the relationship between SES, measured by median household income (MHI), and test scores through the lens of six school districts over almost twenty years. The purpose is to demonstrate that macro level trends concerning MHI and test scores are visible at the micro-level of these Illinois districts. Beyond reifying this trend, the comparative class analysis approach challenges race reductionist explanations of test performance by returning the cross-cutting impact of SES to educational achievement discourse. Race reductionist arguments unintentionally reinforce narratives divorcing student achievement from per pupil expenditures (PPE), which obfuscates applicable remedies found in advanced social democracies. A transformative curriculum is needed to both expose American political economy as the cause of educational malaise and enable the collective construction of a more equitable social reality.

1. All tables are in the Appendix.

The Schools

Lincoln-Way High School District (LWHS), situated in south-suburban Chicago, is used to represent a typical white, middle-class district. To ascertain an accurate measurement of the district's household income data, the communities of Frankfort/Frankfort Square, New Lenox, Mokena, and Manhattan, are used. All public-school students in these area codes attend LWHS. Unfortunately, it is impossible to disaggregate the portions of Tinley Park and Joliet attending LWHS from their larger census area data, but the selected areas still provide a valid assessment of SES realities in the district.

Edwardsville High School (EHS), located in a suburban area east of St. Louis, was chosen because its demographics mirror those of LWHS in terms of racial/ethnic diversity and SES. At the surface, it appears EHS's MHI is much lower than the LWHS area. However, the SES data becomes far more representative once a 23.2% lower cost-of-living adjustment is calculated into the Edwardsville data.² The comparison is useful to demonstrate the larger argument of SES as the determinant factor affecting student test scores.

New Trier High School (NTHS), located in north-suburban Chicago, demonstrates the exceptional advantages students of economic privilege receive. NTHS draws students primarily from Wilmette and Winnetka. Racial/ethnic composition is largely similar to each aforementioned district, with the exception of a sizeable Asian American population. As this paper argues, however, race and ethnicity are not the determinant factors affecting test scores. Mirroring the findings of Annette Lareau's study on the role of race and class in socialization practices, class becomes far more significant in the daily lives of children after fourth grade than race.³ NTHS, and the subsequent districts, display this quite vividly.

Canton High School (CHS) was chosen to underscore the overriding impact of SES, independent of marginalized racial/ethnic identities, on standardized test scores. Canton's demographics are similar to LWHS, EHS, and NTHS, but the MHI is much lower, even when adjusted for a 37% lower cost of living differences.⁴ It is an unfortunate reality that race and class often intersect in the United States, but it is unwise to imagine socially-constructed race as an entity with unmalleable material characteristics.⁵ This is not meant to argue race has no impact on standardized test scores. Instead, the point is to demonstrate race is not nearly as significant on tests scores as social class.⁶

Homewood-Flossmoor High School (HFHS) is a key component of this comparative analysis. Between 1999 and 2016, Homewood and Flossmoor experienced significant demographic

2. "2020 Cost of Living Calculator," Sperling's Best Places, 31 March 2020. <https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/edwardsville-il/frankfort-il/115000>. For illustrative purposes and consistency, the adjustment is between Edwardsville and Frankfort.

3. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

4. "2020 Cost of Living Calculator," Sperling's Best Places, 31 March 2020. <https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/canton-il/frankfort-il/115000>. This adjustment is also in comparison to Frankfort.

5. Educators overwhelmingly reject biologically determinist arguments concerning the achievement gap, instead finding explanations rooted in ethnic pluralism to be much more persuasive. Disassociated from social class, however, these cultural arguments actually generate a problematic essentialism of their own. As Touré Reed argues, such "culturalist conceptions of inequality that formally reject race as a biological category but ultimately impute a rigidity to ethnic group culture—uncoupling it from proximate material influences—treat race as a social construct in name only." See Touré Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism* (New York: Verso, 2020), 12.

6. There are some pseudo-scholars who revived arguments of biological determinism in the wake of the manufactured failures of Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programs. For more information on these "misinformers," see Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). For a dismantling of their conclusions and approach see William Julius Wilson *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). To see limitations of Wilson's argument rooted in ethnic pluralism, see Reed, *Toward Freedom*.

changes and MHI stagnation. Despite the immense changes, however, their standardized test scores remained comparable to districts with similar SES levels and surpassed all districts in the study with lower SES levels, independent of racial/ethnic demographic changes. Although HFHS experienced rapid diversification, the standardized-test data illustrates the overriding impact of SES when compared to the other districts in the study.

Bloom Township High School (BTHS) provides an important juxtaposition to the HFHS experience. Chicago Heights experienced a similar demographic shift compared to Homewood and Flossmoor from 2000 to 2016. However, BTHS consistently performed lower than HFHS on standardized tests. BTHS consistently had the lowest MHI in the study and, tellingly, the lowest test scores in the study. While the racial demographics of a student body certainly influence test scores, social class remained a much more significant factor.

Introduction

American high school students live in a high-stakes society. Growing inequality, rising college costs, and stagnant wages all contribute to a heightened collective anxiety, palpably felt by American educators in these troubled times. Students and parents both know that the margin for error is slim if a debt-free and meaningful future is to be realized. Every spring, high school juniors across the country partake in a routine high-stakes rite of passage: a national standardized test. Although these tests allegedly measure college-readiness, academics know that the social function of these tests is analogous to a vast sorting machine arranging students into categories of social class.⁷ The best predictor of a student's score remains his or her SES, a problematic realization for an allegedly meritocratic society. This class filtration process is nothing new to the American education system and has, in fact, been documented since the 1970s.⁸ While the process is not new, the precarious realities facing American students and school districts, which put a premium on pedagogical imperatives supporting explicit test preparation at the expense of a more meaningful curriculum, have amplified the crisis to unseen levels. The self-serving and reinforcing mythology surrounding student meritocracy, measured through standardized test scores, has infected curricular decisions and the allocation of educational resources to create "intellectual dead zones."⁹

The financial collapse of 2007-2008, in combination with the unrelenting neoliberal assault on social institutions, elevated the public's consciousness regarding the dubious value of standardized testing. As more institutions of higher education became test optional and states experimented with new exams, such as the Illinois Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to comply with the Obama Administration's *Race to the Top* initiative, both *College Board* and ACT felt the squeeze.¹⁰ In response to the newly-resonating but longstanding criticisms, the *College Board* developed a partnership between themselves and the online learning platform *Khan Academy* in 2014.¹¹ Both nonprofit organizations promoted the partnership as a

7. Tawnell D. Hobbs. "SAT Scores Fall as More Students Take the Test." *The Wall Street Journal*. 24 September 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sat-scores-fall-as-more-students-take-the-test-11569297660>

8. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. 1976. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 31-32.

9. Henry Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 153.

10. For more information on how this initiative reproduced the core elements of *NCLB*, see Jesse Rhodes., *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012) and Andrew Hartman, "Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Doo-Gooders," *Jacobin*, 13 December 2011. <https://jacobin-mag.com/2011/12/teach-for-america>

11. "The College Board Announces Bold Plans to Expand Access to Opportunity." *College Board*. 5 March 2014. <https://www.collegeboard.org/releases/2014/expand-opportunity-redesign-sat>. For further reading on how *Khan Academy* is part

beneficial and free service to narrow the persistent wealth and score gaps through the sudden availability of accessible test preparation materials.

The significance of this announcement, however, rippled beyond the debut of another digital test preparatory program. For the first time, *College Board* implicitly acknowledged something it preferred to keep veiled: students' socioeconomic and racial backgrounds have a disproportionate impact on scores. For years, the organization denied that receiving external test preparation services significantly improved scores.¹² Such an admission would seem to implicitly confirm that a student's ability to afford test preparation services, in terms of cost and time, linked SES to performance. While *College Board* continued to eschew any connection that might compromise the objectivity and validity of their tests, national data demonstrated that this reality was undeniable.

