

# TRUE / SLANT

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## Parenting, Race, and Student Performance in School

In Sunday's *Washington Post*, Patrick Welsh, a teacher at T.C. Williams High School (Alexandria, VA), [opined that the achievement gap is about parenting, not race](#). In general, I agree with his piece. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a greater indicator of student achievement than race, and SES is affiliated with many characteristics of parenting. For example, parents who make more money tend to have more formal education, and more educated parents usually are able to—because of both their knowledge and the means to put that knowledge into action—do more things with their children in terms of preparing them for formal education (e.g., teaching them to read and write before kindergarten begins, exposing them to museums and the arts, taking them on vacations).

(Before moving on to my actual point, let me plug [a new Web site](#) that features the work of Nobel Prize winning University of Chicago professor James Heckman. He's an expert in the economics of human development, and his work makes it clear that we get the best value for our tax dollar when we invest in effective early childhood initiatives. The Web site makes his technical work accessible to the average person, especially the two-minute video on the main page and [the slideshow](#) that explains the "Heckman Equation.")

Back to the impact of parenting and race... Although I agree with Mr. Welsh that the presence of parents and good parenting will make much more of an impact on school performance than a student's race, I don't think we can discount race entirely when it comes to discussing academic achievement. This has nothing to do with ability; students of all races achieve at the highest and lowest levels, and everywhere in between. Instead, it has to do with the messages people of certain races sometimes are sent by society when it comes to school, achievement, and success.

This is obviously speculation since I haven't met the black students in Mr. Welsh's class, but it is possible that some part of their underachievement could be attributed to their perception of racial discrimination in America's opportunity structure. John Ogbu, an anthropologist who taught at the University of California-Berkeley for over three decades (he died in 2003), explained this idea in his book about the schools and students in Shaker Heights, Ohio: [Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement](#). In chapter 8, Ogbu writes about the interviews he and his team conducted:

*Students talked about the impact of racial barriers on the academic orientations and efforts of Black students. Although the impact on academic effort might not be serious in the early grades, it became more serious as students got older and began to think that they, too, would have difficulty in the opportunity structure, like their parents had, just because they were Black. It was said that older students became more discouraged from striving for academic pursuit; they became disengaged from schooling." (p. 154)*

There is plenty of evidence that racial discrimination still exists when it comes to hiring practices (Google Scholar is a good resource if you want to do a search). For example, in [a 2003 study](#) by then-Northwestern University assistant professor [Devah Pager](#) (now a professor at Harvard) a pair of white male college students and a pair of black male college students applied for entry-level work with 350 employers in the Milwaukee area. They applied for the positions using similar credentials, with the exception that one member of each pair reported having a criminal record. (The focus of the study was on criminal records, not on race.) The final tally showed that for whites, 34% without criminal backgrounds got callbacks, and 17% with criminal records got callbacks; for blacks, 14% without criminal backgrounds and 5% with criminal records got callbacks. **This**

***means that, with the same academic credentials, a white person with a criminal record had a better chance of getting called back for a job interview than a black person with no criminal record!***

The students in Shaker Heights, Ohio, were being interviewed by Ogbu at the same time this study took place just a few states away. Unfortunately, their perception of racial discrimination in America's opportunity structure was validated.

A student's race clearly is not the predominant factor when it comes to study habits, grades, or overall attitude about school. However, it is important for educators to understand the ways in which race sometimes does play a part in their students' lives and academic performance.