

Income and racial segregation grows in Virginia public schools

By Alex Gonzalez
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Segregation in Virginia public schools has increased by 60 percent since 2003, according to a report by the Commonwealth Institute published this month. This follows a similar pattern across the nation as politicians slash social services to make working people bear the cost of the economic crisis.

Nearly 70 years after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, in which formal segregation in schools was struck down, the capitalist system is incapable of providing an adequate education to students from all ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds.

Analyzing data from the Virginia Department of Education, the report found 136 schools in Virginia, covering around 75,000 students, are considered isolated by race and income. Schools are classified as “isolated” if 75 percent or more of their students receive free or reduced lunch and 75 percent or more are black or Hispanic.

From the school years 2003 to 2014 (the most recent data available), there were 38,500 more students attending such schools in the state of Virginia—about 1 in 5 black students and 1 in 10 of Hispanic students in the state. Compared to other schools, so-called isolated schools offer disproportionately fewer math and science courses and have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions of students, according to the Government Accountability Office.

If the opportunities afforded to its youngest generation are a measurement of a healthy society, this report is an indictment of the vast gulf in opportunities between rich and working class youth. While the largest number of segregated schools was found in the Richmond area, where nearly every child qualifies for free and reduced lunch, segregated schools were also found in some of the nation’s wealthiest districts. The northern Virginia region—which has four of the top 10

richest counties in the nation—had the third largest concentration of segregated schools.

Some of the increase in the number of schools isolated by poverty and race can be attributed to a growing enrollment of black and Hispanic students. However, the authors note a significant proportion is due to a shortage of resources for students who face significant challenges at home, including poverty and food insecurity. In Virginia, one in four people lives in a food desert, without access to affordable, healthy food, and about one in seven children lives in a household below the poverty line.

Lower resources in schools are intimately tied to education budgets being slashed under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Contrary to claims by the Obama administration, there has been no “recovery” in the quality of education experienced by the most vulnerable students in the state.

In the aftermath of the recession, Virginia faced a budget shortfall of more than \$300 million. Lawmakers responded by tailoring the formula used to allot education funding in a way that disproportionately affected poorer school districts. As a result of this adjustment, a separate study by the Commonwealth Institute found, the poorest schools lost three times more in funding than wealthier schools.

Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe announced earlier this year that the state faced a budget deficit of \$1.5 billion, declaring there were “tough decisions” ahead, including using \$125 million that would have been allocated to give raises to teachers and state workers to pay for the budget shortfall. According to the Virginia Department of Education, over 5,000 teaching positions have been slashed at the state level since 2008, while the student population has grown by nearly 50,000.

Just one B-1 Spirit bomber, priced at \$2.4 billion and manufactured in Virginia by defense contractor Northrop Grumman, would be more than enough to pay for the entire state's funding deficit.

Rising school segregation in Virginia follows a national trend. During the same time period, the percentage of all K-12 public schools that were considered isolated climbed from 9 to 16 percent, according to a GAO report.

Due to a growth in the student population, the number of students attending isolated schools more than doubled, from 4.1 to 8.4 million students. Overall, one in every six schools in the US is considered isolated.

The response of the Obama administration to the crisis in public schools has been the implementation of programs such as "Race to the Top," which incentivized states to adopt standardized tests and merit-based pay or face being replaced by for-profit charter schools.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of charter schools grew nationally by over 30 percent between 2009 and 2014. According to the San Jose *Mercury News*, K12, the largest for-profit charter operator in the nation, with headquarters in Virginia, has received more than \$310 million in state funding over the past decade, despite a bleak record of academic achievement.

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