The problem of SES and race/ethnicity impacting standardized test scores was not unique to the *College Board*, however. The main competitor of the *College Board's* SAT, *ACT Inc.*, displayed similar issues.¹³ Through the partnership with the *Gates Foundation*-supported *Khan Academy*, *College Board* saw an opportunity to not only address social inequities in a cursory fashion, but also increase its marketability to state boards of education as the superior college-readiness test.¹⁴ The partnership with *Khan Academy* allowed the SAT to promote itself as the better option, since it provided free test preparation to, ostensibly, any student with an internet connection. Reversing its decades-long stance on the utility of test preparation courses, the *College Board* flipped its position and proclaimed *anyone* could now receive quality test preparation and exercise more personal agency over test scores.¹⁵ The SAT claimed this addressed the equity issue and quickly assumed the mantle as the most popular college-entrance exam nationwide, a title ACT previously held from 2011-2018.¹⁶ Conveniently, *Khan Academy* services gave the *College Board* more cover for its inherent failures: if students did not receive the scores they wanted, it became their own faults for not taking advantage of the free preparation program. Rather than address the underlying structural issues plaguing marginalized students' test scores, the *College Board* now framed failure as an individualized and behavioral problem, following the intellectual trajectory used to justify the assault on most public goods and social programs since the 1980s.

After the proverbial handwashing, SAT aggressively marketed its new test and preparatory program to non-SAT providing states. Illinois, a state mandating the ACT since 2001, chose to adopt the SAT for the 2016-2017 school year and awarded the *College Board* a three-year contract

of the neoliberal assault on higher education, see Megan Erickson's *Class War: The Privatization of Childhood* (New York: Verso, 2015), 110-133.

12. Valerie Strauss, "Can Coaching Truly Boost SAT Scores? For Years, the College Board Said, No. Now it Says, Yes." *The Washington Post*. 9 May 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/09/can-coaching-truly-boost-sat-scores-for-years-the-college-board-said-no-now-it-says-yes/>

13. "The ACT Profile Report-National, Graduating Class 2016." ACT, INC., accessed 21 March 2020. https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/P_99_999999_N_S_N00_ACT-GCPR_National.pdf. This is also a problem plaguing the College Board's Advanced Placement tests. The same conclusions can be applied, but this study does not deal with AP score data.

14. For further reading on how the Bill Gates and other educational "philanthrocapitalists" use their foundations to dodge taxes and actively undermine the mission of public schools, see Henry Giroux. *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 13-26.

15. Strauss, "Can Coaching Truly Boost SAT Scores?" *The Washington Post*.

16. Nick Anderson, "SAT Reclaims Title as Most Widely Used College Admissions Test." *The Washington Post*. 23 October 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/10/23/sat-reclaims-title-most-widely-used-college-admission-test/>
For more on the development of Gates Foundation-funded *Khan Academy* and its shortcomings, see Megan Erickson *Class War*, 130-140.

worth \$14.3 million dollars.¹⁷ While a variety of reasons exist to explain the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) decision to contract with *College Board*, the cosmetic solution to the equity issue certainly played a major role in the decision.

Illusions of Agency in an Ascriptive Society

The Case of Lincoln-Way High District 210

Responding to federal requirements mandated by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the ISBE began requiring public high schools to administer a college-readiness test to *all students* in the 2001-2002 school year.¹⁸ Since all students now participated in the exam, a much-anticipated drop in ACT scores occurred between 2001 and 2002 because many of the subgroups now required for testing had previously been excluded or opted not to take the exam, especially those unlikely to attend college. In any case, the drop in scores, displayed in the data of all schools selected, ushered in a new commitment to explicit test preparation. The advent of evidence-based funding, school report cards, and other indices dependent upon empirical measurements of student achievement made these curricular adjustments seem entirely necessary.

District administrators at LWHS responded to the new imperatives of standardized testing by encouraging teachers to adopt a variety of strategies to expose and train students for the ACT. These strategies included deconstructing reading passages, incorporating more graphs, charts, and diagrams to simulate the math and science sections of the ACT, and most noticeably, adopting a new graduation-required course called *Reading Seminar* in the 2004 school year.¹⁹ Initially, *Reading Seminar* was a year-long course geared toward students quantitatively identified as needing reading assistance. Students scoring above an identified success threshold in 8th grade or those opting to take Honors English freshman year were, initially, exempt from the course. Developing literacy skills and cultivating a passion for reading is, undeniably, a laudable goal. While not exclusively developed to increase test scores, that objective was obvious, given the context of its development and its mission statement:

The Lincoln-Way Reading Department is dedicated to improving student achievement by providing students with increased opportunities for reading narrative and expository text [sic]. The Reading curriculum emphasizes the acquisition of multiple strategies and skills to improve literal and inferential comprehension. It also focuses on vocabulary development through Latin and Greek Roots and context clues. *It is one of our goals for students to improve their performance on high-stakes standardized tests* [emphasis mine]. Finally, it is our hope and intention that students will develop lifelong reading habits.²⁰

17. "Illinois Switching from the ACT to the SAT Instead." Belleville News-Democrat. 21 December 2015. <https://www.bnd.com/news/local/article50939170.html>. Though a seemingly paltry amount, the College Board generates substantial profits outside of the state contracts through various student fees and the sale of student data. For more on these predatory practices,

see Susan Adams' "How the SAT Failed America" and Douglas Belkin's "For Sale: SAT-Takers' Names. Colleges Buy Student Data and Boost Exclusivity."

18. According to the legislation, *all students* refers to 95% of students in each NCLB identified subgroup. See Mitchell Yell and Erik Drasgow, *No Child Left Behind* (Upper Saddle River: New Jersey, 2005), 22.

19. *Personal Interview*. District 210 Reading Teacher. 13 March 2020.

20. "Lincoln-Way Community High School: Reading." Consolidated High School District 210. Accessed 21 March 2020. <http://www.lw210.org/academics/departments/reading/>

Between the 2004-2005 school year and 2009-2010 school year, the empirical proof justifying the new course and test-centric curriculum appeared to pay dividends. LWHS's average ACT scores increased by a full point during this time, which became the *raison d'être* for requiring all incoming students to take the course beginning in 2010. More impressively, ACT scores from 2002, the year the ACT became mandatory, to 2016, the last year *all students* took the exam, increased by 8.45% or 1.8 points. At first glance, it appeared that the proof was in the pudding: the incorporation of explicit test preparation strategies served to increase achievement on the state-mandated ACT. Their pedagogical vision paid off in a seemingly tangible respect.

Emphasis or Economics: The Comparative Case of Lincoln-Way and Edwardsville

In the data-driven nature of modern schools, catalyzed by Silicon Valley misanthropists, LWHS appeared to be on the cutting edge of progressive education. Attributing growth in standardized test scores to the curriculum shift was simply too tempting for those with a stake in the program. This analysis, however, ignored the widely-known fact that SES remains the best predictor of a student's standardized test score. During the period of score growth, had the communities of LWHS simultaneously experienced a change in SES through increased MHI? Would LWHS confirm the direct relationship between SES and standardized test scores or had they managed to transcend the confining limitations of economic environment through their test preparation programs?

To answer these questions, a compilation and analysis of household economic data for LWHS from 2002 to 2016 became necessary. Again, the year 2002 is crucial because it is the first year that all students were tested, and 2016 is the last year all students were tested before switching to the SAT. The *U.S. Census Bureau* (USCB) provided the necessary economic data, but, unfortunately, did not collect MHI at the zip code level from 2000-2010. However, the USCB did collect MHI by zip code for 1999, as part of the 2000 Census, and from the years 2011 to the present-day.²¹ Luckily, measuring the growth of MHI from 1999-2016 serves the purpose of the study without meaningful distortions, since it corresponds closely to the years of legitimate testing data from 2002-2016.

