

The Hidden Factor in Student Success - Family Structure

The federal government can shed light on why some children fail to thrive at school.

[Wall Street Journal](#), By Ian Rowe and Brad Wilcox, July 24, 2026



Every summer, New Yorkers ask why so many Asian students and so few black students are admitted to the city's elite public high schools. Only three of the 777 students in Stuyvesant High School's incoming class this year are black. This has again led to complaints about the entrance exam, demands that it be scrapped, and articles about how the system is "rigged against students of

color." Queens Borough President Donovan Richards went so far as to say black students are "being locked out—this is segregation."

Missing from the debate is any discussion of family structure. Two numbers that seldom surface in discussions about race in America's schools: 80% of Asian children nationwide live with married birth parents, vs. 30% of black children, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. This factor—whether a child has two married parents at home—predicts success in school, or admission to a school like Stuyvesant, almost as well as or even better than race.

None of this excuses a school system that has failed black, Hispanic and low-income families, or denies the need for broader test preparation and access to better schools. But these debates often miss a fundamental reality: A student's success can rise or fall on the structure and stability of his family more than by his skin color or his family's bank account.

Our forthcoming report from the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies shows how thoroughly Washington has neglected this critical point. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gold-standard federal exam known as "The Nation's Report Card," has asked students about their family structure since 2013, but it doesn't break down math and reading scores by that measure. Instead, it reports results by sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability and English-learner status—the categories Washington requires. That reporting is valuable, but it has the unintended consequence of training a generation of educators, researchers and journalists to treat those categories as the only ones worth considering.

Our analysis of the National Survey of Children’s Health shows what this approach leaves out. We found that children in intact families—in which biological or adoptive parents are married and living together—are significantly more likely to thrive in school than peers from stepfamilies, cohabiting households, single-parent homes or grandparent-led households. Children in these non-intact families are 13% less likely to earn mostly A’s and B’s and about twice as likely to be depressed. It is also 47% more likely their parents will be contacted about a problem involving them at school.

Family structure is as powerful a predictor of these outcomes as race and poverty—sometimes more so. Yet more data is needed to understand the importance of family in detail and to correct misinterpretations that appear to be supported by the absence of such data.

Leaving family structure out of federal reporting creates a vacuum that gets filled by theories that treat any gap between demographic groups as proof of discrimination. As self-styled antiracist Ibram X. Kendi has declared, “When I see racial disparities, I see racism.” That is a causal fallacy dressed up as moral clarity. Focusing only on race, ethnicity or income risks missing the family dynamics that can shape a child’s trajectory almost as much or more than those other factors.

At least one federal agency has gotten this right. In a 2010 report, “Family Structure and Children’s Health in the United States,” the National Center for Health Statistics argued that “new categories of families such as unmarried families or unmarried stepfamilies need to be studied so that the health characteristics of children in nontraditional families can be identified.” The report sorted American households into seven distinct family structures: intact married, single parent, blended, unmarried biological or adoptive, cohabiting, extended and other.

The Education Department and other federal agencies that track child well-being should do the same. Family structure should be a standard reporting category alongside race, poverty and disability—not an afterthought.

We can’t rewrite the family circumstances students were born into, but we can be honest about how family shapes student outcomes. We owe it to the rising generation to study family structure thoroughly and use that information to influence how young people think about family formation and the choices they make for themselves and eventually their own children.

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