The communities comprising LWHS at the beginning of the millennium were quite different than they are today. LWHS's feeder communities experienced tremendous demographic growth in the early 2000s, and the district grew from one high school with two campuses to four separate high schools by 2009.²² These changes occurred alongside with the growth of the district's standardized tests scores. To discover whether or not LWHS's test growth occurred within the context of increasing affluence in its communities, USCB's *American Fact Finder* proved to be an invaluable resource to this study.²³ According the data, the MHI in the communities attending LWHS grew from \$70,632 to \$95,098 between 1999 and 2016, an increase of 34.5%.²⁴ For comparative purposes, the MHI for the state of Illinois remained largely flat, moving from \$59,975 to \$59,176, a decrease of 1.0%. While LWHS's standardized test scores from 2002 to 2016 increased by 8.5% during a period of substantial economic growth, it should come as no surprise that the

21. I verified this through an email to the USCB. Internal Revenue Service information provided mean household income, but once I compiled it, the different methodologies distorted comparative qualities.

22. The district shuttered Lincoln-Way North, which opened in 2008, in 2016, due to financial instability and a declining rate of population growth.

23. All median household income is derived from "Community Facts." American Fact Finder. United States Census Bureau, 27 March 2020, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

24. See Table 3.

aggregate score of Illinois students remained largely flat. State scores increased a modest 3.5%, overall, from a 19.9 to a 20.6 during the same time period.

A direct correlation certainly existed for LWHS regarding test scores and MHI. Illinois, overall, seemed to conform as well, given consistency between MHI and ACT scores. Initially, the fact that Illinois's MHI slightly decreased while its standardized tests scores slightly increased seemed problematic. However, considering that income inequality on both a national and state level increased dramatically during this time, it becomes clear that this phenomenon is responsible for the slight distortion. An *Illinois Economic Policy Institute* study verified the conclusion: the slight statewide scoring disparities in the aggregate state data could be explained by immense economic, and therefore, educational inequality in the state.²⁵ Since Illinois school districts draw the majority of their funding from local property tax revenues, the state has the most inequitably funded education system in the nation, which has a drastic impact on test scores.²⁶ Essentially, lower-class students are not only given less educational resources than their advantaged peers, but are also subjected to different pedagogical imperatives.²⁷ Similarly, the GINI Index, a measurement of economic inequality, in Illinois has continued to increase and reached its highest national level in 2019.²⁸ Certainly, the disparities in MHI led to disparities from the almost 500 high school and unit districts in the state's testing data, causing a slight deviation in the observable relationship between MHI and test scores. Furthermore, the average MHI for the entire state is obfuscated due to the wide variance in cost of living expenses across the state. For example, \$59,176 results in a much higher standard of living outside of Chicago and the collar counties. The state MHI would result in higher test scores in communities with lower costs of living, proportionally speaking, than it would when compared to communities with higher costs of living. For these reasons, Illinois's MHI data and the overall standardized test scores are marginally disjointed.

This data alone does not verify the consequential relationship between SES and standardized test scores at the micro level. To further verify the connection, a district with similar demographics, levels of income, and changes in economic growth to LWHS is needed. While it may have been easy to reproduce such conditions in the collar-counties of Chicago, to truly test the argument, the analysis needed to move beyond the Chicagoland area. Edwardsville High School (EHS), situated some 30 miles outside of St. Louis, fit the aforementioned parameters.²⁹ Additionally, Edwardsville experienced similar amounts of MHI growth as the LWHS communities. Edwardsville experienced a 38.6% increase from \$51,657 to \$71,580 between the years 1999-2016. At first sight, it appears the median household income in Edwardsville is far below that of the communities representing LWHS, but once adjusted for cost-of-living differences, the numbers are representative of one another.³⁰

It can be reasonably assumed, like all other high schools in Illinois following *NCLB* legislation, that standardized test preparation became an important focus in this demographically and

25. Frank Manzo IV, "The History of Economic Inequality in Illinois, 1850-2014," Illinois Economic Policy Institute 16 March 2016. <https://illinoisepi.org/site/wp-content/themes/hollow/docs/wages-labor-standards/The-History-of-Economic-Inequality-in-Illinois-FINAL.pdf>

26. "Funding Fundamentals: The Current Landscape." Advance Illinois, October 2015, <https://www.advanceillinois.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The-Current-Landscape.pdf>

27. For more on the "hidden curriculum of social class, see Jean Anyon, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," *Journal of Education* 162, no. 1 (1980), 67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748016200106>

28. Ted Cox, "Income Inequality Worsens Across the U.S., One Illinois, 27 September 2019. <https://www.oneillinois.com/stories/2019/9/27/income-inequality-worsens-across-us>

29. See Tables 4a-4d.

30. See Table 3. Cost of living difference calculations were found at "2020 Cost of Living Calculator," Sperling's Best Places,

31. March 2020. <https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/edwardsville-il/frankfort-il/115000>

economically similar suburban district. Edwardsville’s similar growth in MHI led to direct growth in their test scores, comparable to LWHS, during the same period. MHI growth of 38.6% in Edwardsville led to a growth of 8.9% in their ACT scores, which is nearly identical to the growth of MHI and scores at LWHS. It is highly unlikely that this correlation could be due to identical curriculum decisions taking place at opposite ends of the state. Even if that were the case, it would be highly unlikely that the data would match up so perfectly, which indicates the immense influence of SES on standardized test scores across time and space. To paraphrase a famous philosopher, the study verifies the old adage that “schools shape their own test scores, but they do not shape them as they please.”³¹

The Limits of Race Reductionism

Class Impact on Canton High School

It is an unfortunate reality that class and race are intertwined throughout the history of the United States. When it comes to standardized test scores, black, Hispanic, and Native American students score well below their white and Asian American peers on a regular basis. The racial/ethnic demographics of students often become the most discernible part of the data, and therefore, the underlying explanation for the noticeable variations in test scores. The belief that minority students will not perform as well as their white peers on standardized tests has become both an anecdotal and data-driven assumption.³²

What appears discernible to the eye tends to distract from the veiled impact of SES, as demonstrated by the community attending Canton High School (CHS). Situated in the west-central portion of the state, CHS has a largely white student body, comparable to the composition of LWHS and EHS.³³ Despite having a racially comparable student body, CHS’s standardized test scores are far below what would be expected, based on racial/ethnic demographics alone. CHS’s average ACT scores remained, essentially, unchanged from 2001-2016, decreasing by 1.0% from a 19.3 to a 19.1. Narrowly focusing on racial/ethnic demographics cannot explain the 20% difference between their scores and those of LWHS and EHS.

Turning to the realm of SES seems to lift the quantitative fog surrounding the performance of CHS students. Students at CHS have the penultimate lowest MHI in this study, even after adjusting for cost of living.³⁴ Although Canton’s MHI grew from 1999-2016 by 33.2%, comparable to LWHS and EHS communities, their MHI consistently remained around 30% lower than these two areas, overall, from 2011-2016 when adjusted for cost of living.³⁵ Once again, a direct relationship exists between MHI and standardized test scores, but significantly in the case of Canton,

31. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive, 2006 (1852), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

32. National data demonstrates that Asian American students perform, on average, better than their white peers. While undoubtedly still facing racism, however, contemporary Asian Americans, due to educational, housing, and financial backgrounds, have approached the malleable status of “white.” For more on this process, see Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York’s Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), 228-229.

33. See data charts 4a-4d and 7D. Although Canton has a higher density of black students, the total number of such students is less than ten because the school report card cannot compile data if subgroups have 10 or less students. This makes such students largely insignificant in the standardized test data.

34. It is worth noting that Canton is the only agricultural community in the study. When it comes to social class, however, this is only consequential to discursive understandings of class. The nondiscursive elements of class affecting student achievement, such as the inability of students to find exchange value in college-entrance exams, the difficulties attracting and retaining high quality staff members, and an insufficient local tax base, still exist as a result of *material* class disparities.

35. See Table 3.

the trend occurs outside the singular explanation of race. Economic growth, while consequential, does not make much of a difference to standardized test scores if the community's MHI remains substantially low. Even with positive MHI growth, Canton still remained nearly 20% below the state average MHI at any point in the study. Alas, it appears economic growth alone is not enough to significantly raise achievement levels. Instead, the growth appears inconsequential unless it places the community into a significantly higher income threshold.

Race AND Class, Not Raceclass: Homewood-Flossmoor HS and Bloom Twp. HS

Separating race/ethnicity and class into discernible analytical components required data from districts that experienced increased demographic diversity from 1999-2016. That, of course, is not a difficult endeavor in the state of Illinois. To further test the argument, however, it became necessary to find one diversifying district that experienced economic decline and another whose decline was not as pronounced during the period of increased racial/ethnic diversification. The complexities of class and race in America limit the sample size because racial diversification typically leads to economic depression in communities experiencing demographic shifts of this sort. For the purpose of the study, Bloom Township High School (BTHS) and Homewood Flossmoor High School (HFHS) are two such districts which demonstrate the independent impact of SES, divorced from race/ethnicity, on standardized test scores.

BTHS, located in south-suburban Chicago Heights, resides in the community with the lowest MHI and greatest racial diversity in the study. From 2000-2017, Chicago Heights became more demographically diverse, seeing its white population drop from 50% to 30% in that span of time, while its black and Hispanic population increased proportionally.³⁶ During this period of demographic change, the MHI increased only slightly from \$40,626 in 1999 to \$43,378 in 2016, an increase of just 6.7 percent.³⁷ Conventional wisdom would assume that the increased demographic diversity and relatively insignificant MHI growth would lead to a drop in test scores. Remarkably, however, test scores at BTHS remained stable from 2002-2017, starting at a 16.9 and finishing at a 17 in 2016.³⁸

The experiences of BTHS, again, seem to affirm the role of MHI in two important respects. When adjusted for cost of living, students at BTHS retained the lowest MHI, and consequently, have the lowest standardized test scores of any school throughout the study. At a cursory glance, many would attribute their test performance to their demographic diversification. However, the second and more important observation dilutes this conventional wisdom since the consistency of the scores and MHI again show a direct and correlated relationship. What this shows is that demographic diversity does not immediately necessitate a drop in standardized test scores. On the contrary, the changing demographics seemingly had no effect on the aggregate ACT performance. Student SES, again, appeared to be the dominate factor. This finding, merely reproducing what the national data has long since displayed, demonstrates that racial/ethnic reductionism is a misdiagnosis of the achievement gap. Properly diagnosing the problem, rooted in economic inequality, enables material remedies to combat the achievement gap.³⁹ If the achievement gap actually resulted from racial and ethnic differences, solely, the possibilities for redress would be limited,

36. See Tables 4a-4e.

37. See Table 3.

38. Bloom Township High School actually encompasses two high schools, Bloom High School and Bloom Trail High School. See Table 1.

39. As Touré Reed argues, universal material remedies *combined with* strong anti-discrimination polices are the way forward. Reed, *Toward Freedom*, 17-18.

since these socially-constructed categories are not as malleable as SES. While racial/ethnic backgrounds certainly impact standardized test scores, BTHS demonstrates that material realities play a larger role.

Homewood-Flossmoor presents an insightful comparison to the experience of BTHS. The communities of Homewood and Flossmoor attend HFHS and experienced similar demographic shifts witnessed in Chicago Heights. The combined communities of Homewood and Flossmoor, also located in the south suburbs of Chicago, were 70.9% white in 2000 and dropped to a white population of 48.3% by 2017.⁴⁰ While these communities retained a higher overall percentage of white people, the decrease itself was proportional to that of Chicago Heights. Similarly to Chicago Heights, Homewood did not experience much MHI growth from 1999-2016, increasing by less than 1% from \$70,936 to \$71,423. Flossmoor, on the other hand, actually experienced a decrease in MHI of 15.9%, falling from a comparatively high \$103,477 in 1999 to \$87,027 in 2016.⁴¹

The decrease in MHI, unsurprisingly, led to a drop in the standardized test scores of HFHS from 2002-2016. In 2002, students averaged a 22.0 on their ACT, which then dropped to a 20.7 by 2016.⁴² While the same relationship is observed between MHI and test scores, the HFHS data reveals another significant component of SES and academic achievement. While the scores dropped along with declining MHI, it is important to note that racially/ethnically diverse HFHS's average ACT scores still exceeded those of the almost homogeneously white CHS at any period in the study, further diminishing race reductionist arguments. The experience of HFHS indicates the significance of SES to test scores, even in a diversifying district. Since the SES of students attending HFHS remained relatively high compared to students attending BTHS and CHS, their scores remained better. Optimistically, the HFHS experience demonstrates higher MHI mitigates the commonly-perceived effects of diversification on standardized test scores. Again, economic growth was not the determinant factor, but instead the threshold of MHI played the most significant role affecting standardized test scores.

Although Homewood's MHI remained relatively stagnant while Flossmoor's decreased, both communities still retained an SES well-above the Illinois average. This factor prevented a reproduction of the Chicago Heights experience. Given the substantial difference in MHI between Homewood-Flossmoor and state, it would seem the scores at HFHS should be higher than they currently are. If MHI could be disaggregated into different racial/ethnic categories, a divergence in the MHI of minority and white households would become apparent and demonstrate that MHI is still the most significant factor affecting test scores. While black students at HFHS, on average, do not meet state standards at the same rates as their white peers, this does not tell the full story without integrating economic data. The ISBE state report card collects testing data by race and by class, visible through a low income designation, but it does not have data merging the two together.⁴³ While a general assumption can be made given the historical trends of race and class, this inaccessible data, unfortunately, leaves this conclusion to speculation. This method of presenting the data, however, is probably not coincidental. Separating race and class actually serves policy makers who prefer to present the deficiency in minority test scores as an immutable cultural phe-

40. See Tables 4a-4e.

41. Although it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from data before 2002, it is interesting to note that the scores of Homewood Flossmoor High School in the early 2000s, coinciding with the period their MHIs were most comparable. See Tables 1 and 3.

42. See Table 1.

43. See Table 7E and 8E.

nomenon, rather than a consequence of economic circumstances, since political remedies do actually exist for the latter.⁴⁴ As the case of New Trier will elucidate, material realities not only engender academic achievement, but can also be used to mitigate these same consequences of class.

It's the Economy, Stupid.

Top of the Class: New Trier and SES Success

Situated on the suburban North Shore, New Trier High School is, perennially, the top ranked high school in Illinois. Their standardized test scores are a source of envy, since they consistently produce the top scores of any open enrollment high school in the state. Starting at an average of 26.0 in 2002, the school managed a steady yearly increase to reach an average of 27.8 in 2016.⁴⁵ An internal school board document from 2017 reflects on their students' collective achievement, stating "these growth measures support our belief that students in all levels of classes *experience a dynamic and engaging curriculum, have excellent teachers, and are dedicated to learning*" [emphasis mine].⁴⁶ It is clear from the school's internal study that they attribute the academic success to *agency*: a consciously created a curriculum, the development and retention of excellent teachers, and an intrinsically-motivated student body.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, districts attempting to replicate the success of New Trier never seem to approach their level of success because they are on an impossible mission. The dream remains elusive because there is something curriculum, pedagogy, and student diligence cannot change within the classroom walls: social class. The report neglects to mention that Wilmette and Winnetka, two communities feeding into NTHS, have an MHI over 2.5 times the Illinois average, which is the overriding structural factor leading to the high levels of academic achievement, rather than the practices outlined in their internal board report.⁴⁸ Comparable rates of MHI growth occurred in these two communities as happened in LWHS, EHS, and CHS, but none of these areas came close to the MHI of NTHS at any point.

The demographic data of NTHS is representative of the population at LWHS, EHS, and CHS, as well, outside of the substantial Asian-American presence. Interestingly, NTHS is unique in one dubious demographic aspect: its student body has amongst the highest percentage of students receiving a testing accommodation, such as extended time, granted through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan in Illinois.⁴⁹ Such plans are meant to provide students with a

44. A similar obfuscation of the role played by class occurs with other national data sets and further contributes to the use of race as a proxy for class phenomena. The United States prefers to collect health and vital statistics based upon race and gender, rather than class. The Department of Justice also neglects to collect any direct information concerning the social class of inmates. As a result of the type of data collected, factors other than class become the primary explanations for a lack of social equity. Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr., "The Trouble with Disparity." Nonsite.org, Issue 32. 10 September 2020. <https://nonsite.org/the-trouble-with-disparity/>

45. See Table 1.

46. "ACT Analysis Report for the Class of 2017," New Trier High Township High School District 203, 18 September 2017. https://www.newtrier.k12.il.us/Administration/Curriculum_and_Instruction/Documents/Reports_and_Research/Board_Report_on_ACT_Sept_2017/

47. Agency refers to the ability of school actors, such as the administration and staff, to influence academic performance through individual initiatives and policy making. This is opposed to structural explanations of academic performance, which view environmental factors as the primary influence on achievement.

48. See Table 3.

49. I commend the students of New Trier for recognizing this absurd abuse themselves, as their student newspaper makes clear. Ezra Wallach, "Testing Accommodations Four Times the National Average, Affluent Districts are More Likely to Abuse Accommodations," The New Trier News. *New Trier Township High School District 203*, 11 May 2018, <https://newtriernews.org/news/2018/05/11/testing-accommodations-four-times-national-average/>. The phenomenon has occurred

federally-defined disability various accommodations to ensure educational equity. Fascinatingly, almost a quarter of all students at NTHS qualify for testing accommodations. A typical testing accommodation is to grant “time and half” or “double time” on assessments, which gives students 50%-100% more additional time than non-qualifying students to take their standardized test. It is unlikely that NTHS is a statistical anomaly, whereby their students disproportionately have comprehension and processing disabilities. What is far more likely is that their parents, due to their class position, can afford the professional services it takes to diagnosis such disorders and navigate the educational bureaucracy to get favorable accommodations. Unsurprisingly, this data was not mentioned in their board’s internal document, as it would indicate some forces of success are outside the agency of educational actors at NTHS. Presumably, if every district in the study had such a high percentage of students receiving extended time, scores would improve elsewhere too. Money buys educational benefits, quite literally.⁵⁰

You Get What You Pay For: Per Pupil Expenditures (PPE) as a Mitigating Factor

International Insight on the PPE Problem

For years, educational misanthropists attempting to impose the logic of the marketplace on public education have railed against the fact that the United States spends more taxpayer money per pupil than comparable Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.⁵¹ Reduced to mere quantitative analysis, it seems that the American education system is the quintessential bloated bureaucracy. *Time Magazine* journalist Amanda Ripley’s international comparative analysis of education further legitimized this concern after her findings demonstrated American students scored substantially lower on the Programme for Internationale Assessment (PISA) than did students in foreign countries running on leaner educational apparatuses.⁵² Comparatively speaking, claims of overspending and underperformance seem indisputable. A serious analysis, however, reveals such claims contain serious oversight or intellectual dishonesty.

In her book, Ripley espouses the miracle of the Finnish education system because their students scored highest on the international PISA test at a fraction of the cost spent on the students in the United States. To her credit, Ripley does concede that Finland’s centralized education system allows for more funding to be directed toward students from impoverished or immigrant backgrounds, compared to wealthier and native peers. She even notes that basing educational funding on local property taxes in the U.S. ensures the wealthiest receive the best education, while poorer students are expected to succeed with less resources, further contributing to the social reproduction of achievement deficits.

Instead of continuing to focus on the structural inequalities engendering educational disparities, she turns to a classic anecdote for material inequality: expectations. Ripley shifts her focus from the allocation of educational resources to argue that since Finnish teachers view all of their

for years at affluent Illinois schools, see Diane Rado, “Many Illinois High School Students Get Special Accommodations for ACT.” *Chicago Tribune*. 29 April 2012. <https://www.chicago.com/news/ct-met-testing-accommodations-20120429-58-story.html>
For a national look at this phenomenon, see Douglas Belkin, Jennifer Levits, and Melissa Korn, “Many More Students, Especially the Affluent, Get Extended Time on the SAT” *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 May 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/many-more-students-especially-the-affluent-get-extra-time-to-take-the-sat-11558450347>

50. Every additional \$3,000 in MHI is equivalent to an extra two months of schooling. Erickson, *Class War*, 10.

51. The OECD is comprised of 37 countries, mainly from North America and Western Europe. Swedish demographer, Hans Rosling fittingly described them as the “country club of the United Nations.”

52. Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 18.

students equally, wealth does not factor into educational achievement.⁵³ She goes on to argue that American educators fall victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy which claims low expectations for poor or working-class students produce predictable achievement results. If only American educators projected motivation, sincere effort, and improvement on their students, they could transcend material constraints like their Finnish counterparts!

The fundamental problem with Ripley's analysis is her inability to see the impact of Finland's robust social democracy on the educational system. When interviewing a Finnish teacher, Ripley has an epiphany when he states, "Wealth doesn't mean a thing. . . we are all the same."⁵⁴ While expectations certainly play a role in the achievement levels, these expectations do not exist in a vacuum. In the United States, these expectations are produced and reinforced by the operation of an extraordinarily unequal society and reflected in educational assessments. The mask of meritocracy allows policy makers to blame the individuals, both teachers and students, rather than the underlying mechanisms engendering the inequality.

What Ripley misses and is of utmost importance to the PPE conversation in the United States, however, is *why* Finnish teachers can imagine all students to be the same. Unlike the United States, Finnish social democracy is based upon universalism, where, in addition to education, healthcare, transportation, and housing, a vast social safety net exists to eliminate the destitution experienced by many students in the United States. American schools often provide, or are at least expected to, a modicum of the social services provided by the state in European OECD countries. The United States unquestionably has higher PPE than its counterparts because in addition to providing an education, schools feed students, provide psychological and social support, transport them to and from schools, invest proportionally heavier in safety and security, and provide sports and other extracurricular activities absent from the educational experience of their OECD counterparts. The abject poverty, often fused with dangerous residential environments, simply cannot happen to the same degree in countries embracing social democracy. Had Ripley recognized this, she would not have marveled at the lack of fancy cafeterias inside European schools, but may have instead asked why many American students rely on schools to provide breakfast and lunch.⁵⁵ The precarious existence of many American students today creates an immense anxiety concerning food, shelter, and safety not experienced with same frequency in Finland.⁵⁶ As neoliberalism continues to hollow social programs provided by federal and state governments, the responsibility falls upon schools to address the disinvestment in American students and contributes to relatively high levels of PPE.

The other element of the Finnish education system that is just as profound is their lack of focus on standardized tests. As Ripley and other sources note, the Finnish system relies on teachers to design curriculum and assessments, based upon state-provided general assessment guidelines. There are no standardized tests, outside of the *National Matriculation Test*, which is taken by their equivalent of American high school seniors. The absence of standardized tests means no instructional time is dubiously spent on explicit test preparation, as American schools are turning to.⁵⁷ How can a country which boasts of not teaching to the test manage to perennially score the highest on PISA examinations? Is it because teacher-designed assessments focus on critical reflection and

53. Ibid. 163.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid. 214.

56. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. 2011. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 33-41, 238-245.

57. LyNell Hancock, Why Are Finland's Schools Successful?, *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2011. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/why-are-finlands-schools-successful-49859555/>

analysis in the form of written work, rather than cognitively pointless multiple choice exams?⁵⁸ Some Americans, as alluded to earlier, are in fact receiving a Finnish-style education, but it certainly is not happening at the lower echelons of the SES ladder.

The PPE Effect on the Selected Schools

Of the schools selected in this study, PPE range from a mere \$8,768 at EHS to an enviable \$25,468 spent at NTHS.⁵⁹ This diversity reflects the worst-in-the-nation spending disparities present in the Illinois public school system. While the American political economy is not designed, nor intended, to alleviate the effects of poverty through redistributive policies, increasing PPE does correlate to improved academic achievement, measured through the percentage of low-income (LI) students within each building meeting or exceeding state standards in 2019.⁶⁰

Outside of NTHS, the amount of LI students meeting or exceeding standards range from BTHS's 16% to LWHS's 32%.⁶¹ LI students, who happen to reside in areas with disproportionately higher MHIs than their own, benefit from the class-specific education of their wider community. Is it any wonder why so many Americans feel the need to fraudulently enroll their children into more affluent districts than their own? If education is the gateway to social mobility, parents, unsurprisingly, will cross geographic lines to secure a better education.

NTHS best illustrates the transformational impact of PPE on LI students. Just over 4% of the students at New Trier are LI, which is comparable to the 5.7% of LI students at LWHS. Remarkably, the LI students at NTHS are more than twice as likely to meet or exceed state standards than their counterparts at LWHS. Sixty-six percent of LI students at NTHS meet or exceeded the state benchmarks, while only 32% managed to do so in LWHS. The reasons for the difference between the two schools is twofold: First, LI students at NTHS received instruction tailored toward affluent SES experiences and expectations, which fosters analysis, research, negotiation, and critical reflection. Depending on how long these LI students resided in the district, the benefits of the community's social capital accumulated over the years and put them in a more advantageous position than their peers at LWHS or any other school in the study. Secondly, it is undeniable that the \$25,468 PPE at NTHS played a role in providing services to these students, through early intervention, continued support, and higher salaries to attract expert practitioners, helping LI students perform close to their non-low-income (NLI) peers.⁶² Tellingly, LI students at NTHS meet or exceed state standards at a rate surpassing that of NLI students at any of the other five high schools. Outside of the remote possibility that LI students attending NTHS have a biological predisposition to excel at standardized tests, the cause of their success is probably due to these two factors.

Furthermore, the dynamics of MHI and PPE are further displayed when the disparities between LI students and their NLI peers are examined within the other five schools. In schools whose communities have a low MHI, the achievement disparities between these two groups is quite low, due to the fact that many of the NLI peers are themselves barely escaping the LI designation. The engendering effects of social class continue to operate on both groups. A significant portion of the

58. Ripley, *The Smartest Kids*, 140.

59. See Table 5 for PPE data.

60. According to the ISBE, low-income students include those eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, live in substitute care, or whose families receive public aid.

61. See Tables 8a-8f.

62. Depending on level of experience and educational attainment, teachers at New Trier can earn double the salary of teachers at Canton and about \$40,000-\$60,000 more than the other schools in the study.

PPE at these schools also fund many services that are unrelated to education but needed by an underserved population. The schools with the highest achievement disparities between LI and NLI students, EHS and LWHS, (and to a lesser extent HFHS), had the lowest PPE when indexed to their communities' MHI levels. HFHS appears to have mitigated the disparity between the two groups by spending almost \$7,000 - \$9,000 more on PPE than LWHS and EHS, respectively. Achievement levels of NLI students at HFHS are also not as high as LWHS and EHS, due to substantial economic decline over the past 20 years.

NTHS, on the other hand, with its extremely high PPE, appears to have replicated the Finnish model through their ability to allocate adequate resources to all students. The disparities between their LI students and NLI students meeting or exceeding expectations is only 17%. The results concerning MHI, PPE, and quantified academic achievement reveal the outright dishonesty and/or false consciousness of those who deny the ability of increased spending on students to significantly impact success. Even Ripley admitted finding that the factors mattering most to an effective education are teacher pay and spending equity.⁶³ The questions are now clear. Do policy makers actually wish to fix these issues and how can they be effectively addressed?

Fighting for an Egalitarian Future: A Transformational Curriculum

We “Khannot” Change the Scores: Critical Pedagogy and Education for Liberation

Measured by any standard, explicit test preparation is an insignificant exertion of effort with little bearing on academic achievement. Practicing explicit test preparation, paradoxically, serves to reinforce inequality by confining the imagination, creativity, and authenticity of students within the parameters of a multiple-choice exam. This only further reifies the concrete experience of social class. *Khan Academy* certainly has not made a difference in the national test scores from 2017 to 2019, observable through static national scores from 2017-2019. Interestingly, the scores of Illinois, LWHS, EHS, and BTHS decreased since the development of the digital test prep program.⁶⁴ As anticipated, *Khan Academy*, aside from a colossal waste of time, was nothing more than a mere marketing tool.

Educators, embodying the role of activists and organizers, are on the frontline of a potentially powerful social transformation. They must reject the adoption of top-down pedagogical initiatives perpetuating oppression by adopting the methods of critical pedagogy, described by Henry Giroux as:

The educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power, and learn how to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice, and democracy.⁶⁵

The current imperatives in the test-driven culture resemble what Paulo Freire terms the “banking model of education,” whereby education is used as an instrument of domination. The banking model only deposits information into students and disconnects them from the structural totality of their oppression. Through this educational distortion, students become acclimated to their reality

63. Ripley, *The Smartest Kids*, 215.

64. See Table 2.

65. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*, 116.

and are denied the ability to challenge inequitable conditions. The more students work at storing these deposits, the less likely they are to develop a critical consciousness and intervene as social transformers.⁶⁶ Explicit test preparation in the classroom only serves to further entrench this damaging model of education and limits the possibilities of a more egalitarian future.

The effective education needed to transform the current system can be found in Freire's antithesis of the banking model, which he titles the "problem-posing approach." In this approach, reality is not presented as a closed and limiting order to which students adjust. Instead, reality is presented as a problem to be transformed in a mutually collaborative process. For authentic liberation, the teacher-student hierarchy must be transformed into a process where each teach and learn from one another. Instructors cannot programmatically lead students to liberation by depositing information, but must instead engage in a collaborative process of unveiling reality. Problem-posing education allows a critical consciousness to develop and prompts intervention in the present reality. Unlike the banking model, the world becomes an object requiring transformative action.⁶⁷

Concretely, this entails a shift in student assessment from standardized test preparation to writing essays, creating research papers, working collaboratively with peers on social action projects, and learning how to filter and use mass media effectively. Most importantly, it means connecting what is learned to their immediate environments, in addition to places and people far removed from their own social experience.⁶⁸ These are the methods and assessments which cultivate curiosity, develop character, instill feelings of community, and develop the capacity for democratic citizenship.⁶⁹ If educators aspire to emancipate their students' minds and cultivate the desire to not just fit into society but transform it, they must resist the movement to incarcerate imaginations through explicit test preparation. If the responsibility falls upon educators to condition the quality of students' futures, it is incumbent upon them to design assessments raising the degree of their consciousness, model appropriate means of action, unfetter their dynamic creative forces, and further develop their intellectual faculties.⁷⁰

Teaching is Political

Pedagogy of this sort is not politically neutral. In fact, no act of teaching can be apolitical because teachers, knowingly or not, reinforce the dominant culture through teaching in an "objective manner." Objectivity cannot exist in any classroom because if power is not named, questioned, or challenged by an educator, that particular lesson serves to reinforce the dominant ideas of existing power relations. The struggle over educational policy, expressed in funding and pedagogy, is always a contest of power. Giroux reminds us that learning will always be political because it is connected to the formation and acquisition of agency. Educators must reclaim the buzzword *critical thinking* as the ability to question "commonsense" assumptions and evaluate such ideas in terms of their genesis, development, and purpose, if we are serious about educational transformation.⁷¹ The sidelines do not exist in the educational profession: teachers either perpetuate ine-

66. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. 1970. (Bloomsbury Academic: New York, 2015), 71-87.

67. Ibid.

68. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*, 68.

69. William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life* (Free Press: New York, 2014), 50.

70. Ahmed Sékou Touré, *Africa on the Move*. 1977 (London: PANAF, 2002), 522.

71. Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, 40.

quality, inadvertently or intentionally, or they become agents of social change. Embracing a revolutionary pedagogy is an act of rebellion, but it is a rebellion to reclaim the dynamism of learning, the possibilities of an egalitarian world, and the tremendous enthusiasm imbedded in our students.

While reassessing the purpose and effectiveness of test preparation is a start, meaningful educational reform cannot be separated from economic and political reform. Every moment spent on test preparation serves to reinforce the system confining the imaginative and political potential of our students. Collaborative educational praxis offers the possibility of destroying the ideological barriers created by the material circumstances of capitalism, which contribute to the universal alienation of our students. Subcommandante Marcos, an educator and leader of the Zapatista uprising, applicably reflected on his own path to rebellion, stating, “understanding that there is injustice, then trying to understand the roots of this injustice. . . invariably leads you to ask yourself: and you, what are you going to do about it?”⁷² As one of the last democratic spaces available to discuss such transformative questions, teachers must resist pedagogical practices designed to reproduce the structural inequalities shaping our students’ futures and ensure education remains the practice of freedom.

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Appendix: Tables

Table 1: ACT Scores 1999-2017⁷³

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National	21	21	20.8	20.8	20.8	20.9	20.9	21.1	21.2	21.1	21.1	21	21.1	21.1	20.9	21.0	21.0	20.8	21
Illinois	21.5	21.5	21.7	19.9	20.0	20.0	20.1	20.3	20.3	20.5	20.6	20.5	20.6	20.6	20.3	20.4	20.5	20.6	21.2
Lincoln-Way	22.8	22.7	22.9	21.3	21.4	21.7	22.0	21.8	21.8	22.2	22.6	22.7	22.9	23.0	22.5	22.7	22.8	23.1	23.1
Edwardsville	22.7	22.3	22.5	21.3	21.7	21.4	21.6	22	21.9	22.1	22.3	22	22.8	22.7	23	22.7	22.9	23.2	24
New Trier	23.6	26.0	26.7	26.0	26.3	26.4	26.8	26.8	27.1	26.9	27.4	27.2	27.5	27.7	27.5	27.4	27.5	27.8	27.8
Canton	22.1	21.6	22.9	19.3	18.9	19.2	19.1	20.2	18.7	20.3	20.1	20.1	19.6	19.4	19.3	19	19.1	19.1	21.6
Homewood-Flossmoor	22.7	22.1	22.5	22.0	21.4	21.4	21.3	21.6	21.5	21.5	21.5	20.7	21.5	21.3	21.1	20.7	20.7	20.7	20.8
Bloom	19.1	18.5	18.7	16.9	16.6	16.6	16.6	17.2	17.2	17	16.9	16.6	16.5	16.6	16.5	16.9	17	17	18.5

Table 2: SAT Scores, 2017-2019⁷⁴

Level	2017	2018	2019
Illinois	1015.9	1000.7	994.5
National ⁷⁵	1060	1067	1059
Lincoln-Way	1106.8	1110.9	1103
Edwardsville	1095	1076	1063.7
New Trier	1228	1235.9	1239.5
Canton	971.5	990.6	986.6
Homewood-Flossmoor	1011	1007.2	1015.7
Bloom	902.4	894.5	882.5

Table 3: Mediana Household Income 1999-2017⁷⁶

Area	1999	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Illinois	59,975	56,576	56,853	56,797	57,166	57,574	59,176	61,229
60423 (Frankfort)	74,921	97,151	96,616	95,667	95,520	96,175	97,703	100,098
60448 (Mokena)	72,296	101,456 ¹	99,461	95,201	96,105	97,027	96,654	100,262
60451 (New-Lenox)	71,406	90,521 ¹	89,181	91,980	93,421	96,626	101,580	105,146

73. "Report Card Library Data." Department of Data Strategy and Analytics. Illinois State Board of Education. 30 March 2020. <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Illinois-State-Report-Card-Data.aspx>

74. Ibid.

75. Anna Aldric, Average SAT Scores Over Time: 1972-2019, PrepScholar, 6 October 2019. <https://blog.prepscholar.com/average-sat-scores-over-time>.

76. Community Facts. "American Fact Finder," United States Census Bureau, 27 March 2020, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

60442 (Manhattan)	63,906	79,952 ¹	77,278	76,206	77,500	80,405	84,458	91,702
60091 (Wilmette)	107,767	130,243	130,088	129,551	126,471	131,192	138,322	148,462
60093 (Winnetka)	127,809	146,477	156,394	163,719	146,966	156,047	170,582	173,919
62025 Edwardsville	51, 657	78,006 (96,103) ⁷⁷	76,936 (94,785)	72,877 (89,743)	72,701 (89,567)	72,744 (89,620)	71,580 (88,186)	76,407 (94,133)
61520 Canton	33, 360	41,067 (56,261) ⁷⁸	41,888 (57,386)	44,542 (61,022)	44,604 (61,107)	43,096 (59,041)	44,436 (60,877)	46,382 (63,543)
60430 Homewood	70,936	73,218	73,597	72,754	69,680	69,028	71,423	72,715
60422 Flossmoor	103,477	106,114	99,844	98,140	98,708	90,357	87,027	103,023
60411 Chicago Heights	40,626	43,346	43,983	41,537	41,828	41,188	40,283	43,378

Table 4a: Demographic Changes, White⁷⁹ by selected Zip Code in Percent 2000-2017⁸⁰

Zip Code	2000	2010	2017 (est.)
60423 (Frankfort)	94.7%	91.0%	89.4%
60451 (New Lenox)	97.6%	96.4%	96.3%
60448 (Mokena)	96.8	94.7	95.7
60442 (Manhattan)	97.6	95.2	97.1
60091 (Wilmette)	89.6	85.4	86.1
60093 (Winnetka)	93.9	92.4	90.5
62025 (Edwardsville)	89.4	89.3	87.3
61520 (Canton)	91.2	88.2	90.9
60430 (Homewood)	76.3	58.9	55.0
60422(Flossmoor)	65.5	47.1	41.6
60411 (Chicago-Heights)	49.7	35.7	31.1

Table 4b: Demographic Changes, Black or African American Population by selected Zip Code in Percent 2000-2017

Zip Code	2000	2010	2017 (est.)
60423 (Frankfort)	3.7%	4.2%	4.6%
60451 (New Lenox)	.3%	.6%	.7%
60448 (Mokena)	.6	1.2	1.8

77. Parenthesized numbers are adjusted for cost of living. Cost of living, compared between Edwardsville and Frankfort in 2020, is 23.2% higher for Frankfort, excluding taxes and childcare, which would seemingly lead to an underestimation.

78. Ibid., but 37% higher for Frankfort than Canton, excluding taxes and childcare.

79. Socially-constructed whiteness, displayed in census data, can be misleading since “White-Hispanic” is included in this number. The census does not consider “Hispanic” a race, but instead lists it as an ethnicity to be used in conjunction with “white” or “black.” This, obviously, overinflates the number of “whites” in a given area. For more on the social construction of “whiteness” see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

80. Community Facts. “American Fact Finder,” United States Census Bureau, 27 March 2020, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

60442 (Manhattan)	.4	1.0	.2
60091 (Wilmette)	.6	.8	.8
60093 (Winnetka)	.4	.6	.2
62025 (Edwardsville)	7.6	6.4	8.7
61520 (Canton)	7.3	6.8	7.2
60430 (Homewood)	19.3	34.7	36.9
60422(Flossmoor)	27.9	47.1	55.8
60441 (Chicago Heights)	37.8	49.3	51.6

Table 4c: Percentage of Hispanic or Latino Population by Zip Code, 2000-2017⁸¹

Zip Code	2000	2010	2017 (est.)
60423 (Frankfort)	3.0%	5.4%	5.7%
60451 (New Lenox)	3.1%	5.4%	6.0%
60448 (Mokena)	3.0	4.9	6.2
60442 (Manhattan)	2.3	2.3	5.2
60091 (Wilmette)	2.1	3.3	3.1
60093 (Winnetka)	3.8	5.1	4.2
62025 (Edwardsville)	.9	1.7	2.1
61520 (Canton)	1.9	3.8	4.7
60430 (Homewood)	3.1	6.0	6.5
60422(Flossmoor)	2.3	3.1	3.9
60411 (Chicago Heights)	17.1	23.8	25.2

Table 4d: Percentage of Asian American Populatin by Zip Code, 2000-2017

Zip Code	2000	2010	2017 (est.)
60423 (Frankfort)	1.8%	2.1%	2.8%
60451 (New Lenox)	.4%	.7%	.6%
60448 (Mokena)	1.1	1.8	2.3
60442 (Manhattan)	.2	.7	.5
60091 (Wilmette)	8.1	10.8	15.1
60093 (Winnetka)	3.3	4.4	5.7
62025 (Edwardsville)	1.3	1.9	1.6
61520 (Canton)	.4	.6	.2
60430 (Homewood)	1.6	1.4	2.2
60422(Flossmoor)	4.1	2.5	1.5
60411 (Chicago Heights)	.6%	.4%	.4

Table 5: Per Pupil Expenditures, Fiscal Year 2019⁸²

Lincoln-Way	11,479
New Trier	25,468
Edwardsville	8,768
Canton	11,339
Homewood-Flossmoor	18,212
Bloom Twp.	17,274

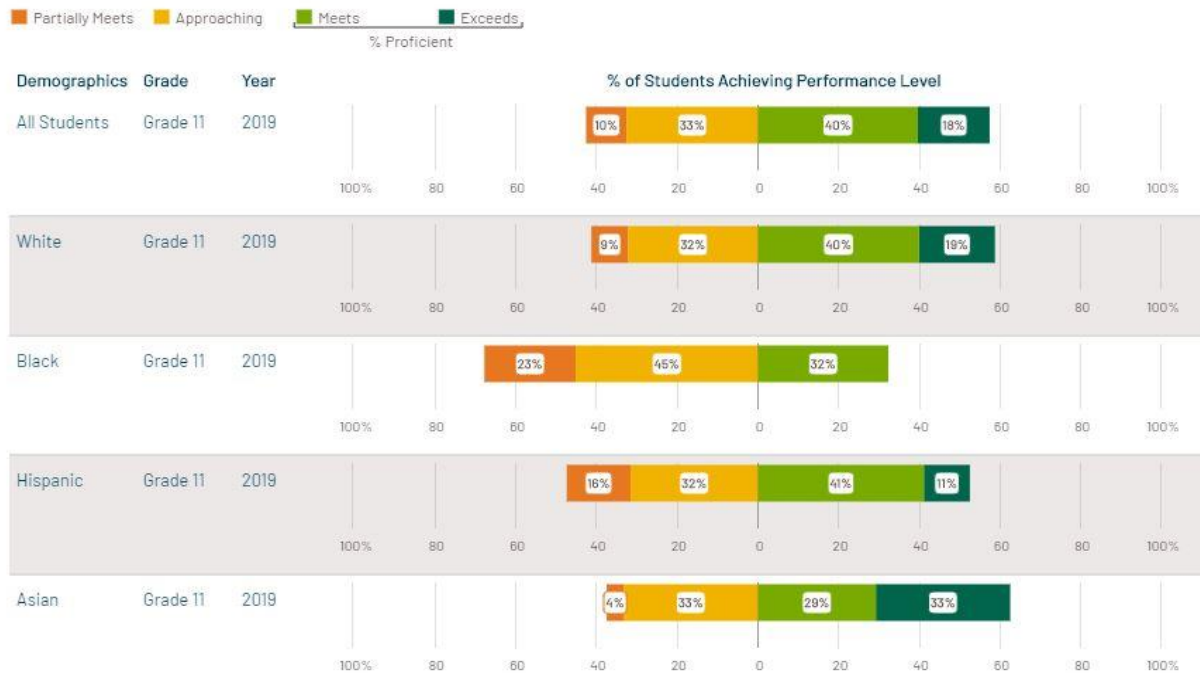
81. This includes any race, “white” or “black.”

82. “Illinois Report Card.” Illinois State Board of Education. 2019. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>

Table 6: Percent of Students at Performance Level Intervals ELA By Race/Ethnic Group, 2019⁸³
6A: Lincoln-Way District 210



6B: Edwardsville

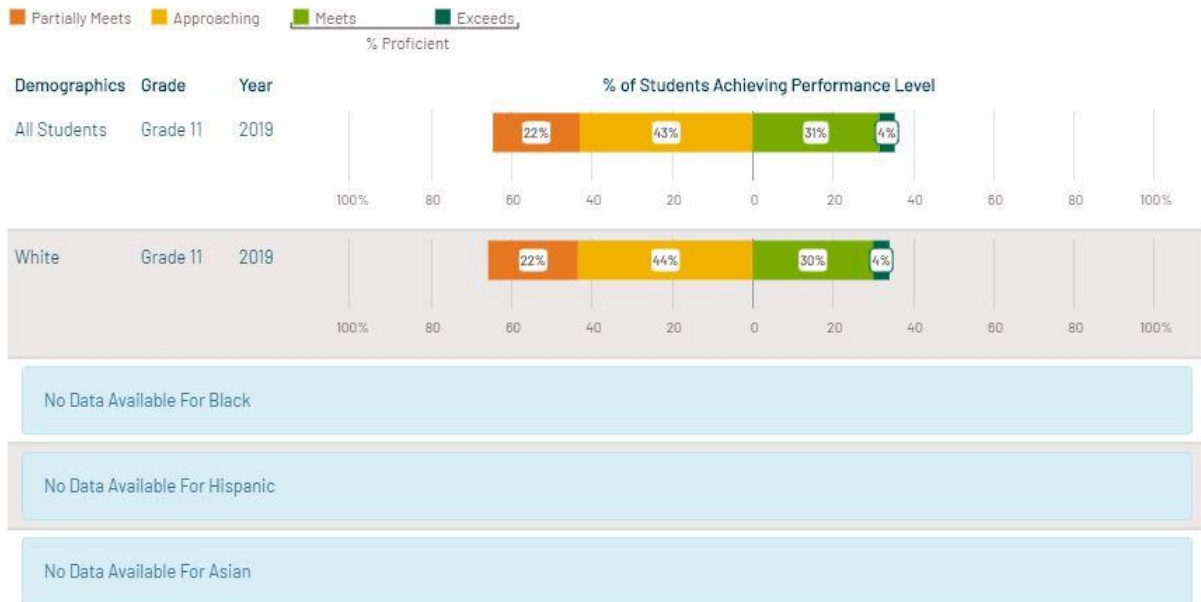


83. Ibid.

7C: New Trier



7D: Canton



7E Homewood-Flossmoor



7F: Bloom



Table 8: Percent of Students at Performance Level Intervals ELA By Low-Income and Non-Low-Income Group, 2019⁸⁴

8A: District 210



8B: Edwardsville



84. "Illinois Report Card." Illinois State Board of Education. 2019. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>

8C: New Trier



8D: Canton



8E: Homewood-Flossmoor



8F: Bloom

